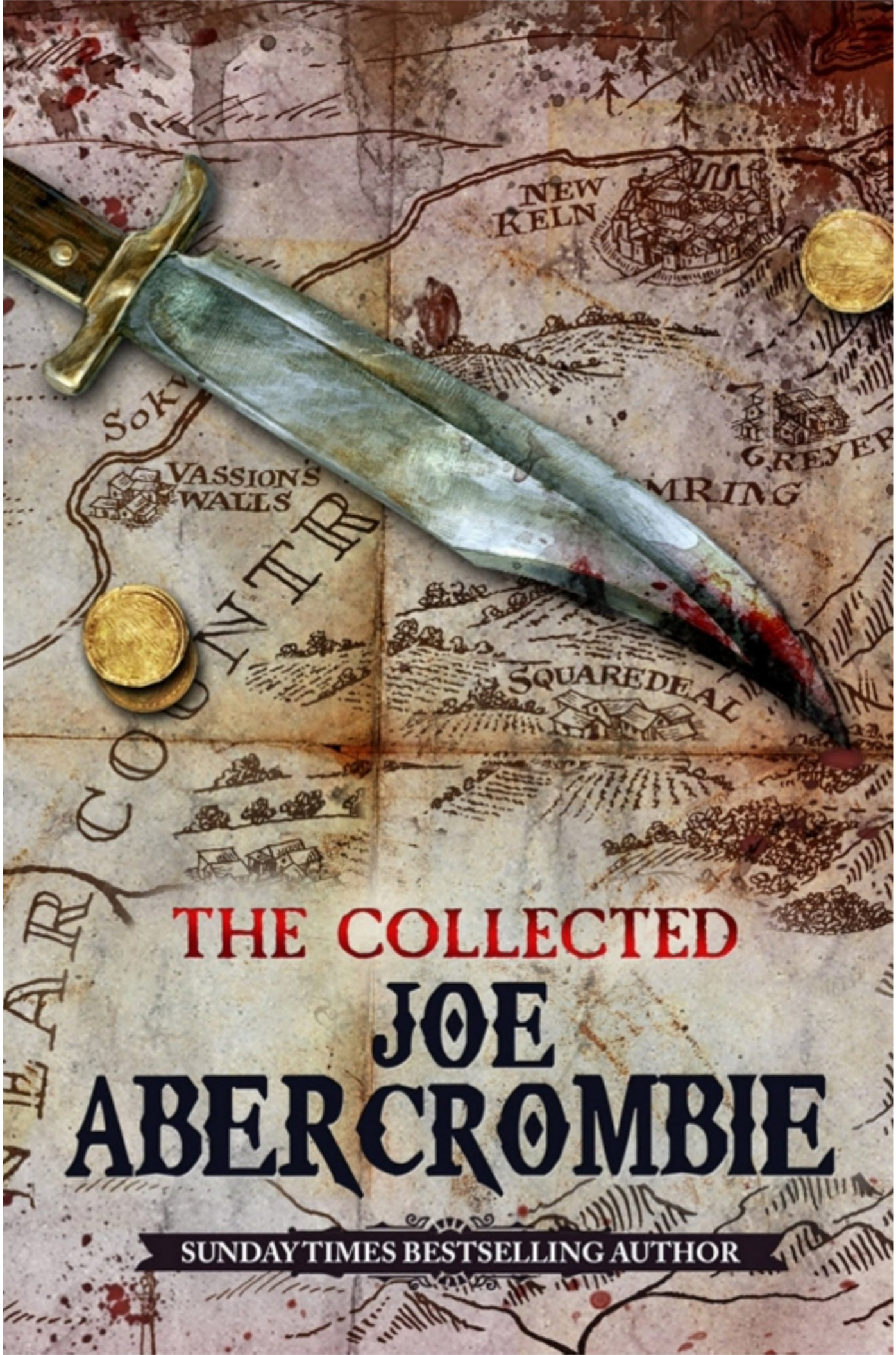

THE COLLECTED JOE ABERCROMBIE

SUNDAY TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

The Collected Joe Abercrombie

Joe Abercrombie

The Blade Itself
Before They Are Hanged
Last Argument of Kings
Best Served Cold
The Heroes
Red Country

GOLLANCZ
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Contents

Title Page

The Blade Itself
Before They Are Hanged
Last Argument of Kings
Best Served Cold
The Heroes
Red Country

Author Bio
Copyright

THE FIRST LAW: BOOK ONE

JOE
ABERCROMBIE

THE BLADE ITSELF

For the Four Readers
You know who you are

Table of Contents

Dedication
Title Page

The End

PART I – ‘The blade itself incites to deeds of violence’

The Survivors
Questions
No Choice at All
Playing With Knives
Teeth and Fingers
The Wide and Barren North
Fencing Practice
The Morning Ritual
First of the Magi
The Good Man
On the List
An Offer and a Gift
The King of the Northmen
A Road Between Two Dentists
Flatheads
The Course of True Love
How Dogs are Trained
Tea and Vengeance

PART II – ‘Life – the way it really is – is a battle not between good and bad, ...

What Freedom Looks Like
The King’s Justice
Means of Escape

Three Signs
The Theatrical Outfitter's
Barbarians at the Gate
Next
Better than Death
Sore Thumb
Questions
Nobility
Dark Work
Words and Dust
The Remarkable Talents of Brother Longfoot
Her Kind Fight Everything
She Loves Me . . . Not
The Seed
Never Bet Against a Magus
The Ideal Audience
The House of the Maker
Nobody's Dog
Each Man Worships Himself
Old Friends
Back to the Mud
Misery
The Bloody-Nine
The Tools we Have

Acknowledgements

The End

Logen plunged through the trees, bare feet slipping and sliding on the wet earth, the slush, the wet pine needles, breath rasping in his chest, blood thumping in his head. He stumbled and sprawled onto his side, nearly cut his chest open with his own axe, lay there panting, peering through the shadowy forest.

The Dogman had been with him until a moment before, he was sure, but there wasn't any sign of him now. As for the others, there was no telling. Some leader, getting split up from his boys like that. He should've been trying to get back, but the Shanka were all around. He could feel them moving between the trees, his nose was full of the smell of them. Sounded as if there was some shouting somewhere on his left, fighting maybe. Logen crept slowly to his feet, trying to stay quiet. A twig snapped and he whipped round.

There was a spear coming at him. A cruel-looking spear, coming at him fast with a Shanka on the other end of it.

'Shit,' said Logen. He threw himself to one side, slipped and fell on his face, rolled away thrashing through the brush, expecting the spear through his back at any moment. He scrambled up, breathing hard. He saw the bright point poking at him again, dodged out of the way, slithered behind a big tree trunk. He peered out and the Flathead hissed and stabbed at him. He showed himself on the other side, just for a moment, then ducked away, jumped round the tree and swung the axe down, roaring loud as he could. There was a crack as the blade buried itself deep in the Shanka's skull. Lucky that, but then Logen reckoned he was due a little luck.

The Flathead stood there, blinking at him. Then it started to sway from side to side, blood dribbling down its face. Then it dropped like a stone, dragging the axe from Logen's fingers, thrashing around on the ground at his feet. He tried to grab hold of his axe-handle but the Shanka still somehow had a grip on its spear and the point was flailing around in the air.

'Gah!' squawked Logen as the spear cut a nick in his arm. He felt a shadow fall across his face. Another Flathead. A damn big one. Already in the air, arms outstretched. No time to get the axe. No time to get out of the

way. Logen's mouth opened, but there was no time to say anything. What do you say at a time like that?

They crashed to the wet ground together, rolled together through the dirt and the thorns and the broken branches, tearing and punching and growling at each other. A tree root hit Logen in the head, hard, and made his ears ring. He had a knife somewhere, but he couldn't remember where. They rolled on, and on, downhill, the world flipping and flipping around, Logen trying to shake the fuzz out of his head and throttle the big Flathead at the same time. There was no stopping.

It had seemed a clever notion to pitch camp near the gorge. No chance of anyone sneaking up behind. Now, as Logen slid over the edge of the cliff on his belly, the idea lost much of its appeal. His hands scrabbled at the wet earth. Only dirt and brown pine needles. His fingers clutched, clutched at nothing. He was beginning to fall. He let go a little whimper.

His hands closed around something. A tree root, sticking out from the earth at the very edge of the gorge. He swung in space, gasping, but his grip was firm.

'Hah!' he shouted. 'Hah!' He was still alive. It would take more than a few Flatheads to put an end to Logen Ninefingers. He started to pull himself up onto the bank but couldn't manage it. There was some great weight around his legs. He peered down.

The gorge was deep. Very deep with sheer, rocky sides. Here and there a tree clung to a crack, growing out into the empty air and spreading its leaves into space. The river hissed away far below, fast and angry, foaming white water fringed by jagged black stone. That was all bad, for sure, but the real problem was closer to hand. The big Shanka was still with him, swinging gently back and forth with its dirty hands clamped tight around his left ankle.

'Shit,' muttered Logen. It was quite a scrape he was in. He'd been in some bad ones alright, and lived to sing the songs, but it was hard to see how this could get much worse. That got him thinking about his life. It seemed a bitter, pointless sort of a life now. No one was any better off because of it. Full of violence and pain, with not much but disappointment and hardship in between. His hands were starting to tire now, his forearms were burning. The big Flathead didn't look like it was going to fall off any time soon. In fact, it had dragged itself up his leg a way. It paused, glaring up at him.

If Logen had been the one clinging to the Shanka's foot, he would most likely have thought, 'My life depends on this leg I'm hanging from – best not take any chances.' A man would rather save himself than kill his enemy. Trouble was that the Shanka didn't think that way, and Logen knew it. So it wasn't much of a surprise when it opened its big mouth and sank its teeth into his calf.

'Aaaargh!' Logen grunted, and squealed and kicked out as hard as he could with his bare heel, kicked a bloody gash in the Shanka's head, but it wouldn't stop biting, and the harder he kicked, the more his hands slipped on the greasy root above. There wasn't much root left to hold on to, now, and what there was looked like snapping off any moment. He tried to think past the pain in his hands, the pain in his arms, the Flathead's teeth in his leg. He was going to fall. The only choice was between falling on rocks or falling on water, and that was a choice that more or less made itself.

Once you've got a task to do, it's better to do it than to live with the fear of it. That's what Logen's father would have said. So he planted his free foot firmly on the rock face, took one last deep breath, and flung himself out into empty space with all the strength he had left. He felt the biting teeth let go of him, then the grasping hands, and for a moment he was free.

Then he began to fall. Fast. The sides of the gorge flashed past – grey rock, green moss, patches of white snow, all tumbling around him.

Logen turned over slowly in the air, limbs flailing pointlessly, too scared to scream. The rushing wind whipped at his eyes, tugged at his clothes, plucked the breath out of his mouth. He saw the big Shanka hit the rock face beside him. He saw it break and bounce and flop off, dead for sure. That was a pleasing sight, but Logen's satisfaction was short-lived.

The water came up to meet him. It hit him in the side like a charging bull, punched the air out of his lungs, knocked the sense out of his head, sucked him in and down into the cold darkness . . .

PART I

‘The blade itself incites to deeds of violence’

Homer

The Survivors

The lapping of water in his ears. That was the first thing. The lapping of water, the rustling of trees, the odd click and twitter of a bird.

Logen opened his eyes a crack. Light, blurry bright through leaves. This was death? Then why did it hurt so much? His whole left side was throbbing. He tried to take a proper breath, choked, coughed up water, spat out mud. He groaned, flopped over onto his hands and knees, dragged himself up out of the river, gasping through clenched teeth, rolled onto his back in the moss and slime and rotten sticks at the water's edge.

He lay there for a moment, staring up at the grey sky beyond the black branches, breath wheezing in his raw throat.

'I am still alive,' he croaked to himself. Still alive, in spite of the best efforts of nature, Shanka, men and beasts. Soaking wet and flat on his back, he started to chuckle. Reedy, gurgling laughter. Say one thing for Logen Ninefingers, say he's a survivor.

A cold wind blew across the rotting river bank, and Logen's laughter slowly died. Alive he might be, but staying alive, that was another question. He sat up, wincing at the pain. He tottered to his feet, leaning against the nearest tree trunk. He scraped the dirt out of his nose, his eyes, his ears. He pulled up his wet shirt to take a look at the damage.

His side was covered in bruises from the fall. Blue and purple stains all up his ribs. Tender to the touch, and no mistake, but it didn't feel like anything was broken. His leg was a mess. Torn and bloody from the Shanka's teeth. It hurt bad, but his foot still moved well enough, and that was the main thing. He'd need his foot, if he was going to get out of this.

He still had his knife in the sheath at his belt, and he was mightily glad to see it. You could never have too many knives in Logen's experience, and this was a good one, but the outlook was still bleak. He was on his own, in woods crawling with Flatheads. He had no idea where he was, but he could follow the river. The rivers all flowed north, from the mountains to the cold sea. Follow the river southwards, against the current. Follow the river and climb up, into the High Places where the Shanka couldn't find him. That was his only chance.

It would be cold up there, this time of year. Deadly cold. He looked down at his bare feet. It was just his luck that the Shanka had come while he had his boots off, trimming his blisters. No coat either – he'd been sitting near the fire. Like this, he wouldn't last a day in the mountains. His hands and feet would turn black in the night, and he'd die bit by bit before he even reached the passes. If he didn't starve first.

'Shit,' he muttered. He had to go back to the camp. He had to hope the Flatheads had moved on, hope they'd left something behind. Something he could use to survive. That was an awful lot of hoping, but he had no choice. He never had any choices.

It had started to rain by the time Logen found the place. Spitting drops that plastered his hair to his skull, kept his clothes wet through. He pressed himself against a mossy trunk and peered out towards the camp, heart pounding, fingers of his right hand curled painful tight around the slippery grip of his knife.

He saw the blackened circle where the fire had been, half-burned sticks and ash trampled round it. He saw the big log Threetrees and Dow had been sitting on when the Flatheads came. He saw odd bits of torn and broken gear scattered across the clearing. He counted three dead Shanka crumpled on the ground, one with an arrow poking out of its chest. Three dead ones, but no sign of any alive. That was lucky. Just lucky enough to survive, as always. Still, they might be back at any moment. He had to be quick.

Logen scuttled out from the trees, casting about on the ground. His boots were still there where he'd left them. He snatched them up and dragged them on to his freezing feet, hopping around, almost slipping in his haste. His coat was there too, wedged under the log, battered and scarred from ten years of weather and war, torn and stitched back together, missing half a sleeve. His pack was lying shapeless in the brush nearby, its contents strewn out down the slope. He crouched, breathless, throwing it all back inside. A length of rope, his old clay pipe, some strips of dried meat, needle and twine, a dented flask with some liquor still sloshing inside. All good. All useful.

There was a tattered blanket snagged on a branch, wet and half caked in grime. Logen pulled it up, and grinned. His old, battered cook pot was underneath. Lying on its side, kicked off the fire in the fight maybe. He

grabbed hold of it with both hands. It felt safe, familiar, dented and blackened from years of hard use. He'd had that pot a long time. It had followed him all through the wars, across the North and back again. They had all cooked in it together, out on the trail, all eaten out of it. Forley, Grim, the Dogman, all of them.

Logen looked over the campsite again. Three dead Shanka, but none of his people. Maybe they were still out there. Maybe if he took a risk, tried to look—

'No.' He said it quietly, under his breath. He knew better than that. There had been a lot of Flatheads. An awful lot. He had no idea how long he'd lain on the river bank. Even if a couple of the boys had got away, the Shanka would be hunting them, hunting them down in the forests. They were nothing but corpses now, for sure, scattered across the high valleys. All Logen could do was make for the mountains, and try to save his own sorry life. You have to be realistic. Have to be, however much it hurts.

'It's just you and me now,' said Logen as he stuffed the pot into his pack and threw it over his shoulder. He started to limp off, as fast as he could. Uphill, towards the river, towards the mountains.

Just the two of them. Him and the pot.

They were the only survivors.

Questions

W*hy do I do this?* Inquisitor Glokta asked himself for the thousandth time as he limped down the corridor. The walls were rendered and whitewashed, though none too recently. There was a seedy feel to the place and a smell of damp. There were no windows, as the hallway was deep beneath the ground, and the lanterns cast slow flowing shadows into every corner.

Why would anyone want to do this? Glokta's walking made a steady rhythm on the grimy tiles of the floor. First the confident click of his right heel, then the tap of his cane, then the endless sliding of his left foot, with the familiar stabbing pains in the ankle, knee, arse and back. Click, tap, pain. That was the rhythm of his walking.

The dirty monotony of the corridor was broken from time to time by a heavy door, bound and studded with pitted iron. On one occasion, Glokta thought he heard a muffled cry of pain from behind one. *I wonder what poor fool is being questioned in there? What crime they are guilty, or innocent of? What secrets are being picked at, what lies cut through, what treasons laid bare?* He didn't wonder long though. He was interrupted by the steps.

If Glokta had been given the opportunity to torture any one man, any one at all, he would surely have chosen the inventor of steps. When he was young and widely admired, before his misfortunes, he had never really noticed them. He had sprung down them two at a time and gone blithely on his way. No more. *They're everywhere. You really can't change floors without them. And down is worse than up, that's the thing people never realise. Going up, you usually don't fall that far.*

He knew this flight well. Sixteen steps, cut from smooth stone, a little worn toward the centre, slightly damp, like everything down here. There was no banister, nothing to cling to. *Sixteen enemies. A challenge indeed.* It had taken Glokta a long time to develop the least painful method of descending stairs. He went sideways like a crab. Cane first, then left foot, then right, with more than the usual agony as his left leg took his weight, joined by a persistent stabbing in the neck. *Why should it hurt in my neck*

when I go down stairs? Does my neck take my weight? Does it? Yet the pain could not be denied.

Glokta paused four steps from the bottom. He had nearly beaten them. His hand was trembling on the handle of his cane, his left leg aching like fury. He tongued his gums where his front teeth used to be, took a deep breath and stepped forward. His ankle gave way with a horrifying wrench and he plunged into space, twisting, lurching, his mind a cauldron of horror and despair. He stumbled onto the next step like a drunkard, fingernails scratching at the smooth wall, giving a squeal of terror. *You stupid, stupid bastard!* His cane clattered to the floor, his clumsy feet wrestled with the stones and he found himself at the bottom, by some miracle still standing.

And here it is. That horrible, beautiful, stretched out moment between stubbing your toe and feeling the hurt. How long do I have before the pain comes? How bad will it be when it does? Gasping, slack-jawed at the foot of the steps, Glokta felt a tingling of anticipation. *Here it comes . . .*

The agony was unspeakable, a searing spasm up his left side from foot to jaw. He squeezed his watering eyes tight shut, clamped his right hand over his mouth so hard that the knuckles clicked. His remaining teeth grated against each other as he locked his jaws together, but a high-pitched, jagged moan still whistled from him. *Am I screaming or laughing? How do I tell the difference?* He breathed in heaving gasps, through his nose, snot bubbling out onto his hand, his twisted body shaking with the effort of staying upright.

The spasm passed. Glokta moved his limbs cautiously, one by one, testing the damage. His leg was on fire, his foot numb, his neck clicked with every movement, sending vicious little stings down his spine. *Pretty good, considering.* He bent down with an effort and snatched up his cane between two fingers, drew himself up once more, wiped the snot and tears on the back of his hand. *Truly a thrill. Did I enjoy it? For most people stairs are a mundane affair. For me, an adventure!* He limped off down the corridor, giggling quietly to himself. He was still smiling ever so faintly when he reached his own door and shuffled inside.

A grubby white box with two doors facing each other. The ceiling was too low for comfort, the room too brightly lit by blazing lamps. Damp was creeping out of one corner and the plaster had erupted with flaking blisters,

speckled with black mould. Someone had tried to scrub a long bloodstain from one wall, but hadn't tried nearly hard enough.

Practical Frost was standing on the other side of the room, big arms folded across his big chest. He nodded to Glokta, with all the emotion of a stone, and Glokta nodded back. Between them stood a scarred, stained wooden table, bolted to the floor and flanked by two chairs. A naked fat man sat in one of them, hands tied tightly behind him and with a brown canvas bag over his head. His quick, muffled breathing was the only sound. It was cold down here, but he was sweating. *As well he should be.*

Glokta limped over to the other chair, leaned his cane carefully against the edge of the table top and slowly, cautiously, painfully sat down. He stretched his neck to the left and right, then allowed his body to slump into a position approaching comfort. If Glokta had been given the opportunity to shake the hand of any one man, any one at all, he would surely have chosen the inventor of chairs. *He has made my life almost bearable.*

Frost stepped silently out of the corner and took hold of the loose top of the bag between meaty, pale finger and heavy, white thumb. Glokta nodded and the Practical ripped it off, leaving Salem Rews blinking in the harsh light.

A mean, piggy, ugly little face. You mean, ugly pig, Rews. You disgusting swine. You're ready to confess right now, I'll bet, ready to talk and talk without interruption, until we're all sick of it. There was a big dark bruise across his cheek and another on his jaw above his double chin. As his watering eyes adjusted to the brightness he recognised Glokta sitting opposite him, and his face suddenly filled with hope. *A sadly, sadly misplaced hope.*

'Glokta, you have to help me!' he squealed, leaning forward as far as his bonds would allow, words bubbling out in a desperate, mumbling mess. 'I'm falsely accused, you know it, I'm innocent! You've come to help me, yes? You're my friend! You have influence here. We're friends, friends! You could say something for me! I'm an innocent man, falsely accused! I'm—'

Glokta held up his hand for silence. He stared at Rews' familiar face for a moment, as though he had never laid eyes on him before. Then he turned to Frost. 'Am I supposed to know this man?'

The albino said nothing. The bottom part of his face was hidden by his Practical's mask, and the top half gave nothing away. He stared unblinking

at the prisoner in the chair, pink eyes as dead as a corpse. He hadn't blinked once since Glokta came into the room. *How can he do that?*

'It's me, Rews!' hissed the fat man, the pitch of his voice rising steadily towards panic. 'Salem Rews, you know me, Glokta! I was with you in the war, before . . . you know . . . we're friends! We—'

Glokta held up his hand again and sat back, tapping one of his few remaining teeth with a fingernail as though deep in thought. 'Rews. The name is familiar. A merchant, a member of the Guild of Mercers. A rich man by all accounts. I remember now ...' Glokta leaned forward, pausing for effect. 'He was a traitor! He was taken by the Inquisition, his property confiscated. You see, he had conspired to avoid the King's taxes.' Rews' mouth was hanging open. 'The King's taxes!' screamed Glokta, smashing his hand down on the table. The fat man stared, wide eyed, and licked at a tooth. *Upper right side, second from the back*.

'But where are our manners?' asked Glokta of no one in particular. 'We may or may not have known each other once, but I don't think you and my assistant have been properly introduced. Practical Frost, say hello to this fat man.'

It was an open-handed blow, but powerful enough to knock Rews clean out of his seat. The chair rattled but was otherwise unaffected. *How is that done? To knock him to the ground but leave the chair standing?* Rews sprawled gurgling across the floor, face flattened on the tiles.

'He reminds me of a beached whale,' said Glokta absently. The albino grabbed Rews under the arm and hauled him up, flung him back into the chair. Blood seeped from a cut on his cheek, but his piggy eyes were hard now. *Blows make most men soften up, but some men harden. I never would have taken this one for a tough man, but life is full of surprises.*

Rews spat blood onto the table top. 'You've gone too far here, Glokta, oh yes! The Mercers are an honourable guild; we have influence! They won't put up with this! I'm a known man! Even now my wife will be petitioning the King to hear my case!'

'Ah, your wife.' Glokta smiled sadly. 'Your wife is a very beautiful woman. Beautiful, and young. I fear, perhaps, a little too young for you. I fear she took the opportunity to be rid of you. I fear she came forward with your books. All the books.' Rews' face paled.

‘We looked at those books,’ Glokta indicated an imaginary pile of papers on his left, ‘we looked at the books in the treasury,’ indicating another on his right. ‘Imagine our surprise when we could not make the numbers add up. And then there were the night-time visits by your employees to warehouses in the old quarter, the small unregistered boats, the payments to officials, the forged documentation. Must I go on?’ asked Glokta, shaking his head in profound disapproval. The fat man swallowed and licked his lips.

Pen and ink were placed before the prisoner, and the paper of confession, filled out in detail in Frost’s beautiful, careful script, awaiting only the signature. *I’ll get him right here and now.*

‘Confess, Rews,’ Glokta whispered softly, ‘and put a painless end to this regrettable business. Confess and name your accomplices. We already know who they are. It will be easier on all of us. I don’t want to hurt you, believe me, it will give me no pleasure.’ *Nothing will.* ‘Confess. Confess, and you will be spared. Exile in Angland is not so bad as they would have you believe. There is still pleasure to be had from life there, and the satisfaction of a day of honest work, in the service of your King. Confess!’ Rews stared at the floor, licking at his tooth. Glokta sat back and sighed.

‘Or not,’ he said, ‘and I can come back with my instruments.’ Frost moved forward, his massive shadow falling across the fat man’s face. ‘Body found floating by the docks,’ Glokta breathed, ‘bloated by seawater and horribly mutilated . . . far . . . far beyond recognition.’ *He’s ready to talk. He’s fat and ripe and ready to burst.* ‘Were the injuries inflicted before or after death?’ he asked the ceiling breezily. ‘Was the mysterious deceased a man or a woman even?’ Glokta shrugged. ‘Who can say?’

There was a sharp knock at the door. Rews’ face jerked up, filled with hope again. *Not now, damn it!* Frost went to the door, opened it a crack. Something was said. The door shut, Frost leaned down to whisper in Glokta’s ear.

‘Ith Theverar,’ came the half-tongued mumble, by which Glokta understood that Severard was at the door.

Already? Glokta smiled and nodded, as if it was good news. Rews’ face fell a little. *How could a man whose business has been concealment find it impossible to hide his emotions in this room?* But Glokta knew how. *It’s hard to stay calm when you’re terrified, helpless, alone, at the mercy of men*

with no mercy at all. Who could know that better than me? He sighed, and using his most world-weary tone of voice asked, 'Do you wish to confess?'

'No!' The defiance had returned to the prisoner's piggy eyes now. He stared back, silent and watchful, and sucked. *Surprising. Very surprising. But then we're just getting started.*

'Is that tooth bothering you, Rews?' There was nothing Glokta didn't know about teeth. His own mouth had been worked on by the very best. *Or the very worst, depending on how you look at it.* 'It seems that I must leave you now, but while I'm away, I'll be thinking about that tooth. I'll be considering very carefully what to do with it.' He took hold of his cane. 'I want you to think about me, thinking about your tooth. And I also want you to think, very carefully, about signing your confession.'

Glokta got awkwardly to his feet, shaking out his aching leg. 'I think you may respond well to a straightforward beating however, so I'm going to leave you in the company of Practical Frost for half an hour.' Rews' mouth became a silent circle of surprise. The albino picked up the chair, fat man and all, and turned it slowly around. 'He's absolutely the best there is at this kind of thing.' Frost took out a pair of battered leather gloves and began to pull them carefully onto his big white hands, one finger at a time. 'You always did like to have the very best of everything, eh, Rews?' Glokta made for the door.

'Wait! Glokta!' wailed Rews over his shoulder. 'Wait I—'

Practical Frost clamped a gloved hand over the fat man's mouth and held a finger to his mask. 'Thhhhhhh,' he said. The door clicked shut.

Severard was leaning against the wall in the corridor, one foot propped on the plaster behind him, whistling tunelessly beneath his mask and running a hand through his long, lanky hair. As Glokta came through the door he straightened up and gave a little bow, and it was plain by his eyes that he was smiling. *He's always smiling.*

'Superior Kalyne wants to see you,' he said in his broad, common accent, 'and I'm of the opinion that I never saw him angrier.'

'Severard, you poor thing, you must be terrified. Do you have the box?'

'I do.'

'And you took something out for Frost?'

'I did.'

'And something for your wife too, I hope?'

‘Oh yes,’ said Severard, his eyes smiling more than ever, ‘My wife will be well taken care of. If I ever get one.’

‘Good. I hasten to answer the call of the Superior. When I have been with him for five minutes, come in with the box.’

‘Just barge into his office?’

‘Barge in and stab him in the face for all I care.’

‘I’d consider that done, Inquisitor.’

Glokta nodded, turned away, then turned back. ‘Don’t really stab him, eh, Severard?’

The Practical smiled with his eyes and sheathed his vicious-looking knife. Glokta rolled his eyes up to the ceiling, then limped off, his cane tapping on the tiles, his leg throbbing. Click, tap, pain. That was the rhythm of his walking.

The Superior’s office was a large and richly appointed room high up in the House of Questions, a room in which everything was too big and too fancy. A huge, intricate window dominated one wood-panelled wall, offering a view over the well-tended gardens in the courtyard below. An equally huge and ornate desk stood in the centre of a richly coloured carpet from somewhere warm and exotic. The head of a fierce animal from somewhere cold and exotic was mounted above a magnificent stone fireplace with a tiny, mean fire close to burning out inside.

Superior Kalyne himself made his office look small and drab. A vast, florid man in his late fifties, he had over-compensated for his thinning hair with magnificent white side whiskers. He was considered a daunting presence even within the Inquisition, but Glokta was past scaring, and they both knew it.

There was a big, fancy chair behind the desk, but the Superior was pacing up and down while he screamed, his arms waving. Glokta was seated on something which, while doubtless expensive, had clearly been designed to make its occupant as uncomfortable as possible. *It doesn’t bother me much, though. Uncomfortable is as good as I ever get.*

He amused himself with the thought of Kalyne’s head mounted above the fireplace instead of that fierce animal’s, while the Superior ranted at him. *He’s every bit like his fireplace, the big dolt. Looks impressive, but there’s not much going on underneath. I wonder how he’d respond to an*

interrogation? I'd start with those ridiculous side whiskers. But Glokta's face was a mask of attention and respect.

'Well you've outdone yourself this time, Glokta, you mad cripple! When the Mercers find out about this they'll have you flayed!'

'I've tried flaying, it tickles.' *Damn it, keep your mouth shut and smile. Where's that whistling fool Severard? I'll have him flayed when I get out of here.*

'Oh yes, that's good, that's very good, Glokta, look at me laugh! And evasion of the King's taxes?' The Superior glowered down, whiskers bristling. 'The King's taxes?' he screamed, spraying Glokta with spit. 'They're all at it! The Mercers, the Spicers, all of them! Every damn fool with a boat!'

'But this was so open, Superior. It was an insult to us. I felt we had to—'

'You felt?' Kalyne was red-faced and vibrating with rage. 'You were explicitly told to keep away from the Mercers, away from the Spicers, away from all the big guilds!' He strode up and down with ever greater speed. *You'll wear your carpet out at this rate. The big guilds will have to buy you a new one.*

'You felt, did you? Well he'll have to go back! We'll have to release him and you'll have to feel your way to a grovelling apology! It's a damn disgrace! You've made me look ridiculous! Where is he now?'

'I left him in the company of Practical Frost.'

'With that mumbling animal?' The Superior tore at his hair in desperation. 'Well that's it then, isn't it? He'll be a ruin now! We can't send him back in that condition! You're finished here, Glokta! Finished! I'm going straight to the Arch Lector! Straight to the Arch Lector!'

The huge door was kicked open and Severard sauntered in carrying a wooden box. *And not a moment too soon.* The Superior stared, speechless, open-mouthed with wrath, as Severard dropped it on the desk with a thump and a jingle.

'What the hell is the meaning of . . .' Severard pulled open the lid, and Kalyne saw the money. *All that lovely money.* He stopped in mid-rant, mouth stuck forming the next sound. He looked surprised, then he looked puzzled, then he looked cautious. He pursed his lips and slowly sat down.

'Thank you, Practical Severard,' said Glokta. 'You may go.' The Superior was stroking thoughtfully at his side whiskers as Severard strolled out, his

face returning gradually to its usual shade of pink. ‘Confiscated from Rews. The property of the Crown now, of course. I thought that I should give it to you, as my direct superior, so that you could pass it on to the Treasury.’ *Or buy a bigger desk, you leech.*

Glokta leaned forward, hands on his knees. ‘You could say, perhaps, that Rews went too far, that questions had been asked, that an example had to be made. We can’t be seen to do nothing, after all. It’ll make the big guilds nervous, keep them in line.’ *It’ll make them nervous and you can screw more out of them.* ‘Or you could always tell them that I’m a mad cripple, and blame me for it.’

The Superior was starting to like it now, Glokta could tell. He was trying not to show it, but his whiskers were quivering at the sight of all that money. ‘Alright, Glokta. Alright. Very well.’ He reached out and carefully shut the lid of the box. ‘But if you ever think of doing something like this again . . . talk to me first, would you? I don’t like surprises.’

Glokta struggled to his feet, limped towards the door. ‘Oh, and one more thing!’ He turned stiffly back. Kalyne was staring at him severely from beneath his big, fancy brows. ‘When I go to see the Mercers, I’ll need to take Rews’ confession.’

Glokta smiled broadly, showing the yawning gap in his front teeth. ‘That shouldn’t be a problem, Superior.’

Kalyne had been right. There was no way that Rews could have gone back in this condition. His lips were split and bloody, his sides covered in darkening bruises, his head lolled sideways, face swollen almost past recognition. *In short, he looks like a man ready to confess.*

‘I don’t imagine you enjoyed the last half hour, Rews, I don’t imagine you enjoyed it much at all. Perhaps it was the worst half hour of your life, I really couldn’t say. I’m thinking about what we have for you here, though, and the sad fact is . . . that’s about as good as it gets. That’s the high life.’ Glokta leaned forward, his face just inches from the bloody pulp of Rews’ nose. ‘Practical Frost’s a little girl compared to me,’ he whispered. ‘He’s a kitten. Once I get started with you, Rews, you’ll be looking back on this with nostalgia. You’ll be begging me to give you half an hour with the Practical. Do you understand?’ Rews was silent, except for the air whistling through his broken nose.

‘Show him the instruments,’ whispered Glokta.

Frost stepped forward and opened the polished case with a theatrical flourish. It was a masterful piece of craftsmanship. As the lid was pulled back, the many trays inside lifted and fanned out, displaying Glokta’s tools in all their gruesome glory. There were blades of every size and shape, needles curved and straight, bottles of oil and acid, nails and screws, clamps and pliers, saws, hammers, chisels. Metal, wood and glass glittered in the bright lamplight, all polished to mirror brightness and honed to a murderous sharpness. A big purple swelling under Rews’ left eye had closed it completely, but the other darted over the instruments: terrified, fascinated. The functions of some were horribly obvious, the functions of others were horribly obscure. *Which scare him more, I wonder?*

‘We were talking about your tooth, I think,’ murmured Glokta. Rews’ eye flicked up to look at him. ‘Or would you like to confess?’ *I have him, here he comes. Confess, confess, confess, confess . . .*

There was a sharp knock at the door. *Damn it again!* Frost opened it a crack and there was a brief whispering. Rews licked at his bloated lip. The door shut, the albino leaned to whisper in Glokta’s ear.

‘Ith the Arth Ector.’ Glokta froze. *The money was not enough. While I was shuffling back from Kalyne’s office, the old bastard was reporting me to the Arch Lector. Am I finished then?* He felt a guilty thrill at the thought. *Well, I’ll see to this fat pig first.*

‘Tell Severard I’m on my way.’ Glokta turned back to talk to his prisoner, but Frost put a big white hand on his shoulder.

‘O. The Arth Ector,’ Frost pointed to the door, ‘he’th ere. Ow.’

Here? Glokta could feel his eyelid twitching. *Why?* He pushed himself up using the edge of the table. *Will they find me in the canal tomorrow? Dead and bloated, far . . . far beyond recognition?* The only emotion that he felt at the idea was a flutter of mild relief. *No more stairs.*

The Arch Lector of His Majesty’s Inquisition was standing outside in the corridor. The grimy walls looked almost brown behind him, so brilliantly spotless were his long white coat, his white gloves, his shock of white hair. He was past sixty, but showed none of the infirmity of age. Every tall, clean-shaven, fine-boned inch of him was immaculately turned out. *He looks like a man who has never once in his life been surprised by anything.*

They had met once before, six years earlier when Glokta joined the Inquisition, and he hardly seemed to have changed. Arch Lector Sult. One of the most powerful men in the Union. *One of the most powerful men in the world, come to that.* Behind him, almost like outsized shadows, loomed two enormous, silent, black-masked Practicals.

The Arch Lector gave a thin smile when he saw Glokta shuffle out of his door. It said a lot, that smile. *Mild scorn, mild pity, the very slightest touch of menace. Anything but amusement.* 'Inquisitor Glokta,' he said, holding out one white-gloved hand, palm down. A ring with a huge purple stone flashed on his finger.

'I serve and obey, your Eminence.' Glokta could not help grimacing as he bent slowly forward to touch his lips to the ring. A difficult and painful manoeuvre, it seemed to take forever. When he finally hoisted himself back upright, Sult was gazing at him calmly with his cool blue eyes. A look that implied he already understood Glokta completely, and was unimpressed.

'Come with me.' The Arch Lector turned and swept away down the corridor. Glokta limped along after him, the silent Practicals marching close behind. Sult moved with an effortless, languid confidence, coat tails flapping gracefully out behind him. *Bastard.* Soon they reached a door, much like his own. The Arch Lector unlocked it and went inside, the Practicals took up positions either side of the doorway, arms folded. *A private interview then. One which I, perhaps, will never leave.* Glokta stepped over the threshold.

A box of grubby white plaster too brightly lit and with a ceiling too low for comfort. It had a big crack instead of a damp patch, but was otherwise identical to his own room. It had the scarred table, the cheap chairs, it even had a poorly cleaned bloodstain. *I wonder if they're painted on, for the effect?* One of the Practicals suddenly pulled the door shut with a loud bang. Glokta was intended to jump, but he couldn't be bothered.

Arch Lector Sult lowered himself gracefully into one of the seats, drew a heavy sheaf of yellowing papers across the table towards him. He waved his hand at the other chair, the one that would be used by the prisoner. The implications were not lost on Glokta.

'I prefer to stand, your Eminence.'

Sult smiled at him. He had lovely, pointy teeth, all shiny white. 'No, you don't.'

He has me there. Glokta lowered himself ungracefully into the prisoner's chair while the Arch Lector turned over the first page of his wedge of documents, frowned and shook his head gently as though horribly disappointed by what he saw. *The details of my illustrious career, perhaps?*

'I had a visit from Superior Kalyne not long ago. He was most upset.' Sult's hard blue eyes came up from his papers. 'Upset with you, Glokta. He was quite vocal on the subject. He told me that you are an uncontrollable menace, that you act without a thought for the consequences, that you are a mad cripple. He demanded that you be removed from his department.' The Arch Lector smiled, a cold, nasty smile, the kind Glokta used on his prisoners. *But with more teeth.* 'I think he had it in mind that you be removed . . . altogether.' They stared at each other across the table.

Is this where I beg for mercy? Is this where I crawl on the ground and kiss your feet? Well, I don't care enough to beg and I'm far too stiff to crawl. Your Practicals will have to kill me sitting down. Cut my throat. Bash my head in. Whatever. As long as they get on with it.

But Sult was in no rush. The white-gloved hands moved neatly, precisely, the pages hissed and crackled. 'We have few men like you in the Inquisition, Glokta. A nobleman, from an excellent family. A champion swordsman, a dashing cavalry officer. A man once groomed for the very top.' Sult looked him up and down as though he could hardly believe it.

'That was before the war, Arch Lector.'

'Obviously. There was much dismay at your capture, and little hope that you would be returned alive. As the war dragged on and the months passed, hope diminished to nothing, but when the treaty was signed, you were among those prisoners returned to the Union.' He peered at Glokta through narrowed eyes. 'Did you talk?'

Glokta couldn't help himself, he spluttered with shrill laughter. It echoed strangely in the cold room. Not a sound you often heard down here. 'Did I talk? I talked until my throat was raw. I told them everything I could think of. I screamed every secret I'd ever heard. I babbled like a fool. When I ran out of things to tell them I made things up. I pissed myself and cried like a girl. Everyone does.'

'But not everyone survives. Two years in the Emperor's prisons. No one else lasted half that long. The physicians were sure you would never leave your bed again, but a year later you made your application to the

Inquisition.' *We both know it. We were both there. What do you want from me, and why not get on with it? I suppose some men just love the sound of their own voices.*

'I was told that you were crippled, that you were broken, that you could never be mended, that you could never be trusted. But I was inclined to give you a chance. Some fool wins the Contest every year, and wars produce many promising soldiers, but your achievement in surviving those two years was unique. So you were sent to the North, and put in charge of one of our mines there. What did you make of Angland?'

A filthy sink of violence and corruption. A prison where we have made slaves of the innocent and guilty alike in the name of freedom. A stinking hole where we send those we hate and those we are ashamed of to die of hunger, and disease, and hard labour. 'It was cold,' said Glokta.

'And so were you. You made few friends in Angland. Precious few among the Inquisition, and none among the exiles.' He plucked a tattered letter from among the papers and cast a critical eye over it. 'Superior Goyle told me that you were a cold fish, had no blood in you at all. He thought you'd never amount to anything, that he could make no use of you.' *Goyle. That bastard. That butcher. I'd rather have no blood than no brains.*

'But after three years, production was up. It was doubled in fact. So you were brought back to Adua, to work under Superior Kalyne. I thought perhaps you would learn discipline with him, but it seems I was wrong. You insist on going your own way.' The Arch Lector frowned up at him. 'To be frank, I think that Kalyne is afraid of you. I think they all are. They don't like your arrogance, they don't like your methods, they don't like your . . . special insight into our work.'

'And what do you think, Arch Lector?'

'Honestly? I'm not sure I like your methods much either, and I doubt that your arrogance is entirely deserved. But I like your results. I like your results very much.' He slapped the bundle of papers closed and rested one hand on top of it, leaning across the table towards Glokta. *As I might lean towards my prisoners when I ask them to confess.* 'I have a task for you. A task that should make better use of your talents than chasing around after petty smugglers. A task that may allow you to redeem yourself in the eyes of the Inquisition.' The Arch Lector paused for a long moment. 'I want you to arrest Sepp dan Teufel.'

Glokta frowned. *Teufel?* ‘The Master of the Mints, your Eminence?’

‘The very same.’

The Master of the Royal Mints. An important man from an important family. A very big fish, to be hooked in my little tank. A fish with powerful friends. It could be dangerous, arresting a man like that. It could be fatal.

‘May I ask why?’

‘You may not. Let me worry about the whys. You concentrate on obtaining a confession.’

‘A confession to what, Arch Lector?’

‘Why, to corruption and high treason! It seems our friend the Master of the Mints has been most indiscreet in some of his personal dealings. It seems he has been taking bribes, conspiring with the Guild of Mercers to defraud the King. As such, it would be very useful if a ranking Mercer were to name him, in some unfortunate connection.’

It can hardly be a coincidence that I have a ranking Mercer in my interrogation room, even as we speak. Glokta shrugged. ‘Once people start talking, it’s shocking the names that tumble out.’

‘Good.’ The Arch Lector waved his hand. ‘You may go, Inquisitor. I will come for Teufel’s confession this time tomorrow. You had better have it.’

Glokta breathed slowly as he laboured back along the corridor.

Breath in, breath out. Calm. He had not expected to leave that room alive. *And now I find myself moving in powerful circles. A personal task for the Arch Lector, squeezing a confession to high treason from one of the Union’s most trusted officials. The most powerful of circles, but for how long? Why me? Because of my results?*

Or because I won’t be missed?

‘I apologise for all the interruptions today, really I do, it’s like a brothel in here with all the coming and going.’ Rews twisted his cracked and swollen lips into a sad smile. *Smiling at a time like this, he’s a marvel. But all things must end.* ‘Let us be honest, Rews. No one is coming to help you. Not today, not tomorrow, not ever. You will confess. The only choices you have are when, and the state you’ll be in when you do. There’s really nothing to be gained by putting it off. Except pain. We’ve got lots of that for you.’

It was hard to read the expression on Rews’ bloody face, but his shoulders sagged. He dipped the pen in the ink with a trembling hand, wrote his name,

slightly slanted, across the bottom of the paper of confession. *I win again. Does my leg hurt any less? Do I have my teeth back? Has it helped me to destroy this man, who I once called a friend? Then why do I do this?* The scratching of the nib on the paper was the only reply.

'Excellent,' said Glokta. Practical Frost turned the document over. 'And this is the list of your accomplices?' He let his eye scan lazily over the names. *A handful of junior Mercers, three ship's captains, an officer of the city watch, a pair of minor customs officials. A tedious recipe indeed. Let us see if we can add some spice.* Glokta turned it around and pushed it back across the table. 'Add Sepp dan Teufel's name to the list, Rews.'

The fat man looked confused. 'The Master of the Mints?' he mumbled, through his thick lips.

'That's the one.'

'But I never met the man.'

'So?' snapped Glokta. 'Do as I tell you.' Rews paused, mouth a little open. 'Write, you fat pig.' Practical Frost cracked his knuckles.

Rews licked his lips. 'Sepp . . . dan . . . Teufel,' he mumbled to himself as he wrote.

'Excellent.' Glokta carefully shut the lid on his horrible, beautiful instruments. 'I'm glad for both our sakes that we won't be needing these today.'

Frost snapped the manacles shut on the prisoner's wrists and dragged him to his feet, started to march him toward the door at the back of the room. 'What now?' shouted Rews over his shoulder.

'Angland, Rews, Angland. Don't forget to pack something warm.' The door cracked shut behind him. Glokta looked at the list of names in his hands. Sepp dan Teufel's sat at the bottom. *One name. On the face of it, just like the others. Teufel. Just one more name. But such a perilous one.*

Severard was waiting outside in the corridor, smiling as always. 'Shall I put the fat man in the canal?'

'No, Severard. Put him in the next boat to Angland.'

'You're in a merciful mood today, Inquisitor.'

Glokta snorted. 'Mercy would be the canal. That swine won't last six weeks in the North. Forget him. We have to arrest Sepp dan Teufel tonight.'

Severard's eyebrows rose. 'Not the Master of the Mints?'

‘None other. On the express orders of his Eminence the Arch Lector. It seems he’s been taking money from the Mercers.’

‘Oh, for shame.’

‘We’ll leave as soon as it gets dark. Tell Frost to be ready.’

The thin Practical nodded, his long hair swaying. Glokta turned and hobbled up the corridor, cane tapping on the grimy tiles, left leg burning.

Why do I do this? He asked himself again.

Why do I do this?

No Choice at All

Logen woke with a painful jolt. He was lying awkwardly, head twisted against something hard, knees drawn up towards his chest. He opened his eyes a bleary crack. It was dark, but there was a faint glow coming from somewhere. Light through snow.

Panic stabbed at him. He knew where he was now. He'd piled some snow in the entrance to the tiny cave, to try and keep in the warmth, such as it was. It must have snowed while he was sleeping, and sealed him in. If the fall had been a heavy one there could be a lot of snow out there. Drifts deeper than a man was tall. He might never get out. He could have climbed all the way up out of the high valleys just to die in a hole in the rock, too cramped for him to even stretch out his legs.

Logen twisted round in the narrow space as best he could, dug away at the snow with his numb hands, floundering at it, grappling with it, hacking through it, mouthing breathless curses to himself. Light spilled in suddenly, searing bright. He shoved the last of the snow out of the way and dragged himself through into the open air.

The sky was a brilliant blue, the sun was blazing overhead. He turned his face towards it, closed his stinging eyes and let the light wash over him. The air was painful cold in his throat. Cutting cold. His mouth was dry as dust, his tongue a piece of wood, badly carved. He scooped up snow and shoved it into his mouth. It melted, he swallowed. Cold, it made his head hurt.

There was a graveyard stink coming from somewhere. Not just his own damp and sour sweat smell, though that was bad enough. It was the blanket, starting to rot. He had two pieces of it wrapped round his hands like mittens, tied round his wrists with twine, another round his head, like a dirty, foul-smelling hood. His boots were stuffed tight with it. The rest was wrapped round and round his body, under his coat. It smelled bad, but it had saved his life last night, and that was a good trade to Logen's mind. It would stink a good deal more before he could afford to get rid of it.

He floundered to his feet and stared about. A narrow valley, steep sided and choked with snow. Three great peaks surrounded it, piles of dark grey stone and white snow against the blue sky. He knew them. Old friends, in

fact. The only ones he had left. He was up in the High Places. The roof of the world. He was safe.

'Safe,' he croaked to himself, but without much joy. Safe from food, certainly. Safe from warmth, without a doubt. Neither of those things would be troubling him up here. He'd escaped the Shanka, maybe, but this was a place for the dead, and if he stayed he'd be joining them.

He was brutal hungry as it was. His belly was a great, painful hole that called to him with piercing cries. He fumbled in his pack for the last strip of meat. An old, brown, greasy thing like a dry twig. That would hardly fill the gap, but it was all he had. He tore at it with his teeth, tough as old boot leather, and choked it down with some snow.

Logen shielded his eyes with his arm and looked northward down the valley, the way he'd come the day before. The ground dropped slowly away, snow and rock giving way to the pine-covered fells of the high valleys, trees giving way to a crinkled strip of grazing land, grassy hills giving way to the sea, a sparkling line on the far horizon. Home. The thought of it made Logen feel sick.

Home. That was where his family was. His father – wise and strong, a good man, a good leader to his people. His wife, his children. They were a good family. They deserved a better son, a better husband, a better father. His friends were there too. Old and new together. It would be good to see them all again, very good. To speak to his father in the long hall. To play with his children, to sit with his wife by the river. To talk of tactics with Threetrees. To hunt with the Dogman in the high valleys, crashing through the forest with a spear, laughing like a fool.

Logen felt a sudden painful longing. He nearly choked on the pain of it. Trouble was, they were all dead. The hall was a ring of black splinters, the river a sewer. He'd never forget coming over the hill, seeing the burnt-out ruin in the valley below. Crawling through the ashes, fumbling for signs that someone got away, while the Dogman pulled at his shoulder and told him to give it up. Nothing but corpses, rotted past knowing. He was done looking for signs. They were all dead as the Shanka could make them, and that was dead for sure. He spat in the snow, brown spit from the dry meat. Dead and cold and rotted, or burned to ashes. Gone back to the mud.

Logen set his jaw and clenched his fists under the rotten shreds of blanket. He could go back to the ruins of the village by the sea, just one last time. He

could charge down with a fighting roar in his throat, the way he had done at Carleon, when he'd lost a finger and won a reputation. He could put a few Shanka out of the world. Split them like he'd split Shama Heartless, shoulder to guts so his insides fell out. He could get vengeance for his father, his wife, his children, his friends. That would be a fitting end for the one they called the Bloody-Nine. To die killing. That might be a song worth the singing.

But at Carleon he'd been young and strong, and with his friends behind him. Now he was weak, and hungry, and alone as could be. He'd killed Shama Heartless with a long sword, sharp as anything. He looked down at his knife. It might be a good one, but he'd get precious little vengeance with it. And who'd sing the song anyway? The Shanka had poor singing voices and worse imaginations, if they even recognised the stinking beggar in the blanket after they'd shot him full of arrows. Perhaps the vengeance could wait, at least until he had a bigger blade to work with. You have to be realistic, after all.

South then, and become a wanderer. There was always work for a man with his skills. Hard work perhaps, and dark, but work all the same. There was an appeal in it, he had to admit. To have no one depending on him but himself, for his decisions to hold no importance, for no one's life or death to be in his hands. He had enemies in the south, that was a fact. But the Bloody-Nine had dealt with enemies before.

He spat again. Now that he had some spit he thought he might make the most of it. It was about all he did have – spit, an old pot, and some stinking bits of blanket. Dead in the north or alive in the south. That was what it came down to, and that was no choice at all.

You carry on. That's what he'd always done. That's the task that comes with surviving, whether you deserve to live or not. You remember the dead as best you can. You say some words for them. Then you carry on, and you hope for better.

Logen took in a long, cold breath, and blew it out. 'Fare you well, my friends,' he muttered. 'Fare you well.' Then he threw his pack over his shoulder, turned, and began to flounder through the deep snow. Downwards, southwards, out of the mountains.

It was raining, still. A soft rain that coated everything in cold dew, collected on the branches, on the leaves, on the needles, and dripped off in great fat drops that soaked through Logen's wet clothes and onto his wet skin.

He squatted, still and silent, in the damp brush, water running down his face, the bright blade of his knife glistening with wet. He felt the great motion of the forest and heard all its thousand sounds. The countless crawling of the insects, the blind scuttling of the moles, the timid rustling of the deer, the slow pulsing of the sap in the old tree trunks. Each thing alive in the forest was in search of its own kind of food, and he was the same. He let his mind settle on an animal close to him, moving cautiously through the woods to his right. Delicious. The forest grew silent but for the endless dripping of water from the branches. The world shrank down to Logen and his next meal.

When he reckoned it was close enough, he sprang forward and bore it down onto the wet ground. A young deer. It kicked and struggled but he was strong and quick, and he stabbed his knife into its neck and chopped the throat out. Hot blood surged from the wound, spilled out across Logen's hands, onto the wet earth.

He picked up the carcass and slung it over his shoulders. That would be good in a stew, maybe with some mushrooms. Very good. Then, once he'd eaten, he would ask the spirits for guidance. Their guidance was pretty useless, but the company would be welcome.

When he reached his camp it was close to sunset. It was a dwelling fit for a hero of Logen's stature – two big sticks holding a load of damp branches over a hollow in the dirt. Still, it was halfway dry in there, and the rain had stopped. He would have a fire tonight. It was a long time since he'd had a treat like that. A fire, and all his own.

Later, well fed and rested, Logen pressed a lump of chagga into his pipe. He'd found it growing a few days before at the base of a tree, big moist yellow discs of it. He'd broken off a good chunk for himself, but it hadn't dried out enough to smoke until today. Now he took a burning twig from the fire and stuck it in the bowl, puffing away hard until the fungus caught and began to burn, giving off its familiar earthy-sweet smell.

Logen coughed, blew out brown smoke and stared into the shifting flames. His mind went back to other times and other campfires. The Dogman was there, grinning, the light gleaming on his pointy teeth. Tul

Duru was sitting opposite, big as a mountain, laughing like thunder. Forley the Weakest too, with those nervous eyes darting around, always a little scared. Rudd Threetrees was there, and Harding Grim, saying nothing. He never did say anything. That was why they called him Grim.

They were all there. Only they weren't. They were all dead, gone back to the mud. Logen tapped the pipe out into the fire and shoved it away. He had no taste for it now. His father had been right. You should never smoke alone.

He unscrewed the cap of the battered flask, took a mouthful, and blew it out in a spray of tiny drops. A gout of flame went up into the cold air. Logen wiped his lips, savouring the hot, bitter taste. Then he sat back against the knotted trunk of a pine, and waited.

It was a while before they came. Three of them. They came silently from the dancing shadows among the trees and made slowly for the fire, taking shape as they moved into the light.

'Ninefingers,' said the first.

'Ninefingers,' the second.

'Ninefingers,' the third, voices like the thousand sounds of the forest.

'You're right welcome to my fire,' said Logen. The spirits squatted and stared at him without expression. 'Only three tonight?'

The one on the right spoke first. 'Every year fewer of us wake from the winter. We are all that remain. A few more winters will pass, and we will sleep also. There will be none of us left to answer your call.'

Logen nodded sadly. 'Any news from the world?'

'We heard a man fell off a cliff but washed up alive, then crossed the High Places at the start of spring, wrapped in a rotten blanket, but we put no faith in such rumours.'

'Very wise.'

'Bethod has been making war,' said the spirit in the centre.

Logen frowned. 'Bethod is always making war. That's what he does.'

'Yes. He has won so many fights now, with your help, he has given himself a golden hat.'

'Shit on that bastard,' said Logen, spitting into the fire. 'What else?'

'North of the mountains, the Shanka run around and burn things.'

'They love the fire,' said the spirit in the centre.

‘They do,’ said the one on the left, ‘even more than your kind, Ninefingers. They love and fear it.’ The spirit leaned forwards. ‘We heard there is a man seeking for you in the moors to the south.’

‘A powerful man,’ said the one in the centre.

‘A Magus of the Old Time,’ the one on the left.

Logen frowned. He’d heard of these Magi. He met a sorcerer once, but he’d been easy to kill. No unnatural powers in particular, not that Logen had noticed. But a Magus was something else.

‘We heard that the Magi are wise and strong,’ said the spirit in the centre, ‘and that such a one could take a man far and show him many things. But they are crafty too, and have their own purposes.’

‘What does he want?’

‘Ask him.’ Spirits cared little for the business of men, they were always weak on the details. Still, this was better than the usual talk about trees.

‘What will you do, Ninefingers?’

Logen considered a moment. ‘I will go south and find this Magus, and ask him what he wants from me.’

The spirits nodded. They didn’t show whether they thought it was a good idea or bad. They didn’t care.

‘Farewell then, Ninefingers,’ said the spirit on the right, ‘perhaps for the last time.’

‘I’ll try to struggle on without you.’

Logen’s wit was wasted on them. They rose and moved away from the fire, fading gradually into the darkness. Soon they were gone, but Logen had to admit they had been more use than he dared to hope. They had given him a purpose.

He would head south in the morning, head south and find this Magus. Who knew? He might be a good talker. Had to be better than being shot full of arrows for nothing, at least. Logen looked into the flames, nodding slowly to himself.

He remembered other times and other campfires, when he had not been alone.

Playing With Knives

It was a beautiful spring day in Adua, and the sun shone pleasantly through the branches of the aromatic cedar, casting a dappled shade on the players beneath. A pleasing breeze fluttered through the courtyard, so the cards were clutched tightly or weighted down with glasses or coins. Birds twittered from the trees, and the shears of a gardener clacked across from the far side of the lawn, making faint, agreeable echoes against the tall white buildings of the quadrangle. Whether or not the players found the large sum of money in the centre of the table pleasant depended, of course, on the cards they held.

Captain Jezal dan Luthar certainly liked it. He had discovered an uncanny talent for the game since he gained his commission in the King's Own, a talent which he had used to win large sums of money from his comrades. He didn't really need the money, of course, coming from such a wealthy family, but it had allowed him to maintain an illusion of thrift while spending like a sailor. Whenever Jezal went home, his father bored everyone on the subject of his good fiscal planning, and had rewarded him by buying his Captaincy just six months ago. His brothers had not been happy. Yes, the money was certainly useful, and there's nothing half so amusing as humiliating one's closest friends.

Jezal half sat, half lay back on his bench with one leg stretched out, and allowed his eyes to wander over the other players. Major West had rocked his chair so far onto its back legs that he looked in imminent danger of tipping over entirely. He was holding his glass up to the sun, admiring the way that the light filtered through the amber spirit inside. He had a faint, mysterious smile which seemed to say, 'I am not a nobleman, and may be your social inferior, but I won a Contest and the King's favour on the battlefield and that makes me the better man, so you children will damn well do as I say.' He was out of this hand though, and, in Jezal's opinion, far too cautious with his money anyway.

Lieutenant Kaspa was sitting forward, frowning and scratching his sandy beard, staring intently at his cards as though they were sums he didn't understand. He was a good-humoured young man but an oaf of a card

player, and was always most appreciative when Jezal bought him drinks with his own money. Still, he could well afford to lose it: his father was one of the biggest landowners in the Union.

Jezal had often observed that the ever so slightly stupid will act more stupidly in clever company. Having lost the high ground already they scramble eagerly for the position of likeable idiot, stay out of arguments they will only lose, and can hence be everyone's friend. Kaspa's look of baffled concentration seemed to say, 'I am not clever, but honest and likeable, which is much more important. Cleverness is overrated. Oh, and I'm very, very rich, so everyone likes me regardless.'

'I believe I'll stay with you,' said Kaspa, and tossed a small stack of silver coins onto the table. They broke and flashed in the sun with a cheerful jingle. Jezal absently added up the total in his head. A new uniform perhaps? Kaspa always got a little quivery when he really held good cards, and he was not trembling now. To say that he was bluffing was to give him far too much credit; more likely he was simply bored with sitting out. Jezal had no doubt that he would fold up like a cheap tent on the next round of betting.

Lieutenant Jalenhorm scowled and tossed his cards onto the table. 'I've had nothing but shit today!' he rumbled. He sat back in his chair and hunched his brawny shoulders with a frown that said, 'I am big and manly, and have a quick temper, so I should be treated with respect by everyone.' Respect was precisely what Jezal never gave him at the card table. A bad temper might be useful in a fight, but it's a liability where money is concerned. It was a shame his hand hadn't been a little better, or Jezal could've bullied him out of half his pay. Jalenhorm drained his glass and reached for the bottle.

That just left Brint, the youngest and poorest of the group. He licked his lips with an expression at once careful and slightly desperate, an expression which seemed to say, 'I am not young or poor. I can afford to lose this money. I am every bit as important as the rest of you.' He had a lot of money today; perhaps his allowance had just come in. Perhaps that was all he had to live on for the next couple of months. Jezal planned to take that money away from him and waste it all on women and drink. He had to stop himself giggling at the thought. He could giggle when he'd won the hand.

Brint sat back and considered carefully. He might be some time making his decision, so Jezal took his pipe from the table.

He lit it at the lamp provided especially for that purpose and blew ragged smoke rings up into the branches of the cedar. He wasn't half as good at smoking as he was at cards, unfortunately, and most of the rings were no more than ugly puffs of yellow-brown vapour. If he was being completely honest, he didn't really enjoy smoking. It made him feel a bit sick, but it was very fashionable and very expensive, and Jezal would be damned if he would miss out on something fashionable just because he didn't like it. Besides, his father had bought him a beautiful ivory pipe the last time he was in the city, and it looked very well on him. His brothers had not been happy about that either, come to think of it.

'I'm in,' said Brint.

Jezal swung his leg off the bench. 'Then I raise you a hundred marks or so.' He shoved his whole stack into the centre of the table. West sucked air through his teeth. A coin fell from the top of the pile, landed on its edge and rolled along the wood. It dropped to the flags beneath with the unmistakeable sound of falling money. The head of the gardener on the other side of the lawn snapped up instinctively, before he returned to his clipping of the grass.

Kaspa shoved his cards away as though they were burning his fingers and shook his head. 'Damn it but I'm an oaf of a card player,' he lamented, and leaned back against the rough brown trunk of the tree.

Jezal stared straight at Lieutenant Brint, a slight smile on his face, giving nothing away. 'He's bluffing,' rumbled Jalenhorm, 'don't let him push you around, Brint.'

'Don't do it, Lieutenant,' said West, but Jezal knew he would. He had to look as if he could afford to lose. Brint didn't hesitate, he pushed all his own coins in with a careless flourish.

'That's a hundred, give or take.' Brint was trying his hardest to sound masterful in front of the older officers, but his voice had a charming note of hysteria.

'Good enough,' said Jezal, 'we're all friends here. What do you have, Lieutenant?'

'I have earth.' Brint's eyes had a slightly feverish look to them as he showed his cards to the group.

Jezal savoured the tense atmosphere. He frowned, shrugged, raised his eyebrows. He scratched his head thoughtfully. He watched Brint's expression change as he changed his own. Hope, despair, hope, despair. At length Jezal spread his cards out on the table. 'Oh look. I have suns, again.'

Brint's face was a picture. West gave a sigh and shook his head. Jalenhorm frowned. 'I was sure he was bluffing,' he said.

'How does he do it?' asked Kaspa, flicking a stray coin across the table.

Jezal shrugged. 'It's all about the players, and nothing about the cards.' He began to scoop up the heap of silver while Brint looked on, teeth gritted, face pale. The money jingled into the bag with a pleasant sound. Pleasant to Jezal, anyway. A coin dropped from the table and fell next to Brint's boot. 'You couldn't fetch that for me could you Lieutenant?' asked Jezal, with a syrupy smile.

Brint stood up quickly, knocking into the table and making the coins and glasses jump and rattle. 'I've things to do,' he said in a thick voice, then shouldered roughly past Jezal, barging him against the trunk of the tree, and strode off toward the edge of the courtyard. He disappeared into the officers' quarters, head down.

'Did you see that?' Jezal was becoming ever more indignant with each passing moment. 'Barging me like that, it's damn impolite! And me his superior officer as well! I've a good mind to put him on report!' A chorus of disapproving sounds greeted this mention of reports. 'Well, he's a bad loser is all!'

Jalenhorm looked sternly out from beneath his brows. 'You shouldn't bite him so hard. He isn't rich. He can't afford to lose.'

'Well if he can't afford to lose he shouldn't play!' snapped Jezal, upset. 'Who's the one told him I was bluffing? You should keep your big mouth shut!'

'He's new here,' said West, 'he just wants to fit in. Weren't you new once?'

'What are you, my father?' Jezal remembered being new with painful clarity, and the mention of it made him feel just a little ashamed.

Kaspa waved his hand. 'I'll lend him some money, don't worry.'

'He won't take it,' said Jalenhorm.

'Well, that's his business.' Kaspa closed his eyes and turned his face up to the sun. 'Hot. Winter is truly over. Must be getting past midday.'

‘Shit!’ shouted Jezal, starting up and gathering his things. The gardener paused in his trimming of the lawn and looked over at them. ‘Why didn’t you say something, West?’

‘What am I, your father?’ asked the Major. Kaspa sniggered.

‘Late again,’ said Jalenhorm, blowing out his cheeks. ‘The Lord Marshal will not be happy!’

Jezal snatched up his fencing steels and ran for the far side of the lawn. Major West ambled after him. ‘Come on!’ shouted Jezal.

‘I’m right behind you, Captain,’ he said. ‘Right behind you.’

‘Jab, jab, Jezal, jab, jab!’ barked Lord Marshal Varuz, whacking him on the arm with his stick.

‘Ow,’ yelped Jezal, and hefted the metal bar again.

‘I want to see that right arm moving, Captain, darting like a snake! I want to be blinded by the speed of those hands!’

Jezal made a couple more clumsy lunges with the unwieldy lump of iron. It was utter torture. His fingers, his wrist, his forearm, his shoulder, were burning with the effort. He was soaked to the skin with sweat; it flew from his face in big drops. Marshal Varuz flicked his feeble efforts away. ‘Now, cut! Cut with the left!’

Jezal swung the big smith’s hammer at the old man’s head with all the strength in his left arm. He could barely lift the damn thing on a good day. Marshal Varuz stepped effortlessly aside and whacked him in the face with the stick.

‘Yow!’ wailed Jezal, as he stumbled back. He fumbled the hammer and it dropped on his foot. ‘Aaargh!’ The iron bar clanged to the floor as he bent down to grab his screaming toes. He felt a stinging pain as Varuz whacked him across the arse, the sharp smack echoing across the courtyard, and he sprawled onto his face.

‘That’s pitiful!’ shouted the old man. ‘You are embarrassing me in front of Major West!’ The Major had rocked his chair back and was shaking with muffled laughter. Jezal stared at the Marshal’s immaculately polished boots, seeing no pressing need to get up.

‘Up, Captain Luthar!’ shouted Varuz. ‘My time at least is valuable! ’

‘Alright! Alright!’ Jezal clambered wearily to his feet and stood there swaying in the hot sun, panting for air, running with sweat.

Varuz stepped close to him and sniffed at his breath. ‘Have you been drinking today already?’ he demanded, his grey moustaches bristling. ‘And last night too, no doubt!’ Jezal had no reply. ‘Well damn you, then! We have work to do, Captain Luthar, and I cannot do it alone! Four months until the Contest, four months to make a master swordsman of you!’

Varuz waited for a reply, but Jezal could not think of one. He was only really doing this to make his father happy, but somehow he didn’t think that was what the old soldier wanted to hear, and he could do without being hit again. ‘Bah!’ Varuz barked in Jezal’s face, and turned away, stick clenched tight behind him in both hands.

‘Marshal Var—’ Jezal began, but before he could finish the old soldier span around and jabbed him right in the stomach.

‘Gargh,’ said Jezal as he sank to his knees. Varuz stood over him.

‘You are going to go on a little run for me, Captain.’

‘Aaaargh.’

‘You are going to run from here to the Tower of Chains. You are going to run up the tower to the parapet. We will know when you have arrived, as the Major and I will be enjoying a relaxing game of squares on the roof,’ he indicated the six-storey building behind him, ‘in plain view of the top of the tower. I will be able to see you with my eye-glass, so there will be no cheating this time!’ and he whacked Jezal on the top of the head.

‘Ow,’ said Jezal, rubbing his scalp.

‘Having shown yourself on the roof, you will run back. You will run as fast as you can, and I know this to be true, because if you have not returned by the time we have finished our game, you will go again.’ Jezal winced. ‘Major West is an excellent hand at squares, so it should take me half an hour to beat him. I suggest you begin at once.’

Jezal lurched to his feet and jogged toward the archway at the far side of the courtyard, muttering curses.

‘You’ll need to go faster than that, Captain!’ Varuz called after him. Jezal’s legs were blocks of lead, but he urged them on.

‘Knees up!’ shouted Major West cheerily.

Jezal clattered down the passageway, past a smirking porter sitting by the door, and out onto the broad avenue beyond. He jogged past the ivy-covered walls of the University, cursing the names of Varuz and West under his heaving breath, then by the near windowless mass of the House of

Questions, its heavy front gate sealed tight. He passed a few colourless clerks hurrying this way and that, but the Agriont was quiet at this time of the afternoon, and Jezal saw nobody of interest until he passed into the park.

Three fashionable young ladies were sitting in the shade of a spreading willow by the lake, accompanied by an elderly chaperone. Jezal upped his pace immediately, and replaced his tortured expression with a nonchalant smile.

'Ladies,' he said as he flashed past. He heard them giggling to one another behind him and silently congratulated himself, but slowed to half the speed as soon as he was out of sight.

'Varuz be damned,' he said to himself, nearly walking as he turned onto the Kingsway, but had to speed up again straight away. Crown Prince Ladisla was not twenty strides off, holding forth to his enormous, brightly coloured retinue.

'Captain Luthar!' shouted his Highness, sunlight flashing off his outrageous golden buttons, 'run for all you're worth! I have a thousand marks on you to win the Contest!'

Jezal had it on good authority that the Prince had backed Bremer dan Gorst to the tune of two thousand marks, but he still bowed as low as he possibly could while running. The prince's entourage of dandies cheered and shouted half-hearted encouragements at his receding back. 'Bloody idiots,' hissed Jezal under his breath, but he would have loved to be one of them.

He passed the huge stone effigies of six hundred years of High Kings on his right, the statues of their loyal retainers, slightly smaller, on his left. He nodded to the great Magus Bayaz just before he turned into the Square of Marshals, but the wizard frowned back as disapprovingly as ever, the awe-inspiring effect only slightly diminished by a streak of white pigeon shit on his stony cheek.

With the Open Council in session the square was almost empty, and Jezal was able to amble over to the gate of the Halls Martial. A thick set sergeant nodded to him as he passed through, and Jezal wondered whether he might be from his own company – the common soldiers all looked the same, after all. He ignored the man and ran on between the towering white buildings.

‘Perfect,’ muttered Jezal. Jalenhorm and Kaspa were sitting by the door to the Tower of Chains, smoking pipes and laughing. The bastards must have guessed that he’d be coming this way.

‘For honour, and glory!’ bellowed Kaspa, rattling his sword in its scabbard as Jezal ran by. ‘Don’t keep the Lord Marshal waiting!’ he shouted from behind, and Jezal heard the big man roaring with amusement.

‘Bloody idiots,’ panted Jezal, shouldering open the heavy door, breath rasping as he started up the steep spiral staircase. It was one of the highest towers in the Agriont: there were two hundred and ninety-one steps in all. ‘Bloody steps,’ he cursed to himself. By the time he reached the hundredth his legs were burning and his chest was heaving. By the time he reached the two-hundredth he was a wreck. He walked the rest of the way, every footfall torture, and eventually burst out through a turret onto the roof and leaned on the parapet, blinking in the sudden brightness.

To the south the city was spread out below him, an endless carpet of white houses stretching all around the glittering bay. In the other direction, the view over the Agriont was even more impressive. A great confusion of magnificent buildings piled one upon the other, broken up by green lawns and great trees, circled by its wide moat and its towering wall, studded with a hundred lofty towers. The Kingsway sliced straight through the centre toward the Lords’ Round, its bronze dome shining in the sunlight. The tall spires of the University stood behind, and beyond them loomed the grim immensity of the House of the Maker, rearing high over all like a dark mountain, casting its long shadow across the buildings below.

Jezal fancied that he saw the sun glint on Marshal Varuz’ eye-glass in the distance. He cursed once again and made for the stairs.

*

Jezal was immensely relieved when he finally made it to the roof and saw that there were still a few white pieces on the board.

Marshal Varuz frowned up at him. ‘You are very lucky. The Major has put up an exceptionally determined defence.’ A smile broke West’s features. ‘You must somehow have earned his respect, even if you have yet to win mine.’

Jezal bent over with his hands on his knees, blowing hard and dripping sweat onto the floor. Varuz took the long case from the table, walked over to Jezal and flipped it open. ‘Show us your forms.’

Jezal took the short steel in his left hand and the long in his right. They felt light as feathers after the heavy iron. Marshal Varuz backed away a step. ‘Begin.’

He snapped into the first form, right arm extended, left close to the body. The blades swished and weaved through the air, glittering in the afternoon sun as Jezal moved from one familiar stance to the next with a practised smoothness. At length he was finished, and he let the steels drop to his sides.

Varuz nodded. ‘The Captain has fast hands, has he not?’

‘Truly excellent,’ said Major West, smiling broadly. ‘A damn sight better than ever I was.’

The Lord Marshal was less impressed. ‘Your knees are too far bent in the third form, and you must strive for more extension on the left arm in the fourth, but otherwise,’ he paused, ‘passable.’ Jezal breathed a sigh of relief. That was high praise indeed.

‘Hah!’ shouted the old man, striking him in the ribs with the end of the case. Jezal sank to the floor, hardly able to breathe. ‘Your reflexes need work, though, Captain. You should always be ready. Always. If you have steels in your hands, you damn well keep them up.’

‘Yes, sir,’ croaked Jezal.

‘And your stamina is a disgrace, you are blowing like a carp. I have it on good authority that Bremer dan Gorst runs ten miles a day, and barely shows a sweat.’ Marshal Varuz leaned down over him. ‘From now on you will do the same. Oh yes. A circuit of the wall of the Agriont every morning at six, followed by an hour of sparring with Major West, who has been kind enough to agree to act as your partner. I am confident that he will point up all the little weaknesses in your technique.’

Jezal winced and rubbed his aching ribs. ‘As for the carousing, I want an end to it. I am all for revelry in its proper place, but there will be time for celebration after the Contest, providing you have worked hard enough to win. Until then, clean living is what we need. Do you understand me, Captain Luthar?’ He leaned down further, pronouncing every word with great care. ‘Clean. Living. Captain.’

‘Yes, Marshal Varuz,’ mumbled Jezal.

Six hours later he was drunker than shit. Laughing like a lunatic he plunged out into the street, head spinning. The cold air slapped him hard in the face, the mean little buildings weaved and swayed, the ill-lit road tipped like a sinking ship. Jezal wrestled manfully with the urge to vomit, took a swaggering step out into the street, turned to face the door. Smeary bright light and loud sounds of laughter and shouting washed out at him. A ragged shape flew from the tavern and struck him in the chest. Jezal grappled with it desperately, then fell. He hit the ground with a bone-jarring crash.

The world was dark for a moment, then he found himself squashed into the dirt with Kaspa on top of him. ‘Damn it!’ he gurgled, tongue thick and clumsy in his mouth. He shoved the giggling Lieutenant away with his elbow, rolled over and lurched up, stumbling about as the street see-sawed around him. Kaspa lay on his back in the dirt, choking with laughter, reeking of cheap booze and sour smoke. Jezal made a lame attempt to brush the dirt from his uniform. There was a big wet patch on his chest that smelled of beer. ‘Damn it!’ he mumbled again. When had that happened?

He became aware of some shouting on the other side of the road. Two men grappling in a doorway. Jezal squinted hard, strained against the gloom. A big man had hold of some well-dressed fellow, and seemed to be tying his hands behind his back. Now he was forcing some kind of bag over his head. Jezal blinked in disbelief. It was far from a reputable area, but this seemed somewhat strong.

The door of the tavern banged open and West and Jalenhorm came out, deep in drunken conversation, something about someone’s sister. Bright light cut across the street and illuminated the two struggling men starkly. The big one was dressed all in black, with a mask over the lower part of his face. He had white hair, white eyebrows, skin white as milk. Jezal stared at the white devil across the road, and he glared back with narrowed pink eyes.

‘Help!’ It was the fellow with the bag on his head, his voice shrill with fear. ‘Help, I am—’ The white man dealt him a savage blow in the midriff and he folded up with a sigh.

‘You there!’ shouted West.

Jalenhorm was already rushing across the street.

‘What?’ said Kaspa, propped up on his elbows in the road.

Jezal’s mind was full of mud, but his feet seemed to be following Jalenhorm, so he stumbled along with them, feeling very sick. West came behind him. The white ghost started up and turned to stand between them and his prisoner. Another man moved briskly out of the shadows, tall and thin, dressed all in black and masked, but with long greasy hair. He held up a gloved hand.

‘Gentlemen,’ his whining commoner’s voice was muffled by his mask, ‘gentlemen please, we’re on the King’s business!’

‘The King conducts his business in the day-time,’ growled Jalenhorm.

The new arrival’s mask twitched slightly as he smiled. ‘That’s why he needs us for the night-time stuff, eh, friend?’

‘Who is this man?’ West was pointing at the fellow with the bag on his head.

The prisoner was struggling up again. ‘I am Sepp dan – oof!’ The white monster silenced him with a heavy fist in the face, knocking him limp into the road.

Jalenhorm put a hand on the hilt of his sword, jaw clenching, and the white ghost loomed forward with a terrible speed. Close up he was even more massive, alien, and terrifying. Jalenhorm took an involuntary step back, stumbled on the rutted surface of the road and pitched onto his back with a crash. Jezal’s head was thumping.

‘Back!’ bellowed West. His sword whipped out of its scabbard with a faint ringing.

‘Thaaaaah!’ hissed the monster, fists clenched like two big white rocks.

‘Aargh,’ gurgled the man with the bag on his head.

Jezal’s heart was in his mouth. He looked at the thin man. The thin man’s eyes smiled back. How could anyone smile at a time like this? Jezal was surprised to see that he had a long, ugly knife in his hand. Where did that come from? He fumbled drunkenly for his sword.

‘Major West!’ came a voice from the shadows down the street. Jezal paused, uncertain, steel halfway out. Jalenhorm scrambled to his feet, the back of his uniform crusted with mud, pulled out his own sword. The pale monster stared at them unblinking, not retreating a finger’s breadth.

‘Major West!’ came the voice again, accompanied now by a clicking, scraping sound. West’s face had turned pale. A figure emerged from the

shadows, limping badly, cane tapping on the dirt. His broad-brimmed hat obscured the upper part of his face, but his mouth was twisted into a strange smile. Jezal noticed with a sudden wave of nausea that his four front teeth were missing. He shuffled towards them, ignoring all the naked steel, and offered his free hand to West.

The Major slowly sheathed his sword, took the hand and shook it limply. 'Colonel Glokta?' he asked in a husky voice.

'Your humble servant, though I'm no longer an army man. I'm with the King's Inquisition now.' He reached up slowly and removed his hat. His face was deathly pale, deeply lined, close-cropped hair scattered with grey. His eyes stared out feverish bright from deep, dark rings, the left one noticeably narrower than the right, pink-rimmed and glistening wet. 'And these are my assistants, Practicals Severard,' the lanky one gave a mockery of a bow, 'and Frost.'

The white monster jerked the prisoner to his feet with one hand. 'Hold on,' said Jalenhorm, stepping forward, but the Inquisitor put a gentle hand on his arm.

'This man is a prisoner of His Majesty's Inquisition, Lieutenant Jalenhorm.' The big man paused, surprised to be called by name. 'I realise your motives are of the best, but he is a criminal, a traitor. I have a warrant for him, signed by Arch Lector Sult himself. He is most unworthy of your assistance, believe me.'

Jalenhorm frowned and stared balefully at Practical Frost. The pale devil looked terrified. About as terrified as a stone. He hauled the prisoner over his shoulder without apparent effort and turned up the street. The one called Severard smiled with his eyes, sheathed his knife, bowed again and followed his companion, whistling tunelessly as he sauntered off.

The Inquisitor's left eyelid began to flutter and tears rolled down his pale cheek. He wiped it carefully on the back of his hand. 'Please forgive me. Honestly. It's coming to something when a man can't control his own eyes, eh? Damn weeping jelly. Sometimes I think I should just have it out, and make do with a patch.' Jezal's stomach roiled. 'How long has it been, West? Seven years? Eight?'

A muscle was working on the side of the Major's head. 'Nine.'

'Imagine that. Nine years. Can you believe it? It seems like only yesterday. It was on the ridge, wasn't it, where we parted?'

‘On the ridge, yes.’

‘Don’t worry, West, I don’t blame you in the least.’ Glokta slapped the Major warmly on the arm. ‘Not for that, anyway. You tried to talk me out of it, I remember. I had time enough to think about it in Gurkhul, after all. Lots of time to think. You were always a good friend to me. And now young Collem West, a Major in the King’s Own, imagine that.’ Jezal had not the slightest idea what they were talking about. He wanted only to be sick, then go to bed.

Inquisitor Glokta turned toward him with a smile, displaying once again the hideous gap in his teeth. ‘And this must be Captain Luthar, for whom everyone has such high hopes in the coming Contest. Marshal Varuz is a hard master, is he not?’ He waved his cane weakly at Jezal. ‘Jab, jab, eh, Captain? Jab, jab.’

Jezal felt his bile rising. He coughed and looked down at his feet, willing the world to remain motionless. The Inquisitor looked around expectantly at each of them in turn. West looked pale. Jalenhorm mud-stained and sulky. Kaspa was still sitting in the road. None of them had anything to say.

Glokta cleared his throat. ‘Well, duty calls,’ he bowed stiffly, ‘but I hope to see you all again. Very soon.’ Jezal found himself hoping he never saw the man again.

‘Perhaps we might fence again sometime?’ muttered Major West.

Glokta gave a good natured laugh. ‘Oh, I would enjoy that, West, but I find that I’m ever so slightly crippled these days. If you’re after a fight, I’m sure that Practical Frost could oblige you,’ he looked over at Jalenhorm, ‘but I must warn you, he doesn’t fight like a gentleman. I wish you all a pleasant evening.’ He placed his hat back on his head then turned slowly and shuffled off down the dingy street.

The three officers watched him limp away in an interminable, awkward silence. Kaspa finally stumbled over. ‘What was all that about?’ he asked.

‘Nothing,’ said West through gritted teeth. ‘Best we forget it ever happened.’

Teeth and Fingers

T*ime is short. We must work quickly*. Glokta nodded to Severard, and he smiled and pulled the bag off Sepp dan Teufel's head.

The Master of the Mints was a strong, noble-looking man. His face was already starting to bruise. 'What is the meaning of this?' he roared, all bluster and bravado. 'Do you know who I am?'

Glokta snorted. 'Of course we know who you are. Do you think we are in the habit of snatching people from the streets at random?'

'I am the Master of the Royal Mints!' yelled the prisoner, struggling at his bonds. Practical Frost looked on impassively, arms folded. The irons were already glowing orange in the brazier. 'How dare you ...'

'We cannot have these constant interruptions!' shouted Glokta. Frost kicked Teufel savagely in the shin and he yelped with pain. 'How can our prisoner sign his paper of confession if his hands are tied? Please release him.'

Teufel stared suspiciously around as the albino untied his wrists. Then he saw the cleaver. The polished blade shone mirror bright in the harsh lamp light. *Truly a thing of beauty. You'd like to have that, wouldn't you, Teufel? I bet you'd like to cut my head off with it.* Glokta almost hoped that he would, his right hand seemed to be reaching for it, but he used it to shove the paper of confession away instead.

'Ah,' said Glokta, 'the Master of the Mints is a right-handed gentleman.'

'A right-handed gentleman,' Severard hissed in the prisoner's ear.

Teufel was staring across the table through narrowed eyes. 'I know you! Glokta, isn't it? The one who was captured in Gurkhul, the one they tortured. Sand dan Glokta, am I right? Well, you're in over your head this time, I can tell you! Right in over your head! When High Justice Marovia hears about this ...'

Glokta sprang to his feet, his chair screeching on the tiles. His left leg was agony, but he ignored it. 'Look at this!' he hissed, then opened his mouth wide, giving the horrified prisoner a good look at his teeth. *Or what's left of them.* 'You see that? You see? Where they cracked out the teeth above, they left them below, and where they took them out below, they left them above,

all the way to the back. See?' Glokta pulled his cheeks back with his fingers so Teufel could get a better view. 'They did it with a tiny chisel. A little bit each day. It took months.' Glokta sat down stiffly, then smiled wide.

'What excellent work, eh? The irony of it! To leave you half your teeth, but not a one of 'em any use! I have soup most days.' The Master of the Mints swallowed hard. Glokta could see a drop of sweat running down his neck. 'And the teeth were just the beginning. I have to piss sitting down like a woman, you know. I'm thirty-five years old, and I need help getting out of bed.' He leaned back again and stretched out his leg with a wince. 'Every day is its own little hell for me. Every day. So tell me, can you seriously believe that anything you might say could scare me?'

Glokta studied his prisoner, taking his time. *No longer half so sure of himself.* 'Confess,' he whispered. 'Then we can ship you off to Angland and still get some sleep tonight.'

Teufel's face had turned almost as pale as Practical Frost's, but he said nothing. *The Arch Lector will be here soon. Already on his way, most likely. If there is no confession when he arrives . . . we'll all be off to Angland. At best.* Glokta took hold of his cane and got to his feet. 'I like to think of myself as an artist, but artistry takes time and we have wasted half the evening searching for you in every brothel in the city. Thankfully, Practical Frost has a keen nose and an excellent sense of direction. He can sniff out a rat in a shithouse.'

'A rat in a shithouse,' echoed Severard, eyes glittering bright in the orange glow from the brazier.

'We are on a tight schedule so let me be blunt. You will confess to me within ten minutes.'

Teufel snorted and folded his arms. 'Never.'

'Hold him.' Frost seized the prisoner from behind and folded him in a vice-like grip, pinning his right arm to his side. Severard grabbed hold of his left wrist and spread his fingers out on the scarred table-top. Glokta curled his fist round the smooth grip of the cleaver, the blade scraping against the wood as he pulled it slowly towards him. He stared down at Teufel's hand. *What beautiful fingernails he has. How long and glossy. You cannot work down a mine with nails like that.* Glokta raised the cleaver high.

'Wait!' screamed the prisoner.

Bang! The heavy blade bit deep into the table top, neatly paring off Teufel's middle fingernail. He was breathing fast now, and there was a sheen of sweat on his forehead. *Now we'll see what kind of a man you really are.*

'I think you can see where this is going,' said Glokta. 'You know, they did it to a corporal who was captured with me, one cut a day. He was a tough man, very tough. They made it past his elbow before he died.' Glokta lifted the cleaver again. 'Confess.'

'You couldn't ...'

Bang! The cleaver took off the very tip of Teufel's middle finger. Blood bubbled out on to the table top. Severard's eyes were smiling in the lamp light. Teufel's jaw dropped. *But the pain will be a while coming.* 'Confess!' bellowed Glokta.

Bang! The cleaver took off the top of Teufel's ring finger, and a little disc out of his middle finger which rolled a short way and dropped off onto the floor. Frost's face was carved from marble. 'Confess!'

Bang! The tip of Teufel's index finger jumped in the air. His middle finger was down to the first joint. Glokta paused, wiping the sweat from his forehead on the back of his hand. His leg was throbbing with the exertion. Blood was dripping onto the tiles with a steady tap, tap, tap. Teufel was staring wide-eyed at his shortened fingers.

Severard shook his head. 'That's excellent work, Inquisitor.' He flicked one of the discs of flesh across the table. 'The precision . . . I'm in awe.'

'Aaaargh!' screamed the Master of the Mints. *Now it dawns on him.* Glokta raised the cleaver once again.

'I will confess!' shrieked Teufel, 'I will confess!'

'Excellent,' said Glokta brightly.

'Excellent,' said Severard.

'Etherer,' said Practical Frost.

The Wide and Barren North

The Magi are an ancient and mysterious order, learned in the secrets of the world, practised in the ways of magic, wise and powerful beyond the dreams of men. That was the rumour. Such a one should have ways of finding a man, even a man alone in the wide and barren North. If that was so, then he was taking his time about it.

Logen scratched at his tangled beard and wondered what was keeping the great one. Perhaps he was lost. He asked himself again if he should have stayed in the forests, where food at least was plentiful. But to the south the spirits had said, and if you went south from the hills you came to these withered moors. So here he had waited in the briars and the mud, in bad weather, and mostly gone hungry.

His boots were worn out anyway, so he had set his miserable camp not far from the road, the better to see this wizard coming. Since the wars, the North was full of dangerous scum – deserting warriors turned bandit, peasants fled from their burned-out land, leaderless and desperate men with nothing left to lose, and so on. Logen wasn't worried, though. No one had a reason to come to this arsehole of the world. No one but him and the Magus.

So he sat and waited, looked for food, didn't find any, sat and waited some more. At this time of year the moors were often soaked by sudden downpours, but he would have smoky, thorny little fires by night if he could, to keep his flagging spirits up and attract any passing wizards. It had been raining this evening, but it had stopped a while before and it was dry enough for a fire. Now he had his pot over it, cooking a stew with the last of the meat he had brought with him from the forest. He would have to move on in the morning, and look for food. The Magus could catch up with him later, if he still cared.

He was stirring his meagre meal, and wondering whether to go back north or move on south tomorrow, when he heard the sound of hooves on the road. One horse, moving slowly. He sat back on his coat and waited. There was a neigh, the jingle of a harness. A rider came over the rise. With the watery sun low on the horizon behind, Logen couldn't see him clearly, but

he sat stiff and awkward in his saddle, like a man not used to the road. He urged his horse gently in the direction of the fire and reined in a few yards away.

'Good evening,' he said.

He was not in the least what Logen had been expecting. A gaunt, pale, sickly-looking young man with dark rings round his eyes, long hair plastered to his head by the drizzle and a nervous smile. He seemed more wet than wise, and certainly didn't look powerful beyond the dreams of men. He looked mostly hungry, cold, and ill. He looked something like Logen felt, in fact.

'Shouldn't you have a staff?'

The young man looked surprised. 'I don't . . . that is to say . . . er . . . I'm not a Magus.' He trailed off and licked his lips nervously.

'The spirits told me to expect a Magus, but they're often wrong.'

'Oh . . . well, I'm an apprentice. But my Master, the great Bayaz,' and he bowed his head reverently, 'is none other than the First of the Magi, great in High Art and learned in deep wisdom. He sent me to find you,' he looked suddenly doubtful, 'and bring you . . . you are Logen Ninefingers?'

Logen held up his left hand and looked at the pale young man through the gap where his middle finger used to be. 'Oh good.' The apprentice breathed a sigh of relief, then suddenly stopped himself. 'Oh, that is to say . . . er . . . sorry about the finger.'

Logen laughed. It was the first time since he dragged himself out of the river. It wasn't very funny but he laughed loud. It felt good. The young man smiled and slipped painfully from the saddle. 'I am Malacus Quai.'

'Malacus what?'

'Quai,' he said, making for the fire.

'What kind of a name is that?'

'I am from the Old Empire.'

Logen had never heard of any such place. 'An empire, eh?' 'Well, it was, once. The mightiest nation in the Circle of the World.' The young man squatted down stiffly by the fire. 'But the glory of the past is long faded. It's not much more than a huge battlefield now.' Logen nodded. He knew well enough what one of those looked like. 'It's far away. In the west of the world.' The apprentice waved his hand vaguely.

Logen laughed again. 'That's east.'

Quai smiled sadly. ‘I am a seer, though not, it seems, a very good one. Master Bayaz sent me to find you, but the stars have not been auspicious and I became lost in the bad weather.’ He pushed his hair out of his eyes and spread his hands. ‘I had a packhorse, with food and supplies, and another horse for you, but I lost them in a storm. I fear I am no outdoorsman.’

‘Seems not.’

Quai took a flask from his pocket and leaned across with it. Logen took it from him, opened it, took a swig. The hot liquor ran down his throat, warmed him to the roots of his hair. ‘Well, Malacus Quai, you lost your food but you kept hold of what really mattered. It takes an effort to make me smile these days. You’re right welcome at my fire.’

‘Thank you.’ The apprentice paused and held his palms out to the meagre flames. ‘I haven’t eaten for two days.’ He shook his head, hair flapping back and forth. ‘It has been . . . a difficult time.’ He licked his lips and looked at the pot.

Logen passed him the spoon. Malacus Quai stared at it with big round eyes. ‘Have you eaten?’

Logen nodded. He hadn’t, but the wretched apprentice looked famished and there was barely enough for one. He took another swig from the flask. That would do for him, for now. Quai attacked the stew with relish. When it was done he scraped the pot out, licked the spoon, then licked the edge of the pot for good measure. He sat back against a big rock. ‘I am forever in your debt, Logen Ninefingers, you’ve saved my life. I hardly dared hope you’d be so gracious a host.’

‘You’re not quite what I expected either, being honest.’ Logen pulled at the flask again, and licked his lips. ‘Who is this Bayaz?’

‘The First of the Magi, great in High Art and learned in deep wisdom. I fear he will be most seriously displeased with me.’

‘He’s to be feared, then?’

‘Well,’ replied the apprentice weakly, ‘he does have a bit of a temper.’

Logen took another swallow. The warmth was spreading through his body now, the first time he had felt warm in weeks. There was a pause. ‘What does he want from me, Quai?’

There was no reply. The soft sound of snoring came from across the fire. Logen smiled and, wrapping himself in his coat, lay down to sleep as well.

The apprentice woke with a sudden fit of coughing. It was early morning and the dingy world was thick with mist. It was probably better that way. There was nothing to see but miles of mud, rock, and miserable brown gorse. Everything was coated in cold dew, but Logen had managed to get a sad tongue of fire going. Quai's hair was plastered to his pallid face. He rolled onto his side and coughed phlegm onto the ground.

'Aaargh,' he croaked. He coughed and spat again.

Logen secured the last of his meagre gear on the unhappy horse. 'Morning,' he said, looking up at the white sky, 'though not a good one.'

'I will die. I will die, and then I will not have to move.'

'We've got no food, so if we stay here you will die. Then I can eat you and go back over the mountains.'

The apprentice smiled weakly. 'What do we do?'

What indeed? 'Where do we find this Bayaz?'

'At the Great Northern Library.'

Logen had never heard of it, but then he'd never been that interested in books. 'Which is where?'

'It's south of here, about four days' ride, beside a great lake.'

'Do you know the way?'

The apprentice tottered to his feet and stood, swaying slightly, breathing fast and shallow. He was ghostly pale and his face had a sheen of sweat. 'I think so,' he muttered, but he hardly looked certain.

Neither Quai nor his horse would make four days without food, even providing they didn't get lost. Food had to be the first thing. To follow the road through the woods to the south was the best option, despite the greater risk. They might get killed by bandits, but the forage would be better, and the hunger would likely kill them otherwise.

'You'd better ride,' said Logen.

'I lost the horses, I should be the one to walk.'

Logen put his hand on Quai's forehead. It was hot and clammy. 'You've a fever. You'd better ride.'

The apprentice didn't try to argue. He looked down at Logen's ragged boots. 'Can you take my boots?'

Logen shook his head. 'Too small.' He knelt down over the smouldering remains of the fire and pursed his lips.

'What are you doing?'

‘Fires have spirits. I will keep this one under my tongue, and we can use it to light another fire later.’ Quai looked too ill to be surprised. Logen sucked up the spirit, coughed on the smoke, shuddered at the bitter taste. ‘You ready to leave?’

The apprentice raised his arms in a hopeless gesture. ‘I am packed.’

Malacus Quai loved to talk. He talked as they made their way south across the moors, as the sun climbed into the grimy skies, as they entered the woods toward evening time. His illness did nothing to stop his chatter, but Logen didn’t mind. It was a long time since anyone had talked to him, and it helped to take his mind off his feet. He was starving and tired, but it was his feet that were the problem. His boots were tatters of old leather, his toes cut and battered, his calf was still burning from the Shanka’s teeth. Every step was an ordeal. Once they had called him the most feared man in the North. Now he was afraid of the smallest sticks and stones in the road. There was a joke in there somewhere. He winced as his foot hit a pebble.

‘ . . . so I spent seven years studying with Master Zacharus. He is great among the Magi, the fifth of Juvens’ twelve apprentices, a great man.’ Everything connected with the Magi seemed to be great in Quai’s eyes. ‘He felt I was ready to come to the Great Northern Library and study with Master Bayaz, to earn my staff. But things have not been easy for me here. Master Bayaz is most demanding and ...’

The horse stopped and snorted, shied and took a hesitant step back. Logen sniffed the air and frowned. There were men nearby, and badly washed ones. He should have noticed it sooner but his attention had been on his feet. Quai looked down at him. ‘What is it?’

As if in answer a man stepped out from behind a tree perhaps ten strides ahead, another a little further down the road. They were scum, without a doubt. Dirty, bearded, dressed in ragged bits of mismatched fur and leather. Not, on the whole, unlike Logen. The skinny one on the left had a spear with a barbed head. The big one on the right had a heavy sword speckled with rust, and an old dented helmet with a spike on top. They moved forward, grinning. There was a sound behind and Logen looked over his shoulder, his heart sinking. A third man, with a big boil on his face, was making his way cautiously down the road toward them, a heavy wood axe in his hands.

Quai leaned down from his saddle, eyes wide with fear. ‘Are they bandits?’

‘You’re the fucking seer,’ hissed Logen through gritted teeth.

They stopped a stride or two in front. The one with the helmet seemed to be in charge. ‘Nice horse,’ he growled. ‘Would you lend it to us?’ The one with the spear grinned as he took hold of the bridle.

Things had taken a turn for the worse alright. A moment ago that had hardly seemed possible, but fate had found a way. Logen doubted that Quai would be much use in a fight. That left him alone against three or more, and with only a knife. If he did nothing him and Malacus would end up robbed, and more than likely killed. You have to be realistic about these things.

He looked the three bandits over again. They didn’t expect a fight, not from two unarmed men – the spear was sideways on, the sword pointed at the ground. He didn’t know about the axe, so he’d have to trust to luck with that one. It’s a sorry fact that the man who strikes first usually strikes last, so Logen turned to the one with the helmet and spat the spirit in his face.

It ignited in the air and pounced on him hungrily. His head burst into spitting flames, the sword clattered to the ground. He clawed desperately at his face and his arms caught fire as well. He reeled screaming away.

Quai’s horse startled at the flames and reared up, snorting. The skinny man stumbled back with a gasp and Logen leaped at him, grabbed the shaft of the spear with one hand and butted him in the face. His nose crunched against Logen’s forehead and he staggered away with blood streaming down his chin. Logen jerked him back with the spear, swung his right arm round in a wide arc and punched him in the neck. He went down with a gurgle and Logen tore the spear from his hands.

He felt movement behind him and dropped to the ground, rolling away to his left. The axe whistled through the air above his head and cut a long slash in the horse’s side, spattering drops of blood across the ground and ripping the buckle on the saddle girth open. Boil-face tottered away, spinning around after his axe. Logen sprang at him but his ankle twisted on a stone and he tottered like a drunkard, yelping at the pain. An arrow hummed past his face from somewhere in the trees behind and was lost in the bushes on the other side of the road. The horse snorted and kicked, eyes rolling madly, then took off down the road at a crazy gallop. Malacus Quai wailed as the saddle slid off its back and he was flung into the bushes.

There was no time to think about him. Logen charged at the axe-man with a roar, aiming the spear at his heart. He brought his axe up in time to nudge the point away, but not far enough. The spear spitted him through the shoulder, spun him round. There was a sharp crack as the shaft snapped, Logen lost his balance and pitched forward, bearing Boil-face down into the road. The spear-point sticking out of his back cut a deep gash into Logen's scalp as he fell on top of him. Logen seized hold of the axe-man's matted hair with both hands, pulled his head back and mashed his face into a rock.

He lurched to his feet, head spinning, wiping blood out of his eyes just in time to see an arrow zip out of the trees and thud into a trunk a stride or two away. Logen hurtled at the archer. He saw him now, a boy no more than fourteen, reaching for another arrow. Logen pulled out his knife. The boy was nocking the arrow to his bow, but his eyes were wide with panic. He fumbled the string and drove the arrow through his hand, looking greatly surprised.

Logen was on him. The boy swung the bow at him but he ducked below it and jumped forward, driving the knife up with both hands. The blade caught the boy under the chin and lifted him into the air, then snapped off in his neck. He dropped on top of Logen, the jagged shard of the knife cutting a long gash in his arm. Blood splattered everywhere, from the cut on Logen's head, from the cut on Logen's arm, from the gaping wound in the boy's throat.

He shoved the corpse away, staggered against a tree and gasped for breath. His heart was pounding, the blood roaring in his ears, his stomach turning over. 'I am still alive,' he whispered, 'I am still alive.' The cuts on his head and his arm were starting to throb. Two more scars. It could have been a lot worse. He scraped the blood from his eyes and limped back to the road.

Malacus Quai was standing, staring ashen-faced at the three corpses. Logen took him by the shoulders, looked him up and down. 'You hurt?'

Quai only stared at the bodies. 'Are they dead?'

The corpse of the big one with the helmet was still smoking, making a disgustingly appetising smell. He had a good pair of boots on, Logen noticed, a lot better than his own. The one with the boil had his neck turned too far around to be alive, that and he had the broken spear through him.

Logen rolled the skinny one over with his foot. He still had a look of surprise on his bloody face, eyes staring up at the sky, mouth open.

'Must've crushed his windpipe,' muttered Logen. His hands were covered in blood. He grabbed one with the other to stop them from trembling.

'What about the one in the trees?'

Logen nodded. 'What happened to the horse?'

'Gone,' muttered Quai hopelessly. 'What do we do?'

'We see if they've got any food.' Logen pointed to the smoking corpse. 'And you help me get his boots off.'

Fencing Practice

‘**P**ress him, Jezal, press him! Don’t be shy!’ Jezal was only too willing to oblige. He sprang forward, lunging with his right. West was already off balance and he stumbled back, all out of form, only just managing to parry with his short steel. They were using half-edged blades today, to add a little danger to the proceedings. You couldn’t really stab a man with one, but you could give him a painful scratch or two, if you tried hard enough. Jezal intended to give the Major a scratch for yesterday’s humiliation.

‘That’s it, give him hell! Jab, jab, Captain! Jab, jab!’

West made a clumsy cut, but Jezal saw it coming and swatted the steel aside, still pressing forward, jabbing for all he was worth. He slashed with the left, and again. West blocked desperately, staggered back against the wall. Jezal had him at last. He cackled with glee as he lunged forward again with the long steel, but his opponent had come suddenly and surprisingly alive. West slipped away, shoved the lunge aside with disappointing firmness. Jezal stumbled forward, off balance, gave a shocked gasp as the point of his sword found a gap between two stones and his steel was wrenched out of his numb hand, lodged there wobbling in the wall.

West darted forward, ducked inside Jezal’s remaining blade and slammed into him with his shoulder. ‘Ooof,’ said Jezal as he staggered back and crashed to the floor, fumbling his short steel. It skittered across the stones and Lord Marshal Varuz caught it smartly under his foot. The blunted point of West’s sword hovered over Jezal’s throat.

‘Damn it!’ he cursed, as the grinning Major offered him his hand.

‘Yes,’ murmured Varuz with a deep sigh, ‘damn it indeed. An even more detestable performance than yesterday’s, if that’s possible! You let Major West make a fool of you again!’ Jezal slapped West’s hand away with a scowl and got to his feet. ‘He never once lost control of that bout! You allowed yourself to be drawn in, and then disarmed! Disarmed! My grandson would not have made that mistake, and he is eight years old!’ Varuz whacked at the floor with his stick. ‘Explain to me please, Captain Luthar, how you will win a fencing match from a prone position, and without your steels?’

Jezal sulked and rubbed the back of his head.

'No? In future, if you fall off a cliff carrying your steels, I want to see you smashed to bits at the bottom, gripping them tightly in your dead fingers, do you hear me?'

'Yes, Marshal Varuz,' mumbled a sullen Jezal, wishing the old bastard would take a tumble off a cliff himself. Or perhaps the Tower of Chains. That would be adequate. Maybe Major West could join him.

'Over-confidence is a curse to the swordsman! You must treat every opponent as though he will be your last. As for your footwork,' and Varuz curled his lip with disgust, 'fine and fancy coming forward, but put you on the back foot and you quite wither away. The Major only had to tap you and you fell down like a fainting schoolgirl.'

West grinned across at him. He was loving this. Absolutely loving it, damn him.

'They say Bremer dan Gorst has a back leg like a pillar of steel. A pillar of steel they say! It would be easier to knock down the House of the Maker than him.' The Lord Marshal pointed over at the outline of the huge tower, looming up over the buildings of the courtyard. 'The House of the Maker!' he shouted in disgust.

Jezal sniffed and kicked at the floor with his boot. For the hundredth time he entertained the notion of giving it up and never holding a steel again. But what would people say? His father was absurdly proud of him, always boasting about his skill to anyone who would listen. He had his heart set on seeing his son fight in the Square of Marshals before a screaming crowd. If Jezal threw it over now his father would be mortified, and he could say goodbye to his commission, goodbye to his allowance, goodbye to his ambitions. No doubt his brothers would love that.

'Balance is the key,' Varuz was spouting. 'Your strength rises up through the legs! From now on we will add an hour on the beam to your training. Every day.' Jezal winced. 'So: a run, exercises with the heavy bar, forms, an hour of sparring, forms again, an hour on the beam.' The Lord Marshal nodded with satisfaction. 'That will suffice, for now. I will see you at six o'clock tomorrow morning, ice cold sober.' Varuz frowned. 'Ice. Cold. Sober.'

‘I can’t do this forever, you know,’ said Jezal as he hobbled stiffly back towards his quarters. ‘How much of this horrible shit should a man have to take?’

West grinned. ‘This is nothing. I’ve never seen the old bastard so soft on anyone. He must really like you. He wasn’t half so friendly with me.’

Jezal wasn’t sure he believed it. ‘Worse than this?’

‘I didn’t have the grounding that you’ve had. He made me hold the heavy bar over my head all afternoon until it fell on me.’ The Major winced slightly, as though even the memory was painful. ‘He made me run up and down the Tower of Chains in full armour. He had me sparring four hours a day, every day.’

‘How did you put up with it?’

‘I didn’t have a choice. I’m not a nobleman. Fencing was the only way for me to get noticed. But it paid off in the end. How many commoners do you know with a commission in the King’s Own?’

Jezal shrugged. ‘Come to think of it, very few.’ As a nobleman himself, he didn’t think there should be any.

‘But you’re from a good family, and a Captain already. If you can win the Contest there’s no telling how far you could go. Hoff – the Lord Chamberlain, Marovia – the High Justice, Varuz himself for that matter, they were all champions in their day. Champions with the right blood always go on to great things.’

Jezal snorted. ‘Like your friend Sand dan Glokta?’

The name dropped between them like a stone. ‘Well . . . almost always.’

‘Major West!’ came a rough voice from behind. A thickset sergeant with a scar down his cheek was hurrying over to them.

‘Sergeant Forest, how are you?’ asked West, clapping the soldier warmly on the back. He had a touch with peasants, but then Jezal had to keep reminding himself that West was little better than a peasant himself. He might be educated, and an officer, and so forth, but he still had more in common with the sergeant than he did with Jezal, once you thought about it.

The sergeant beamed. ‘Very well, thank you, sir.’ He nodded respectfully to Jezal. ‘Morning, Captain.’

Jezal favoured him with a terse nod and turned away to look up the avenue. He could think of no possible reason why an officer would want to

be familiar with the common soldiers. Furthermore, he was scarred and ugly. Jezal had no use whatever for ugly people.

'What can I do for you?' West was asking.

'Marshal Burr wishes to see you, sir, for an urgent briefing. All senior officers are ordered to attend.'

West's face clouded. 'I'll be there as soon as I can.' The sergeant saluted and strode off.

'What's all that about?' asked Jezal carelessly, watching some clerk chase around after a paper he had dropped.

'Angland. This King of the Northmen, Bethod.' West said the name with a scowl, as though it left a bitter taste. 'They say he's defeated all his enemies in the North, and now he's spoiling for a fight with The Union.'

'Well, if it's a fight he wants,' said Jezal airily. Wars were a fine thing, in his opinion, an excellent opportunity for glory and advancement. The paper fluttered past his boot on the light breeze, closely followed by the puffing clerk. Jezal grinned at him as he hurried past, bent almost double in his clumsy efforts to try and grab it.

The Major snatched up the grubby document and handed it over. 'Thank you, sir,' said the clerk, his sweaty face quite pitiful with gratitude, 'thank you so much!'

'Think nothing of it,' murmured West, and the clerk gave a sycophantic little bow and hurried away. Jezal was disappointed. He had been rather enjoying the chase. 'There could be war, but that's the least of my troubles right now.' West breathed a heavy sigh. 'My sister is in Adua.'

'I didn't know you had a sister.'

'Well I do, and she's here.'

'So?' Jezal had little enthusiasm for hearing about the Major's sister. West might have pulled himself up, but the rest of his family were distinctly beneath Jezal's notice. He was interested in meeting poor, common girls he could take advantage of, and rich, noble ones he might think about marrying. Anything in between was of no importance.

'Well, my sister can be charming but she is also a little . . . unconventional. She can be something of a handful in the wrong mood. Truth be told, I'd prefer to take care of a pack of Northmen than her.'

'Come now, West,' said Jezal absently, hardly taking any notice of what he was saying, 'I'm sure she can't be that difficult.'

The Major brightened. ‘Well, I’m relieved to hear you say that. She’s always been keen to see the Agriont for herself, and I’ve been saying for years that I’d give her a tour if she ever came here. We’d arranged it for today in fact.’ Jezal had a sinking feeling. ‘Now, with this meeting—’

‘But I have so little time these days!’ whinged Jezal.

‘I promise I’ll make it up to you. We’ll meet you at my quarters in an hour.’

‘Hold on . . .’ But West was already striding away.

Don’t let her be too ugly, Jezal was thinking as he slowly approached the door to Major West’s quarters and raised his unwilling fist to knock. Just don’t let her be too ugly. And not too stupid either. Anything but an afternoon wasted on a stupid girl. His hand was halfway to the door when he became aware of raised voices on the other side. He stood guiltily in the corridor, his ear drawing closer and closer to the wood, hoping to hear something complimentary about himself.

‘. . . and what about your maid?’ came Major West’s muffled voice, sounding greatly annoyed.

‘I had to leave her at the house, there was a lot to do. Nobody’s been there in months.’ West’s sister. Jezal’s heart sank. A deep voice, she sounded like a fat one. Jezal couldn’t afford to be seen walking about the Agriont with a fat girl on his arm. It could ruin his reputation.

‘But you can’t just wander about the city on your own!’

‘I got here alright, didn’t I? You’re forgetting who we are, Collem. I can make do without a servant. To most of the people here I’m no better than a servant anyway. Besides, I’ll have your friend Captain Luthar to look after me.’

‘That’s even worse, as you damn well know!’

‘Well I wasn’t to know that you’d be busy. I would’ve thought you’d make the time to see your own sister.’ She didn’t sound an idiot, which was something, but fat and now peevish too. ‘Aren’t I safe with your friend?’

‘He’s a good enough sort, but is he safe with you?’ Jezal wasn’t sure what the Major meant by that little comment. ‘And walking about the Agriont alone, and with a man you hardly know? Don’t play the fool, I know you better than that! What will people think?’

‘Shit on what they think.’ Jezal jerked away from the door. He wasn’t used to hearing ladies use that sort of language. Fat, peevish and coarse, damn it. This might be even worse than he’d feared. He looked up the corridor, considering making a run for it, already working out his excuse. Curse his bad luck, though, someone was coming up the stairs now. He couldn’t leave without being seen. He would just have to knock and get it over with. He gritted his teeth and pounded resentfully at the door.

The voices stopped suddenly, and Jezal put on an unconvincing friendly grin. Let the torture begin. The door swung open.

For some reason, he had been expecting a kind of shorter, fatter version of Major West, in a dress. He had been greatly mistaken. She was perhaps slightly fuller of figure than was strictly fashionable, since skinny girls were all the rage, but you couldn’t call her fat, not fat at all. She had dark hair, dark skin, a little darker than would generally be thought ideal. He knew that a lady should remain out of the sun whenever possible, but looking at her, he really couldn’t remember why. Her eyes were very dark, almost black, and blue eyes were turning the heads this season, but hers shone in the dim light of the doorway in a rather bewitching manner.

She smiled at him. A strange sort of smile, higher on one side than the other. It gave him a slightly uneasy feeling, as though she knew something funny that he didn’t. Still, excellent teeth, all white and shiny. Jezal’s anger was swiftly vanishing. The longer he looked at her the more her looks grew on him, and the emptier his head became of cogent thought.

‘Hello,’ she said.

His mouth opened slightly, as if by force of habit, but nothing came out. His mind was a blank page.

‘And you must be Captain Luthar?’

‘Er ...’

‘I’m Collem’s sister, Ardee,’ she slapped her forehead. ‘I’m such an idiot though, Collem will have told you all about me. I know the two of you are great friends.’

Jezal glanced awkwardly at the Major, who was frowning back at him and looking somewhat put out. It would hardly do to say he had been entirely unaware of her existence until that morning. He struggled to frame even a mildly amusing reply, but nothing came to mind.

Ardee took hold of him by the elbow and drew him into the room, talking all the while. ‘I know you’re a great fencer, but I’ve been told your wit is even sharper than your sword. So much so in fact, that you only use your sword upon your friends, as your wit is far too deadly.’ She looked at him expectantly. Silence.

‘Well,’ he mumbled, ‘I do fence a bit.’ Pathetic. Utterly awful.

‘Is this the right man, or do I have the gardener here?’ She looked him over with a strange expression, hard to read. Perhaps it was the same sort of look Jezal would have while examining a horse he was thinking of buying: cautious, searching, intent, and ever so slightly disdainful. ‘Even the gardeners have splendid uniforms, it seems.’

Jezal was almost sure that had been some kind of insult, but he was too busy trying to think of something witty to pay it too much mind. He knew he would have to speak now or spend the entire day in embarrassed silence, so he opened his mouth and trusted to luck. ‘I’m sorry if I seem dumbfounded, but Major West is such an unattractive man. How could I have expected so beautiful a sister?’

West snorted with laughter. His sister raised an eyebrow, and counted the points off on her fingers. ‘Mildly offensive to my brother, which is good. Somewhat amusing, which is also good. Honest, which is refreshing, and wildly complimentary to me, which, of course, is excellent. A little late, but on the whole worth waiting for.’ She looked Jezal in the eye. ‘The afternoon might not be a total loss.’

Jezal wasn’t sure he liked that last comment, and he wasn’t sure he liked the way she looked at him, but he was enjoying looking at her, so he was prepared to forgive a lot. The women of his acquaintance rarely said anything clever, especially the fine-looking ones. He supposed they were trained to smile and nod and listen while the men did the talking. On the whole he agreed with that way of doing things, but the cleverness sat well on West’s sister, and she had more than caught his curiosity. Fat and peevish were off the menu, of that there could be no doubt. As for coarse, well, handsome people are never coarse, are they? Just . . . unconventional. He was beginning to think that the afternoon, as she had said, might not be a total loss.

West made for the door. ‘It seems I must leave you two to make fools of one another. Lord Marshal Burr is expecting me. Don’t do anything I

wouldn't, eh?' The comment seemed to be aimed at Jezal, but West was looking at his sister.

'That would seem to allow virtually everything,' she said, catching Jezal's eye. He was amazed to feel himself blushing like a little girl, and he coughed and looked down at his shoes.

West rolled his eyes. 'Mercy,' he said, as the door clicked shut.

'Would you care for a drink?' Ardee asked, already pouring wine into a glass. Alone with a beautiful young woman. Hardly a new experience, Jezal told himself, and yet he seemed to be lacking his usual confidence.

'Yes, thank you, most kind.' Yes, a drink, a drink, just the thing to steady the nerves. She held the glass out to him and poured another for herself. He wondered if a young lady should be drinking at this time of day, but it seemed pointless to say anything. She wasn't his sister, after all.

'Tell me, Captain, how do you know my brother?'

'Well, he's my commanding officer, and we fence together.' His brain was beginning to function again. 'But then . . . you know that already.'

She grinned at him. 'Of course, but my governess always maintained that young men should be allowed their share of the conversation.'

Jezal gave an ungainly cough as he was swallowing and spilled some wine down his jacket. 'Oh dear,' he said.

'Here, take this a moment.' She gave him her glass and he took it without thinking, but then found himself without a free hand. When she started dabbing at his chest with a white handkerchief he could hardly object, though it did seem rather forward. Being honest, he might have objected if she wasn't so damn fine-looking. He wondered if she realised what an excellent view she was giving him down the front of her dress, but of course not, how could she? She was simply new here, unused to courtly manners, the artless ways of a country girl and so forth . . . nice view though, there was no denying that.

'There, that's better,' she said, though the dabbing had made no apparent difference. Not to his uniform anyway. She took the glasses from him, drained her own quickly with a practised flick of her head and shoved them on the table. 'Shall we go?'

'Yes . . . of course. Oh,' and he offered her his arm.

She led him out into the corridor and down the stairs, chatting freely. It was a flurry of conversational blows and, as Marshal Varuz had pointed out

earlier, his defence was weak. He parried desperately as they made their way across the wide Square of Marshals, but he could barely get a word in. It seemed as though it was Ardee who had been living there for years and Jezal who was the bumpkin from the provinces.

'The Halls Martial are behind there?' She nodded over at the looming wall that separated the headquarters of the Union's armies from the rest of the Agriont.

'Indeed they are. That is where the Lord Marshals have their offices, and so forth. And there are barracks there, and armouries, and, er . . .' He trailed off. He could not think of much else to say, but Ardee came to his rescue.

'So my brother must be somewhere in there. He's quite the famous soldier, I suppose. First through the breach at Ulrioch, and so on.'

'Well, yes, Major West is very well respected here ...'

'He can be such a bore, though, can't he? He does so love to be mysterious and troubled.' She put on a faint, faraway smile and rubbed her chin thoughtfully, just as her brother might have done. She had captured the man perfectly, and Jezal had to laugh, but he was starting to wonder if she should be walking quite so close beside him, holding his arm in quite so intimate a way. Not that he objected of course. Quite the reverse, but people were looking.

'Ardee—' he said.

'So this must be the Kingsway.'

'Er, yes, Ardee—'

She was gazing up at the magnificent statue of Harod the Great, his stern eyes fixed on the middle distance. 'Harod the Great?' she asked.

'Er, yes. In the dark ages, before there was a Union, he fought to bring the Three Kingdoms together. He was the first High King.' You idiot, thought Jezal, she knows that already, everyone does. 'Ardee, I think your brother would not—'

'And this is Bayaz, the First of the Magi?'

'Yes, he was Harod's most trusted adviser. Ardee—'

'Is it true they still keep a vacant seat for him in the Closed Council?'

Jezal was taken aback. 'I'd heard that there's an empty chair there, but I didn't know that—'

'They all look so serious, don't they?'

'Er . . . I suppose those were serious times,' he said, grinning lamely.

A Knight Herald thundered down the avenue on a huge, well-lathered horse, the sun glinting on the golden wings of his helmet. Secretaries scattered to let him pass, and Jezal tried to guide Ardee gently out of the way. To his great dismay she refused to be moved. The horse flashed past within a few inches of her, close enough for the wind to flick her hair in Jezal's face. She turned to him with a flush of excitement on her cheek, otherwise utterly undaunted by her brush with severe injury.

'A Knight Herald?' she asked, taking Jezal's arm once again and leading him off down the Kingsway.

'Yes,' squeaked Jezal, desperately trying to bring his voice under control, 'the Knights Herald are entrusted with a grave responsibility. They carry messages from the King to every part of the Union.' His heart had stopped hammering. 'Even across the Circle Sea to Angland, Dagoska, and Westport. They are entrusted to speak with the King's voice, and so forbidden from speaking except on the King's business.'

'Fedor dan Haden was on the boat on our way over, he's a Knight Herald. We talked for hours.' Jezal attempted unsuccessfully to contain his surprise. 'We talked about Adua, about the Union, about his family. Your name was mentioned, actually.' Jezal failed to look nonchalant once again. 'In connection with the coming Contest.' Ardee leaned even closer to him. 'Fedor was of the opinion that Bremer dan Gorst will cut you to pieces.'

Jezal gave a strangled cough, but he rallied well. 'Unfortunately, that opinion seems widely held.'

'But not by you, I trust?'

'Er . . .'

She stopped and took him by the hand, staring earnestly into his eyes. 'I'm sure that you'll get the better of him, no matter what they say. My brother speaks very highly of you, and he's stingy with his praise.'

'Er . . .' mumbled Jezal. His fingers were tingling pleasantly. Her eyes were big and dark, and he found himself greatly at a loss for words. She had this way of biting on her lower lip that made his thoughts stray. A fine, full lip. He wouldn't have minded having a little chew on it himself. 'Well, thank you.' He gave a gormless grin.

'So this is the park,' said Ardee, turning away from him to admire the greenery. 'It's even more beautiful than I'd imagined.'

'Erm . . . yes.'

‘How wonderful, to be at the heart of things. I’ve spent so much of my life on the edge. There must be many important decisions made here, many important people.’ Ardee allowed her hand to trail through the fronds of a willow tree by the road. ‘Collem’s worried there might be war in the North. He was worried for my safety. I think that’s why he wanted me to come here. I think he worries too much. What do you think, Captain Luthar?’

He had been in blissful ignorance of the political situation until a couple of hours before, but that would never do as a reply. ‘Well,’ he said, straining to remember the name, and then with relief, ‘this Bethod could do with a rap on the knuckles.’

‘They say he has twenty thousand Northmen under his banner.’ She leaned towards him. ‘Barbarians,’ she murmured. ‘Savages,’ she whispered. ‘I heard he skins his captives alive.’

Jezal thought this was hardly suitable conversation for a young lady. ‘Ardee . . .’ he began.

‘But I’m sure with men like you and my brother to protect us, we womenfolk have nothing to worry about.’ And she turned and made off up the path. Jezal had to hurry once again to catch up.

‘And is that the House of the Maker?’ Ardee nodded towards the grim outline of the huge tower.

‘Why, yes it is.’

‘Does no one go inside?’

‘No one. Not in my lifetime anyway. The bridge is kept behind lock and key.’ He frowned up at the tower. Seemed strange now, that he never thought about it. Living in the Agriont, it was always there. You just got used to it somehow. ‘The place is sealed, I believe.’

‘Sealed?’ Ardee moved very close to him. Jezal glanced around nervously but nobody was looking. ‘Isn’t it strange that nobody goes in there? Isn’t it a mystery?’ He could almost feel her breath on his neck, ‘I mean to say, why not just break the door down?’

Jezal was finding it horribly difficult to concentrate with her so close. He wondered for a moment, both frightening and exciting, whether she might be flirting with him? No, no, of course not! Just not used to the city was all. The artless ways of a country girl . . . but then she was *very* close. If only she were a little less attractive or a little less confident. If only she were a little less . . . West’s sister.

He coughed and looked off down the path, hoping vainly for a distraction. There were a few people moving along it, but no one that he recognised, unless . . . Ardee's spell was suddenly broken, and Jezal felt his skin go cold. A hunched figure, overdressed on this sunny day, was limping toward them, leaning heavily on a cane. He was bent over and wincing with every step, the faster-moving travellers giving him a wide berth. Jezal tried to steer Ardee away before he saw them, but she resisted gracefully and made a direct line for the shambling Inquisitor.

His head snapped up as they approached and his eyes glinted with recognition. Jezal's heart sank. There was no avoiding him now.

'Why, Captain Luthar,' said Glokta warmly, shuffling a little too close and shaking his hand, 'what a pleasure! I'm surprised that Varuz has let you go so early in the day. He must be mellowing in his old age.'

'The Lord Marshal is still most demanding,' snapped Jezal.

'I hope my Practicals didn't inconvenience you the other night.' The Inquisitor shook his head sadly. 'They have no manners. No manners at all. But they are the very best at what they do! I swear, the King doesn't have two more valuable servants.'

'I suppose we all serve the King in our own way.' There was a little more hostility in Jezal's voice than he had intended.

If Glokta was offended he didn't show it. 'Quite so. I don't believe I know your friend.'

'No. This is—'

'Actually, we've met,' said Ardee, much to Jezal's surprise, giving her hand to the Inquisitor. 'Ardee West.'

Glokta's eyebrows rose. 'No!' He bent down stiffly to kiss the back of her hand. Jezal saw his mouth twist as he straightened up, but the toothless grin soon returned. 'Collem West's sister! But you are so much changed.'

'For the better, I hope,' she laughed. Jezal felt horribly uncomfortable.

'Why – yes indeed,' said Glokta.

'And you are changed also, Sand.' Ardee looked suddenly very sad. 'We were all so worried in my family. We hoped and hoped for your safe return.' Jezal saw a spasm run over Glokta's face. 'Then when we heard you were hurt . . . how are you?'

The Inquisitor glanced at Jezal, his eyes cold as a slow death. Jezal stared down at his boots, a lump of fear in his throat. He had no need to be scared

of this cripple, did he? But somehow he wished he was still at fencing practice. Glokta stared at Ardee, his left eye twitching slightly, and she looked back at him undaunted, her eyes full of quiet concern.

'I am well. As well as can be expected.' His expression had turned very strange. Jezal felt more uncomfortable than ever. 'Thank you for asking. Truly. Nobody ever does.'

There was an awkward silence. The Inquisitor stretched his neck sideways and there was a loud click. 'Ah!' he said, 'that's got it. It's been a pleasure to see you again, both of you, but duty calls.' He treated them to another revolting smile then hobbled off, his left foot scraping in the gravel.

Ardee frowned at his twisted back as he limped slowly away. 'It's so sad,' she said under her breath.

'What?' mumbled Jezal. He was thinking about that big white bastard in the street, those narrow pink eyes. The prisoner with the bag on his head. We all serve the King in our own way. Quite so. He gave an involuntary shiver.

'He and my brother used to be quite close. He came to stay with us one summer. My family were so proud to have him it was embarrassing. He used to fence with my brother every day, and he always won. The way he moved, it was something to see. Sand dan Glokta. He was the brightest star in the sky.' She flashed her knowing half-smile again. 'And now I hear you are.'

'Er . . .' said Jezal, not sure whether she was praising him or poking fun. He could not escape the feeling that he had been out-fenced twice that day, once by each sibling.

He rather fancied that the sister had given him the worse beating.

The Morning Ritual

It was a bright summer's day, and the park was filled to capacity with colourful revellers. Colonel Glokta strode manfully toward some meeting of great importance, people bowing and scraping respectfully away to give him room. He ignored most, favoured the more important ones with his brilliant smile. The lucky few beamed back at him, delighted to be noticed.

'I suppose we all serve the King in our own way,' whined Captain Luthar, reaching for his steel, but Glokta was far too quick for him. His blade flashed with lightning speed, catching the sneering idiot through the neck.

Blood splattered across Ardee West's face. She clapped her hands in delight, looking at Glokta with shining eyes.

Luthar seemed surprised to be killed. 'Hah. Quite so,' said Glokta with a smile. The Captain pitched over onto his face, blood pouring from his punctured throat. The crowd roared their appreciation and Glokta indulged them with a deep, graceful bow. The cheering was redoubled.

'Oh, Colonel, you shouldn't,' murmured Ardee as Glokta licked the blood from her cheek.

'Shouldn't what?' he growled, tipping her back in his arms and kissing her fiercely. The crowd were in a frenzy. She gasped as he broke away, looking up at him adoringly with those big dark eyes of hers, lips slightly parted.

'The Arth Ector wanth you,' she said with a comely smile.

'What?' The crowd had fallen silent, damn them, and his left side was turning numb.

Ardee touched him tenderly on the cheek. 'The Arth Ector!' she shouted.

There was a heavy knock at the door. Glokta's eyes flicked open.

Where am I? Who am I?

Oh no.

Oh yes. He realised straight away he had been sleeping badly, his body was twisted round under the blankets, his face pushed into the pillow. His whole left side was dead.

The beating on the door came heavier than before. 'The Arth Ector!' came Frost's tongueless bellow from the other side.

Pain shot through Glokta's neck as he tried to raise his head from the pillow. *Ah, there's nothing like the first spasm of the day to get the mind working.* 'Alright!' he croaked, 'give me a minute, damn it!'

The albino's heavy footsteps thudded away down the corridor. Glokta lay still for a moment, then cautiously moved his right arm, ever so slowly, breath rasping with the effort, and tried to twist himself onto his back. He clenched his fist as the needling started in his left leg. *If only the damn thing would stay numb.* But the pain was coming on fast now. He was also becoming aware of an unpleasant smell. *Damn it. I've shit myself again.*

'Barnam!' howled Glokta, then waited, panting, left side throbbing with a vengeance. *Where is the old idiot?* 'Barnam!' he screamed at the top of his lungs.

'Are you alright, sir?' came the servant's voice from beyond the door.

Alright? Alright, you old fool? Just when do you think I was last alright? 'No, damn it! I've soiled the bed!'

'I've boiled water for a bath, sir. Can you get up?'

Once before Frost had had to break the door down. *Maybe I should let it stand open all night, but then how could I sleep?* 'I think I can manage,' Glokta hissed, tongue pressed into his empty gums, arms trembling as he hauled himself out of the bed and onto the chair beside it.

His grotesque, toeless left leg twitched to itself, still beyond his control. He glared down at it with a burning hatred. *Fucking horrible thing. Revolting, useless lump of flesh. Why didn't they just cut you off? Why don't I still?* But he knew why not. With his leg still on he could at least pretend to be half a man. He punched his withered thigh, then immediately regretted it. *Stupid, stupid.* The pain crept up his back, a little more intense than before, and growing with every second. *Come now, come now, let's not fight.* He started to rub gently at the wasted flesh. *We are stuck with each other, so why torment me?*

'Can you get to the door, sir?' Glokta wrinkled his nose at the smell then took hold of his cane and slowly, agonisingly, pushed himself to his feet. He hobbled across the room, almost slipping halfway there but righting himself with a searing twinge. He turned the key in the lock, leaning against the wall for balance, and hauled the door open.

Barnam was standing on the other side, his arms outstretched, ready to catch him. *The ignominy of it. To think that I, Sand dan Glokta, the greatest*

swordsman the Union has ever seen, must be carried to my bath by an old man so that I can wash my own shit off. They must be laughing loud now, all those fools I beat, if they still remember me. I'd be laughing too, if it didn't hurt so much. But he let the weight off his left leg and put his arm round Barnam's shoulders without complaint. *What's the use after all? Might as well make it easy for myself. As easy as it can be.*

Glokta took a deep breath. 'Go gently, the leg hasn't woken up yet.' They hopped and stumbled down the corridor, slightly too narrow for both of them together. The bathroom seemed a mile away. *Or more. I'd rather walk a hundred miles as I used to be, than to the bathroom as I am. But that's my bad luck isn't it? You can't go back. Not ever.*

The steam felt deliciously warm on Glokta's clammy skin. With Barnam holding him under the arms he slowly lifted his right leg and put it gingerly into the water. *Damn it, that's hot.* The old servant helped him get the other leg in, then, taking him under the armpits, lowered him like a child, until he was immersed up to his neck.

'Ahhh.' Glokta cracked a toothless smile. 'Hot as the Maker's forge, Barnam, just the way I like it.' The heat was getting into the leg now, and the pain was subsiding. *Not gone. Never gone. But better. A lot better.* Glokta began to feel almost as if he could face another day. *You have to learn to love the small things in life, like a hot bath. You have to love the small things, when you've nothing else.*

Practical Frost was waiting for him downstairs in the tiny dining room, his bulk wedged into a low chair against the wall. Glokta sagged into the other chair and caught a whiff from the steaming porridge bowl, wooden spoon sticking up at an angle without even touching the side. His stomach rumbled and his mouth began watering fiercely. *All the symptoms, in fact, of extreme nausea.*

'Hurray!' shouted Glokta. 'Porridge again!' He looked over at the motionless Practical. 'Porridge and honey, better than money, everything's funny, with porridge and honey!'

The pink eyes did not blink.

'It's a rhyme for children. My mother used to sing it to me. Never actually got me to eat this slop though. But now,' and he dug the spoon in, 'I can't get enough of it.'

Frost stared back at him.

'Healthy,' said Glokta, forcing down a mouthful of sweet mush and spooning up another, 'delicious,' choking down some more, 'and here's the real clincher,' he gagged slightly on the next swallow, 'no chewing required.' He shoved the mostly full bowl away and tossed the spoon after it. 'Mmmmm,' he hummed. 'A good breakfast makes for a good day, don't you find?'

It was like staring at a whitewashed wall, but without all the emotion.

'So the Arch Lector wants me again, does he?'

The albino nodded.

'And what might our illustrious leader desire with the likes of us, do you think?'

A shrug.

'Hmmm.' Glokta licked bits of porridge out of his empty gums. 'Does he seem in a good mood, do you know?'

Another shrug.

'Come, come, Practical Frost, don't tell me everything at once, I can't take it in.'

Silence. Barnam entered the room and cleared away the bowl. 'Do you want anything else, sir?'

'Absolutely. A big half-raw slab of meat and a nice crunchy apple.' He looked over at Practical Frost. 'I used to love apples when I was a child.'

How many times have I made that joke? Frost looked back impassively, there was no laughter there. Glokta turned to Barnam, and the old man gave a tired smile.

'Oh well,' sighed Glokta. 'A man has to have hope doesn't he?'

'Of course sir,' muttered the servant, heading for the door.

Does he?

*

The Arch Lector's office was on the top floor of the House of Questions, and it was a long way up. Worse still, the corridors were busy with people. Practicals, clerks, Inquisitors, crawling like ants through a crumbling dung-hill. Whenever he felt their eyes on him Glokta would limp along, smiling,

head held high. Whenever he felt himself alone he would pause and gasp, sweat and curse, and rub and slap the tenuous life back into his leg.

Why does it have to be so high? he asked himself as he shuffled up the dim halls and winding stairs of the labyrinthine building. By the time he reached the ante-chamber he was exhausted and blowing hard, left hand sore on the handle of his cane.

The Arch Lector's secretary examined him suspiciously from behind a big dark desk that took up half the room. There were some chairs placed opposite for people to get nervous waiting in, and two huge Practicals flanked the great double doors to the office, so still and grim as to appear a part of the furniture.

'Do you have an appointment?' demanded the secretary in a shrill voice. *You know who I am, you self-important little shit.*

'Of course,' snapped Glokta, 'do you think I limped all the way up here to admire your desk?'

The secretary looked down his nose at him. He was a pale, handsome young man with a mop of yellow hair. *The puffed up fifth son of some minor nobleman with over-active loins, and he thinks he can patronise me?* 'And your name is?' he asked with a sneer.

Glokta's patience was worn out by the climb. He smashed his cane down on the top of the desk and the secretary near jumped out of his chair. 'What are you? A fucking idiot? How many crippled Inquisitors do you have here?'

'Er . . .' said the secretary, mouth working nervously.

'Er? Er? Is that a number? Speak up!'

'Well I—'

'I'm Glokta, you dolt! Inquisitor Glokta!'

'Yes, sir, I—'

'Get your fat arse out of that chair, fool! Don't keep me waiting!' The secretary sprang up, hurried to the doors, pushed one open and stood aside respectfully. 'That's better,' growled Glokta, shuffling after him. He looked up at the Practicals as he hobbled past. He was almost sure one of them had a slight smile on his face.

The room had hardly changed since he was last there, six years before. It was a cavernous, round space, domed ceiling carved with gargoyle faces, its one enormous window offering a spectacular view over the spires of the

University, a great section of the outer wall of the Agriont, and the looming outline of the House of the Maker beyond.

The chamber was mostly lined with shelves and cabinets, stacked high with neatly ordered files and papers. A few dark portraits peered down from the sparse white walls, including a huge one of the current King of the Union as a young man, looking wise and stern. *No doubt painted before he became a senile joke. These days there's usually a bit less authority and a bit more stray drool about him.* There was a heavy round table in the centre of the room, its surface painted with a map of the Union in exquisite detail. Every city in which there was a department of the Inquisition was marked with a precious stone, and a tiny silver replica of Adua rose out of the table at its hub.

The Arch Lector was sitting in an ancient high chair at this table, deep in conversation with another man: a gaunt, balding, sour-faced old fellow in dark robes. Sult beamed up as Glokta shuffled towards them, the other man's expression hardly changed.

'Why, Inquisitor Glokta, delighted you could join us. Do you know Surveyor General Halleck?'

'I have not had the pleasure,' said Glokta. *Not that it looks like much of a pleasure, though.* The old bureaucrat stood and shook Glokta's hand without enthusiasm.

'And this is one of my Inquisitors, Sand dan Glokta.'

'Yes indeed,' murmured Halleck. 'You used to be in the army, I believe. I saw you fence once.'

Glokta tapped his leg with his cane. 'That can't have been any time recently.'

'No.' There was a silence.

'The Surveyor General is likely soon to receive a most significant promotion,' said Sult. 'To a chair on the Closed Council itself.' *The Closed Council? Indeed? A most significant promotion.*

Halleck seemed less than delighted, however. 'I will consider it done when it is his Majesty's pleasure to invite me,' he snapped, 'and not before.'

Sult floated smoothly over this rocky ground. 'I am sure the Council feels that you are the only candidate worth recommending, now that Sepp dan Teufel is no longer being considered.' *Our old friend Teufel? No longer considered for what?*

Halleck frowned and shook his head. ‘Teufel. I worked with the man for ten years. I never liked him,’ *or anyone else, by the look of you,* ‘but I would never have thought him a traitor.’

Sult shook his head sadly. ‘We all feel it keenly, but here is his confession in black and white.’ He held up the folded paper with a doleful frown. ‘I fear the roots of corruption can run very deep. Who would know that better than I, whose sorry task it is to weed the garden?’

‘Indeed, indeed,’ muttered Halleck, nodding grimly. ‘You deserve all of our thanks for that. You also, Inquisitor.’

‘Oh no, not I,’ said Glokta humbly. The three men looked at each other in a sham of mutual respect.

Halleck pushed back his chair. ‘Well, taxes do not collect themselves. I must return to my work.’

‘Enjoy your last few days in the job,’ said Sult. ‘I give you my word that the King will send for you soon!’

Halleck allowed himself the thinnest of smiles, then nodded stiffly to them and stalked away. The secretary ushered him out and pulled the heavy door shut. There was silence. *But I’m damned if I’ll be the one to break it.*

‘I expect you’re wondering what this was all about, eh, Glokta?’

‘The thought had crossed my mind, your Eminence.’

‘I bet it had.’ Sult swept from his chair and strode across to the window, his white-gloved hands clasped behind his back. ‘The world changes, Glokta, the world changes. The old order crumbles. Loyalty, duty, pride, honour. Notions that have fallen far from fashion. What has replaced them?’ He glanced over his shoulder for a moment, and his lip curled. ‘Greed. Merchants have become the new power in the land. Bankers, shopkeepers, salesmen. Little men, with little minds and little ambitions. Men whose only loyalty is to themselves, whose only duty is to their own purses, whose only pride is in swindling their betters, whose only honour is weighed out in silver coin.’ *No need to ask where you stand on the merchant class.*

Sult scowled out at the view, then turned back into the room. ‘Now it seems anyone’s son can get an education, and a business, and become rich. The merchant guilds: the Mercers, the Spicers and their like, grow steadily in wealth and influence. Jumped-up, posturing commoners dictating to their natural betters. Their fat and greedy fingers, fumbling at the strings of

power. It is almost too much to stand.' He gave a shudder as he paced across the floor.

'I will speak honestly with you, Inquisitor.' The Arch Lector waved his graceful hand as though his honesty were a priceless gift. 'The Union has never seemed more powerful, has never controlled more land, but beneath the façade we are weak. It is hardly a secret that the King has become entirely unable to make his own decisions. Crown Prince Ladisla is a fop, surrounded by flatterers and fools, caring for nothing but gambling and clothes. Prince Raynault is far better fitted to rule, but he is the younger brother. The Closed Council, whose task it should be to steer this leaking vessel, is packed with frauds and schemers. Some may be loyal, some are definitely not, each intent on pulling the King his own way.' *How frustrating, when I suppose they should all be pulling him in yours?*

'Meanwhile, the Union is beset with enemies, dangers outside our borders, and dangers within. Gurkhul has a new and vigorous Emperor, fitting his country for another war. The Northmen are up in arms as well, skulking on the borders of Angland. In the Open Council the noblemen clamour for ancient rights, while in the villages the peasants clamour for new ones.' He gave a deep sigh. 'Yes, the old order crumbles, and no one has the heart or the stomach to support it.'

Sult paused, staring up at one of the portraits: a hefty, bald man dressed all in white. Glokta recognised him well enough. *Zoller, the greatest of all Arch Lectors. Tireless champion of the Inquisition, hero to the torturer, scourge of the disloyal.* He glared down balefully from the wall, as though even beyond death he could burn traitors with a glance.

'Zoller,' growled Sult. 'Things were different in his day, I can tell you. No whinging peasants then, no swindling merchants, no sulking noblemen. If men forgot their place they were reminded with hot iron, and any carping judge who dared to whine about it was never heard from again. The Inquisition was a noble institution, filled with the best and the brightest. To serve their King and to root out disloyalty were their only desires, and their only rewards.' *Oh, things were grand in the old days.*

The Arch Lector slid back into his seat and leaned forward across the table. 'Now we have become a place where third sons of impoverished noblemen can line their pockets with bribes, or where near-criminal scum can indulge a passion for torture. Our influence with the King has been

steadily eroded, our budgets have been steadily cut. Once we were feared and respected, Glokta, but now . . .' *We're a miserable sham.* Sult frowned, 'Well, less so. Intrigues and treasons abound, and I fear that the Inquisition is no longer equal to its task. Too many of the Superiors can no longer be trusted. They are no longer concerned with the interests of the King, or of the state, or of anybody's interests beyond their own.' *The Superiors? Not to be trusted? I swoon with the shock.* Sult's frown grew still deeper. 'And now Feekt is dead.'

Glokta looked up. *Now that is news.* 'The Lord Chancellor?'

'It will become public knowledge tomorrow morning. He died suddenly a few nights ago, while you were busy with your friend Rews. There are still some questions surrounding his death, but the man was nearly ninety. The surprise is that he lasted this long. The golden Chancellor they called him, the greatest politician of his day. Even now they are setting his likeness in stone, for a statue on the Kingsway.' Sult snorted to himself. 'The greatest gift that any of us can hope for.'

The Arch Lector's eyes narrowed to blue slits. 'If you have any childish notions that the Union is controlled by its King, or by those prating blue-blood fools on the Open Council, you can let them wilt now. The Closed Council is where the power lies. More than ever since the King's illness. Twelve men, in twelve big, uncomfortable chairs, myself among them. Twelve men with very different ideas, and for twenty years, war and peace, Feekt held us in balance. He played off the Inquisition against the judges, the bankers against the military. He was the axle on which the Kingdom turned, the foundation on which it rested, and his death has left a hole. All kinds of gaping holes, and people will be rushing to fill them. I have a feeling that whining ass Marovia, that bleeding heart of a High Justice, that self-appointed champion of the common man, will be first in the queue. It is a fluid, and a dangerous, situation.' The Arch Lector planted his fists firmly on the table before him. 'We must ensure that the wrong people do not take advantage of it.'

Glokta nodded. *I think I take your meaning, Arch Lector. We must ensure that it is we who take advantage, and no one else.*

'It need hardly be said that the post of Lord Chancellor is one of the most powerful in the realm. The gathering of taxes, the treasury, the King's mints, all come under his auspices. Money, Glokta, money. And money is

power, I need hardly tell you. A new Chancellor will be appointed tomorrow. The foremost candidate was our erstwhile Master of the Mints, Sepp dan Teufel.' *I see. Something tells me he will no longer be under consideration.*

Sult's lip curled. 'Teufel was closely linked with the merchant guilds, and the Mercers in particular.' His sneer became a scowl. 'In addition to which he was an associate of High Justice Marovia. So, you see, he would hardly have made a suitable Lord Chancellor.' *No indeed. Hardly suitable.* 'Surveyor General Halleck is a far better choice, in my opinion.'

Glokta looked towards the door. 'Him? Lord Chancellor?' Sult got up smiling and moved over to a cabinet against the wall. 'There really is no one else. Everyone hates him, and he hates everyone, except me. Furthermore, he is a hard-nosed conservative, who despises the merchant class and everything they stand for.' He opened the cabinet and took out two glasses and an ornate decanter. 'If not exactly a friendly face on the Council, he will at least be a sympathetic one, and damned hostile toward everyone else. I can hardly think of a more suitable candidate.'

Glokta nodded. 'He seems honest.' *But not so honest that I'd trust him to put me in the bath. Would you, your Eminence?*

'Yes,' said Sult, 'he will be very valuable to us.' He poured out two glasses of rich red wine. 'And just as a bonus, I was able to arrange for a sympathetic new Master of the Mints as well. I hear that the Mercers are absolutely biting their tongues off with fury. Marovia's none too happy either, the bastard.' Sult chuckled to himself. 'All good news, and we have you to thank.' He held out one of the glasses.

Poison? A slow death twitching and puking on the Arch Lector's lovely mosaic floor? Or just pitching onto my face on his table? But there was really no option but to grasp the glass and take a hearty swig. The wine was unfamiliar but delicious. *Probably from somewhere very beautiful and far away. At least if I die up here I won't have to make it back down all those steps.* But the Arch Lector was drinking too, all smiles and good grace. *So I suppose I will last out the afternoon, after all.*

'Yes, we have made a good first step. These are dangerous times alright, and yet danger and opportunity often walk hand in hand.' Glokta felt a strange sensation creeping up his back. *Is that fear, or ambition, or both?* 'I need someone to help me put matters in order. Someone who does not fear

the Superiors, or the merchants, or even the Closed Council. Someone who can be relied upon to act with subtlety, and discretion, and ruthlessness. Someone whose loyalty to the Union is beyond question, but who has no friends within the government.' *Someone who's hated by everyone? Someone to take the fall if things turn sour? Someone who will have few mourners at their funeral?*

'I have need of an Inquisitor Exempt, Glokta. Someone to operate beyond the Superiors' control, but with my full authority. Someone answerable only to me.' The Arch Lector raised an eyebrow, as though the thought had only just come to him. 'It strikes me that you are exceptionally well suited to this task. What do you think?'

I think the holder of such a post would have a great many enemies and only one friend. Glokta peered up at the Arch Lector. *And that friend might not be so very reliable. I think the holder of such a post might not last long.* 'Could I have some time to consider it?'

'No.'

Danger and opportunity often walk hand in hand . . . 'Then I accept.'

'Excellent. I do believe this is the start of a long and productive relationship.' Sult smiled at him over the rim of his glass. 'You know, Glokta, of all the merchants grubbing away out there, it is the Mercers I find the most unpalatable. It was largely through their influence that Westport entered the Union, and it was because of Westport's money that we won the Gurkish war. The King rewarded them, of course, with priceless trading rights, but ever since then their arrogance has been insufferable. Anyone would have thought they fought the battles themselves, for the airs they have put on, and the liberties they have taken. The honourable Guild of Mercers,' he sneered. 'It occurs to me, now that your friend Rews has given us the means to hook them in so deeply, it would be a shame to let them wriggle free.'

Glokta was much surprised, though he thought he hid it well. *To go further? Why? The Mercers wriggle free and they keep on paying, and that keeps all kinds of people happy. As things are, they're scared and soft – wondering who Rews named, who might be next in the chair. If we go further they may be hurt, or finished entirely. Then they'll stop paying, and a lot of people will be unhappy. Some of them in this very building.* 'I can

easily continue my investigations, your Eminence, if you would like me to.' Glokta took another sip. It really was an excellent wine.

'We must be cautious. Cautious and very thorough. The Mercers' money flows like milk. They have many friends, even amongst the highest circles of the nobility. Brock, Heugen, Isher, and plenty more besides. Some of the very greatest men in the land. They've all been known to suck at that tit, one time or another, and babies will cry when their milk is snatched away.' A cruel grin flickered across Sult's face. 'But still, if children are to learn discipline, they must sometimes be made to weep . . . who did that worm Rews name in his confession?'

Glokta leaned forward painfully and slid Rews' paper of confession toward him, unfolded it and scanned the list of names from bottom to top.

'Sepp dan Teufel, we all know.'

'Oh, we know and love him, Inquisitor,' said Sult, beaming down, 'but I feel we may safely cross him off the list. Who else?'

'Well, let's see,' Glokta took a leisurely look back at the paper. 'There's Harod Polst, a Mercer.' *A nobody.*

Sult waved his hand impatiently. 'He's nobody.'

'Solimo Scandi, a Mercer from Westport.' *Also nobody.*

'No, no, Glokta, we can do better than Solimo what's-his-name can't we? These little Mercers are of no real interest. Pull up the root, and the leaves die by themselves.'

'Quite so, Arch Lector. We have Villem dan Robb, minor nobility, holds a junior customs post.' Sult looked thoughtful, shook his head. 'Then there's —'

'Wait! Villem dan Robb . . .' The Arch Lector snapped his fingers, 'His brother Kiral is one of the Queen's gentlemen. He snubbed me at a social gathering.' Sult smiled. 'Yes, Villem dan Robb, bring him in.'

And so we go deeper. 'I serve and obey, your Eminence. Is there anyone's name in particular that need be mentioned?' Glokta set down his empty glass.

'No.' The Arch Lector turned away and waved his hand again. 'Any of 'em, all of 'em. I don't care.'

First of the Magi

The lake stretched away, fringed by steep rocks and dripping greenery, surface pricked by the rain, flat and grey as far as the eye could see. Logen's eye couldn't see too far in this weather, it had to be said. The opposite shore could have been a hundred strides away, but the calm waters looked deep. Very deep.

Logen had long ago given up any attempt at staying dry, and the water ran through his hair and down his face, dripped from his nose, his fingers, his chin. Being wet, tired, and hungry had become a part of life. It often had been, come to think on it. He closed his eyes and felt the rain patter against his skin, heard the water lapping on the shingle. He knelt by the lake, pulled the stopper from his flask and pushed it under the surface, watched the bubbles break as it filled up.

Malacus Quai stumbled out of the bushes, breathing fast and shallow. He sank down to his knees, crawled against the roots of a tree, coughed out phlegm onto the pebbles. His coughing sounded bad now. It came right up from his guts and made his whole rib cage rattle. He was even paler than he had been when they first met, and a lot thinner. Logen was somewhat thinner too. These were lean times, all in all. He walked over to the haggard apprentice and squatted down.

'Just give me a moment.' Quai closed his sunken eyes and tipped his head back. 'Just a moment.' His mouth hung open, the tendons in his scrawny neck standing out. He looked like a corpse already.

'Don't rest too long. You might never get up.'

Logen held out the flask. Quai didn't even lift his arm to take it, so Logen put it against his lips and tipped it up a little. He took a wincing swallow, coughed, then his head dropped back against the tree like a stone.

'Do you know where we are?' asked Logen.

The apprentice blinked out at the water as though he'd only just noticed it. 'This must be the north end of the lake . . . there should be a track.' His voice had sunk to a whisper. 'At the southern end there's a road with two stones.' He gave a sudden violent cough, swallowed with difficulty. 'Follow the road over the bridge and you're there,' he croaked.

Logen looked off along the beach at the dripping trees. ‘How far is it?’ No answer. He took hold of the sick man’s bony shoulder and shook it. Quai’s eyelids flickered open, he stared up blearily, trying to focus. ‘How far?’

‘Forty miles.’

Logen sucked his teeth. Quai wouldn’t be walking forty miles. He’d be lucky to make forty strides on his own. He knew it well enough, you could see it in his eyes. He’d be dead soon, Logen reckoned, a few days at the most. He’d seen stronger men die of a fever.

Forty miles. Logen thought about it carefully, rubbing his chin with his thumb. Forty miles.

‘Shit,’ he whispered.

He dragged the pack over and pulled it open. They had some food left, but not much. A few shreds of tough dried meat, a heel of mouldy black bread. He looked out over the lake, so peaceful. They wouldn’t be running out of drinking water any time soon at least. He pulled his heavy cookpot out of his pack and set it down on the shingle. They’d been together a long time, but there was nothing left to cook. You can’t become attached to things, not out here in the wild. He tossed the rope away into the bushes, then threw the lightened pack over his shoulder.

Quai’s eyes had closed again, and he was scarcely breathing. Logen still remembered the first time he had to leave someone behind, remembered it like it was yesterday. Strange how the boy’s name had gone but the face was with him still.

The Shanka had taken a piece out of his thigh. A big piece. He’d moaned all the way, he couldn’t walk. The wound was going bad, he was dying anyway. They had to leave him. No one had blamed Logen for it. The boy had been too young, he should never have gone. Bad luck was all, could happen to anyone. He’d cried after them as they made their way down the hillside in a grim, silent group, heads down. Logen seemed to hear the cries even when they’d left him far behind. He could still hear them.

In the wars it had been different. Men dropped from the columns all the time on the long marches, in the cold months. First they fell to the back, then they fell behind, then they fell over. The cold, the sick, the wounded. Logen shivered and hunched his shoulders. At first he’d tried to help them. Then he became grateful he wasn’t one of them. Then he stepped over the corpses and hardly noticed them. You learn to tell when someone isn’t

getting up again. He looked at Malacus Quai. One more death in the wild was nothing to remark upon. You have to be realistic, after all.

The apprentice started from his fitful sleep and tried to push himself up. His hands were shaking bad. He looked up at Logen, eyes glittering bright. ‘I can’t get up,’ he croaked.

‘I know. I’m surprised you made it this far.’ It didn’t matter so much now. Logen knew the way. If he could find that track he might make twenty miles a day.

‘If you leave me some of the food . . . perhaps . . . after you get to the library . . . someone . . .’

‘No,’ said Logen, setting his jaw. ‘I need the food.’

Quai made a strange sound, somewhere between a cough and a sob.

Logen leaned down and set his right shoulder in Quai’s stomach, pushed his arm under his back. ‘I can’t carry you forty miles without it,’ and he straightened up, hauling the apprentice over his shoulder. He set off down the shore, holding Quai in place by his jacket, his boots crunching into the wet shingle. The apprentice didn’t even move, just hung there like a sack of wet rags, his limp arms knocking against the backs of Logen’s legs.

When he’d made it thirty strides or so Logen turned around and looked back. The pot was sitting forlorn by the lake, already filling up with rainwater. They’d been through a lot together, him and that pot.

‘Fare you well, old friend.’

The pot did not reply.

Logen set his shivering burden gently down at the side of the road and stretched his aching back, scratched at the dirty bandage on his arm, took a drink of water from his flask. Water was the only thing to have passed his sore lips that day, and the hunger was gnawing at his guts. At least it had stopped raining. You have to learn to love the small things in life, like dry boots. You have to love the small things, when you’ve nothing else.

Logen spat in the dirt and rubbed the life back into his fingers. There was no missing the place, that was sure. The two stones towered over the road, ancient and pitted, patched with green moss at the base and grey lichen higher up. They were covered in faded carvings, lines of letters in a script Logen couldn’t understand, didn’t even recognise. There was a forbidding feel about them though, a sense more of warning than welcome.

‘The First Law ...’

‘What?’ said Logen, surprised. Quai had been in an unpleasant place between sleep and waking ever since they left the pot behind two days before. The pot could have made more meaningful sounds in that time. That morning Logen had woken to find him scarcely breathing. He’d been sure that he was dead, to begin with, but the man was still clinging weakly to life. He didn’t give up easy, you had to give him that.

Logen knelt down and shoved the wet hair out of Quai’s face. The apprentice suddenly grabbed his wrist and started forward.

‘It’s forbidden,’ he whispered, staring at Logen with wide eyes, ‘to touch the Other Side!’

‘Eh?’

‘To speak with devils,’ he croaked, grabbing hold of Logen’s battered coat. ‘The creatures of the world below are made of lies! You mustn’t do it!’

‘I won’t,’ muttered Logen, wondering if he’d ever know what the apprentice was talking about. ‘I won’t. For what that’s worth.’

It wasn’t worth much. Quai had already dropped back into his twitching half-sleep. Logen chewed at his lip. He hoped the apprentice would wake again, but he didn’t think it likely. Still, perhaps this Bayaz would be able to do something, he was the First of the Magi after all, great in high wisdom and so on. So Logen hefted Quai up onto his shoulder again and trudged between the ancient stones.

The road climbed steep into the rocks above the lake, here built up, there cut deep into the stony ground. It was worn and pitted with age, pocked with weeds. It switched back on itself again and again, and soon Logen was panting and sweating, his legs burning with the effort. His pace began to slow.

The fact was, he was getting tired. Not just tired from the climb, or from the back-breaking slog he’d walked that day with a half-dead apprentice over his shoulder, or from the slog the day before, or even from the fight in the woods. He was tired of everything. Of the Shanka, of the wars, of his whole life.

‘I can’t walk for ever, Malacus, I can’t fight for ever. How much of this horrible shit should a man have to take? I need to sit down a minute. In a proper fucking chair! Is that too much to ask? Is it?’ In this frame of mind,

cursing and grumbling at every step, and with Quai's head knocking against his arse, Logen came to the bridge.

It was as ancient as the road, coated with creepers, simple and slender, arching maybe twenty strides across a dizzying gorge. Far below a river surged over jagged rocks, filling the air with noise and shining spray. On the far side a high wall had been built between towering faces of mossy stone, made with such care it was difficult to say where the natural cliff ended and the man-made one began. A single ancient door was set into it, faced with beaten copper, turned streaky green by the wet and the years.

As Logen picked his way carefully across the slippery stone he found himself wondering, through force of habit, how you could storm this place. You couldn't. Not with a thousand picked men. There was only a narrow shelf of rock before the door, no room to set a ladder or swing a ram. The wall was ten strides high at least, and the gate had a dreadful solid look. And if the defenders were to bring down the bridge . . . Logen peered over the edge, and swallowed. It was a long way down.

He took a deep breath and thumped on the damp green copper with his fist. Four big, booming knocks. He'd beat on the gates of Carleon like that, after the battle, and its people had rushed to surrender. No one rushed to do anything now.

He waited. He knocked again. He waited. He became wetter and wetter in the mist from the river. He ground his teeth. He raised his arm to knock again. A narrow hatch snapped open, and a pair of rheumy eyes stared at him coldly from between thick bars.

'Who's this now?' snapped a gruff voice.

'Logen Ninefingers is my name. I've—'

'Never heard of you.'

Hardly the welcome Logen had been hoping for. 'I've come to see Bayaz.' No reply. 'The First of the—'

'Yes. He's here.' But the door didn't open. 'He isn't taking visitors. I told that to the last messenger.'

'I'm no messenger, I have Malacus Quai with me.'

'Malaca what?'

'Quai, the apprentice.'

'Apprentice?'

'He's very ill,' said Logen slowly. 'He may die.'

‘Ill, you say? Die, was it?’

‘Yes.’

‘And what was your name again—’

‘Just open the fucking door!’ Logen shook his fist pointlessly at the slot. ‘Please.’

‘We don’t let just anyone in . . . hold up. Show me your hands.’

‘What?’

‘Your hands.’ Logen held his hands up. The watery eyes moved slowly across his fingers. ‘There are nine. There’s one missing, see?’ He shoved the stump at the hatch.

‘Nine, is it? You should have said.’

Bolts clanked and the door creaked slowly open. An elderly man, bent under an old-fashioned suit of armour, was staring at him suspiciously from the other side. He was holding a long sword much too heavy for him. Its point wobbled around wildly as he strained to keep it upright.

Logen held up his hands. ‘I surrender.’

The ancient gatekeeper was not amused. He grunted sourly as Logen stepped past him, then he wrestled the door shut and fumbled with the bolts, turned and trudged away without another word. Logen followed him up a narrow valley lined with strange houses, weathered and mossy, half dug into the steep rocks, merging with the mountainside.

A dour-faced woman was working at a spinning wheel on a doorstep, and she frowned at Logen as he walked past with the unconscious apprentice over his shoulder. Logen smiled back at her. She was no beauty, that was sure, but it had been a very long time. The woman ducked into her house and kicked the door shut, leaving the wheel spinning. Logen sighed. The old magic was still there.

The next house was a bakery with a squat, smoking chimney. The smell of baking bread made Logen’s empty stomach rumble. Further on, a couple of dark-haired children were laughing and playing, running round a scrubby old tree. They reminded Logen of his own children. They didn’t look anything like them, but he was in a morbid frame of mind.

He had to admit to being a little disappointed. He’d been expecting something cleverer-looking, and a lot more beards. These folk didn’t seem so very wise. They looked just like any other peasants. Not unlike his own

village had looked before the Shanka came. He wondered if he was in the right place. Then they rounded a bend in the road.

Three great, tapering towers were built into the mountainside ahead, joined at their bases but separating higher up, covered in dark ivy. They seemed far older even than the ancient bridge and road, as old as the mountain itself. A jumbled mess of other buildings crowded around their feet, straggling around the sides of a wide courtyard in which people were busy with everyday chores. A thin woman was churning some milk on a stoop. A stocky blacksmith was trying to shoe a restless mare. An old, bald butcher in a stained apron had finished chopping up some animal and was washing his bloody forearms in a trough.

And on a set of wide steps before the tallest of the three towers sat a magnificent old man. He was dressed all in white, with a long beard, a hook nose, and white hair spilling from under a white skull-cap. Logen was impressed, finally. The First of the Magi surely looked the part. As Logen shuffled towards him he started up from the steps and hurried over, white coat flapping behind him.

'Set him down here,' he muttered, indicating a patch of grass by the well, and Logen knelt and dumped Quai on the ground, as gently as he could with his back aching so much. The old man bent over him, laid a gnarled hand on his forehead.

'I brought your apprentice back,' muttered Logen pointlessly.

'Mine?'

'Aren't you Bayaz?'

The old man laughed. 'Oh no, I am Wells, head servant here at the Library.'

'I am Bayaz,' came a voice from behind. The butcher was walking slowly toward them, wiping his hands on a cloth. He looked maybe sixty but heavily built, with a strong face, deeply lined, and a close-cropped grey beard around his mouth. He was entirely bald, and the afternoon sun shone brightly off his tanned pate. He was neither handsome nor majestic, but as he came closer there did seem to be something about him. An assurance, an air of command. A man used to giving orders, and to being obeyed.

The First of the Magi took Logen's left hand in both of his and pressed it warmly. Then he turned it over and examined the stump of his missing finger.

‘Logen Ninefingers, then. The one they call the Bloody-Nine. I have heard stories about you, even shut up here in my library.’

Logen winced. He could guess what sort of stories the old man might have heard. ‘That was a long time ago.’

‘Of course. We all have a past, eh? I make no judgements on hearsay.’ And Bayaz smiled. A broad, white, beaming smile. His face lit up with friendly creases, but a hardness lingered around his eyes, deep-set and glistening green. A stony hardness. Logen grinned back, but he reckoned already that he wouldn’t want to make an enemy of this man.

‘And you have brought our missing lamb back to the fold.’ Bayaz frowned down at Malacus Quai, motionless on the grass. ‘How is he?’

‘I think he will live, sir,’ said Wells, ‘but we should get him out of the cold.’

The First of the Magi snapped his fingers and a sharp crack echoed from the buildings. ‘Help him.’ The smith hurried forward and took Quai’s feet, and together he and Wells carried the apprentice through the tall door into the library.

‘Now, Master Ninefingers, I have called and you have answered, and that shows good manners. Manners might be out of fashion in the North, but I want you to know that I appreciate them. Courtesy should be answered with courtesy, I have always thought. But what’s this now?’ The old gatekeeper was hurrying back across the yard, greatly out of breath. ‘Two visitors in one day? Whatever next?’

‘Master Bayaz!’ wheezed the gatekeeper, ‘there’s riders at the gate, well horsed and well armed! They say they’ve an urgent message from the King of the Northmen!’

Bethod. It had to be. The spirits had said he had given himself a golden hat, and who else would have dared to call himself King of the Northmen? Logen swallowed. He’d got away from their last meeting with his life and nothing else, and yet it was better than many had managed, far better.

‘Well, master?’ asked the gatekeeper, ‘shall I tell them to be off?’

‘Who leads them?’

‘A fancy lad with a sour face. Said he’s this King’s son or something. ’

‘Was it Calder or Scale? They’re both something sour.’

‘The younger one, I reckon.’

Calder then, that was something. Either one was bad, but Scale was much the worse. Both together were an experience to be avoided. Bayaz seemed to consider a moment. ‘Prince Calder may enter, but his men must remain beyond the bridge.’

‘Yes sir, beyond the bridge.’ The gatekeeper wheezed away. He’d love that, would Calder. Logen was greatly tickled by the thought of the so-called Prince screaming uselessly through that little slot.

‘The King of the Northmen now, can you imagine?’ Bayaz stared absently off down the valley. ‘I knew Bethod when he was not so grand. And so did you, eh, Master Ninefingers?’

Logen frowned. He’d known Bethod when he was next to nothing, a little chieftain like so many others. Logen had come for help against the Shanka, and Bethod had given it, at a price. Back then, the price had seemed light, and well worth the paying. Just to fight. To kill a few men. Logen had always found killing easy, and Bethod had seemed a man well worth fighting for – bold, proud, ruthless, venomously ambitious. All qualities that Logen had admired, back then, all qualities he thought he had himself. But time had changed them both, and the price had risen.

‘He used to be a better man,’ Bayaz was musing, ‘but crowns sit badly on some people. Do you know his sons?’

‘Better than I’d like.’

Bayaz nodded. ‘They’re absolute shit, aren’t they? And I fear now they will never improve. Imagine that pin-head Scale a king. Ugh!’ The wizard shuddered. ‘It almost makes you want to wish his father a long life. Almost, but not quite.’

The little girl that Logen had seen playing scurried over. She had a chain of yellow flowers in her hands, and she held it up to the old wizard. ‘I made this,’ she said. Logen could hear the rapid pounding of hooves coming up the road.

‘For me? How perfectly charming.’ Bayaz took the flowers from her. ‘Excellent work, my dear. The Master Maker himself could not have done better.’

The rider clattered out into the yard, pulled his horse up savagely and swung from the saddle. Calder. The years had been kinder to him than to Logen, that much was clear. He was dressed all in fine blacks trimmed with dark fur. A big red jewel flashed on his finger, the hilt of his sword was set

with gold. He'd grown and filled out, half the size of his brother Scale, but a big man still. His pale, proud face was pretty much as Logen remembered though, thin lips twisted in a permanent sneer.

He threw his reins at the woman churning milk then strode briskly across the yard, glowering about him, his long hair flapping in the breeze. When he was about ten strides away he saw Logen. His jaw dropped. Calder took a shocked half step back and his hand twitched towards his sword. Then he smiled a cold little smile.

'So you've taken to keeping dogs have you, Bayaz? I'd watch this one. He's been known to bite his master's hand.' His lip curled further. 'I could put him down for you if you'd like.'

Logen shrugged. Hard words are for fools and cowards. Calder might have been both, but Logen was neither. If you mean to kill, you're better getting right to it than talking about it. Talk only makes the other man ready, and that's the last thing you want. So Logen said nothing. Calder could take that for weakness if he pleased, and so much the better. Fights might find Logen depressingly often, but he was long, long past looking for them.

Bethod's second son turned his contempt on the First of the Magi. 'My father will be displeased, Bayaz! That my men must wait outside the gate shows little respect!'

'But I have so little, Prince Calder,' said the wizard calmly. 'Please don't be downhearted, though. Your last messenger wasn't allowed over the bridge, so you see we're making progress.'

Calder scowled. 'Why have you not answered my father's summons? '

'There are so many demands on my time.' Bayaz held up the chain of flowers. 'These don't make themselves, you know.'

The Prince was not amused. 'My father,' he boomed, 'Bethod, King of the Northmen, commands you to attend upon him at Carleon!' He cleared his throat. 'He will not . . .' He coughed.

'What?' demanded Bayaz. 'Speak up, child!'

'He commands . . .' The Prince coughed again, spluttered, choked. He put a hand to his throat. The air seemed to have become very still.

'Commands, does he?' Bayaz frowned. 'Bring great Juvens back from the land of the dead. He may command me. He alone, and no other.' The frown grew deeper still, and Logen had to resist a strange desire to back away. 'You may not. Nor may your father, whatever he calls himself.'

Calder sank slowly to his knees, face twisted, eyes watering. Bayaz looked him up and down. ‘What solemn attire, did somebody die? Here,’ and he tossed the chain of flowers over the Prince’s head. ‘A little colour may lighten your mood. Tell your father he must come himself. I do not waste my time on fools and younger sons. I am old fashioned in this. I like to talk to the horse’s head, not the horse’s arse. Do you understand me, boy?’ Calder was sagging sideways, eyes red and bulging. The First of the Magi waved his hand. ‘You may go.’

The Prince heaved in a ragged breath, coughed and reeled to his feet, stumbled for his horse and hauled himself up into the saddle with a deal less grace than he had got down. He shot a murderous glance over his shoulder as he made for the gate, but it didn’t have quite the same weight with his face red as a slapped arse. Logen realised he was grinning, wide. It was a long time since he’d enjoyed himself this much.

‘I understand that you can speak to the spirits.’

Logen was caught off guard. ‘Eh?’

‘To speak to the spirits.’ Bayaz shook his head. ‘It is a rare gift in these times. How are they?’

‘What, the spirits?’

‘Yes.’

‘Dwindling.’

‘Soon they will all sleep, eh? The magic leaks out of the world. That is the set order of things. Over the years my knowledge has grown, and yet my power has diminished.’

‘Calder seemed impressed.’

‘Bah.’ Bayaz waved his hand. ‘A mere nothing. A little trick of air and flesh, easily done. No, believe me, the magic ebbs away. It is a fact. A natural law. Still, there are many ways to crack an egg, eh, my friend? If one tool fails then we must try another.’ Logen was no longer entirely sure what they were talking about, but he was too tired to ask.

‘Yes, indeed,’ murmured the First of the Magi. ‘There are many ways to crack an egg. Speaking of which, you look hungry.’

Logen’s mouth flooded with spit at the very mention of food. ‘Yes,’ he mumbled. ‘Yes . . . I could eat.’

‘Of course.’ Bayaz clapped him warmly on the shoulder. ‘And then perhaps a bath? Not that we are offended of course, but I find that there is

nothing more soothing than hot water after a long walk, and you, I suspect, have had a very long walk indeed. Come with me, Master Ninefingers, you're safe here.'

Food. Bath. Safety. Logen had to stop himself from weeping as he followed the old man into the library.

The Good Man

It was a hot, hot day outside, and the sun shone brightly through the many-paned windows, casting criss-cross patterns on the wooden floor of the audience chamber. It was mid-afternoon, and the room was soupy warm and stuffy as a kitchen.

Fortis dan Hoff, the Lord Chamberlain, was red-faced and sweaty in his fur-trimmed robes of state, and had been in an increasingly filthy mood all afternoon. Harlen Morrow, his Under-Secretary for Audiences, looked even more uncomfortable, but then he had his terror of Hoff to contend with, in addition to the heat. Both men seemed greatly distressed in their own ways, but at least they got to sit down.

Major West was sweating steadily into his embroidered dress uniform. He had been standing in the same position, hands behind his back, teeth gritted, for nearly two hours while Lord Hoff sulked and grumbled and bellowed his way through the applicants and anyone else in view. West fervently wished, and not for the first time that afternoon, that he was lying under a tree in the park, with a strong drink. Or perhaps under a glacier, entombed within the ice. Anywhere but here.

Standing guard on these horrible audiences was hardly one of West's more pleasant duties, but it could have been worse. You had to spare a thought for the eight soldiers stood around the walls: they were in full armour. West was waiting for one of them to pass out and crash to the floor with a sound like a cupboard full of saucepans, no doubt to the great disgust of the Lord Chamberlain, but so far they were all somehow staying upright.

'Why is this damned room always the wrong temperature?' Hoff was demanding to know, as if the heat was an insult directed solely at him. 'It's too hot half the year, too cold the other half! There's no air in here, no air at all! Why don't these windows open? Why can't we have a bigger room?'

'Er . . .' mumbled the harassed Under-Secretary, pushing his spectacles up his sweaty nose, 'requests for audiences have always been held here, my Lord Chamberlain.' He paused under the fearsome gaze of his superior. 'Er . . . it is . . . traditional?'

‘I know that, you dolt!’ thundered Hoff, face crimson with heat and fury. ‘Who asked for your damn fool of an opinion anyway?’

‘Yes, that is to say, no,’ stuttered Morrow, ‘that is to say, quite so, my Lord.’

Hoff shook his head with a mighty frown, staring around the room in search of something else to displease him. ‘How many more must we endure today?’

‘Er . . . four more, your Grace.’

‘Damn it!’ thundered the Chamberlain, shifting in his huge chair and flapping his fur-trimmed collar to let some air in. ‘This is intolerable!’ West found himself in silent agreement. Hoff snatched up a silver goblet from the table and took a great slurp of wine. He was a great one for drinking, indeed he had been drinking all afternoon. It had not improved his temper. ‘Who’s the next fool?’ he demanded.

‘Er . . .’ Morrow squinted at a large document through his spectacles, tracing across the crabby writing with an inky finger. ‘Goodman Heath is next, a farmer from—’

‘A farmer? A farmer did you say? So we must sit in this ridiculous heat, listening to some damn commoner moan on about how the weather has affected his sheep?’

‘Well, my Lord,’ muttered Morrow, ‘it does seem as though, er, Goodman Heath has, er, a legitimate grievance against his, er, landlord, and—’

‘Damn it all! I am sick to my stomach of other people’s grievances! ’ The Lord Chamberlain took another swallow of wine. ‘Show the idiot in!’

The doors were opened and Goodman Heath was allowed into their presence. To underline the balance of power within the room, the Lord Chamberlain’s table was raised up on a high dais, so that even standing the poor man had to look up at them. An honest face, but very gaunt. He held a battered hat before him in trembling hands. West shrugged his shoulders in discomfort as a drop of sweat ran down his back.

‘You are Goodman Heath, correct?’

‘Yes, my Lord,’ mumbled the peasant in a broad accent, ‘from—’

Hoff cut him off with consummate rudeness. ‘And you come before us seeking an audience with his August Majesty, the High King of the Union?’

Goodman Heath licked his lips. West wondered how far he had come to be made a fool of. A very long way, most likely. ‘My family have been put

off our land. The landlord said we had not been paying the rent but—'

The Lord Chamberlain waved a hand. 'Plainly this is a matter for the Commission for Land and Agriculture. His August Majesty the King is concerned with the welfare of all his subjects, no matter how mean,' West almost winced at this slight, 'but he cannot be expected to give personal attention to every trifling thing. His time is valuable, and so is mine. Good day.' And that was it. Two of the soldiers pulled the double doors open for Goodman Heath to leave.

The peasant's face had gone very pale, his knuckles wringing at the brim of his hat. 'Good my Lord,' he stammered, 'I've already been to the Commission . . .'

Hoff looked up sharply, making the farmer stammer to a halt. 'Good day, I said!'

The peasant's shoulders slumped. He took a last look around the room. Morrow was examining something on the far wall with great interest and refused to meet his eye. The Lord Chamberlain stared back at him angrily, infuriated by this unforgivable waste of his time. West felt sick to be a part of it. Heath turned and shuffled away, head bowed. The doors swung shut.

Hoff bashed his fist on the table. 'Did you see that?' He stared round fiercely at the sweating assembly. 'The sheer gall of the man! Did you see that, Major West?'

'Yes, my Lord Chamberlain, I saw it all,' said West stiffly. 'It was a disgrace.'

Fortunately, Hoff did not take his whole meaning. 'A disgrace, Major West, you are quite right! Why the hell is it that all the promising young men go into the army? I want to know who is responsible for letting these beggars in here!' He glared at the Under-Secretary, who swallowed and stared at his documents. 'What's next?'

'Er,' mumbled Morrow, 'Coster dan Kault, Magister of the Guild of Mercers.'

'I know who he is, damn it!' snapped Hoff, wiping a fresh sheen of sweat from his face. 'If it isn't the damn peasants it's the damn merchants!' he roared at the soldiers by the door, his voice easily loud enough to be heard in the corridor outside. 'Show the grubbing old swindler in, then!'

Magister Kault could hardly have presented a more different appearance from the previous supplicant. He was a big, plump man, with a face as soft

as his eyes were hard. His purple vesture of office was embroidered with yards of golden thread, so ostentatious that the Emperor of Gurkhul himself might have been embarrassed to wear it. He was accompanied by a pair of senior Mercers, their own attire scarcely less magnificent. West wondered if Goodman Heath could earn enough in ten years to pay for one of those gowns. He decided not, even if he hadn't been thrown off his land.

'My Lord Chamberlain,' intoned Kault with an elaborate bow. Hoff acknowledged the head of the Guild of Mercers as faintly as humanly possible, with a raised eyebrow and an almost imperceptible twist of the lip. Kault waited for a greeting which he felt more befitting of his station, but none was forthcoming. He noisily cleared his throat. 'I have come to seek an audience with his August Majesty—'

The Lord Chamberlain snorted. 'The purpose of this session is to decide who is worthy of his Majesty's attention. If you aren't seeking an audience with him you have blundered into the wrong room.' It was already clear that this interview would be every bit as unsuccessful as the last. There was a kind of horrible justice to it, West supposed. The great and the small were treated exactly alike.

Magister Kault's eyes narrowed slightly, but he continued. 'The honourable Guild of Mercers, of whom I am the humble representative . . .' Hoff slurped wine noisily and Kault was obliged to pause for a moment. ' . . . have been the victims of a most malicious and mischievous attack—'

'Fill this up, would you?' yelled the Lord Chamberlain, waving his empty goblet at Morrow. The Under-Secretary slipped eagerly from his chair and seized the decanter. Kault was forced to wait, teeth gritted, while the wine gurgled out.

'Continue!' blustered Hoff, waving his hand, 'we don't have all day!'

'A most malicious and under-handed attack—'

The Lord Chamberlain squinted down. 'An attack you say? A common assault is a matter for the City Watch!'

Magister Kault grimaced. He and his two companions were already starting to sweat. 'Not an attack of that variety, my Lord Chamberlain, but an insidious and underhanded assault, designed to discredit the shining reputation of our Guild, and to damage our business interests in the Free Cities of Styria, and across the Union. An attack perpetrated by certain deceitful elements of his Majesty's Inquisition, and—'

‘I have heard enough!’ The Lord Chamberlain jerked up his big hand for silence. ‘If this is a matter of trade, then it should be handled by His Majesty’s Commission for Trade and Commerce.’ Hoff spoke slowly and precisely, in the manner of a school-master addressing his most disappointing pupil. ‘If this is a matter of law, then it should be handled by the department of High Justice Marovia. If it is a matter of the internal workings of his Majesty’s Inquisition, then you must arrange an appointment with Arch Lector Sult. In any case, it is hardly a matter for the attention of his August Majesty.’

The head of the Mercer’s Guild opened his mouth but the Lord Chamberlain spoke over him, voice louder than ever. ‘Your King employs a Commission, selects a High Justice, and appoints an Arch Lector, so that he need not deal with every trifling issue himself! Incidentally, that is also why he grants licences to certain merchant guilds, and not to line the pockets . . .’ and his lip twisted into an unpleasant sneer ‘ . . . of the trading class! Good day.’ And the doors were opened.

Kault’s face had turned pale with anger at that last comment. ‘You may depend upon it, Lord Chamberlain,’ he said coldly, ‘that we will seek redress elsewhere, and with the very greatest of persistence.’

Hoff glared back at him for a very long while. ‘Seek it wherever you like,’ he growled, ‘and with as much persistence as you please. But not here. Good . . . day!’ If you could have stabbed someone in the face with the phrase ‘good day’, the head of the Guild of Mercers would have lain dead on the floor.

Kault blinked a couple of times, then turned angrily and strode out with as much dignity as he could muster. His two lackeys followed close on his heels, their fabulous gowns flapping behind them. The doors were pushed shut.

Hoff smashed the table once again with his fist. ‘An outrage!’ he spluttered. ‘Those arrogant swine! Do they seriously think they can flout the King’s law and still seek the King’s help when things turn sour?’

‘Well, no,’ said Morrow, ‘of course . . .’

The Lord Chamberlain ignored his Under-Secretary and turned to West with a sneering smile. ‘Still, I fancy I could see the vultures circling around them, despite the low ceiling, eh, Major West?’

‘Indeed, my Lord Chamberlain,’ mumbled West, thoroughly uncomfortable and wishing this torture would end. Then he could get back to his sister. His heart sank. She was even more of a handful than he remembered. She was clever alright, but he worried that she might be too clever for her own good. If only she would just marry some honest man and be happy. His position here was precarious enough, without her making a spectacle of herself.

‘Vultures, vultures,’ Hoff was murmuring to himself. ‘Nasty-looking birds, but they have their uses. What’s next?’

The sweating Under-Secretary looked even more uncomfortable than before as he fumbled for the right words. ‘We have a party of . . . diplomats?’

The Lord Chamberlain paused, goblet halfway to his mouth. ‘Diplomats? From whom?’

‘Er . . . from this so-called King of the Northmen, Bethod.’

Hoff burst out laughing. ‘Diplomats?’ he cackled, mopping his face on his sleeve. ‘Savages, you mean!’

The Under-Secretary chuckled unconvincingly. ‘Ah yes, my Lord, ha, ha! Savages, of course!’

‘But dangerous, eh, Morrow?’ snapped the Lord Chamberlain, his good humour evaporating instantly. The Under-Secretary’s cackling gurgled to a halt. ‘Very dangerous. We must be careful. Show them in!’

There were four of them. The two smallest were great big, fierce-looking men, scarred and bearded, clad in heavy battered armour. They had been disarmed at the gate of the Agriont, of course, but there was still a sense of danger about them, and West had the feeling they would have given up a lot of big, well-worn weapons. These were the sort of men who were crowded on the borders of Angland, hungry for war, not far from West’s home.

With them came an older man, also in pitted armour, and with long hair and a great white beard. There was a livid scar across his face and through his eye, which was blind white. He had a broad smile on his lips though, and his pleasant demeanour was greatly at odds with that of his two dour companions, and with the fourth man, who came behind.

He had to stoop to get under the lintel, which was a good seven feet above the floor. He was swathed and hooded in a rough brown cloak, features invisible. As he straightened up, towering over everyone else, the room

began to seem absurdly cramped. His sheer bulk was intimidating, but there was something more, something that seemed to come off him in sickly waves. The soldiers around the walls felt it, and they shifted uncomfortably. The Under-Secretary for Audiences felt it, sweating and twitching and fussing with his documents. Major West certainly felt it. His skin had gone cold despite the heat, and he could feel every hair on his body standing up under his damp uniform.

Only Hoff seemed unaffected. He looked the four Northmen up and down with a deep frown on his face, no more impressed with the hooded giant than he had been with Goodman Heath. 'So you are messengers from Bethod.' He rolled the words around in his mouth, then spat them out, 'The King of the Northmen.'

'We are,' said the smiling old man, bowing with great reverence. 'I am White-Eye Hansul.' His voice was rich, round and pleasant, without any accent, not at all what West had been expecting.

'And you are Bethod's emissary?' asked Hoff casually, taking another swallow of wine from his goblet. For the first time ever West was pleased the Lord Chamberlain was in the room with him, but then he glanced up at the hooded man and the feeling of unease returned.

'Oh no,' said White-Eye, 'I am here merely as translator. This is the emissary of the King of the Northmen,' and his good eye flicked nervously up to the dark figure in the cloak, as though even he was afraid. 'Fenris.' He stretched out the 's' on the end of the name so that it hissed in the air. 'Fenris the Feared.'

An apt name indeed. Major West thought back to songs he had heard in his childhood, stories of bloodthirsty giants in the mountains of the distant north. The room was silent for a moment.

'Humph,' said the Lord Chamberlain, unmoved. 'And you seek an audience with his August Majesty, the High King of the Union?'

'We do indeed, my Lord Chamberlain,' said the old warrior. 'Our master, Bethod, greatly regrets the hostility between our two nations. He wishes only to be on the best of terms with his southern neighbours. We bring an offer of peace from my King to yours, and a gift to show our good faith. Nothing more.'

'Well, well,' said Hoff, sitting back in his high chair with a broad smile. 'A gracious request, graciously made. You may see the King in Open

Council tomorrow, and present your offer, and your gift, before the foremost peers of the realm.'

White-Eye bowed respectfully. 'You are most kind, my Lord Chamberlain.' He turned for the door, followed by the two dour warriors. The cloaked figure lingered for a moment, then he too slowly turned and stooped through the doorway. It wasn't until the doors were shut that West could breathe easily again. He shook his head and shrugged his sweaty shoulders. Songs about giants indeed. A great big man in a cloak was all. But looking again, that doorway really was very high . . .

'There, you see, Master Morrow?' Hoff looked intensely pleased with himself. 'Hardly the savages you led me to expect! I feel we are close to a resolution of our northern problems, don't you?'

The Under-Secretary did not look in the least convinced. 'Er . . . yes, my Lord, of course.'

'Yes indeed. A lot of fuss over nothing. A lot of pessimistic, defeatist nonsense from our jumpy citizens up north, eh? War? Bah!' Hoff whacked his hand on the table again, making wine slop out of his goblet and spatter on the wood. 'These Northmen wouldn't dare! Why, next thing you know they'll be petitioning us for membership of the Union! You see if I'm not right, eh, Major West?'

'Er ...'

'Good! Excellent! We've got something done today at least! One more and we can get out of this damn furnace! Who do we have, Morrow?'

The Under-Secretary frowned and pushed his glasses up his nose. 'Er . . . we have one Yoru Sulfur,' he wrestled with the unfamiliar name.

'We have a who?'

'Er . . . Sulfir, or Sulfor, or something.'

'Never heard of him,' grunted the Lord Chamberlain, 'what manner of a man is he? Some kind of a southerner? Not another peasant, please!'

The Under-Secretary examined his notes, and swallowed. 'An emissary?'

'Yes, yes, but from whom?'

Morrow was positively cringing, like a child expecting a slap. 'From the Great Order of Magi!' he blurted out.

There was a moment of stunned silence. West's eyebrows went up and his jaw came open, and he guessed that the same was happening, unseen, behind the visors of the soldiers. He winced instinctively as he anticipated

the response of the Lord Chamberlain, but Hoff surprised them all by bursting into peals of laughter. ‘Excellent! At last some entertainment. It’s been years since we had a Magus here! Show in the wizard! We mustn’t keep him waiting!’

Yoru Sulfur was something of a disappointment. He had simple, travel-stained clothes, was scarcely better dressed than Goodman Heath had been, in fact. His staff was not shod with gold, had no lump of shining crystal on the end. His eye did not flash with a mysterious fire. He looked a fairly ordinary sort of a man in his middle thirties, slightly tired, as though after a long journey, but otherwise well at his ease before the Lord Chamberlain.

‘A good day to you, gentlemen,’ he said, leaning on his staff. West was having some difficulty working out where he was from. Not the Union, because his skin was too dark, and not Gurkhul or the far south, because his skin was too light. Not from the North or from Styria. Further then, but where? Now that West looked at him more closely he noticed that his eyes were different colours: one blue, one green.

‘And a good day to you, sir,’ said Hoff, smiling as though he really meant it. ‘My door is forever open to the Great Order of Magi. Tell me, do I have the pleasure of addressing great Bayaz himself?’

Sulfur looked puzzled. ‘No, was I wrongly announced? I am Yoru Sulfur. Master Bayaz is a bald gentleman.’ He pushed a hand through his own head of curly brown hair. ‘There is a statue of him outside in the avenue. But I did have the honour to study under him for several years. He is a most powerful and knowledgeable master.’

‘Of course! Of course he is! And how may we be of service?’

Yoru Sulfur cleared his throat, as though to tell a story. ‘On the death of King Harod the Great, Bayaz, the First of the Magi, left the Union. But he swore an oath to return.’

‘Yes, yes, that’s true,’ chuckled Hoff. ‘Very true, every school-child knows it.’

‘And he pronounced that, when he returned, his coming would be heralded by another.’

‘True, also.’

‘Well,’ said Sulfur, smiling broadly, ‘here I am.’

The Lord Chamberlain roared with laughter. ‘Here you are!’ he shouted, thumping the table. Harlen Morrow allowed himself a little chuckle, but

shut up immediately as Hoff's smile began to fade.

'During my tenure as Lord Chamberlain, I have had three members of the Great Order of Magi apply to me for audiences with the King. Two were most clearly insane, and one was an exceptionally courageous swindler.' He leaned forward, placing his elbows on the table and steepling his fingers before him. 'Tell me, Master Sulfur, which kind of Magus are you?'

'I am neither of those.'

'I see. Then you will have documents.'

'Of course.' Sulfur reached into his coat and brought out a small letter, closed with a white seal, a single strange symbol stamped into it. He placed it carelessly on the table before the Lord Chamberlain.

Hoff frowned. He picked up the document and turned it over in his hands. He examined the seal carefully, then he dabbed his face with his sleeve, broke the wax, unfolded the thick paper and began to read.

Yoru Sulfur showed no sign of nerves. He didn't appear troubled by the heat. He strolled around the room, he nodded to the armoured soldiers, he didn't seem upset by their lack of response. He turned suddenly to West. 'It's terribly hot in here, isn't it? It's a wonder these poor fellows don't pass out, and crash to the floor with a sound like a cupboard full of saucepans.' West blinked. He had been thinking the very same thing.

The Lord Chamberlain put the letter down carefully on the table, no longer in the least amused. 'It occurs to me that the Open Council would be the wrong place to discuss this matter.'

'I agree. I was hoping for a private audience with Lord Chancellor Feekt.'

'I am afraid that will not be possible.' Hoff licked his lips. 'Lord Feekt is dead.'

Sulfur frowned. 'That is most unfortunate.'

'Indeed, indeed. We all feel his loss most keenly. Perhaps I and certain other members of the Closed Council can assist you.'

Sulfur bowed his head. 'I am guided by you, my Lord Chamberlain.'

'I will try to arrange something for later this evening. Until then we will find you some lodgings within the Agriont . . . suitable for your station.' He signalled to the guards, and the doors were opened.

'Thank you so much, Lord Hoff. Master Morrow. Major West.' Sulfur nodded to them graciously, each in turn, and then turned and left. The doors

were closed once more, leaving West wondering how the man had known his name.

Hoff turned to his Under-Secretary for Audiences. ‘Go immediately to Arch Lector Sult, and tell him we must meet at once. Then fetch High Justice Marovia, and Lord Marshal Varuz. Tell them it is a matter of the very highest importance, and not a word of this to anyone beyond those three.’ He shook his finger in Morrow’s sweaty face. ‘Not a word!’

The Under-Secretary stared back, spectacles askew. ‘Now!’ roared Hoff. Morrow leapt to his feet, stumbled on the hem of his gown, then hurried out through a side door. West swallowed, his mouth very dry.

Hoff stared long and hard at each man in the room. ‘As for the rest of you, not a word to anyone about any of this, or the consequences for all of you will be most severe! Now out, everyone out!’ The soldiers clanked from the room immediately. West needed no further encouragement and he hurried after them, leaving the brooding Lord Chamberlain alone in his high chair.

West’s thoughts were dark and confused as he pulled the door shut behind him. Fragments of old stories of the Magi, fears about war in the North, images of a hooded giant, towering up near the ceiling. There had been some strange and some sinister visitors to the Agriont that day, and he felt quite weighed down by worries. He tried to shrug them off, told himself it was all foolishness, but then all he could think of was his sister, cavorting about the Agriont like a fool.

He groaned to himself. She was probably with Luthar right now. Why the hell had he introduced the two of them? For some reason he had been expecting the same awkward, sickly, sharp-tongued girl he remembered from years ago. He had got quite a shock when this woman had turned up at his quarters. He had barely recognised her. Undoubtedly a woman, and a fine-looking one too. Meanwhile, Luthar was arrogant and rich and handsome and had all the self-restraint of a six-year old. He knew they had seen each other since, and more than once. Just as friends, of course. Ardee had no other friends here. Just friends.

‘Shit!’ he cursed. It was like putting a cat by the cream and trusting it not to stick its tongue in. Why the hell hadn’t he thought it through? It was a damn disaster in the making! But what could he do about it now? He stared off miserably down the hallway.

There's nothing like seeing another's misery to make you forget your own, and Goodman Heath was a sorry sight indeed. He was sitting alone on a long bench, face deathly pale, staring off into space. He must have been sitting there all this time, while the Mercers and the Northmen and the Magus came and went, waiting for nothing but with nowhere left to go. West glanced up and down the hallway. There was no one else nearby. Heath was oblivious to him, mouth open, eyes glassy, battered hat forgotten on his knees.

West couldn't simply leave the man like this, he didn't have it in him.

'Goodman Heath,' he said as he approached, and the peasant looked up at him, surprised. He fumbled for his hat and made to rise, muttering apologies.

'No, please, don't get up.' West sat down on the bench. He stared at his feet, unable to look the man in the eye. There was an awkward silence. 'I have a friend who sits on the Commission for Land and Agriculture. There might be something he can do for you . . .' He trailed off, embarrassed, squinting up the corridor.

The farmer gave a sad smile. 'I'd be right grateful for anything you could do.'

'Yes, yes, of course, I'll do what I can.' It would do no good whatsoever, and they both knew it. West grimaced and bit his lip. 'You'd better take this,' and he pressed his purse into the peasant's limp, calloused fingers. Heath looked at him, mouth slightly open. West gave a quick, awkward smile then got to his feet. He was very keen to be off.

'Sir!' called Goodman Heath after him, but West was already hurrying down the corridor, and he didn't look back.

On the List

W*hy do I do this?* The outline of Villem dan Robb's townhouse was cut out in black against the clear night sky. It was an unremarkable building, a two-storey-dwelling with a low wall and a gate in front, just like a hundred others in this street. *Our old friend Rews used to live in a palatial great villa near the market. Robb really should have asked him for some more ambitious bribes. Still. Lucky for us he didn't.* Elsewhere in the city the fashionable avenues would be brightly lit and busy with drunken revellers right through until dawn. But this secluded side street was far from the bright lights and the prying eyes.

We can work undisturbed.

Round the side of the building, on the upper floor, a lamp was burning in a narrow window. *Good. Our friend is at home. But still awake – we must tread gently.* He turned to Practical Frost and pointed down the side of the house. The albino nodded and slipped away silently across the street.

Glokta waited for him to reach the wall and disappear into the shadows beside the building, then he turned to Severard and pointed at the front door. The eyes of the lanky Practical smiled at him for a moment, then he scuttled quickly away, staying low, rolled over the low wall and dropped without a sound onto the other side.

Perfect so far, but now I must move. Glokta wondered why he had come. Frost and Severard were more than capable of dealing with Robb by themselves, and he would only slow them down. *I might even fall on my arse and alert the idiot to our presence. So why did I come?* But Glokta knew why. The feeling of excitement was already building in his throat. It felt almost like being alive.

He had muffled the end of his cane with a bit of rag, so he was able to limp to the wall, ever so delicately, without making too much noise. By that time Severard had swung the gate open, holding the hinge with one gloved hand so that it didn't make a noise. *Nice and neat. That little wall might as well be a hundred feet high for all my chances of getting over it.*

Severard was kneeling on the step against the front door, picking the lock. His ear was close to the wood, his eyes squinting with concentration, gloved

hands moving deftly. Glokta's heart was beating fast, his skin prickly with tension. *Ah, the thrill of the hunt.*

There was a soft click, then another. Severard slipped his glittering picks into a pocket, then reached out and slowly, carefully turned the doorknob. The door swung silently open. *What a useful fellow he is. Without him and Frost I am just a cripple. They are my hands, my arms, my legs. But I am their brains.* Severard slipped inside and Glokta followed him, wincing with pain every time he put his weight on his left leg.

The hallway was dark, but there was a shaft of light spilling down the stairs from above and the banisters cast strange, distorted shadows on the wooden floor. Glokta pointed up the steps, and Severard nodded and began to tiptoe toward them, keeping his feet close to the wall. It seemed to take him an age to get there.

The third step made a quiet creaking sound as he put his weight on it. Glokta winced, Severard froze in place. They waited, still as statues. There was no sound from upstairs. Glokta began to breathe again. Severard moved ever so slowly upwards, step by gentle step. As he got towards the top he peered cautiously round the corner, back pressed against the wall, then he took the last step and disappeared from view without a sound.

Practical Frost emerged from the shadows at the far end of the corridor. Glokta raised an eyebrow at him but he shook his head. *Nobody downstairs.* He turned to the front door and started to close it, ever so gently. Only when it was shut did he slowly, slowly release the doorknob, so the latch slid silently into place.

'You'll want to see this.'

Glokta gave a start at the sudden sound, turning round quickly and causing a jolt of pain to shoot through his back. Severard was standing, hands on hips, at the head of the stairs. He turned and made off towards the light, and Frost bounded up the steps after him, no longer making any pretence at stealth.

Why can no one ever stay on the ground floor? Always upstairs. At least he didn't have to try to be quiet as he struggled up the steps after his Practicals, right foot creaking, left foot scraping on the boards. Bright lamplight was flooding out into the upstairs corridor from an open door at the far end, and Glokta limped toward it. He paused as he crossed the threshold, catching his breath after the climb.

Oh dear me, what a mess. A big bookcase had been torn away from the wall, and books were scattered, open and closed, all about the floor. A glass of wine had been knocked over on the desk, making sodden red rags of the crumpled papers strewn across it. The bed was in disarray, the covers pulled half off, the pillows and the mattress slashed and spilling feathers. A wardrobe had its doors open, one of them dangling half off. A few tattered garments were hanging inside, but most were lying torn in a heap below.

A handsome young man lay on his back under the window, staring up, pale-faced and open mouthed at the ceiling. It would have been an understatement to say that his throat had been cut. It had been hacked so savagely that his head was only just still attached. There was blood splattered everywhere, on the torn clothes, on the slashed mattress, all over the body itself. There were a couple of smeared, bloody palm-prints on the wall, a great pool of blood across a good part of the floor, still wet. *He was killed tonight. Perhaps only a few hours ago. Perhaps only a few minutes.*

'I don't think he'll be answering our questions,' said Severard.

'No.' Glokta's eyes drifted over the wreckage. 'I think he might be dead. But how did it happen?'

Frost fixed him with a pink eye and raised a white eyebrow. 'Poithon?'

Severard spluttered with shrill laughter under his mask. Even Glokta allowed himself a chuckle. 'Clearly. But how did our poison get in?'

'Open wi'ow,' mumbled Frost, pointing at the floor.

Glokta limped into the room, careful not to let his feet or his cane touch the sticky mess of blood and feathers. 'So, our poison saw the lamp burning, just as we did. He entered via the downstairs window. He climbed silently up the stairs.' Glokta turned the corpse's hands over with the tip of his cane. *A few specks of blood from the neck, but no damage to the knuckles or the fingers. He did not struggle. He was taken by surprise.* He craned forward and peered at the gaping wound.

'A single, powerful cut. Probably with a knife.'

'And Villem dan Robb has sprung a most serious leak,' said Severard.

'And we are short one informant,' mused Glokta. There had been no blood in the corridor. *Our man took pains not to get his feet wet while searching the room, however messy it may look. He was not angry or afraid. It was just a job.*

‘The killer was a professional,’ murmured Glokta, ‘he came here with murder in mind. Then perhaps he made this little effort to give the appearance of a burglary, who can say? Either way, the Arch Lector won’t be satisfied with a corpse.’ He looked up at his two Practicals. ‘Who’s next on the list?’

This time there had been a struggle, without a doubt. *If a one-sided one.* Solimo Scandi was sprawled on his side, facing the wall, as though embarrassed by the state of his slashed and tattered nightshirt. There were deep cuts in his forearms. *Where he struggled vainly to ward off the blade.* He had crawled across the floor, leaving a bloody trail across the highly polished wood. *Where he struggled vainly to get away.* He had failed. The four gaping knife wounds in his back had been the end of him.

Glokta felt his face twitching as he looked down at the bloody corpse. *One body might just be a coincidence. Two make a conspiracy.* His eyelid fluttered. *Whoever did this knew we were coming, and when, and precisely who for. They are one step ahead of us. More than likely, our list of accomplices has already become a list of corpses.* There was a creaking sound behind Glokta and his head whipped round, sending shooting pains down his stiff neck. Nothing but the open window swinging in the breeze. *Calm, now. Calm, and think it out.*

‘It would seem the honourable Guild of Mercers have been doing a little housekeeping.’

‘How could they know?’ muttered Severard.

How indeed? ‘They must have seen Rews’ list, or been told who was on it.’ *And that means . . .* Glokta licked at his empty gums. ‘Someone inside the Inquisition has been talking.’

For once, Severard’s eyes were not smiling. ‘If they know who’s on the list, they know who wrote it. They know who we are.’

Three more names on the list, perhaps? Down at the bottom? Glokta grinned. *How very exciting.* ‘You scared?’

‘I’m not happy, I’ll tell you that.’ He nodded down at the corpse. ‘A knife in the back isn’t part of my plan.’

‘Nor mine, Severard, believe me.’ *No indeed. If I die, I’ll never know who betrayed us.*

And I want to know.

A bright, cloudless spring day, and the park was busy with fops and idlers of every variety. Glokta sat very still on his bench, in the merciful shade of a spreading tree, and stared out at the shimmering greenery, the sparkling water, the happy, the drunken, the colourful revellers. There were people wedged together on the benches around the lake, pairs and groups scattered around the grass, drinking and talking and basking in the sun. There seemed no space for any more.

But no one came and sat next to Glokta. Occasionally somebody would hurry up, hardly able to believe their luck in finding such a spot, then they would see him sitting there. Their faces would fall and they would swerve away, or walk right past as though they had never meant to sit. *I drive them away as surely as the plague, but perhaps that's just as well. I don't need their company.*

He watched a group of young soldiers rowing a boat on the lake. One of them stood up, wobbling around, holding forth with a bottle in his hand. The boat rocked alarmingly, and his companions shouted at him to get down. Vague gales of good-natured laughter came wafting through the air, delayed a little by the distance. *Children. How young they look. How innocent. And such was I, not long ago. It seems a thousand years, though. Longer. It seems a different world.*

'Glokta.'

He looked up, shading his eyes with his hand. It was Arch Lector Sult, arrived at last, a tall dark shape against the blue sky. Glokta thought he looked a little more tired, more lined, more drawn than usual as he stared coldly down.

'This had better be interesting.' Sult flicked out the tails of his long white coat and lowered himself gracefully onto the bench. 'The commoners are up in arms again near Keln. Some idiot of a landowner hangs a few peasants and now we have a mess to deal with! How hard can it be to manage a field full of dirt and a couple of farmers? You don't have to treat them well, just as long as you don't hang them!' His mouth was a straight, hard line as he glared out across the lawns. 'This had better be damned interesting.'

Then I'll try not to disappoint you. 'Villem dan Robb is dead.' As though to add emphasis to Glokta's statement, the drunken soldier slipped and toppled over the side of the boat, splashing into the water. His friends' screams of laughter reached Glokta a moment later. 'He was murdered.'

‘Huh. It happens. Pick up the next man on the list.’ Sult got to his feet, frowning. ‘I didn’t think you’d need my approval for every little thing. That’s why I picked you for this job. Just get on with it!’ he snapped as he turned away.

There’s no need to rush, Arch Lector. That’s the trouble with good legs, you tend to run around too much. If you have trouble moving, on the other hand, you don’t move until you damn well know it’s time. ‘The next man on the list also suffered a mishap.’

Sult turned back, one eyebrow slightly raised. ‘He did?’

‘They all did.’

The Arch Lector pursed his lips, sat back down on the bench. ‘All of them?’

‘All of them.’

‘Hmm,’ mused Sult. ‘That is interesting. The Mercers are cleaning up, are they? I hardly expected such ruthlessness. Times have changed, alright, times have certainly . . .’ He trailed off, slowly starting to frown. ‘You think someone gave them Rews’ list, don’t you? You think one of ours has been talking. That’s why you asked me to come here, isn’t it?’

Did you think I was just avoiding the stairs? ‘Each one of them killed? Each and every name on our list? The very night we go to arrest them? I am not a great believer in coincidences.’ *Are you, Arch Lector?*

He was evidently not. His face had turned very grim. ‘Who saw the confession?’

‘Me, and my two Practicals, of course.’

‘You have absolute confidence in them?’

‘Absolute.’ There was a pause. The boat was drifting, rudderless, as the soldiers scrambled about, oars sticking up in the air, the man in the water splashing and laughing, spraying water over his friends.

‘The confession was in my office for some time,’ murmured the Arch Lector. ‘Some members of my staff could have seen it. Could have.’

‘You have absolute confidence in them, your Eminence?’

Sult stared at Glokta for a long, icy moment. ‘They wouldn’t dare. They know me better than that.’

‘That leaves Superior Kalyne,’ said Glokta quietly.

The Arch Lector’s lips hardly moved as he spoke. ‘You must tread carefully, Inquisitor, very carefully. The ground is not at all safe where you

are walking. Fools do not become Superiors of the Inquisition, despite appearances. Kalyne has many friends, both within the House of Questions and outside it. Powerful friends. Any accusation against him must be backed up by the very strongest of proof.' Sult stopped suddenly, waiting for a small group of ladies to pass out of earshot. 'The very strongest of proof,' he hissed, once they had moved away. 'You must find me this assassin.'

Easier said than done. 'Of course, your Eminence, but my investigation has reached something of a dead end.'

'Not quite. We still have one card left to play. Rews himself.'

Rews? 'But, Arch Lector, he will be in Angland by now.' *Sweating down a mine or some such. If he has even lasted this long.*

'No. He is here in the Agriont, under lock and key. I thought it best to hold on to him.' Glokta did his utmost to contain his surprise. *Clever. Very clever. Fools do not become Arch Lectors either, it seems.* 'Rews will be your bait. I will have my secretary carry a message to Kalyne, letting him know that I have relented. That I am prepared to let the Mercers continue to operate, but under tighter control. That as a gesture of goodwill I have let Rews go. If Kalyne is the source of our leak, I daresay he will let the Mercers know that Rews is free. I daresay they will send this assassin to punish him for his loose tongue. I daresay you could take him while he is trying. If the killer doesn't come, well, we might have to look for our traitor elsewhere, and we have lost nothing.'

'An excellent plan, your Eminence.'

Sult stared at him coldly. 'Of course. You will need somewhere to operate, somewhere far from the House of Questions. I will make the funds available, have Rews delivered to your Practicals, and let you know when Kalyne has the information. Find me this assassin, Glokta, and squeeze him. Squeeze him until the pips squeak.' The boat lurched wildly as the soldiers tried to haul their wet companion in, then it suddenly turned right over, dumping them all into the water.

'I want names,' hissed Sult, glowering at the splashing soldiers, 'I want names, and evidence, and documents, and people who will stand up in Open Council and point fingers.' He stood up smoothly from the bench. 'Keep me informed.' He strode off towards the House of Questions, feet crunching on

the gravel of the path, and Glokta watched him go. *An excellent plan. I'm glad you're on my side, Arch Lector. You are on my side, aren't you?*

The soldiers had succeeded in hauling the upended boat onto the bank and were standing, dripping wet, shouting at one another, no longer so good-humoured. One of the oars was still floating, abandoned in the water, drifting gradually towards the point where the stream flowed from the lake. Soon it would pass under the bridge and be carried out, beneath the great walls of the Agriont and into the moat. Glokta watched it turning slowly round in the water. *A mistake. One should attend to the details. It is easy to forget the little things, but without the oar, the boat is useless.*

He let his gaze wander across some of the other faces in the park. His eye alighted on a handsome pair sitting on a bench by the lake. The young man was speaking quietly to the girl, a sad and earnest expression on his face. She got up quickly, moving away from him with her hands over her face. *Ah, the pain of the jilted lover. The loss, the anger, the shame. It seems as though you'll never recover. What poet was it who wrote there's no pain worse than the pain of a broken heart? Sentimental shit. He should have spent more time in the Emperor's prisons.* He smiled, opening his mouth and licking the empty gums where his front teeth used to be. *Broken hearts heal with time, but broken teeth never do.*

Glokta looked at the young man. He had an expression of slight amusement on his face as he watched the weeping girl walk away. *The young bastard! I wonder if he's broken as many hearts as I did, in my youth? It hardly seems possible now. It takes me half an hour just to pluck up the courage to stand. The only women I've made cry lately have been the wives of those I've had exiled to Angland—*

'Sand.'

Glokta turned around. 'Lord Marshal Varuz, what an honour. '

'Oh no, no,' said the old soldier, sitting down on the bench with the swift, precise movements of the fencing master. 'You look well,' he said, but without really looking. *I look crippled, you mean.* 'How are you, my old friend?' *I'm crippled, you pompous old ass. And friend, is it? All those years since I came back, and you have never sought me out, not once. Is that a friendship?*

'Well enough, thank you, Lord Marshal.'

Varuz shifted uncomfortably on the bench. ‘My latest student, Captain Luthar . . . perhaps you know him?’

‘We are acquainted.’

‘You should see his forms.’ Varuz shook his head sadly. ‘He has the talent, alright, though he will never be in your class, Sand.’ *I don’t know. I hope some day he’ll be just as crippled as I am.* ‘But he has plenty of talent, enough to win. Only he’s wasting it. Throwing it away.’ *Oh, the tragedy of it. I am so upset I could be sick. Had I eaten anything this morning.*

‘He is lazy, Sand, and stubborn. He lacks courage. He lacks dedication. His heart is just not in it, and time is running out. I was wondering, if you have the time of course,’ Varuz looked Glokta in the eye for just an instant, ‘whether you might be able to speak to him for me.’

I can hardly wait! Lecturing that whining ass would be the realisation of all my dreams. You arrogant old dolt, how dare you? You built your reputation on my successes, then when I needed your help you cut me off. And now you come to me, and seek my help, and call me friend?

‘Of course, Marshal Varuz, I would be glad to speak to him. Anything for an old friend.’

‘Excellent, excellent! I’m sure you’ll make all the difference! I train him every morning, in that courtyard near the House of the Maker, where I used to train you . . .’ The old Marshal trailed off awkwardly.

‘I will come as soon as my duties permit.’

‘Of course, your duties . . .’ Varuz was already getting up, evidently keen to be on his way. Glokta held out his hand, making the old soldier pause for a moment. *You needn’t worry, Lord Marshal, I am not contagious.* Varuz gave it a limp shake, as though worried it might snap off, then he mumbled his excuses and strode away, head held high. The dripping soldiers bowed and saluted as he walked past, somewhat embarrassed.

Glokta stretched out his leg, wondering whether to get up. *And go where? The world will not end if I sit here a moment longer. There is no rush. No rush.*

An Offer and a Gift

‘And, forward!’ bellowed Marshal Varuz. Jezal lurched at him, toes curling round the edges of the beam, trying desperately to keep his balance, making a clumsy lunge or two just to give the impression of his heart being in Four hours of training a day were taking their toll on him, and he felt beyond mere exhaustion.

Varuz frowned and flicked Jezal’s blunted steel aside, moving effortlessly along the beam as though it was a garden path. ‘And back!’

Jezal stumbled back on his heels, left arm waving stupidly around him in an attempt to keep his balance. Everything above his knees was aching terribly from the effort. Below the knees it was much, much worse. Varuz was over sixty, but he showed no signs of fatigue. He wasn’t even sweating as he danced forward down the beam, swishing his steels around. Jezal himself was gasping for air as he parried desperately with his left hand, badly off balance, his right foot fishing in space for the safety of the beam behind him.

‘And, forward!’ Jezal’s calves were agony as he stumbled to change his direction and shove a blow at the infuriating old man, but Varuz did not move back. Instead he ducked under the despairing cut and used the back of his arm to sweep Jezal’s feet away.

Jezal let out a howl as the courtyard turned over around him. His leg smacked painfully against the edge of the beam, then he sprawled on his face on the grass, chin thumping into the turf and making his teeth rattle. He rolled a short distance then lay there on his back, gasping like a fish snatched suddenly from the water, leg throbbing where it had collided with the beam on his way down. He would have yet another ugly bruise in the morning.

‘Awful, Jezal, awful!’ cried the old soldier as he sprang nimbly down onto the lawn. ‘You teeter about the beam as though it were a tightrope!’ Jezal rolled over, cursing, and started to climb stiffly to his feet. ‘It is a solid piece of oak, wide enough to get lost in!’ The Lord Marshal illustrated his point by whacking at the beam with his short steel, making splinters fly.

‘I thought you said forward,’ moaned Jezal.

Varuz' eyebrows went up sharply. 'Do you seriously suppose, Captain Luthar, that Bremer dan Gorst gives his opponents reliable information as to his intentions?'

'Bremer dan Gorst will be trying to beat me, you old shit! You are supposed to be helping me to beat him!' That was what Jezal thought, but he knew better than to say it. He just shook his head dumbly.

'No! No indeed he does not! He makes every effort to deceive and confuse his opponents, as all great swordsmen must!' The Lord Marshal paced up and down, shaking his head. Jezal considered again whether to give it all up. He was sick of falling into bed exhausted each night, at a time when he should have been just starting to get drunk. He was sick of waking up every morning, bruised and aching, to face another four interminable hours of running, beam, bar, forms. He was sick of being knocked on his arse by Major West. Most of all he was sick of being bullied by this old fool.

' . . . A depressing display, Captain, very depressing. I do believe you are actually getting worse ...'

Jezal would never win the Contest. No one expected him to, himself least of all. So why not give it up, and go back to his cards and late nights? Wasn't that all he really wanted from life? But then what would mark him out from a thousand other noble younger sons? He had decided long ago that he wanted to be something special. A Lord Marshal himself perhaps, and then Lord Chamberlain. Something big and important anyway. He wanted a big chair on the Closed Council, and to make big decisions. He wanted people to fawn and smile around him and hang on his every word. He wanted people to whisper, 'There goes Lord Luthar!' as he swept past. Could he be happy being forever a richer, cleverer, better-looking version of Lieutenant Brint? Ugh! It was not to be thought of.

' . . . We have a terribly long way to go, and not enough time to get there, not unless you change your attitude. Your sparring is lamentable, your stamina is still weak, and as for your balance, the less said about that the better ...'

And what would everyone else think if he gave up? What would his father do? What would his brothers say? What about the other officers? He would look a coward. And then there was Ardee West. She seemed to have been much on his mind during the past couple of days. Would she lean so close

to him if he didn't fence? Would she talk to him in such soft tones? Would she laugh at his jokes? Would she look up at him with those big, dark eyes, so he could almost feel her breath on his face—

'Are you listening, boy?' thundered Varuz. Jezal felt a bit of his breath on his face alright, and a deal of spit too.

'Yes, sir! Sparring lamentable, stamina weak!' Jezal swallowed nervously. 'Less said about balance the better.'

'That's right! I am beginning to think, though I can hardly believe it after the trouble you have put me to, that your heart really isn't in this.' He glared into Jezal's eyes. 'What do you think, Major?'

There was no reply. West was slumped in his chair, arms folded, frowning grimly and staring into space.

'Major West?' snapped the Lord Marshal.

He looked up suddenly, as though he had only just become aware of their presence. 'I'm sorry, sir, I had become distracted.'

'So I see.' Varuz sucked his teeth. 'It seems that nobody has been concentrating this morning.' It was a great relief that some of the old man's anger had been deflected elsewhere, but Jezal's happiness was not long-lived.

'Very well,' snapped the old Marshal, 'if that's the way you want it. Starting tomorrow we will begin each session with a swim in the moat. A mile or two should do it.' Jezal squeezed his teeth together to keep from screaming. 'Cold water has a wonderful way of sharpening the senses. And perhaps we need to start a little earlier, to catch you in your most receptive frame of mind. That means we begin at five. In the meantime, Captain Luthar, I suggest that you consider whether you are here in order to win the Contest, or simply for the pleasure of my company.' And he turned on his heel and stalked off.

Jezal waited until Varuz had left the courtyard before losing his temper, but once he was sure the old man was out of earshot he flung his steels against the wall in a fury.

'Damn it!' he shouted as the swords rattled to the ground. 'Shit!' He looked around for something to kick that wouldn't hurt too much. His eye lighted on the leg of the beam, but he misjudged the kick badly and had to stifle the urge to grab his bruised foot and hop around like an idiot. 'Shit, shit!' he raged.

West was disappointingly unimpressed. He got up, frowning, and made to follow Marshal Varuz.

‘Where are you off to?’ asked Jezal.

‘Away,’ said West, over his shoulder, ‘I’ve seen enough.’

‘What does that mean?’

West stopped and turned to face him. ‘Amazing though it may seem, there are bigger problems in the world than this.’

Jezal stood there open mouthed as West stalked from the courtyard. ‘Just who do you think you are?’ he shouted after him, once he was sure he was gone. ‘Shit, shit!’ He considered giving the beam another kick, but thought better of it.

Jezal was in a foul mood on his way back to his quarters, so he stayed away from the busier parts of the Agriont, sticking to the quieter lanes and gardens to the side of the Kingsway. He glowered down at his feet as he walked, to further discourage any social encounter. But luck was not on his side.

‘Jezal!’ It was Kaspa, out for a stroll with a yellow-haired girl in expensive clothes. They had a severe-looking middle-aged woman with them, no doubt the girl’s governess or some such. They had stopped to admire some piece of minor sculpture in a little-visited yard.

‘Jezal!’ Kaspa shouted again, waving his hat above his head. There was no avoiding them. He plastered an unconvincing smile onto his face and stalked over. The pale girl smiled at him as he approached, but if he was meant to be charmed he didn’t feel it.

‘Been fencing again, Luthar?’ asked Kaspa pointlessly. Jezal was sweating and holding a pair of fencing steels. It was well known that he fenced every morning. You didn’t need a fine mind to make the connection, which was fortunate, because Kaspa certainly didn’t have one.

‘Yes. How did you guess?’ Jezal hadn’t meant to kill the conversation quite so dead, but he passed it off with a false chuckle, and the smiles of the ladies soon returned.

‘Hah, hah,’ laughed Kaspa, ever willing to be the butt of a joke.

‘Jezal, may I introduce my cousin, the Lady Ariss dan Kaspa? This is my superior officer, Captain Luthar.’ So this was the famous cousin. One of the Union’s richest heiresses and from an excellent family. Kaspa was always

babbling about what a beauty she was, but to Jezal she seemed a pale, skinny, sickly-looking thing. She smiled weakly and offered out her limp, white hand.

He brushed it with the most perfunctory of kisses. ‘Charmed,’ he muttered, without relish. ‘I must apologise for my appearance, I’ve just been fencing.’

‘Yes,’ she squeaked, in a high, piping voice, once she was sure he had finished speaking. ‘I have heard you are a great fencer.’ There was a pause while she groped for something to say, then her eyes lit up. ‘Tell me Captain, is fencing really very dangerous?’

What insipid drivel. ‘Oh no, my lady, we only use blunted steels in the circle.’ He could have said more, but he was damned if he was going to make all the effort. He gave a thin smile. So did she. The conversation hovered over the abyss.

Jezal was about to make his excuses, the subject of fencing evidently exhausted, but Ariss cut him off by blundering on to another topic. ‘And tell me, Captain, is there really likely to be a war in the North?’ Her voice had almost entirely faded away by the end of the sentence, but the chaperone stared on approvingly, no doubt delighted by the conversational skills of her charge.

Spare us. ‘Well it seems to me . . .’ Jezal began. The pale, blue eyes of Lady Ariss stared back at him expectantly. Blue eyes are absolute crap, he reflected. He wondered which subject she was more ignorant of: fencing or politics? ‘What do you think?’

The chaperone’s brow furrowed slightly. Lady Ariss looked somewhat taken aback, blushing slightly as she groped for words. ‘Well, er . . . that is to say . . . I’m sure that everything will . . . turn out well?’

Thank the fates! thought Jezal, we are saved! He had to get out of here. ‘Of course, everything will turn out well.’ He forced out one more smile. ‘It has been a real pleasure to make your acquaintance, but I’m afraid I’m on duty shortly, so I must leave you.’ He bowed with frosty formality. ‘Lieutenant Kaspa, Lady Ariss.’

Kaspa clapped him on the arm, as friendly as ever. His ignorant waif of a cousin smiled uncertainly. The governess frowned at him as he passed, but Jezal took no notice.

*

He arrived at the Lords' Round just as the council members were returning from their lunchtime recess. He acknowledged the guards in the vestibule with a terse nod, then strode through the enormous doorway and down the central isle. A straggling column of the greatest peers of the realm were hard on his heels, and the echoing space was full of shuffling footsteps, grumblings and whisperings, as Jezal made his way around the curved wall to his place behind the high table.

'Jezal, how was fencing?' It was Jalenhorm, here early for once, and seizing on the opportunity to talk before the Lord Chamberlain arrived.

'I've had better mornings. Yourself?'

'Oh, I've been having a fine time. I met that cousin of Kaspa's, you know,' he searched for the name.

Jezal sighed. 'Lady Ariss.'

'Yes, that's it! Have you seen her?'

'I was lucky enough to run into them just now.'

'Phew!' exclaimed Jalenhorm, pursing his lips. 'Isn't she stunning? '

'Hmm.' Jezal looked away, bored, and watched the robed and fur-trimmed worthies file slowly to their places. At least he watched a sample of their least favourite sons and paid representatives. Very few of the magnates turned up in person for Open Council these days, not unless they had something significant to complain about. A lot of them didn't even bother to send someone in their place.

'I swear, one of the finest-looking girls I ever saw. I know Kaspa's always raving about her, but he didn't do her justice.'

'Hmm.' The councillors began to spread out, each man towards his own seat. The Lords' Round was designed like a theatre, the Union's leading noblemen sitting where the audience would be, on a great half-circle of banked benches with an aisle down the centre.

As in the theatre, some seats were better than others. The least important sat high up at the back, and the occupants' significance increased as you came forward. The front row was reserved for the heads of the very greatest families, or whoever they sent in their stead. Representatives from the south, from Dagoska and Westport, were on the left, nearest to Jezal. On the

far right were those from the north and west, from Angland and Starikland. The bulk of the seating, in between, was for the old nobility of Midderland, the heart of the Union. The Union proper, as they would have seen it. As Jezal saw it too, for that matter.

'What poise, what grace,' Jalenhorm was rhapsodising, 'that wonderful fair hair, that milky-white skin, those fantastic blue eyes.'

'And all of that money.'

'Well yes, that too,' smiled the big man. 'Kaspa says his uncle is even richer than his father. Imagine that! And he has just the one child. She will inherit every mark of it. Every mark!' Jalenhorm could scarcely contain his excitement. 'It's a lucky man that can bag her! What was her name again?'

'Ariss,' said Jezal sourly. The Lords, or their proxies, had all shuffled and grumbled their way to their seats. It was a poor attendance: the benches were less than half full. That was about as full as it ever got. If the Lords' Round really had been a theatre, its owners would have been desperately in search of a new play.

'Ariss. Ariss.' Jalenhorm smacked his lips as though the name left a sweet taste. 'It's a lucky man that gets her.'

'Yes indeed. A lucky man.' Providing he prefers cash to conversation, that is. Jezal thought he might have preferred to marry the governess. At least she had seemed to have a bit of backbone.

The Lord Chamberlain had entered the hall now, and was making his way towards the dais on which the high table stood, just about where the stage would have been, had the Round been a theatre. He was followed by a gaggle of black-gowned secretaries and clerks, each man more or less encumbered with heavy books and sheaves of official-looking papers. With his crimson robes of state flapping behind him, Lord Hoff looked like nothing so much as a rare and stately gliding bird, pursued by a flock of troublesome crows.

'Here comes old vinegar,' whispered Jalenhorm, as he sidled off to find his place on the other side of the table. Jezal put his hands behind his back and struck the usual pose, feet a little spread, chin high in the air. He swept an eye over the soldiers, regularly spaced around the curved wall, but each man was motionless and perfectly presented in full armour, as always. He took a deep breath and prepared himself for several hours of the most extreme tedium.

The Lord Chamberlain threw himself into his tall chair and called for wine. The secretaries took their places around him, leaving a space in the centre for the King, who was absent as usual. Documents were rustled, great ledgers were heaved open, pens were sharpened and rattled in ink wells. The Announcer walked to the end of the table and struck his staff of office on the floor for order. The whispering of the noblemen and their proxies, and that of the few attendees in the public gallery over their heads, gradually died down, leaving the vast chamber silent.

The Announcer puffed out his chest. 'I call this meeting,' he said, in slow and sonorous tones, as though he were giving the eulogy at a funeral, 'of the Open Council of the Union . . .' he gave an unnecessarily long and significant pause. The Lord Chamberlain's eyes flicked angrily towards him, but the Announcer was not to be robbed of his moment of glory. He made everyone wait an instant longer before finishing, ' . . . to order!'

'Thank you,' said Hoff sourly. 'I believe we were about to hear from the Lord Governor of Dagoska before we were interrupted by luncheon.' The scratching nibs of quills accompanied his voice, as two clerks recorded his every word. The faint echoes of the pens merged with the echoes of his words in the great space above.

An elderly man struggled to his feet in the front row close to Jezal, some papers clasped before him in shaky hands.

'The Open Council,' droned the Announcer, as ponderously as he dared, 'recognises Rush dan Thuel, accepted proxy of Sand dan Vurms, the Lord Governor of Dagoska!'

'Thank you, sir.' Thuel's cracking, wispy voice was absurdly small in the vast space. It barely carried as far as Jezal, and he was no more than ten strides away. 'My Lords—' he began.

'Speak up!' called someone from the back. There was a ripple of laughter. The old man cleared his throat and tried again.

'My Lords, I come before you with an urgent message from the Lord Governor of Dagoska.' His voice had already faded to its original, barely audible level, each word accompanied by the persistent scratching of quills. Whispers began to emanate from the public gallery above, making it still harder to hear him. 'The threat posed to that great city by the Emperor of Gurkhul increases with every passing day.'

Vague sounds of disapproval began to float up from the far side of the room, where the representatives from Angland were seated, but the bulk of the councillors simply looked bored. ‘Attacks on shipping, harassment of traders, and demonstrations beyond our walls, have compelled the Lord Governor to send me—’

‘Lucky us!’ somebody shouted. There was another wave of laughter, slightly louder this time.

‘The city is built on but a narrow peninsula,’ persisted the old man, straining to make himself heard over the increasing background noise, ‘attached to a land controlled entirely by our bitter enemies the Gurkish, and separated from Midderland by wide leagues of salt water! Our defences are not all they might be! The Lord Governor is sorely in need of more funds ...’

The mention of funds brought instant uproar from the assembly. Thuel’s mouth was still moving, but there was no chance of hearing him now. The Lord Chamberlain frowned and took a swallow from his goblet. The clerk furthest from Jezal had laid down his quill and was rubbing his eyes with his inky thumb and forefinger. The clerk closest had just finished writing a line. Jezal craned forward to see. It said simply:

Some shouting here.

The Announcer thumped his staff on the tiles with a look of great self-satisfaction. The hubbub eventually died down but Thuel had now been taken with a coughing fit. He tried to speak but was unable, and eventually he waved his hand and sat down, very red in the face, while his neighbour thumped him on the back.

‘If I may, Lord Chamberlain?’ shouted a fashionable young man in the front row on the other side of the hall, leaping to his feet. The scratching of the quills began once again. ‘It seems to me—’

‘The Open Council,’ cut in the Announcer, ‘recognises Hersel dan Meed, third son and accepted proxy of Fedor dan Meed, the Lord Governor of Angland!’

‘It seems to me,’ continued the handsome young man, only slightly annoyed by this interruption, ‘that our friends in the south are forever expecting a full-scale attack by the Emperor!’ Dissenting voices were now raised on the other side of the room. ‘An attack which never materialises! Did we not defeat the Gurkish only a few short years ago, or does my

memory deceive me?' The booing increased in volume. 'This scaremongering represents an unacceptable drain on the Union's resources!' He was shouting to be heard. 'In Angland we have many miles of border and too few soldiers, while the threat from Bethod and his Northmen is very real! If anyone is in need of funds ...'

The shouting was instantly redoubled. Cries of 'Hear, hear!', 'Nonsense!', 'True!' and 'Lies!' could be vaguely made out over the hubbub. Several of the representatives were on their feet, shouting. Some vigorously nodded their agreement, some violently shook their heads in dissent. Others yawned and stared around. Jezal could see one fellow, near to the back in the centre, who was almost certainly asleep, and in imminent danger of slumping into his neighbour's lap.

He allowed his eyes to wander up, over the faces ranged around the rail of the public gallery. He felt a strange tugging in his chest. Ardee West was up there, looking straight down at him. As their eyes met she smiled and waved. He was smiling himself, with his arm halfway up to wave, when he remembered where he was. He pushed his arm behind his back and looked around nervously, but was relieved to find that no one important had noticed his mistake. The smile would not quite leave his face though.

'My Lords!' roared the Lord Chamberlain, smashing his empty goblet down on the high table. He had the loudest voice Jezal had ever heard. Even Marshal Varuz could have learned a thing or two about shouting from Hoff. The sleeping man near the back started up, sniffing and blinking. The noise died away almost immediately. Those representatives left standing looked around guiltily, like naughty children called to account, and gradually sat down. The whispers from the public gallery went still. Order was restored.

'My Lords! I can assure you, the King has no more serious concern than the safety of his subjects, no matter where they are! The Union does not permit aggression against its people or property!' Hoff punctuated each comment by smashing his fist down in front of him. 'From the Emperor of Gurkhul, from these savages in the North, or from anyone else!' He struck the table so hard on this last comment that ink splashed from a well and ran all over one of the clerks' carefully prepared documents. Calls of agreement and support greeted the Lord Chamberlain's patriotic display.

'As for the specific circumstance of Dagoska!' Thuel looked up hopefully, chest still shaking with suppressed coughs. 'Is that city not possessed of

some of the most powerful and extensive defences in the world? Did it not resist a siege by the Gurkish, less than a decade ago, for over a year? What has become of the walls, sir, the walls?' The great room fell quiet as everyone strained to hear the reply.

'Lord Chamberlain,' wheezed Thuel, his voice nearly drowned out as one of the clerks turned the crackling page of his huge book and began scratching on the next, 'the defences have fallen into poor repair, and we lack the soldiers to keep them properly manned. The Emperor is not ignorant of this,' he whispered, all but inaudible, 'I beg of you . . .' He dissolved into another fit of coughing, and dropped into his seat, accompanied by some light jeering from the Angland delegation.

Hoff frowned even more deeply. 'It was my understanding that the defences of the city were to be maintained by monies raised locally, and by trade levies upon the Honourable Guild of Spicers, who have operated in Dagoska under an exclusive and highly profitable licence these past seven years. If resources cannot be found even to maintain the walls,' and he swept the assembly with a dark eye, 'perhaps it is time that this licence was put out to tender.' There was a volley of angry mutterings around the public gallery.

'In any case, the Crown can spare no extra monies at present!' Jeers of dissatisfaction came from the Dagoska side of the room, hoots of agreement from the Angland side.

'As for the specific circumstance of Angland!' thundered the Lord Chamberlain, turning toward Meed. 'I believe we may shortly hear some good news, for you to take back to your father the Lord Governor.' A cloud of excited whisperings rose up into the gilded dome above. The handsome young man looked pleasantly surprised, as well he might. It was rare indeed that anyone took good news away from the Open Council, or news of any kind for that matter.

Thuel had got control of his lungs once more, and he opened his mouth to speak, but he was interrupted by a great beating on the huge door behind the high table. The Lords looked up: surprised, expectant. The Lord Chamberlain smiled, in the manner of a magician who has just pulled off an exceptionally difficult trick. He signalled to the guards, the heavy iron bolts were drawn back, and the great, inlaid doors creaked slowly open.

Eight Knights of the Body, encased in glittering armour, faceless behind high, polished helmets, resplendent in purple cloaks marked on the back with a golden sun, stomped in unison down the steps and took their places to either side of the high table. They were closely followed by four trumpeters, who stepped smartly forward, raised their shining instruments to their lips and blew an ear-splitting fanfare. Jezal gritted his rattling teeth and narrowed his eyes, but eventually the ringing echoes faded. The Lord Chamberlain turned angrily toward the Announcer, who was staring at the new arrivals with his mouth open.

'Well?' hissed Hoff.

The Announcer jumped to life. 'Ah . . . yes of course! My Lords and Ladies, I have the great honour to present . . .' he paused and took a huge breath, ' . . . his Imperial Highness, the King of Angland, of Starikland, and of Midderland, the Protector of Westport and of Dagoska, his August Majesty, Guslav the Fifth, High King of the Union!' There was a great rustling noise as every man and woman in the hall shifted from their seats and down onto one knee.

The royal palanquin processed slowly through the doors, carried on the shoulders of six more faceless knights. The King was sitting in a gilded chair on top, propped up on rich cushions and swaying gently from side to side. He was staring about him with the startled expression of a man who went to sleep drunk, and has woken up in an unfamiliar room.

He looked awful. Enormously fat, lolling like a great hill swathed in fur and red silk, head squashed into his shoulders by the weight of the great, sparkling crown. His eyes were glassy and bulging, with huge dark bags hanging beneath, and the pink point of his tongue kept flicking nervously over his pale lips. He had great low jowls and a roll of fat around his neck, in fact his whole face gave the appearance of having slightly melted and started to run down off his skull. Such was the High King of the Union, but Jezal bowed his head a little lower as the palanquin approached, just the same.

'Oh,' muttered his August Majesty, as though he had forgotten something, 'please rise.' The rustling noise filled the hall again as everybody rose and returned to their seats. The King turned toward Hoff, brow deeply furrowed, and Jezal heard him say, 'Why am I here?'

'The Northmen, your Majesty.'

‘Oh yes!’ The King’s eyes lit up. He paused. ‘What about them?’

‘Er . . .’ but the Lord Chamberlain was saved from replying by the opening of the doors on the opposite side of the hall, the ones through which Jezal had first entered. Two strange men strode through and advanced down the aisle.

One was a grizzled old warrior with a scar and a blind eye, carrying a flat wooden box. The other was cloaked and hooded, every feature hidden, and so big that he made the whole hall seem out of proportion. The benches, the tables, even the guards, all suddenly looked like small versions designed for the use of children. As he passed, a couple of the representatives closest to the aisle cringed and shuffled away. Jezal frowned to himself. This hooded giant did not have the look of good news, whatever Lord Hoff might say. Angry and suspicious mutterings filled the echoing dome as the two Northmen took their places on the tiled floor before the high table.

‘Your Majesty,’ said the Announcer, bowing so ridiculously low that he had to support himself with his staff, ‘the Open Council recognises Fenris the Feared, the envoy of Bethod, King of the Northmen, and his translator, White-Eye Hansul!’

The King was staring off happily towards one of the great windows in the curved wall, utterly oblivious, perhaps admiring the way the light shone through the beautiful stained glass, but he looked suddenly round, jowls vibrating, as the old half-blind warrior addressed him.

‘Your Majesty. I bring brotherly greetings from my master, Bethod, King of the Northmen.’ The Round had fallen very still, and the clerks’ scratching nibs seemed absurdly loud. The old warrior nodded at the great hooded shape beside him with an awkward smile. ‘Fenris the Feared brings an offer from Bethod to yourself. From King to King. From the North to the Union. An offer, and a gift.’ And he raised the wooden box.

The Lord Chamberlain gave a self-satisfied smirk. ‘Speak your offer first.’

‘It is an offer of peace. An endless peace between our two great nations.’ White-Eye bowed again. His manners were impeccable,

Jezal had to admit. Not what one would expect from savages of the cold and distant North. His goodly speech would almost have been enough to put the

room at ease, had it not been for the hooded man beside him, looming like a dark shadow.

The King's face twitched into a weak smile at this mention of peace however. 'Good,' he muttered. 'Excellent. Peace. Capital. Peace is good.'

'He asks but one small thing in return,' said White-Eye.

The Lord Chamberlain's face had turned suddenly dour, but it was too late. 'He has but to name it,' said the King, smiling indulgently.

The hooded man stepped forward. 'Angland,' he hissed.

There was a moment of stillness, then the hall exploded with noise. There was a gale of disbelieving laughter from the public gallery. Meed was on his feet, red-faced and screaming. Thuel tottered up from his bench, then fell back coughing. Angry bellows were joined by hoots of derision. The King was staring about him with all the dignity of a startled rabbit.

Jezal's eyes were fixed on the hooded man. He saw a great hand slip out from his sleeve and reach for the clasp on his cloak. He blinked in surprise. Was the hand blue? Or was it just a trick of the light through the stained glass? The cloak dropped to the floor.

Jezal swallowed, his heart thumping loud in his ears. It was like staring at a terrible wound: the more he was revolted, the less he could look away. The laughter died, the shouting died, the great space became terribly still once more.

Fenris the Feared seemed larger yet without his cloak, towering over his cringing translator. Without any doubt, he was the biggest man that Jezal had ever seen, if man he was. His face was in constant, twisted, sneering motion. His bulging eyes twitched and blinked as they stared crazily round at the assembly. His thin lips smiled and grimaced and frowned by turns, never still. But all this seemed ordinary, by comparison with his strangest feature.

His whole left side, from head to toe, was covered in writing.

Crabby runes were scrawled across the left half of his shaven head, across his eyelid, his lips, his scalp, his ear. His huge left arm was tattooed blue with tiny writing, from bulging shoulder to the tips of his long fingers. Even his bare left foot was covered in strange letters. An enormous, inhuman, painted monster stood at the very heart of the Union's government. Jezal's jaw hung open.

Around the high table there were fourteen Knights of the Body, each man a hard-trained fighter of good blood. There were perhaps forty guardsmen of Jezal's own company around the walls, each one a seasoned veteran. They outnumbered these two Northmen more than twenty to one, and were well armed with the best steel the King's armouries could provide. Fenris the Feared carried no weapon. For all his size and strangeness, he should have been no threat to them.

But Jezal did not feel safe. He felt alone, weak, helpless, and terribly afraid. His skin was tingling, his mouth was dry. He felt a sudden urge to run, and hide, and never come out again.

And this strange effect was not limited to him, or even to those around the high table. Angry laughs turned to shocked gurgles as the painted monster turned slowly around in the centre of the circular floor, flickering eyes running over the crowd. Meed shrank back onto his bench, anger all leached out of him. A couple of worthies on the front row actually scrambled over the backs of their benches and into the row behind. Others looked away, or covered their faces with their hands. One of the soldiers dropped his spear, and it clattered loudly to the floor.

Fenris the Feared turned slowly to the high table, raising his great tattooed fist, opening his chasm of a mouth, a hideous spasm running over his face. 'Angland!' he screamed, louder and more terrible by far than the Lord Chamberlain had ever been. The echoes of his voice bounced off the domed ceiling high above, resounded from the curved walls, filling the great space with piercing sound.

One of the Knights of the Body stumbled back and slipped, his armoured leg clanking against the edge of the high table.

The King shrank back and covered his face with his hand, one terrified eye staring out from between his fingers, crown teetering on his head.

The quill of one of the clerks dropped from his nerveless fingers. The hand of the other moved across the paper by habit while his mouth fell open, scrawling a messy word diagonally through the neat lines of script above.

Angland.

The Lord Chamberlain's face had turned waxy pale. He reached slowly for his goblet, raised it to his lips. It was empty. He placed it carefully back down on the table, but his hand was trembling, and the base rattled on the

wood. He paused for a moment, breathing heavily through his nose. ‘Plainly, this offer is not acceptable.’

‘That is unfortunate,’ said White-Eye Hansul, ‘but there is still the gift.’ Every eye turned towards him. ‘In the North we have a tradition. On occasion, when there is bad blood between two clans, when there is the threat of war, champions come forward from each side, to fight for all their people, so that the issue might be decided . . . with only one death.’

He slowly opened the lid of the wooden box. There was a long knife inside, blade polished mirror-bright. ‘His Greatness, Bethod, sends the Feared not only as his envoy, but as his champion. He will fight for Angland, if any here will face him, and spare you a war you will not win.’ He held the box up to the painted monster. ‘This is my master’s gift to you, and there could be none richer . . . your lives.’

Fenris’ right hand darted out and snatched the knife from the box. He raised it high, blade flashing in the coloured light from the great windows. The knights should have jumped forward. Jezal should have drawn his sword. All should have rushed to the defence of the King, but nobody moved. Every mouth was agape, every eye fastened on that glinting tooth of steel.

The blade flashed down. Its point drove easily through skin and flesh until it was buried right to the hilt. The point emerged, dripping blood, from the underside of Fenris’ own tattooed left arm. His face twitched, but no more than usual. The blade moved grotesquely as he stretched out his fingers, raised his left arm high for all to see. The drops of blood made a steady patter on the floor of the Lords’ Round.

‘Who will fight me?’ he screamed, great cords of sinew bulging from his neck. His voice was almost painful to the ear.

Utter silence. The Announcer, who was closest to the Feared, and already on his knees, swooned and collapsed on his face.

Fenris turned his goggling eyes on the biggest knight before the table, a full head shorter than he was. ‘You?’ he hissed. The unfortunate man’s foot scraped on the floor as he backed away, no doubt wishing he had been born a dwarf.

A puddle of dark blood had spread across the floor beneath Fenris’ elbow. ‘You?’ he snarled at Fedor dan Meed. The young man turned slightly grey, teeth rattling together, no doubt wishing he was someone else’s son.

Those blinking eyes swept across the ashen faces on the high table. Jezal's throat constricted as Fenris' eyes met his. 'You?'

'Well I would, but I'm terribly busy this afternoon. Perhaps tomorrow?' The voice hardly sounded like his own. He certainly hadn't meant to say any such thing. But who else's could it be? The words floated confidently, breezily up towards the gilded dome above.

There was scattered laughter, a shout of 'Bravo!' from somewhere at the back, but the eyes of the Feared did not leave Jezal's for an instant. He waited for the sounds to die, then his mouth twisted into a hideous leer.

'Tomorrow then,' he whispered. Jezal's guts gave a sudden painful shift. The seriousness of the situation pressed itself upon him like a ton of rocks. Him? Fight that?

'No.' It was the Lord Chamberlain. He was still pale, but his voice had regained much of its vigour. Jezal took heart, and fought manfully for control of his bowels. 'No!' barked Hoff again. 'There will be no duel here! There is no issue to decide! Angland is a part of the Union, by ancient law!'

White-Eye Hansul chuckled softly. 'Ancient law? Angland is part of the North. Two hundred years ago there were Northmen there, living free. You wanted iron, so you crossed the sea, and slaughtered them and stole their land! It must be, then, that most ancient of laws: that the strong take what they wish from the weak?' His eyes narrowed. 'We have that law also!'

Fenris the Feared ripped the knife from his arm. A few last drops of blood spattered onto the tiles, but that was all. There was no wound on the tattooed flesh. No mark at all. The knife clattered onto the tiles and lay there in the pool of blood at his feet. Fenris swept the assembly with his bulging, blinking, crazy eyes one last time, then he turned and strode across the floor and up the aisle, Lords and proxies scrambling away down their benches as he approached.

White-Eye Hansul bowed low. 'Perhaps the time will come when you wish that you had accepted our offer, or our gift. You will hear from us,' he said quietly, then he held up three fingers to the Lord Chamberlain. 'When it is time, we will send three signs.'

'Send three hundred if you wish,' barked Hoff, 'but this pantomime is over!'

White-Eye Hansul nodded pleasantly. 'You will hear from us.' And he turned and followed Fenris the Feared out of the Lords' Round. The great

doors clapped shut. The quill of the nearest clerk scratched weakly against the paper.

You will hear from us.

Fedor dan Meed turned towards the Lord Chamberlain, jaw locked tight, handsome features contorted with fury. ‘And this is the good news you would have me convey to my father?’ he screamed. The Open Council erupted. Bellowing, shouting, abuse directed toward anyone and everyone, chaos of the worst kind.

Hoff jumped up, chair toppling over behind him, mouthing angry words, but even he was drowned out by the uproar. Meed turned his back on him and stormed out. Other delegates from the Angland side of the room rose grimly and followed the son of their Lord Governor. Hoff stared after them, livid with anger, mouth working silently.

Jezal watched the King slowly take his hand from his face and lean down toward his Lord Chamberlain. ‘When are the Northmen getting here?’ he whispered.

The King of the Northmen

Logen breathed in deep, enjoying the unfamiliar feel of the cool breeze on his fresh-shaved jaw, and took in the view. It was the beginning of a clear day. The dawn mist was almost gone, and from the balcony outside Logen's room, high up on the side of one of the towers of the library, you could see for miles. The great valley was spread out before him, split into stark layers. On top was the grey and puffy white of the cloudy sky. Then there was the ragged line of black crags that ringed the lake, and the dim brown suggestion of others beyond. Next came the dark green of the wooded slopes, then the thin, curving line of grey shingle on the beach. All was repeated in the still mirror of the lake below – another, shadowy world, upside down beneath his own.

Logen looked down at his hands, fingers spread out on the weathered stone of the parapet. There was no dirt, no dried blood under his cracked fingernails. They looked pale, soft, pinkish, strange. Even the scabs and scrapes on his knuckles were mostly healed. It was so long since Logen had been clean that he'd forgotten what it felt like. His new clothes were coarse against his skin, robbed of its usual covering of dirt and grease and dry sweat.

Looking out at the still lake, clean and well fed, he felt a different man. For a moment he wondered how this new Logen might turn out, but the bare stone of the parapet stared back at him where his missing finger used to be. That could never heal. He was Ninefingers still, the Bloody-Nine, and always would be. Unless he lost any more fingers. He did smell better though, that had to be admitted.

'Did you sleep well, Master Ninefingers?' Wells was in the doorway, peering out onto the balcony.

'Like a baby.' Logen didn't have the heart to tell the old servant that he'd slept outside. The first night he'd tried the bed, rolling and wriggling, unable to come to terms with the strange comfort of a mattress and the unfamiliar warmth of blankets. Next he'd tried the floor. That had been an improvement. But the air had still seemed close, flat, stale. The ceiling had hung over him, seeming to creep ever lower, threatening to crush him with

the weight of stone above. It was only when he'd lain down on the hard flags of the balcony, with his old coat spread over him and just the clouds and the stars above, that sleep had come. Some habits are hard to break.

'You have a visitor,' said Wells.

'Me?'

Malacus Quai's head appeared around the door frame. His eyes were a little less sunken, the bags underneath them a little less dark. There was some colour to his skin, and some flesh on his bones. He no longer looked like a corpse, just gaunt and sick, as he had done when Logen first met him. He guessed that was about as healthy as Quai ever looked.

'Hah!' laughed Logen. 'You survived!'

The apprentice gave a series of tired nods as he shambled across the room. He was swathed in a thick blanket which trailed on the floor and made it difficult for him to walk properly. He shuffled out of the door to the balcony and stood there, sniffing and blinking in the chill morning air.

Logen was more pleased to see him than he'd expected. He clapped him on the back like an old friend, perhaps a little too warmly. The apprentice stumbled, blanket tangled round his feet, and would have fallen if Logen hadn't put out an arm to steady him.

'Still not quite in fighting shape,' muttered Quai, with a weak grin.

'You look a deal better than when I last saw you.'

'So do you. You lost the beard I see, and the smell too. A few less scars and you'd look almost civilised.'

Logen held his hands up. 'Anything but that.'

Wells ducked through the doorway into the bright morning light. He had a roll of cloth and a knife in his hand. 'Could I see your arm, Master Ninefingers?'

Logen had almost forgotten about the cut. There was no new blood on the bandage, and when he unwound it there was a long, red-brown scab underneath, running almost all the way from wrist to elbow, surrounded by fresh pink skin. It hardly hurt any more, just itched. It crossed two other, older scars. One, a jagged grey effort near his wrist, he thought he might have got in the duel with Threetrees, all those years ago. Logen grimaced as he remembered the battering they'd given each other. The second scar, fainter, higher up, he wasn't sure about. Could've come from anywhere.

Wells bent down and tested the flesh round the wound while Quai peered cautiously over his shoulder. ‘It’s mending well. You’re a fast healer.’

‘Lots of practice.’

Wells looked up at Logen’s face, where the cut on his forehead had already faded to one more pink line. ‘I can see. Would it be foolish to advise you to avoid sharp objects in the future?’

Logen laughed. ‘Believe it or not, I always did my best to avoid them in the past. But they seem to seek me out, despite my efforts.’

‘Well,’ said the old servant, cutting off a fresh length of cloth and winding it carefully round Logen’s forearm, ‘I hope this is the last bandage you ever need.’

‘So do I,’ said Logen, flexing his fingers. ‘So do I.’ But he didn’t think it would be.

‘Breakfast will be ready soon.’ And Wells left the two of them alone on the balcony.

They stood there in silence for a moment, then the wind blew up cold from the valley. Quai shivered and pulled his blanket tight around him. ‘Out there . . . by the lake. You could have left me. I would have left me.’

Logen frowned. Time was he’d have done it and never given it a second thought, but things change. ‘I’ve left a lot of people, in my time. Reckon I’m sick of that feeling.’

The apprentice pursed his lips and looked out at the valley, the woods, the distant mountains. ‘I never saw a man killed before.’

‘You’re lucky.’

‘You’ve seen a lot of death, then?’

Logen winced. In his youth, he would have loved to answer that very question. He could have bragged, and boasted, and listed the actions he’d been in, the Named Men he’d killed. He couldn’t say now when the pride had dried up. It had happened slowly. As the wars became bloodier, as the causes became excuses, as the friends went back to the mud, one by one. Logen rubbed at his ear, felt the big notch that Tul Duru’s sword had made, long ago. He could have stayed silent. But for some reason, he felt the need to be honest.

‘I’ve fought in three campaigns,’ he began. ‘In seven pitched battles. In countless raids and skirmishes and desperate defences, and bloody actions of every kind. I’ve fought in the driving snow, the blasting wind, the middle

of the night. I've been fighting all my life, one enemy or another, one friend or another. I've known little else. I've seen men killed for a word, for a look, for nothing at all. A woman tried to stab me once for killing her husband, and I threw her down a well. And that's far from the worst of it. Life used to be cheap as dirt to me. Cheaper.

'I've fought ten single combats and I won them all, but I fought on the wrong side and for all the wrong reasons. I've been ruthless, and brutal, and a coward. I've stabbed men in the back, burned them, drowned them, crushed them with rocks, killed them asleep, unarmed, or running away. I've run away myself more than once. I've pissed myself with fear. I've begged for my life. I've been wounded, often, and badly, and screamed and cried like a baby whose mother took her tit away. I've no doubt the world would be a better place if I'd been killed years ago, but I haven't been, and I don't know why.'

He looked down at his hands, pink and clean on the stone. 'There are few men with more blood on their hands than me. None, that I know of. The Bloody-Nine they call me, my enemies, and there's a lot of 'em. Always more enemies, and fewer friends. Blood gets you nothing but more blood. It follows me now, always, like my shadow, and like my shadow I can never be free of it. I should never be free of it. I've earned it. I've deserved it. I've sought it out. Such is my punishment.'

And that was all. Logen breathed a deep, ragged sigh and stared out at the lake. He couldn't bring himself to look at the man beside him, didn't want to see the expression on his face. Who wants to learn he's keeping company with the Bloody-Nine? A man who's wrought more death than the plague, and with less regret. They could never be friends now, not with all those corpses between them.

Then he felt Quai's hand clap him on the shoulder. 'Well, there it is,' he said, grinning from ear to ear, 'but you saved me, and I'm right grateful for it!'

'I've saved a man this year, and only killed four. I'm born again.' And they both laughed for a while, and it felt good.

'So, Malacus, I see you are back with us.'

They turned, Quai stumbling on his blanket and looking a touch sick. The First of the Magi was standing in the doorway, dressed in a long white shirt

with sleeves rolled up to the elbow. He still looked more like a butcher than a wizard to Logen.

'Master Bayaz . . . er . . . I was just coming to see you,' stuttered Quai.

'Indeed? How fortunate for us both then, that I have come to you.' The Magus stepped out onto the balcony. 'It occurs to me that a man who is well enough to talk, and laugh, and venture out of doors, is doubtless well enough to read, and study, and expand his tiny mind. What would you say to that?'

'Doubtless ...'

'Doubtless, yes! Tell me, how are your studies progressing?'

The wretched apprentice looked utterly confused. 'They have been somewhat . . . interrupted?'

'You made no progress with Juvens' *Principles of Art* while you were lost in the hills in bad weather?'

'Er . . . no progress . . . no.'

'And your knowledge of the histories. Did that develop far, while Master Ninefingers was carrying you back to the library?'

'Er . . . I must confess . . . it didn't.'

'Your exercises and meditations though, surely you have been practising those, while unconscious this past week?'

'Well, er . . . no, the unconsciousness was . . . er . . .'

'So, tell me, would you say that you are ahead of the game, so to speak? Or have your studies fallen behind?'

Quai stared down at the floor. 'They were behind when I left.'

'Then perhaps then you could tell me where you plan to spend the day?'

The apprentice looked up hopefully. 'At my desk?'

'Excellent!' Bayaz smiled wide. 'I was about to suggest it, but you have anticipated me! Your keenness to learn does you much credit!' Quai nodded furiously and hurried towards the door, the hem of his blanket trailing on the flags.

'Bethod is coming,' murmured Bayaz. 'He will be here today.' Logen's smile vanished, his throat felt suddenly tight. He remembered their last meeting well enough. Stretched out on his face on the floor of Bethod's hall at Carleon, beaten and broken and well chained up, dribbling blood into the straw and hoping the end wouldn't be too long coming. Then, no reason given, they'd let him go. Flung him out the gates with the Dogman,

Threetrees, the Weakest and the rest, and told him never to come back. Never. The first time Bethod ever showed a grain of mercy, and the last, Logen didn't doubt.

'Today?' he asked, trying to keep his voice even.

'Yes, and soon. The King of the Northmen. Hah! The arrogance of him!' Bayaz glanced sidelong at Logen. 'He is coming to ask me for a favour, and I would like you to be there.'

'He won't like that.'

'Exactly.'

The wind felt colder than before. If Logen never saw Bethod again it would be far too soon. But some things have to be done. It's better to do them, than to live with the fear of them. That's what Logen's father would have said. So he took a deep breath and squared his shoulders. 'I'll be there.'

'Excellent. Then there is but one thing missing.'

'What?'

Bayaz smirked. 'You need a weapon.'

It was dry in the cellars beneath the library. Dry and dark and very, very confusing. They'd gone up and down steps, around corners, past doors, taking here or there a turning to the left or right. The place was a warren. Logen hoped he didn't lose sight of the wizard's flickering torch, or he could easily be stuck beneath the library for ever.

'Dry down here, nice and dry,' Bayaz was saying to himself, voice echoing down the passageway and merging with their flapping footfalls. 'There's nothing worse than damp for books.' He pulled up suddenly next to a heavy door. 'Or for weapons.' He gave the door a gentle shove and it swung silently open.

'Look at that! Hasn't been opened for years, but the hinges still move smooth as butter! That's craftsmanship for you! Why does no one care about craftsmanship anymore?' Bayaz stepped over the threshold without waiting for an answer, and Logen followed close behind.

The wizard's torch lit up a long, low hall with walls of rough stone blocks, the far end lost in shadows. The room was lined with racks and shelves, the floor littered with boxes and stands, everything heaped and bursting with a mad array of arms and armour. Blades and spikes and

polished surfaces of wood and metal caught the flickering torchlight as Bayaz paced slowly across the stone floor, weaving between the weapons and casting around.

'Quite a collection,' muttered Logen, as he followed the Magus through the clutter.

'A load of old junk mostly, but there should be a few things worth the finding.' Bayaz took a helmet from a suit of ancient, gilded plate armour and looked it over with a frown. 'What do you make of that?'

'I've never been much for armour.'

'No, you don't strike me as the type. All very well on horse-back, I dare say, but it's a pain in the arse when you've a journey to make on foot.' He tossed the helmet back onto its stand, then stood there staring at the armour, lost in thought. 'Once you've got it on, how do you piss?'

Logen frowned. 'Er . . .' he said, but Bayaz was already moving off down the room, and taking the light with him.

'You must have used a few weapons in your time, Master Ninefingers. What's your preference for?'

'I've never really had one,' said Logen, ducking under a rusty halberd leaning out from a rack. 'A champion never knows what he might be called on to fight with.'

'Of course, of course.' Bayaz took up a long spear with a vicious barbed head, and wafted it around a bit. Logen stepped back cautiously. 'Deadly enough. You could keep a man at bay with one of these. But a man with a spear needs a lot of friends, and they all need spears as well.' Bayaz shoved it back on the rack and moved on.

'This looks fearsome.' The Magus took hold of the gnarled shaft of a huge double-bladed axe. 'Shit!' he said as he lifted it up, veins bulging out of his neck. 'It's heavy enough!' He set it down with a thump, making the rack wobble. 'You could kill a man with that! You could cut him clean in half! If he was standing still.'

'This is better,' said Logen. It was a simple, solid-looking sword, in a scabbard of weathered brown leather.

'Oh, yes indeed. Much, much better. That blade is the work of Kanedias, the Master Maker himself.' Bayaz handed his torch to Logen and took the long sword from the rack.

‘Has it ever occurred to you, Master Ninefingers, that a sword is different from other weapons? Axes and maces and so forth are lethal enough, but they hang on the belt like dumb brutes.’ He ran an eye over the hilt, plain cold metal scored with faint grooves for a good grip, glinting in the torchlight. ‘But a sword . . . a sword has a voice.’

‘Eh?’

‘Sheathed it has little to say, to be sure, but you need only put your hand on the hilt and it begins to whisper in your enemy’s ear.’ He wrapped his fingers tightly round the grip. ‘A gentle warning. A word of caution. Do you hear it?’

Logen nodded slowly. ‘Now,’ murmured Bayaz, ‘compare it to the sword half drawn.’ A foot length of metal hissed out of the sheath, a single silver letter shining near the hilt. The blade itself was dull, but its edge had a cold and frosty glint. ‘It speaks louder, does it not? It hisses a dire threat. It makes a deadly promise. Do you hear it?’

Logen nodded again, his eye fastened on that glittering edge. ‘Now compare it to the sword full drawn.’ Bayaz whipped the long blade from its sheath with a faint ringing sound, brought it up so that the point hovered inches from Logen’s face. ‘It shouts now, does it not? It screams defiance! It bellows a challenge! Do you hear it?’

‘Mmm,’ said Logen, leaning back and staring slightly cross-eyed at the shining point of the sword.

Bayaz let it drop and slid it gently back into its scabbard, something to Logen’s relief. ‘Yes, a sword has a voice. Axes and maces and so forth are lethal enough, but a sword is a subtle weapon, and suited to a subtle man. You I think, Master Ninefingers, are subtler than you appear.’ Logen frowned as Bayaz held the sword out to him. He had been accused of many things in his life, but never subtlety. ‘Consider it a gift. My thanks for your good manners.’

Logen thought about it a moment. He hadn’t owned a proper weapon since before he crossed the mountains, and he wasn’t keen to take one up again. But Bethod was coming, and soon. Better to have it, and not want it, than to want it, and not have it. Far, far better. You have to be realistic about these things.

‘Thank you,’ said Logen, taking the sword from Bayaz and handing him back the torch. ‘I think.’

A small fire crackled in the grate, and the room was warm, and homely, and comfortable.

But Logen didn't feel comfortable. He stood by the window, staring down into the courtyard below, nervous and twitchy and scared, like he used to be before a fight. Bethod was coming. He was somewhere out there. On the road through the woods, or passing between the stones, or across the bridge, or through the gate.

The First of the Magi didn't seem tense. He sat comfortably in his chair, his feet up on the table next to a long wooden pipe, leafing through a small white-bound book with a faint smile on his face. No one had ever looked calmer, and that only made Logen feel worse.

'Is it good?' asked Logen.

'Is what good?'

'The book.'

'Oh yes. It is the best of books. It is Juvens' *Principles of Art*, the very cornerstone of my order.' Bayaz waved his free hand at the shelves which covered two walls, and the hundreds of other identical books lined neatly upon them. 'It's all the same. One book.'

'One?' Logen's eyes scanned across the thick, white spines. 'That's a pretty damn long book. Have you read it all?'

Bayaz chuckled. 'Oh yes, many times. Every one of my order must read it, and eventually make their own copy.' He turned the book around, so that Logen could see. The pages were thickly covered with lines of neat, but unintelligible symbols. 'I wrote these, long ago. You should read it too.'

'I'm really not much of a reader.'

'No?' asked Bayaz. 'Shame.' He flicked over the page and carried on.

'What about that one?' There was another book, sat alone on its side on the very top of one of the shelves, a large, black book, scarred and battered-looking. 'That written by this Juvens as well?'

Bayaz frowned up at it. 'No. His brother wrote that.' He got up from his chair, stretched up and pulled it down. 'This is a different kind of knowledge.' He dragged open his desk drawer, slid the black book inside and slammed it shut. 'Best left alone,' he muttered, sitting back down and opening up the *Principles of Art* again.

Logen took a deep breath, put his left hand on the hilt of the sword, felt the cold metal pressing into his palm. The feel of it was anything but

reassuring. He let go and turned back to the window, frowning down into the courtyard. He felt his breath catch in his throat.

'Bethod. He's here.'

'Good, good,' muttered Bayaz absently. 'Who does he have with him?'

Logen peered at the three figures in the courtyard. 'Scale,' he said with a scowl. 'And a woman. I don't recognise her. They're dismounting.' Logen licked his dry lips. 'They're coming in.'

'Yes, yes,' murmured Bayaz, 'that is how one gets to a meeting. Try to calm yourself, my friend. Breathe.'

Logen leaned back against the whitewashed plaster, arms folded, and took a deep breath. It didn't help. The hard knot of worry in his chest only pressed harder. He could hear heavy footsteps in the corridor outside. The doorknob turned.

Scale was the first into the room. Bethod's eldest son had always been burly, even as a boy, but since Logen last saw him he'd grown monstrous. His rock of a head seemed almost an afterthought on top of all that brawn, his skull a good deal narrower than his neck. He had a great block of jaw, a flat stub of a nose, and furious, bulging, arrogant little eyes. His thin mouth was twisted in a constant sneer, much like his younger brother Calder's, but there was less guile here and a lot more violence. He had a heavy broadsword on his hip, and his meaty hand was never far from it as he glowered at Logen, oozing malice from every pore.

The woman came next. She was very tall, slender and pale, almost ill-looking. Her slanting eyes were as narrow and cold as Scale's were bulging and wrathful, and were surrounded with a quantity of dark paint, which made them look narrower and colder still. There were golden rings on her long fingers, golden bracelets on her thin arms, golden chains around her white neck. She swept the room with her frosty blue eyes, each thing she noticed seeming to lift her to new heights of disgust and contempt. First the furniture, then the books, particularly Logen, and Bayaz most of all.

The self-styled King of the Northmen came last, and more magnificent than ever, robed in rich, coloured cloth and rare white furs. He wore a heavy golden chain across his shoulders, a golden circlet round his head, set with a single diamond, big as a bird's egg. His smiling face was more deeply lined than Logen remembered, his hair and beard touched with grey, but he was no less tall, no less vigorous, no less handsome, and he'd gained much of

authority and wisdom – of majesty even. He looked every inch a great man, a wise man, a just man. He looked every inch a King. But Logen knew better.

'Bethod!' said Bayaz, warmly, snapping his book shut. 'My old friend! You can hardly imagine what a joy it is to see you again.' He swung his feet off the table, and gestured at the golden chain, the flashing diamond. 'And to see you so hugely advanced in the world! I remember the time was you were happy to visit me alone. But I suppose great men must be attended on, and I see you have brought some . . . other people. Your charming son I know, of course. I see that you've been eating well at least, eh, Scale?'

'*Prince* Scale,' rumbled Bethod's monstrous son, his eyes popping out even more.

'Hmm,' said Bayaz, with an eyebrow raised. 'I have not had the pleasure of meeting your other companion before.'

'I am Caurib.' Logen blinked. The woman's voice was the most beautiful thing he'd ever heard. Calming, soothing, intoxicating. 'I am a sorceress,' she sang, tossing her head with a scornful smile. 'A sorceress, from the utmost north.' Logen stood frozen, his mouth half open. His hatred seeped away. They were all friends here. More than friends. He couldn't take his eyes from her, didn't want to. The others in the room had faded. It was as if she was speaking only to him, and the fondest wish of his heart was that she should never stop—

But Bayaz only laughed. 'A real sorceress, and you have the golden voice! How wonderful! It's a long time since I heard that one, but it will not serve you here.' Logen shook his head clear and his hatred rushed back in, hot and reassuring. 'Tell me, does one have to study, to become a sorceress? Or is it simply a question of jewellery, and a deal of paint about the face?' Caurib's eyes narrowed to deadly blue slits, but the First of the Magi didn't give her time to speak. 'And from the *utmost* north, imagine that!' He shivered slightly. 'It must be cold up there, this time of year. Rough on the nipples, eh? Have you come to us for the warm weather, or is there something else?'

'I go where my King commands,' she hissed, pointed chin lifting a little higher.

'Your King?' asked Bayaz, staring about the room as though there must be someone else there, hiding in the corner.

‘My father is King of the Northmen now!’ snarled Scale. He sneered at Logen. ‘You should kneel to him, Bloody-Nine!’ He sneered at Bayaz. ‘And so should you, old man!’

The First of the Magi spread his hands in apology. ‘Oh I’m afraid I don’t kneel to anyone. Too old for it. Stiffness in the joints, you see.’

Scale’s boot thumped heavy on the floor as he began to move forward, a curse half out of his mouth, but his father placed a gentle hand on his arm. ‘Come now, my son, there is no need for kneeling here.’ His voice was cold and even as freshly fallen snow. ‘It is not fitting that we bicker. Are our interests not the same? Peace? Peace in the North? I have come only to ask for your wisdom, Bayaz, as I did in days past. Is it so wrong, to seek the help of an old friend?’ No one had ever sounded more genuine, more reasonable, more trustworthy. But Logen knew better.

‘But do we not have peace in the North already?’ Bayaz leaned back in his chair, hands clasped before him. ‘Are the feuds not all ended? Were you not the victor? Do you not have everything you wanted, and more? King of the Northmen, eh? What help could I possibly offer you?’

‘I only share my counsel with friends, Bayaz, and you have been no friend to me of late. You turn away my messengers, my son even. You play host to my sworn enemies.’ He frowned towards Logen, and his lip curled. ‘Do you know what manner of thing this is? The Bloody-Nine? An animal! A coward! An oath-breaker! Is that the kind of company that you prefer?’

Bethod smiled a friendly smile as he turned back to Bayaz, but there was no missing the threat in his words. ‘I fear the time has come for you to decide whether you are with me, or against me. There can be no middle ground in this. Either you are a part of my future, or a relic of the past. Yours is the choice, my friend.’ Logen had seen Bethod give such choices before. Some men had yielded. The rest had gone back to the mud.

But Bayaz, it seemed, was not to be rushed. ‘Which shall it be?’ He reached forward slowly and took his pipe from the table. ‘The future, or the past?’ He strolled over to the fire and squatted down, back turned to his three guests, took a stick from the grate, set it to the bowl, and puffed slowly away. It seemed to take an age for him to get the damn thing lit. ‘With, or against?’ he mused as he returned to his chair.

‘Well?’ demanded Bethod.

Bayaz stared up at the ceiling and blew out a thin stream of yellow smoke. Caurib looked the old Magus up and down with icy contempt, Scale twitched with impatience, Bethod waited, eyes a little narrowed. Finally, Bayaz gave a heavy sigh. 'Very well. I am with you.'

Bethod smiled wide, and Logen felt a lurch of terrible disappointment. He had hoped for better from the First of the Magi. Damn foolish, how he never learned to stop hoping.

'Good,' murmured the King of the Northmen. 'I knew you would see my way of thinking, in the end.' He slowly licked his lips, like a hungry man watching good food brought in. 'I mean to invade Angland.'

Bayaz raised an eyebrow, then he started to chuckle, then he thumped the table with his fist. 'Oh that's good, that's very good! You find peace does not suit your kingdom, eh, Bethod? The clans are not used to being friends, are they? They hate each other and they hate you, am I right?'

'Well,' smiled Bethod, 'they are somewhat restive.'

'I bet they are! But send them to war with the Union, then they will be a nation, eh? United against the common enemy, to be sure. And if you win? You'll be the man who did the impossible! The man who drove the damn southerners out of the North! You'll be loved, or at any rate, more feared than ever. If you lose, well, at least you keep the clans busy a while, and sap their strength in the process. I remember now why I used to like you! An excellent plan!'

Bethod looked smug. 'Of course. And we will not lose. The Union is soft, arrogant, unprepared. With your help—'

'My help?' interrupted Bayaz. 'You presume too much.'

'But you—'

'Oh, that.' The Magus shrugged. 'I am a liar.'

Bayaz lifted his pipe to his mouth. There was a moment of stunned silence. Then Bethod's eyes narrowed. Caurib's widened. Scale's heavy brow crinkled with confusion. Logen's smile slowly returned.

'A liar?' hissed the sorceress. 'And more besides, say I!' Her voice still had the singing note about it, but it was a different song now – hard, shrill, murderous sharp. 'You old worm! Hiding here behind your walls, and your servants, and your books! Your time is long past, fool! You are nothing but words and dust!' The First of the Magi calmly pursed his lips and blew out smoke. 'Words and dust, old worm! Well, we shall see. We will come to

your library!' The wizard set his pipe carefully down on the table, a little smoke still curling up out of the bowl. 'We will come back to your library, and put your walls to the hammer, your servants to the sword, and your books to the fire! To the—'

'Silence.' Bayaz was frowning now, deeper even than he had at Calder, days before in the yard outside. Again Logen felt the desire to step away, but stronger by far. He found himself glancing around the room for a place to hide. Caurib's lips still moved, but only a meaningless croak came out.

'Break my walls, would you?' murmured Bayaz. His grey brows drew inwards, deep, hard grooves cutting into the bridge of his nose.

'Kill my servants, will you?' asked Bayaz. The room had turned very chill, despite the logs on the fire.

'Burn my books, say you?' thundered Bayaz. 'You say too much, witch!' Caurib's knees buckled. Her white hand clawed at the door-frame, chains and bangles jingling together as she slumped against the wall.

'Words and dust, am I?' Bayaz thrust up four fingers. 'Four gifts you had of me, Bethod – the sun in winter, a storm in summer, and two things you could never have known, but for my Art. What have you given me in return, eh? This lake and this valley, which were mine already, and but one other thing.' Bethod's eyes flicked across to Logen, then back. 'You owe me still, yet you send messengers to me, you make demands, you presume to *command* me? That is not my idea of manners.'

Scale had caught up now, and his eyes were near popping out of his head. 'Manners? What does a King need with manners? A King takes what he wants!' And he took a heavy step towards the table.

Now Scale was big enough and cruel enough, to be sure. Most likely you could never find a better man for kicking someone once he was down. But Logen wasn't down, not yet, and he was good and sick of listening to this bloated fool. He stepped forward to block Scale's path, resting his hand on the hilt of his sword. 'Far enough.'

The Prince looked Logen over with his bulging eyes, held up his meaty fist, squeezing his great fingers so the knuckles turned white. 'Don't tempt me Ninefingers, you broken cur! Your day's long past! I could crush you like an egg!'

'You can try it, but I've no mind to let you. You know my work. One step more and I'll set to work on you, you fucking swollen pig.'

‘Scale!’ snapped Bethod. ‘There is nothing for us here, that much is plain. We are leaving.’ The hulking prince locked his great lump of a jaw, his huge hands clenching and unclenching by his sides, glowering at Logen with the most bestial hatred imaginable. Then he sneered, and slowly backed away.

Bayaz leaned forward. ‘You said you would bring peace to the North, Bethod, and what have you done? You have piled war on war! The land is bled white with your pride and your brutality! King of the Northmen? Hah! You’re not worth the helping! And to think, I had such high hopes for you!’

Bethod only frowned, his eyes as cold as the diamond on his forehead. ‘You have made an enemy of me, Bayaz, and I am a bad enemy to have. The very worst. You will yet regret this day’s work.’ He turned his scorn on Logen. ‘As for you, Ninefingers, you will have no more mercy from me! Every man in the North will be your enemy now! You will be hated, and hunted, and cursed, wherever you go! I will see to it!’

Logen shrugged. There was nothing new there. Bayaz stood up from his chair. ‘You’ve said your piece, now take your witch and get you gone!’

Caurib stumbled from the room first, still gasping for air.

Scale gave Logen one last scowl, then he turned and lumbered away. The so-called King of the Northmen was the last to leave, nodding slowly and sweeping the room with a deadly glare. As their footsteps faded down the corridor Logen took a deep breath, steadied himself, and let his hand drop from the hilt of the sword.

‘So,’ said Bayaz brightly, ‘that went well.’

A Road Between Two Dentists

Past midnight, and it was dark in the Middleway. Dark and it smelled bad. It always smelled bad down by the docks: old salt water, rotten fish, tar and sweat and horse shit. In a few hours time this street would be thronging with noise and activity. Tradesmen shouting, labourers cursing under their loads, merchants hurrying to and fro, a hundred carts and wagons rumbling over the dirty cobbles. There would be an endless tide of people, thronging off the ships and thronging on, people from every part of the world, words shouted in every language under the sun. But at night it was still. Still and silent. *Silent as the grave, and even worse smelling.*

'It's down here,' said Severard, strolling towards the shadowy mouth of a narrow alley, wedged in between two looming warehouses.

'Did he give you much trouble?' asked Glokta as he shuffled painfully after.

'Not too much.' The Practical adjusted his mask, letting some air in behind. *Must get very clammy under there, all that breath and sweat. No wonder Practicals tend to have bad tempers.* 'He gave Rews' mattress some trouble, stabbed it all to bits. Then Frost knocked him on the head. Funny thing. When that boy knocks a man on the head, the trouble all goes out of him.'

'What about Rews?'

'Still alive.' The light from Severard's lamp passed over a pile of putrid rubbish. Glokta heard rats squeaking in the darkness as they scurried away.

'You know all the best neighbourhoods, don't you Severard?'

'That's what you pay me for, Inquisitor.' His dirty black boot squelched, heedless, into the stinking mush. Glokta limped gingerly around it, holding the hem of his coat up in his free hand. 'I grew up round here,' continued the Practical. 'Folk don't ask questions.'

'Except for us.' *We always have questions.*

'Course.' Severard gave a muffled giggle. 'We're the Inquisition.' His lamp picked out a dented iron gate, the high wall above topped with rusty spikes. 'This is it.' *Indeed, and what an auspicious-looking address it is.* The gate evidently didn't see much use, its brown hinges squealed in protest

as the Practical unlocked it and heaved it open. Glokta stepped awkwardly over a puddle that had built up in a rut in the ground, cursing as his coat trailed in the foul water.

The hinges screamed again as Severard wrestled the heavy gate shut, forehead creasing with the effort, then he lifted the hood on his lantern, lighting up a wide ornamental courtyard, choked with rubble and weeds and broken wood.

'And here we are,' said Severard.

It must once have been a magnificent building, in its way. *How much would all those windows have cost? How much all that decorative stonework? Visitors must have been awed by its owner's wealth, if not his good taste.* But no more. The windows were blinded with rotting boards, the swirls of masonry were choked with moss and caked with bird droppings. The thin layer of green marble on the pillars was cracked and flaking, exposing the rotten plaster underneath. All was crumbled, broken and decayed. Fallen lumps of the façade were strewn everywhere, casting long shadows on the high walls of the yard. Half the head of a broken cherub stared mournfully up at Glokta as he limped past.

He had been expecting some dingy warehouse, some dank cellar near the water. 'What is this place?' he asked, staring up at the rotting palace.

'Some merchant built it, years ago.' Severard kicked a lump of broken sculpture out of his way and it clattered off into the darkness. 'A rich man, very rich. Wanted to live near his warehouses and his wharves, keep one eye on business.' He strolled up the cracked and mossy steps to the huge, flaking front door. 'He thought the idea might catch on, but how could it? Who'd want to live round here if they didn't have to? Then he lost all his money, as merchants do. His creditors have had trouble finding a buyer.'

Glokta stared at a broken fountain, leaning at an angle and half filled with stagnant water. 'Hardly surprising.'

Severard's lamp barely lit the cavernous space of the entrance hall. Two enormous, curved, slumping staircases loomed out of the gloom opposite them. A wide balcony ran around the walls at first floor level, but a great section of it had collapsed and crashed through the damp floorboards below, so that one of the stairways ended, amputated, hanging in the empty air. The damp floor was strewn with lumps of broken plaster, fallen roofing slates, shattered timbers and a spattering of grey bird droppings. The night sky

peered in through several yawning holes in the roof. Glokta could hear the vague sound of pigeons cooing in amongst the shadowy rafters, and somewhere the slow dripping of water.

What a place. Glokta stifled a smile. *It reminds me of myself, in a way. We both were magnificent once, and we both have our best days far behind us.*

'It's big enough, wouldn't you say?' asked Severard, picking his way in amongst the rubble towards a yawning doorway under the broken staircase, his lamp casting strange, slanting shadows as he moved.

'Oh, I'd have thought so, unless we get more than a thousand prisoners at once.' Glokta shuffled after him, leaning heavily on his cane, worried about his footing on the slimy floor. *I'll slip and fall right on my arse, right here in all this bird shit. That would be perfect.*

The arch opened into a crumbling hall, rotten plaster falling away in sheets, showing the damp bricks beneath. Gloomy doorways passed by on either side. *The sort of place that would make a man nervous, if he was prone to nervousness. He might imagine unpleasant things in these chambers, just beyond the lamp light, and horrible acts taking place in the darkness.* He looked up at Severard, ambling jauntily along in front, tuneless whistling vaguely audible from behind his mask, and frowned. *But we are not prone to nervousness. Perhaps we are the unpleasant things. Perhaps the acts are ours.*

'How big is this place?' asked Glokta as he hobbled along.

'Thirty-five rooms, not counting the servant's quarters.'

'A palace. How the hell did you find it?'

'I used to sleep here, some nights. After my mother died. I found a way in. The roof was still mostly on back then, and it was a dry place to sleep. Dry and safe. More or less.' *Ah, what a hard life it's been. Thug and torturer is a real step up for you, isn't it?*

Every man has his excuses, and the more vile the man becomes, the more touching the story has to be. What is my story now, I wonder?

'Ever resourceful, eh, Severard?'

'That's what you pay me for, Inquisitor.'

They passed into a wide space: a drawing room, a study, a ball-room even, it was big enough. Once beautiful panels were sagging from the walls, covered in mould and flaking gilt paint. Severard moved over to one, still

attached, and pushed it firmly at one side. There was a soft click as it swung open, revealing a dark archway beyond. *A hidden door? How delightful. How sinister. How very appropriate.*

'This place is as full of surprises as you are,' said Glokta, limping painfully towards the opening.

'And you wouldn't believe the price I got.'

'We bought this?'

'Oh no. I did. With Rews' money. And now I'm renting it to you.' Severard's eyes sparkled in the lamplight. 'It's a gold mine!'

'Hah!' laughed Glokta, as he shuffled carefully down the steps. *All this, and a head for business too. Perhaps I'll be working for Arch Lector Severard one of these days. Stranger things have happened.* Glokta's shadow loomed out ahead of him into the darkness as he laboured crab-like down the steps, his right hand feeling out the gaps between the rough stone blocks to lend him some support.

'The cellars go on for miles,' muttered Severard from behind. 'We have our own private access to the canals, and to the sewers too, if you're interested in sewers.' They passed a dark opening on their left, then another on their right, always going slowly downwards. 'Frost tells me you can get all the way from here to the Agriont, without once coming up for air.'

'That could be useful.'

'I'd say so, if you can stand the smell.'

Severard's lamp found a heavy door with a small, barred opening. 'Home again,' he said, and gave four quick knocks. A moment later Practical Frost's masked face loomed abruptly out of the darkness at the little window. 'Only us.' The albino's eyes showed no sign of warmth or recognition. *But then they never do.* Heavy bolts slid back on the other side of the door, and it swung smoothly open.

There was a table and chair, and fresh torches on the walls, but they were unlit. *It must have been pitch black in here until our little lamp arrived.* Glokta looked over at the albino. 'Have you just been sitting here in the dark?' The hulking Practical shrugged, and Glokta shook his head. 'Sometimes I worry about you, Practical Frost, I really do.'

'He's down here,' said Severard, ambling off down the hall, heels making clicking echoes on the stone flags of the floor. This must once have been a

wine cellar: there were several barrel-vaulted chambers leading off to either side, sealed with heavy gratings.

'Glokta!' Salem Rews' fingers were gripped tightly round the bars, his face pressed up between them.

Glokta stopped in front of the cell and rested his throbbing leg. 'Rews, how are you? I hardly expected to see you again so soon.' He had lost weight already, his skin was slack and pale, still marked with fading bruises. *He does not look well, not well at all.*

'What's happening. Glokta? Please, why am I here?'

Well, where's the harm? 'It seems the Arch Lector still has a use for you. He wants you to give evidence.' Glokta leaned towards the bars. 'Before the Open Council,' he whispered.

Rews grew paler still. 'Then what?'

'We'll see.' *Angland, Rews, Angland.*

'What if I refuse?'

'Refuse the Arch Lector?' Glokta chuckled. 'No, no, no, Rews. You don't want to do a thing like that.' He turned away and shuffled after Severard.

'For pity's sake! It's dark down here!'

'You'll get used to it!' Glokta called over his shoulder. *Amazing, what one can get used to.*

The last of the chambers held their latest prisoner. Chained up to a bracket in the wall, naked and bagged of course. He was short and stocky, tending slightly to fat, with fresh grazes on his knees, no doubt from being flung into the rough stone cell.

'So this is our killer, eh?' The man rolled himself up onto his knees when he heard Glokta's voice, straining forward against his chains. A little blood had soaked through the front of the bag and dried there, making a brown stain on the canvas.

'A very unsavoury character indeed,' said Severard. 'Doesn't look too fearsome now, though, does he?'

'They never do, once they're brought to this. Where do we work?'

Severard's eyes smiled even more. 'Oh, you're going to like this, Inquisitor.'

'It's a touch theatrical,' said Glokta, 'but none the worse for that.'

The room was large and circular with a domed ceiling, painted with a curious mural that ran all the way round the curved walls. The body of a

man lay on the grass, bleeding from many wounds, with a forest behind him. Eleven other figures walked away, six on one side, five on the other, painted in profile, awkwardly posed, dressed in white but their features indistinct. They faced another man, arms stretched out, all in black and with a sea of colourfully daubed fire behind him. The harsh light from six bright lamps didn't make the work look any better. *Hardly of the highest quality, more decoration than art, but the effect is quite striking, nonetheless.*

'No idea what it's supposed to be,' said Severard.

'The Mather Ma'er,' mumbled Practical Frost.

'Of course,' said Glokta, staring up at the dark figure on the wall, and the flames behind. 'You should study your history, Practical Severard. This is the Master Maker, Kanedias.' He turned and pointed to the dying man on the opposite wall. 'And this is great Juvens, whom he has killed.' He swept his hand over the figures in white. 'And these are Juvens' apprentices, the Magi, marching to avenge him.' *Ghost stories, fit to scare children with.*

'What kind of man pays to have shit like this on the walls of his cellar?' asked Severard, shaking his head.

'Oh, this sort of thing was quite popular at one time. There's a room painted like this in the palace. This is a copy, and a cheap one.' Glokta looked up at the shadowed face of Kanedias, staring grimly down into the room, and the bleeding corpse on the opposite wall. 'Still, there's something quite unsettling about it, isn't there?' *Or there would be, if I gave a damn.* 'Blood, fire, death, vengeance. No idea why you'd want it in the cellar. Perhaps there was something dark about our friend the merchant.'

'There's always something dark about a man with money,' said Severard. 'Who are these two?'

Glokta frowned, peering forward. Two small, vague figures could be seen under the arms of the Maker, one on each side. 'Who knows?' asked Glokta, 'maybe they're his Practicals.'

Severard laughed. A vague exhalation of air even came from behind Frost's mask, though his eyes showed no sign of amusement. *My, my, he must be thoroughly tickled.*

Glokta shuffled toward the table in the centre of the room. Two chairs faced each other across the smooth, polished surface. One was a spare, hard affair of the sort you found in the cellars of the House of Questions, but the

other was altogether more impressive, throne-like almost, with sweeping arms and a high back, upholstered in brown leather.

Glokta placed his cane against the table and lowered himself carefully, back aching. ‘Oh, this is an excellent chair,’ he breathed, sinking slowly back into the soft leather, stretching out his leg, throbbing from the long walk here. There was a slight resistance. He looked beneath the table. There was a matching footstool there.

Glokta tipped his head back and laughed. ‘Oh this is fine! You shouldn’t have!’ He settled his leg down on the stool with a comfortable sigh.

‘It was the least we could do,’ said Severard, folding his arms and leaning against the wall next to the bleeding body of Juvens. ‘We did well from your friend Rews, very well. You’ve always seen us right, and we don’t forget that.’

‘Unhhh,’ said Frost, nodding his head.

‘You spoil me.’ Glokta stroked the polished wood on the arm of the chair. *My boys. Where would I be without you? Back home in bed with mother fussing over me, I suppose, wondering how she’ll ever find a nice girl to marry me now.* He glanced over the instruments on the table. His case was there, of course, and a few other things, well-used, but still highly serviceable. A pair of long-handled tongs particularly caught his eye. He glanced up at Severard. ‘Teeth?’

‘Seemed a good place to start.’

‘Fair enough.’ Glokta licked at his own empty gums then cracked his knuckles, one by one. ‘Teeth, it is.’

As soon as the gag was off the assassin started screaming at them in Styrian, spitting and cursing, struggling pointlessly at his chains. Glokta didn’t understand a word of it. *But I think I catch the meaning, more or less. Something very offensive indeed, I imagine. Something about our mothers, and so on. But I am not easily offended.* He was a rough looking sort, face pockmarked with acne scars, nose broken more than once and bent out of shape. *How disappointing. I was hoping the Mercers might have gone up-market on this occasion at least, but that’s merchants for you. Always looking for the bargain.*

Practical Frost ended the torrent of unintelligible abuse by punching the man heavily in the stomach. *That’ll take his breath away for a moment.*

Long enough to get the first word in.

'Now then,' said Glokta, 'we'll have none of that nonsense here. We know you're a professional, sent to blend in and do a job. You wouldn't blend in too well if you couldn't even speak the language, now would you?'

The prisoner had got his breath back. 'Pox on all of you, you bastards!' he gasped.

'Excellent! The common tongue will do nicely for our little chats. I have a feeling we may end up having several. Is there anything you would like to know about us before we begin? Or shall we get straight to it?'

The prisoner stared up suspiciously at the painted figure of the Master Maker, looming over Glokta's head. 'Where am I?'

'We're just off the Middleway, down near the water.' Glokta winced as the muscles in his leg suddenly convulsed. He stretched it out cautiously, waiting until he heard the knee click before he carried on. 'You know, the Middleway is one of the very arteries of the city, it runs straight through its heart, from the Agriont to the sea. It passes through many different districts, has all manner of notable buildings. Some of the most fashionable addresses in the whole city are just up the lane. To me though, it's nothing but a road between two dentists.'

The prisoner's eyes narrowed, then darted over the instruments on the table. *But no more cursing. It seems the mention of dentistry has got his attention.*

'Up at the other end of the avenue,' and Glokta pointed roughly northwards, 'in one of the most expensive parts of town, opposite the public gardens, in a beautiful white house in the very shadow of the Agriont, is the establishment of Master Farrad. You might have heard of him?'

'Get fucked!'

Glokta raised his eyebrows. *If only.* 'They say that Master Farrad is the finest dentist in the world. I believe he came from Gurkhul originally, but he escaped the tyranny of the Emperor to join us in the Union and make a better life for himself, saving our wealthiest citizens from the terrors of bad teeth. When I came back from my own little visit to the South, my family sent me to him, to see if there was anything he could do for me.' Glokta smiled wide, showing the assassin the nature of the problem. 'Of course there wasn't. The Emperor's torturers saw to that. But he's a damn fine dentist, everyone says so.'

‘So what?’

Glokta let his smile fade. ‘Down at the other end of the Middleway, down near the sea, in amongst the filth and the scum and the slime of the docks, am I. The rents may be cheap hereabouts, but I feel confident that, once we have spent some time together, you will not think me any less talented than the esteemed Master Farrad. It is simply that my talents lie in a different direction. The good Master eases the pain of his patients, while I am a dentist . . .’ and Glokta leaned slowly forward ‘ . . . of a different sort.’

The assassin laughed in his face. ‘Do you think you can scare me with a bag on the head and a nasty painting?’ He looked round at Frost and Severard. ‘You crowd of freaks?’

‘Do I think we scare you? The three of us?’ Glokta allowed himself a chuckle at that. ‘Here you sit, alone, unarmed and thoroughly restrained. Who knows where you are but us, or cares to know? You have no hope of deliverance, or of escape. We’re all professionals here. I think you can guess what’s coming, more or less.’ Glokta grinned a sickly grin. ‘Of course we scare you, don’t play the fool. You hide it well, I’ll admit, but that can’t last. The time will come, soon enough, when you’ll be begging to go back in the bag.’

‘You’ll get nothing from me,’ growled the assassin, staring him straight in the eye. ‘Nothing.’ *Tough. A tough man. But it’s easy to act tough before the work begins. I should know.*

Glokta rubbed his leg gently. The blood was flowing nicely now, the pain almost gone. ‘We’ll keep it simple to begin with. Names, that’s all I want, for now. Just names. Why don’t we start with yours? At least you can’t tell us you don’t know the answer.’

They waited. Severard and Frost stared down at the prisoner, the green eyes smiling, the pink ones not. Silence.

Glokta sighed. ‘Right then.’ Frost planted his fists on either side of the assassin’s jaw, started to squeeze until his teeth were forced apart. Severard shoved the ends of the tongs in between and forced his jaws open, much too wide for comfort. The assassin’s eyes bulged. *Hurts, doesn’t it? But that’s nothing, believe me.*

‘Watch his tongue,’ said Glokta, ‘we want him talking.’

‘Don’t worry,’ muttered Severard, peering into the assassin’s mouth. He ducked back suddenly. ‘Ugh! His breath smells like shit!’

A shame, but I am hardly surprised. Clean living is rarely a priority for hired killers. Glokta got slowly to his feet, limped round the table. ‘Now then,’ he murmured, one hand hovering over his instruments, ‘where to begin?’ He picked up a mounted needle and craned forward, his other hand gripped tight around the top of his cane, probing carefully at the killer’s teeth. *Not a pretty set, to be sure. I do believe I’d rather have my teeth than his.*

‘Dear me, these are in a terrible state. Rotten through and through. That’s why your breath stinks so badly. There’s no excuse for it, a man of your age.’

‘Haah!’ yelped the prisoner as Glokta touched a nerve. He tried to speak, but with the tongs in place he made less sense than Practical Frost.

‘Quiet now, you’ve had your chance to talk. Perhaps you’ll get another later, I haven’t decided.’ Glokta put the needle back down on the table, shaking his head sadly. ‘Your teeth are a fucking disgrace. Revolting. I do declare, they’re just about falling out on their own. Do you know,’ he said, as he took the little hammer and chisel from the table, ‘I do believe you’d be better off without them.’

Flatheads

Grey morning time, out in the cold, wet woods, and the Dogman was just sat there, thinking about how things used to be better. Sat there, minding the spit, turning it round every once in a while and trying not to get too nervous with the waiting. Tul Duru wasn't helping any with that. He was striding up and down the grass, round the old stones and back, wearing his great boots out, about as patient as a wolf on heat. Dogman watched him stomping – clomp, clomp, clomp. He'd learned a long time ago that great fighters are only good for one thing. Fighting. At pretty much everything else, and at waiting in particular, they're fucking useless.

'Why don't you sit yourself down, Tul?' muttered Dogman. 'There's stones aplenty for the purpose. Warmer here by the fire and all. Rest those flapping feet o' yours, you're getting me twitchy.'

'Sit me down?' rumbled the giant, coming up and looming over the Dogman like a great bloody house. 'How can I sit, or you either?' He frowned across the ruins and into the trees from under his great, heavy brows. 'You sure this is the place?'

'This is the place.' Dogman stared round at the broken stones, hoping like hell that it was. He couldn't deny there was no sign of 'em yet. 'They'll be here, don't you worry.' So long as they ain't all got themselves killed, he thought, but he had the sense not to say it. He'd spent enough time marching with Tul Duru Thunderhead to know – you don't get that man stirred up. Unless you want a broken head, o' course.

'They better be here soon is all.' Tul's bloody great hands curled up into fists fit to break rocks with. 'I got no taste for just sitting here, arse in the wind!'

'Nor do I, neither,' said the Dogman, showing his palms and doing his best to keep everything gentle, 'but don't you fret on it, big lad. They'll be along soon enough, just the way we planned. This is the place.' He eyed the hog crackling away, dripping some nice gravy in the fire. His mouth was watering good now, his nose was full of the smell of meat . . . and something else beside. Just a whiff. He looked up, sniffing.

'You smell something?' asked Tul, peering into the woods.

‘Something, maybe.’ The Dogman leaned down and took a hold on his bow.

‘What is it? Shanka?’

‘Not sure, could be.’ He sniffed the air again. Smelled like a man, and a mighty sour-smelling one at that.

‘I could have killed the fucking pair o’ you!’

Dogman span about, half falling over and near fumbling his bow while he did it. Black Dow wasn’t ten strides behind him, down wind, creeping over to the fire with a nasty grin. Grim was at his shoulder, face blank as a wall, as always.

‘You bastards!’ bellowed Tul. ‘You near made me shit with your sneaking around!’

‘Good,’ sneered Dow. ‘You could lose some fucking lard.’

Dogman took a long breath and tossed his bow back down. Some relief to know they were in the right spot after all, but he could’ve done without the scare. He’d been jumpy since he saw Logen go over the edge of that cliff. Roll right on over and not a thing anyone could do about it. Could happen to anyone any time, death, and that was a fact.

Grim clambered over the broken stones and sat himself down on one next to the Dogman, gave him the barest of nods. ‘Meat?’ barked Dow, shoving past Tul and flopping down beside the fire, ripping a leg off the carcass and tearing into it with his teeth.

And that was it. That was all the greeting, after a month or more apart. ‘A man with friends is rich indeed,’ muttered the Dogman out the corner of his mouth.

‘Whatsay?’ spat Dow, cold eyes sliding round, his mouth full of pig, his dirty, stubbly chin all shiny with grease.

Dogman showed his palms again. ‘Nothing to take offence at.’ He’d spent enough time marching with Black Dow to know – you might as well cut your own neck as make that evil bastard angry. ‘Any trouble while we was split up?’ he asked, looking to change the subject.

Grim nodded. ‘Some.’

‘Fucking Flatheads!’ snarled Dow, spraying bits of meat in Dogman’s face. ‘They’re bloody everywhere!’ He pointed the hog’s leg across the fire like it was a blade. ‘I’ve taken enough of this shit! I’m going back south.

It's too bloody cold by half, and fucking Flatheads everywhere! Bastards! I'm going south!'

'You scared?' asked Tul.

Dow turned to look up at him with a big yellow grin, and the Dogman winced. It was a damn fool of a question, that. He'd never been scared in his life, Black Dow. Didn't know what it was to be scared. 'Feared of a few Shanka? Me?' He gave a nasty laugh. 'We done some work on them, while you two been snoring. Gave some of 'em warm beds to sleep in. Too warm by half.'

'Burned 'em,' muttered Grim. That was a full day's talk out of him already.

'Burned a whole fucking pile of 'em,' hissed Dow, grinning like he never heard such a joke as corpses on fire. 'They don't scare me, big lad, no more'n you do, but I don't plan to sit here waiting for 'em neither, just so Threetrees has time to haul his flabby old arse out of bed. I'm going south!' And he tore off another mouthful of meat.

'Who's got the flabby arse now?'

Dogman cracked a grin as he saw Threetrees striding over towards the fire, and he started up and grabbed the old boy by the hand. He had Forley the Weakest with him and all, and Dogman clapped the little man on the back as he came past. Nearly knocked him over, he was that pleased to see they were all alive and made it through another month. Didn't hurt to have some leadership round the fire, neither. Everyone looked happy for once, smiling and pressing hands and all the rest. Everyone but Dow, o' course. He just sat there, staring at the fire, sucking on his bone, face sour as old milk.

'Right good to see you again, lads, and all in one piece.' Threetrees hefted his big round shield off his shoulder and leant it up against a broken old bit of wall. 'How've you been?'

'Fucking cold,' said Dow, not even looking up. 'We're going south.'

Dogman sighed. Back together for ten heartbeats and the bickering was already started. It was going to be a tough crowd now, without Logen to keep things settled. A tough crowd, and apt to get bloody. Threetrees wasn't rushing into anything, though. He took a moment to think on it, like always. He loved to take his moment, that one. That was what made him so

dangerous. ‘Going south, eh?’ said Threetrees, after he’d chewed it over for a minute. ‘And just when did all this get decided?’

‘Nothing’s decided,’ said the Dogman, showing his palms one more time. He reckoned he might be doing that a lot from now on.

Tul Duru frowned down at Dow’s back. ‘Nothing at all,’ he rumbled, mightily annoyed at having his mind made up for him.

‘Nothing is right,’ said Threetrees, slow and steady as the grass growing. ‘I don’t recall this being no voting band.’

Dow took no time at all to think about that. He never took time, that one. That was what made *him* so dangerous. He leaped up, flinging the bone onto the ground, squaring up to Threetrees with a fighting look. ‘I . . . say . . . south!’ he snarled, eyes bulging like bubbles on a stew.

Threetrees didn’t back down a step. That wouldn’t have been his way at all. He took his moment to think on it, course, then he took a step forward of his own, so his nose and Dow’s were almost touching. ‘If you wanted a say, you should have beaten Ninefingers,’ he growled, ‘instead of losing like the rest of us.’

Black Dow’s face turned dark as tar at that. He didn’t like being reminded of losing. ‘The Bloody-Nine’s gone back to the mud!’ he snarled. ‘Dogman seen it, didn’t you?’

Dogman had to nod. ‘Aye,’ he muttered.

‘So that’s the end of that! There’s no reason for us to be pissing around here, North of the mountains, with Flatheads crawling up our arses! I say south!’

‘Ninefingers may be dead,’ said Threetrees in Dow’s face, ‘but your debt ain’t. Why he saw fit to spare a man as worthless as you I’ll never know, but he named me as second,’ and he tapped his big chest, ‘and that means I’m the one with the say! Me and no other!’

Dogman took a careful step back. The two of ’em were shaping up for blows alright, and he’d no wish to get a bloody nose in all the confusion. It would hardly have been the first time. Forley took a stab at keeping the peace. ‘Come on boys,’ he said, all nice and soft, ‘there’s no need for this.’ He might not have been much at killing, Forley, but he was a damn good boy for stopping those that were from killing each other. Dogman wished him luck with it. ‘Come on, why don’t you—’

‘Shut your fucking hole, you!’ growled Dow, one dirty finger stabbing savage in Forley’s face. ‘What’s your fucking say worth, Weakest?’

‘Leave him be!’ rumbled Tul, holding his great fist up under Dow’s chin, ‘or I’ll give you something to shout about!’

The Dogman could hardly look. Dow and Threetrees were always picking at each other. They got fired up quick and damped down quick. The Thunderhead was a different animal. Once that big ox got properly riled there was no calming him. Not without ten strong men and a lot of rope. Dogman tried to think what Logen would have done. He’d have known how to stop ’em fighting, if he hadn’t been dead.

‘Shit!’ shouted Dogman, jumping up from the fire all of a sudden. ‘There’s fucking Shanka crawling all over us! And if we get through with them there’s always Bethod to think on! We’ve a world full of scores to settle without making more ourselves! Logen’s gone and Threetrees is second, and that’s the only say I’ll hear!’ He did some jabbing with his own finger, at no one in particular, then he waited, hoping like hell that it had done the trick.

‘Aye,’ grunted Grim.

Forley started nodding like a woodpecker. ‘Dogman’s right! We need to fight each other like we need the cock-rot! Threetrees is second. He’s the chief now.’

It was quiet for a moment, and Dow fixed the Dogman with that cold, empty, killing look, like the cat with the mouse between its paws. Dogman swallowed. A lot of men, most men even, wouldn’t have dared meet no look like that from Black Dow. He got the name from having the blackest reputation in the North, with coming sudden in the black of night, and leaving the villages behind him black from fire. That was the rumour. That was the fact.

It took all the bones Dogman had not to stare at his boots. He was just ready to do it when Dow looked away, eyed the others, one at a time. Most men wouldn’t have met that look, but these here weren’t most men. You could never have hoped to meet a bloodier crowd, not anywhere under the sun. Not a one of them backed down, or even seemed to consider it. Apart from Forley the Weakest, of course, he was staring at the grass before his turn even came.

Once Dow saw they were all against him he cracked a happy smile, just as if there never was a problem. ‘Fair enough,’ he said to Threetrees, the anger all seeming to drain away in an instant. ‘What’s it to be then, chief?’

Threetrees looked over at the woods. He sniffed and sucked at his teeth. He scratched at his beard, taking his moment to think on it. He looked each one of them over, considering. ‘We go south,’ he said.

He smelled ’em before he saw ’em, but that was always the way with him. He had a good nose, did the Dogman, that’s how he got the name after all. Being honest though, anyone could have smelled ’em. They fucking stank.

There were twelve down in the clearing. Sitting, eating, grunting to each other in their nasty, dirty tongue, big yellow teeth sticking out everywhere, dressed in lumps of smelly fur and reeking hide and odd bits of rusty armour. Shanka.

‘Fucking Flatheads,’ Dogman muttered to himself. He heard a soft hiss behind, turned round to see Grim peering up from behind a bush. He held out his open hand to say stop, tapped the top of his skull to say Flatheads, held up his fist, then two fingers to say twelve, and pointed back down the track towards the others. Grim nodded and faded away into the woods.

The Dogman took one last look at the Shanka, just to make sure they were all still unwary. They were, so he slipped back down the tree and off.

‘They’re camped round the road, twelve that I saw, maybe more.’

‘They looking for us?’ asked Threetrees.

‘Maybe, but they ain’t looking too hard.’

‘Could we get around them?’ asked Forley, always looking to miss out on a fight.

Dow spat onto the ground, always looking to get into one. ‘Twelve is nothing! We can do them alright!’

The Dogman looked over at Threetrees, thinking it out, taking his moment. Twelve wasn’t nothing, and they all knew it, but it might be better to deal with them than leave them free and easy behind.

‘What’s it to be, chief?’ asked Tul.

Threetrees set his jaw. ‘Weapons.’

A fighting man’s a fool that don’t keep his weapons clean and ready. Dogman had been over his no more’n an hour before. Still, you won’t be killed for checking ’em, while you might be for not doing it.

There was the hissing of steel on leather, the clicking of wood and the clanking of metal. Dogman watched Grim twang at his bowstring, check over the feathers on his shafts. He watched Tul Duru run his thumb down the edge of his big heavy sword, almost as tall as Forley was, clucking like a chicken at a spot of rust. He watched Black Dow rubbing a rag on the head of his axe, looking at the blade with eyes soft as a lover's. He watched Threetrees tugging at the buckles on his shield straps, swishing his blade through the air, bright metal glinting.

The Dogman gave a sigh, pulled the straps on his guard tighter round his left wrist, checked the wood of his bow for cracks. He made sure all his knives were where they should be. You can never have too many knives, Logen had told him once, and he'd taken it right to heart. He watched Forley checking his short-sword with clumsy hands, his mouth chewing away, eyes all wet with fear. That got his own nerves jumping, and he glanced round at the others. Dirty, scarred, frowns and lots of beard. There was no fear there, no fear at all, but that was nothing to be shamed at. Different men have different ways, Logen had told him once, and you have to have fear to have courage. He'd taken that right to heart as well.

He walked over to Forley and gave him a clap on the shoulder. 'You have to have fear to have courage,' he said.

'That so?'

'So they say, and it's a good thing too.' The Dogman leaned close so no one else could hear. 'Cause I'm about ready to shit.' He reckoned that's what Logen would have done, and now that Logen had gone back to the mud it fell to him. Forley gave half a smile, but it slumped pretty fast, and he looked more scared then ever. There's only so much you can do.

'Right, boys,' said Threetrees, once the gear was all checked and stowed in its proper places, 'here's how we'll get it done.

Grim, Dogman, opposite sides of their camp, out in the trees. Wait for the signal, then shoot any Flathead with a bow. Failing that, whatever's closest.'

'Right you are, chief,' said the Dogman. Grim gave a nod.

'Tul, you and me'll take the front, but wait for the signal, eh?'

'Aye,' rumbled the giant.

'Dow, you and Forley at the back. You come on when you see us go. But this time you wait for us to go!' hissed Threetrees, stabbing with his thick

finger.

'Course, chief.' Dow shrugged his shoulders, just as though he always did as he was told.

'Right then, there it is,' said Threetrees, 'anyone still confused? Any empty heads round the fire?' The Dogman mumbled and shook his head. They all did. 'Fair enough. Just one more thing.' The old boy leaned forward, looking at each of them one by one. 'Wait . . . for . . . the . . . fucking . . . signal!'

It wasn't 'til the Dogman was hid behind a bush with his bow in his hand and a shaft at the ready that he realised. He'd no idea what the signal was. He looked down at the Shanka, still sat there all unwary, grunting and shouting and banging about. By the dead he needed to piss. Always needed to piss before a fight. Had anyone said the signal? He couldn't remember.

'Shit,' he whispered, and just then Dow came hurtling out from the trees, axe in one hand, sword in the other.

'Fucking Flatheads!' he screamed, giving the nearest a fearsome big blow in the head and splattering blood across the clearing. In so far as you could tell what a Shanka was thinking, these ones looked greatly surprised. Dogman reckoned that would have to do for a signal.

He let loose his shaft at the nearest Flathead, just reaching for a big club and watched it catch it through the armpit with a satisfying thunk. 'Hah!' he shouted. He saw Dow spit another through the back with his sword, but there was a big Shanka now with a spear ready to throw. An arrow came looping out of the trees and stuck it through the neck, and it let go a squeal and sprawled out backwards. That Grim was a damn good shot.

Now Threetrees came roaring from the scrub on the other side of the clearing, catching them off guard. He barged one Flathead in the back with his shield and it sprawled face-first into the fire, he hacked at another with his sword. The Dogman let go a shaft and it stuck a Shanka in its gut. It dropped down on its knees and a moment later Tul took its head off with a great swing of his sword.

The fight was joined and moving quick – chop, grunt, scrape, rattle. There was blood flying and weapons swinging and bodies dropping too fast for the Dogman to try an arrow at. The three of them had the last few hemmed in, squawking and gibbering. Tul Duru was swinging his big sword around,

keeping them at bay. Threetrees darted in and chopped the legs out from under one, and Dow cut another down as it looked round.

The last one squawked and made a run for the trees. Dogman shot at it, but he was hurrying and he missed. The arrow almost hit Dow in the leg, but luckily he didn't notice. It had almost got away into the bushes, then it squealed and fell back, thrashing. Forley had stabbed it, hiding in the scrub. 'I got one!' he yelled.

It was quiet for a moment, while the Dogman scrambled down toward the clearing and they all looked round to see if there was anything left to fight, then Black Dow gave a great bellow, shaking his bloody weapons over his head. 'We fucking killed 'em!'

'You nearly killed us all, you damn fool!' shouted Threetrees.

'Eh?'

'What about the fucking signal?'

'I thought I heard you shout!'

'I never!'

'Did you not?' asked Dow, looking greatly puzzled. 'What was the signal anyhow?'

Threetrees gave a sigh and put his head in his hands.

Forley was still staring down at his sword. 'I got one!' he said again. Now that the fight was over, the Dogman was about ready to burst, so he turned round and pissed against a tree.

'We killed 'em!' shouted Tul, clapping him on the back.

'Watch out!' yelled Dogman as piss went all down his leg. They all had a laugh at him over that. Even Grim had himself a little chuckle.

Tul shook Threetrees by the shoulder. 'We killed 'em, chief!'

'We killed these, aye,' he said, looking sour, 'but there'll be plenty more. Thousands of 'em. They won't be happy staying up here neither, up here beyond the mountains. Sooner or later they'll be going south. Maybe in the summer, when the passes clear, maybe later. But it's not long off.'

The Dogman glanced at the others, all shifty and worried after that little speech. The glow of victory hadn't lasted too long. It never did. He looked round at the dead Flatheads on the ground, broken and bloody, sprawled and crumpled. It seemed a hollow little victory they'd had now. 'Shouldn't we try and tell 'em, Threetrees?' he asked. 'Shouldn't we try and warn someone?'

‘Aye.’ Threetrees gave a sad little smile. ‘But who?’

The Course of True Love

Jezal trudged miserably across the grey Agriont with his fencing steels in his hand: yawning, stumbling, grumbling, still horribly sore from his endless run the day before. He hardly saw anyone as he dragged himself to his daily bullying from Lord Marshal Varuz. Apart from the odd premature tweeting of some bird in amongst the gables and the tired scraping of his own reluctant boots, all was quiet. No one was up at this time. No one should be up at this time. Him least of all.

He hauled his aching legs through the archway and up the tunnel. The sun was barely above the horizon and the courtyard beyond was full of deep shadows. Squinting into the darkness he could see Varuz sat at the table, waiting for him. Damn it. He had hoped to be early for once. Did the old bastard sleep at all?

'Lord Marshal!' shouted Jezal, breaking into a half-hearted jog.

'No. Not today.' A shiver crept up Jezal's neck. It was not the voice of his fencing master, but there was something unpleasantly familiar about it. 'Marshal Varuz is busy with more important matters this morning.' Inquisitor Glokta was sitting in the shadows by the table and smiling up with his revolting gap-toothed grin. Jezal's skin prickled with disgust. It was hardly what one needed first thing in the morning.

He slowed to a reluctant walk and stopped next to the table. 'You will doubtless be pleased to learn that there will be no running, or swimming, or beam, or heavy bar today,' said the cripple. 'You won't even be needing those.' He waved his cane at Jezal's fencing steels. 'We will just be having a little chat. That is all.'

The idea of five punishing hours with Varuz seemed suddenly very appealing, but Jezal was not about to show his discomfort. He tossed his steels onto the table with a loud rattle and sat down carelessly in the other chair, Glokta regarding him from the shadows all the while. Jezal had it in mind to stare him into some kind of submission, but it proved a vain attempt. After a couple of seconds looking at that wasted face, that empty grin, those fever-bright sunken eyes, he began to find the table top most interesting.

‘So tell me, Captain, why did you take up fencing?’

A game then. A private hand of cards with only two players. And everything that was said would get back to Varuz, that was sure. Jezal would have to play his hand carefully, keep his cards close and his wits about him. ‘For my own honour, for that of my family, for that of my King,’ he said coldly. The cripple could try and find fault with that answer.

‘Ah, so it’s for the benefit of your nation that you put yourself through this. What a fine citizen you must be. What selflessness. What an example to us all.’ Glokta snorted. ‘Please! If you must lie, at least pick a lie that you yourself find convincing. That answer is an insult to us both.’

How dare this toothless has-been take that tone with him? Jezal’s legs gave a twitch: he was right on the point of getting up and walking away, Varuz and his hideous stooge be damned. But he caught the cripple’s eye as he put his hands on the arms of the chair to push himself up. Glokta was smiling at him, a mocking sort of smile. To leave would be to admit defeat somehow. Why did he take up fencing anyway? ‘My father wanted me to do it.’

‘So, so. My heart brims with sympathy. The loyal son, bound by his strong sense of duty, is forced to fulfil his father’s ambitions. A familiar tale, like a comfortable old chair we all love to sit in. Tell ’em what they want to hear, eh? A better answer, but just as far from the truth.’

‘Why don’t you tell me then?’ snapped Jezal sulkily, ‘since you seem to know so much about it!’

‘Alright, I will. Men don’t fence for their King, or for their families, or for the exercise either, before you try that one on me. They fence for the recognition, for the glory. They fence for their own advancement. They fence for themselves. I should know.’

‘You should know?’ Jezal snorted. ‘It hardly seems to have worked in your case.’ He regretted it immediately. Damn his mouth, it got him in all kinds of trouble.

But Glokta only flashed his disgusting smile again. ‘It was working well enough, until I found my way into the Emperor’s prisons. What’s your excuse, liar?’

Jezal didn’t like the way this conversation was going. He was too used to easy victories at the card table, and poor players. His skills had dulled.

Better to sit this one out until he got the measure of his new opponent. He clamped his jaw shut and said nothing.

'It takes hard work, of course, winning a Contest. You should have seen our mutual friend Collem West working. He sweated at it for months, running around while the rest of us laughed at him. A jumped-up, idiot commoner competing with his betters, that's what we all thought. Blundering through his forms, stumbling about on the beam, being made a fool of, again and again, day after day. But look at him now.' Glokta tapped his cane with a finger. 'And look at me. Seems he had the last laugh, eh, Captain? Just shows what you can achieve with a little hard work. You've twice the talent he had, and the right blood. You don't have to work one tenth so hard, but you refuse to work at all.'

Jezal wasn't about to let that one past. 'Not work at all? Don't I put myself through this torture every day—'

'Torture?' asked Glokta sharply.

Jezal realised too late his unfortunate choice of words. 'Well,' he mumbled, 'I meant ...'

'I know more than a little about both fencing and torture.

Believe me when I say,' and the Inquisitor's grotesque grin grew wider still, 'that they're two quite different things.'

'Er . . .' said Jezal, still off balance.

'You have the ambitions, and the means to realise them. A little effort would do it. A few months' hard work, then you would probably never need to try at anything again in your life, if that's what you want. A few short months, and you're set.' Glokta licked at his empty gums. 'Barring accidents of course. It's a great chance you've been offered. I'd take it, if I was you, but I don't know. Maybe you're a fool as well as a liar.'

'I'm no fool,' said Jezal coldly. It was the best he could do.

Glokta raised an eyebrow, then winced, leaning heavily on his cane as he slowly pushed himself to his feet. 'Give it up if you like, by all means. Sit around for the rest of your days and drink and talk shit with the rest of the junior officers. There are a lot of people who'd be more than happy to live that life. A lot of people who haven't had the chances you've had. Give it up. Lord Marshal Varuz will be disappointed, and Major West, and your father, and so on, but please believe me when I say,' and he leaned down,

still smiling his horrible smile, ‘that I couldn’t care less. Good day, Captain Luthar.’ And Glokta limped off toward the archway.

After that less than delightful interview, Jezal found himself with a few hours of unexpected free time on his hands – but he was scarcely in the frame of mind to enjoy it. He wandered the empty streets, squares and gardens of the Agriont, thinking grimly on what the cripple had said to him, cursing the name of Glokta, but unable to quite push the conversation from his mind. He turned it over and over, every phrase, constantly coming up with new things that he should have said. If only he had thought of them at the time.

‘Ah, Captain Luthar!’ Jezal started and looked up. A man he did not recognise was sitting on the dewy grass beneath a tree, smiling up at him, a half-eaten apple in his hand. ‘The early morning is the perfect time for a stroll, I find. Calm and grey and clean and empty. It’s nothing like the gaudy pinkness of evening time. All that clutter, all those people coming and going. How can one think in amongst all that nonsense? And now I see you are of the same mind. How delightful.’ He took a big, crunching bite out of the apple.

‘Do I know you?’

‘Oh no, no,’ said the stranger, getting to his feet and brushing some dirt from the seat of his trousers, ‘not yet. My name is Sulfur, Yoru Sulfur.’

‘Really? And what brings you to the Agriont?’

‘You might say I have come on a diplomatic mission.’

Jezal looked him over, trying to place his origin. ‘A mission from?’

‘From my master, of course,’ said Sulfur unhelpfully. His eyes were different colours, Jezal noticed. An ugly and off-putting characteristic, he rather thought.

‘And your master is?’

‘A very wise and powerful man.’ He stripped the core with his teeth and tossed it away into the bushes, wiping his hands on the front of his shirt. ‘I see you’ve been fencing.’

Jezal glanced down at his steels. ‘Yes,’ he said, realising that he had finally come to a decision, ‘but for the last time. I’m giving it up.’

‘Oh dear me, no!’ The strange man seized Jezal by the shoulder. ‘Oh dear me, no you mustn’t!’

‘What?’

‘No, no! My master would be horrified if he knew. Horrified! Give up fencing and you give up more than that! This is how one comes to the notice of the public, you see? They decide, in the end. There’s no nobility without the commoners, no nobility at all! They decide!’

‘What?’ Jezal glanced around the park, hoping to catch sight of a guard so he could notify him that a dangerous madman was loose in the Agriont.

‘No, you mustn’t give it up! I won’t hear of it! No indeed! I’m sure that you’ll stick with it after all! You must!’

Jezal shook Sulfur’s hand off his shoulder. ‘Who are you?’

‘Sulfur, Yoru Sulfur, at your service. See you again, Captain, at the Contest, if not before!’ And he waved over his shoulder as he strolled off.

Jezal stared after him, mouth slightly open. ‘Damn it!’ he shouted, throwing his steels down on the grass. Everyone seemed to want to take a hand in his business today, even crazy strangers in the park.

As soon as he thought it was late enough, Jezal went to call on Major West. You could always be sure of a sympathetic ear with him, and Jezal was hoping that he might be able to manipulate his friend into breaking the bad news to Lord Marshal Varuz. That was a scene that he wanted no part of, if he could possibly avoid it. He knocked on the door and waited, he knocked again. The door opened.

‘Captain Luthar! What an almost unbearable honour!’

‘Ardee,’ muttered Jezal, somewhat surprised to find her here, ‘it’s good to see you again.’ For once he actually meant it. She was interesting, is what she was. It was a new and refreshing thing for him to actually be interested in what a woman had to say. And she was damn good-looking too, there was no denying it, and seemed prettier every time he saw her. Nothing could ever happen between them, of course, what with West being his friend and all, but there was no harm in looking, was there? ‘Er . . . is your brother around?’

She threw herself carelessly down onto the settle against the wall, one leg stretched out, looking very sour. ‘He’s out. Gone out. Always busy. Much too busy for me.’ There was a definite flush to her cheek. Jezal’s eye lighted on the decanter. The stopper was out and the wine was halfway down.

‘Are you drunk?’

‘Somewhat,’ she squinted at a half-full wine glass at her elbow, ‘but mostly I’m just bored.’

‘It’s not even ten.’

‘Can’t I be bored before ten?’

‘You know what I mean.’

‘Leave the moralising to my brother. It suits him better. And have a drink.’ She waved her hand at the bottle. ‘You look like you need one.’

Well, that was true enough. He poured himself a glass and sat down in a chair facing Ardee, while she regarded him with heavy-lidded eyes. She took her own glass from the table. There was a thick book lying next to it, face down.

‘How’s the book?’ asked Jezal.

‘*The Fall of the Master Maker*, in three volumes. They say it’s one of the great classics of history. Lot of boring rubbish,’ she snorted derisively. ‘Full of wise Magi, stern knights with mighty swords and ladies with mightier bosoms. Magic, violence and romance, in equal measure. Utter shit.’ She slapped the book off the table and it tumbled onto the carpet, pages flapping.

‘There must be something you can find to keep busy?’

‘Really? What would you suggest?’

‘My cousins do a lot of embroidery.’

‘Fuck yourself.’

‘Hmm,’ said Jezal, smiling. The swearing no longer seemed half so offensive as it had done when they first met. ‘What did you do at home, in Angland?’

‘Oh, home,’ her head dropped against the back of the settle. ‘I thought I was bored there. I could hardly wait to come here to the bright centre of things. Now I can hardly wait to go back. Marry some farmer. Have a dozen brats. At least I’d get some conversation that way.’ She closed her eyes and sighed. ‘But Collem won’t let me. He feels responsible, now that our father’s dead. Thinks it’s too dangerous. He’d rather I didn’t get slaughtered by the Northmen, but that’s about where his sense of responsibility ends. It certainly doesn’t extend to spending ten minutes together with me. So it looks like I’m stuck here, with all you arrogant snobs.’

Jezal shifted uncomfortably in his seat. ‘He seems to manage. ’

‘Oh yes,’ snorted Ardee, ‘Collem West, he’s a damn fine fellow! Won a Contest don’t you know? First through the breach at Ulrioch, wasn’t he? No breeding at all, never be one of us, but a damn fine fellow, for a commoner! Shame about that upstart sister of his though, too clever by half. And they say she drinks,’ she whispered. ‘Doesn’t know her place. Total disgrace. Best just to ignore her.’ She sighed again. ‘Yes, the sooner I go home, the happier everyone will be.’

‘I won’t be happier.’ Damn, did he say that out loud?

Ardee laughed, none too pleasantly. ‘Well, it’s enormously noble of you to say so. Why aren’t you fencing anyway?’

‘Marshal Varuz was busy today.’ He paused for a moment. ‘In fact, I had your friend Sand dan Glokta as fencing master this morning.’

‘Really? What did he have to say for himself?’

‘Various things. He called me a fool.’

‘Imagine that.’

Jezal frowned. ‘Yes, well. I’m as bored with fencing as you are with that book. That was what I wanted to talk to your brother about. I’m thinking of giving it up.’

She burst out laughing. Snorting, gurgling peals of it. Her whole body was shaking. Wine sloshed out of her glass and splattered across the floor. ‘What’s so funny?’ he demanded.

‘It’s just,’ she wiped a tear from her eye, ‘I had a bet with Collem. He was sure you’d stick at it. And now I’m ten marks richer.’

‘I’m not sure that I like being the subject of your bet,’ said Jezal sharply.

‘I’m not sure I give a damn.’

‘This is serious.’

‘No it isn’t!’ she snapped. ‘For my brother it was serious, he had to do it! No one even notices you if you don’t have a “dan” in your name, and who’d know better than me? You’re the only person who’s given me the time of day since I got here, and then only because Collem made you. I’ve precious little money and no blood at all, and that makes me less than nothing to the likes of you. The men ignore me and the women cut me dead. I’ve got nothing here, nothing and no one, and you think you’ve got the hard life? Please! I might take up fencing,’ she said bitterly. ‘Ask the Lord Marshal if he has space for a pupil, would you? At least then I’d have someone to talk to!’

Jezal blinked. That wasn't interesting. That was rude. 'Hold on, you've no idea what it's like to—'

'Oh stop whinging! How old are you? Five? Why don't you go back to sucking on your mother's tit, infant?'

He could hardly believe what he was hearing. How dare she? 'My mother's dead,' he said. Hah. That should make her feel guilty, squeeze an apology out of her. It didn't.

'Dead? Lucky her, at least she doesn't have to listen to your damn whining! You spoiled little rich boys are all the same. You get everything you could possibly want, then throw a tantrum because you have to pick it up yourself! You're pathetic! You make me fucking sick!'

Jezal goggled. His face was burning, stinging, as if he'd been slapped. He'd rather have been slapped. He had never been spoken to like that in his life. Never! It was worse than Glokta. Much worse, and far more unexpected. He realised his mouth was hanging half open. He snapped it shut, grinding his teeth together, slapped his glass down on the table, and got up to leave. He was turning to the door when it suddenly opened, leaving him and Major West staring at each other.

'Jezal,' said West, looking at first simply surprised and then, as he glanced over at his sister, sprawling on the settle, slightly suspicious. 'What are you doing here?'

'Er . . . I came to see you actually.'

'Oh yes?'

'Yes. But it can wait. I've things to do.' And Jezal pushed past his friend and out into the corridor.

'What was all that about?' He heard West saying as he strode away from the room. 'Are you drunk?'

With every step Jezal's fury mounted until he was halfway to being strangled by it. He had been the victim of an assault! A savage and undeserved attack! He stopped in the corridor, trembling with rage, his breath snorting in his nose like he'd run ten miles, his fists clenched painfully tight. And from a woman too! A woman! And a bloody commoner! How dare she? He had wasted time on her, and laughed at her jokes, and found her attractive! She should have been honoured to be noticed!

‘That fucking bitch!’ he snarled to himself. He had half a mind to go back and say it to her face, but it was too late. He stared around for something to hit. How to pay her back? How? Then it came to him.

Prove her wrong.

That would do it. Prove her wrong, and that crippled bastard Glokta too. He’d show them how hard he could work. He’d show them he was no fool, no liar, no spoiled child. The more he thought about it, the more it made sense. He’d win this damn Contest, is what he’d do! That’d wipe the smiles off their faces! He set off briskly down the corridor, with a strange new feeling building in his chest.

A sense of purpose. That was what it was. Perhaps it wasn’t too late for a run.

How Dogs are Trained

Practical Frost stood by the wall, utterly motionless, utterly silent, barely visible in the deep shadows, a part of the building. The albino hadn't moved an inch in an hour or more, hadn't shifted his feet, hadn't blinked, hadn't breathed that Glokta had noticed, his eyes fixed on the street before them.

Glokta himself cursed, shifted uncomfortably, winced, scratched his face, sucked at his empty gums. *What's keeping them? A few minutes more and I might fall asleep, drop into that stinking canal and drown. How very apt that would be.* He watched the oily, smelly water below him flap and ripple. *Body found floating by the docks, bloated by seawater and far, far beyond recognition . . .*

Frost touched his arm in the darkness, pointed down the street with a big white finger. Three men were moving slowly toward them, walking with the slightly bow-legged stance of men who spend a lot of time aboard ship, keeping their balance on a swaying deck. *So that's one half of our little party. Better late than never.* The three sailors came halfway across the bridge over the canal then stopped and waited, no more than twenty strides away. Glokta could hear the tone of their conversation: brash, confident, common accents. He shuffled slightly further into the shadows clinging to the building.

Now footsteps came from the opposite direction, hurried footsteps. Two more men appeared, walking quickly down the street. One, a very tall, thin fellow in an expensive-looking fur coat was glancing suspiciously around him. *That must be Gofred Hornlach, senior Mercer. Our man.* His companion had a sword at his hip, and was struggling with a big wooden trunk over one shoulder. *Servant, or bodyguard, or both. He is of no interest.* Glokta felt the hairs on the back of his neck prickling as they neared the bridge. Hornlach exchanged a few quick words with one of the sailors, a man with a big brown beard.

'Ready?' he whispered to Frost. The Practical nodded.

'Hold!' shouted Glokta at the top of his voice, 'in the name of his Majesty!' Hornlach's servant spun round, dropping the trunk onto the bridge with a bang, hand moving toward his sword. There was a soft twang from

the shadows on the other side of the road. The servant looked surprised, gave a snort, then toppled onto his face. Practical Frost strode swiftly out of the shadows, feet padding on the road.

Hornlach stared down, wide-eyed, at the corpse of his bodyguard, then across at the hulking albino. He turned to the sailors. 'Help me!' he cried. 'Stop him!'

Their leader smiled back. 'I don't think so.' His two companions moved without hurry to block the bridge. The Mercer stumbled away, took a faltering step toward the shadows by the canal on the other side. Severard appeared from a doorway before him, flatbow rested across his shoulder. *Replace the bow with a bunch of flowers and he'd look as if he was on his way to a wedding. You'd never think that he just killed a man.*

Surrounded, Hornlach could only look around dumbly, eyes wide with fear and surprise, as the two Practicals approached, Glokta limping up behind them. 'But I paid you!' Hornlach shouted desperately at the sailors.

'You paid me for a berth,' said their Captain. 'Loyalty is extra.'

Practical Frost's big white hand slapped down on the merchant's shoulder, forced him onto his knees. Severard strolled over to the bodyguard, wedged the dirty toe of his boot under the body and rolled it over. The corpse stared up at the night sky, eyes glassy, the feathers of the flatbow bolt sticking out from his neck. The blood round his mouth looked black in the moonlight.

'Dead,' grunted Severard, most unnecessarily.

'A bolt through the neck will do that,' said Glokta. 'Clean him up, would you?'

'Right you are.' Severard grabbed the bodyguard's feet and hauled them over the parapet of the bridge, then he took him under the armpits and heaved the body straight over the side with a grunt. *So smooth, so clean, so practised. You can tell he's done it before.* There was a splash as the corpse hit the slimy water below. Frost had Hornlach's hands tied firmly behind him now, and the bag on. The prisoner squawked through the canvas as he was dragged to his feet. Glokta himself shuffled over to the three sailors, his legs numb after all that time spent standing still in the alley.

'And here we are,' he said, pulling a heavy purse from his inside coat pocket. He held it swinging just above the Captain's waiting palm. 'Tell me, what happened tonight?'

The old sailor smiled, weathered face crinkling up like boot leather. ‘My cargo was spoiling and we had to be away on the first tide, I told him that. We waited and waited, half the night down by that stinking canal, but would you believe it? The bastard never showed.’

‘Very good. That’s the story I’d tell in Westport, if anyone should ask.’

The Captain looked hurt. ‘That’s how it happened, Inquisitor. What other story could there be?’

Glokta let the purse drop and the money jingled inside. ‘With the compliments of his Majesty.’

The Captain weighed the purse in his hand. ‘Always pleased to do his Majesty a favour!’ And he and his two companions turned, all yellow smiles, and made off toward the quay.

‘Right then,’ said Glokta, ‘let’s get on with it.’

‘Where are my clothes?’ shouted Hornlach, wriggling in his chair.

‘I do apologise for that. I know it’s quite uncomfortable, but clothes can hide things. Leave a man his clothes and you leave him pride, and dignity, and all kinds of things it’s better not to have in here. I never question a prisoner with their clothes on. Do you remember Salem Rews?’

‘Who?’

‘Salem Rews. One of your people. A Mercer. We caught him dodging the King’s taxes. He made a confession, named a few people. I wanted to talk to them, but they all died.’

The merchant’s eyes flickered left and right. *Thinking about his options, trying to guess what we might know.* ‘People die all the time.’

Glokta stared at the painted corpse of Juvens behind his prisoner, bleeding bright red paint all over the wall. *People die all the time.* ‘Of course, but not quite so violently. I have a notion that someone wanted them dead, that someone ordered them dead. I have a notion it was you.’

‘You’ve got no proof! No proof! You won’t get away with this!’

‘Proof means nothing, Hornlach, but I’ll indulge you. Rews survived. He’s just down the hall, as it goes, no friends left, blubbering away, naming every Mercer he can think of, or that we can think of, for that matter.’ Narrowed eyes, but no reply. ‘We used him to catch Carpi.’

‘Carpi?’ asked the merchant, trying to look nonchalant.

‘Surely you remember your assassin? Slightly flabby Styrian? Acne scars? Swears a lot? We have him too. He told us the whole story. How you hired him, how much you paid him, what you asked him to do. The whole story.’ Glokta smiled. ‘He has an excellent memory, for a killer, very detailed.’

The fear was showing now, just a trace of it, but Hornlach rallied well. ‘This is an affront to my Guild!’ he shouted, with as much authority as he could muster, naked and tied to a chair. ‘My master, Coster dan Kault, will never allow this, and he’s a close friend of Superior Kalyne!’

‘Shit on Kalyne, he’s finished. Besides, Kault thinks you’re tucked up safe aboard that ship, bound for Westport and far beyond our reach. I don’t think you’ll be missed for several weeks.’ The merchant’s face had gone slack. ‘A great deal could happen in that time . . . a very great deal.’

Hornlach’s tongue darted over his lips. He glanced furtively up at Frost and Severard, leaned slightly forward. *So. Now comes the bargaining.* ‘Inquisitor,’ he said in a wheedling tone, ‘if I’ve learned one thing from life, it’s that every man wants something. Every man has his price, yes? And we have deep pockets. You have only to name it. Only name it! What do you want?’

‘What do I want?’ asked Glokta, leaning in to a more conspiratorial distance.

‘Yes. What’s this all about? What do you want?’ Hornlach was smiling now, a coy, clever little smile. *How quaint, but you won’t buy your way out of this.*

‘I want my teeth back.’

The merchant’s smile began to fade.

‘I want my leg back.’

Hornlach swallowed.

‘I want my life back.’

The prisoner had turned very pale.

‘No? Then perhaps I’ll settle for your head on a stick. You’ve nothing else I want, no matter how deep your pockets are.’ Hornlach was trembling slightly now. *No more bluster? No more deals? Then we can begin.* Glokta picked up the paper in front of him, and read the first question. ‘What is your name?’

‘Look, Inquisitor, I . . .’ Frost smashed the table with his fist and Hornlach cowered in his chair.

‘Answer his fucking question!’ screamed Severard in his face.

‘Gofred Hornlach,’ squealed the merchant.

Glokta nodded. ‘Good. You are a senior member of the Guild of Mercers?’

‘Yes, yes!’

‘One of Magister Kault’s deputies, in fact?’

‘You know I am!’

‘Have you conspired with other Mercers to defraud his Majesty the King? Did you hire an assassin to wilfully murder ten of his Majesty’s subjects? Were you ordered so to do by Magister Coster dan Kault, the head of the Guild of Mercers?’

‘No!’ shouted Hornlach, voice squeaky with panic. *That is not the answer we need.* Glokta glanced up at Practical Frost. The big white fist sank into the merchant’s gut, and he gave a gentle sigh and slid sideways.

‘My mother keeps dogs, you know,’ said Glokta.

‘Dogs,’ hissed Severard in the gasping merchant’s ear, as he shoved him back into the chair.

‘She loves them. Trains them to do all manner of tricks.’ Glokta pursed his lips. ‘Do you know how dogs are trained?’

Hornlach was still winded, lolling in his chair with watering eyes, some way from being able to speak. *Still at that stage of a fish pulled suddenly from the water. Mouth opening and closing, but no sound.*

‘Repetition,’ said Glokta. ‘Repeat, repeat, repeat. You must have that dog perform his tricks one hundred times the same, and then you must do it all again. It’s all about repetition. And if you want that dog to bark on cue, you mustn’t be shy with the whip. You’re going to bark for me, Hornlach, in front of the Open Council.’

‘You’re mad,’ cried the Mercer, staring around at them, ‘you’re all mad!’

Glokta flashed his empty smile. ‘If you like. If it helps.’ He glanced back at the paper in his hand. ‘What is your name?’

The prisoner swallowed. ‘Gofred Hornlach.’

‘You are a senior member of the Guild of Mercers?’

‘Yes.’

‘One of Magister Kault’s deputies, in fact?’

‘Yes!’

‘Have you conspired with other Mercers to defraud his Majesty the King? Did you hire an assassin to wilfully murder ten of his Majesty’s subjects? Were you ordered so to do by Magister Coster dan Kault, the head of the Guild of Mercers?’

Hornlach cast desperately around him. Frost stared back, Severard stared back.

‘Well?’ demanded Glokta.

The merchant closed his eyes. ‘Yes,’ he whimpered.

‘What’s that?’

‘Yes!’

Glokta smiled. ‘Excellent. Now tell me. What is your name?’

Tea and Vengeance

‘It’s a beautiful country, isn’t it?’ asked Bayaz, staring up at the rugged fells on either side of the road. Their horses’ hooves thumped slowly along the track, the steady sound at odds with Logen’s unease. ‘Is it?’

‘Well, it’s a hard country, of course, to those who don’t know its ways. A tough country, and unforgiving. But there’s something noble there too.’ The First of the Magi swept his arm across the view, breathed in the cold air with relish. ‘It has honesty, integrity. The best steel doesn’t always shine the brightest.’ He glanced over, swaying gently in his saddle. ‘You should know that.’

‘I can’t say I see the beauty of it.’

‘No? What do you see?’

Logen let his eyes wander over the steep, grassy slopes, spotted with patches of sedge and brown gorse, studded with outcrops of grey rock and stands of trees. ‘I see good ground for a battle. Provided you got here first.’

‘Really? How so?’

Logen pointed at a knobbly hilltop. ‘Archers on the bluff there couldn’t be seen from the road, and you could hide most of your foot in these rocks. A few of the lightest armoured left on the slopes, just to draw the enemy on up the steepest ground there.’

He pointed to the thorny bushes that covered the lower slopes. ‘You’d let them come on a way, then when they were struggling through that gorse, you’d give them the arrows. Shafts falling on you from above like that, that’s no fun at all. They come quicker and further, and they bite deeper. That’d break them up. By the time they got to the rocks they’d be dog-tired and running short on discipline. That would be the time to charge. A bunch of Carls, leaping out of those stones, charging down from above, fresh and keen and screaming like devils, that could break ’em right there.’

Logen narrowed his eyes at the hillside. He’d been on both sides of a surprise like that, and in neither case was the memory a pleasant one. ‘But if they had a mind to hold, a few horsemen in those trees could finish it up. A few Named Men, a few hard fighters, bearing down on you from a place you never expected them, that’s a terrifying thing. That’d make them run.

But tired as they'd be, they wouldn't run too fast. That means prisoners, and prisoners might mean ransoms, or at least enemies cheaply killed. I see a slaughter, or a victory worth the singing, depending which side you're on. That's what I see.'

Bayaz smiled, head nodding with the slow movement of his horse. 'Was it Stolicus who said the ground must be a general's best friend, or it becomes his worst enemy?'

'I never heard of him, but he was right enough. This is good ground for an army, providing you got here first. Getting there first is the trick.'

'Indeed. We don't have an army, however.'

'These trees could hide a few horsemen even better than a lot.' Logen glanced sidelong at the wizard. He was slouched happily in the saddle, enjoying a pleasant ride in the country. 'I don't think Bethod will have appreciated your advice, and I had scores enough with him already. He got wounded where he feels it most, in his pride. He'll want vengeance. Want it badly.'

'Ah yes, vengeance, that most widespread of Northern pastimes. Its popularity never seems to wane.'

Logen stared grimly around at the trees, the rocks, the folds in the valley's sides, the many hiding places. 'There'll be men out in these hills, looking for us. Small bands of skilled and battle-hardened men, well mounted and well armed, familiar with the land. Now Bethod has finished all his enemies there's nowhere in the North out of his reach. They might be waiting there,' he pointed off towards some rocks by the road, 'or in those trees, or those.' Malacus Quai, riding up ahead with the packhorse, glanced nervously around. 'They could be anywhere.'

'Does that frighten you?' asked Bayaz.

'Everything frightens me, and it's well that it does. Fear is a good friend to the hunted, it's kept me alive this long. The dead are fearless, and I don't care to join them. He'll send men to the library too.'

'Oh yes, to burn my books and so on.'

'Does that frighten you?'

'Not much. The stones by the gate have the word of Juvens on them, and that is not to be denied, even now. No one with violence in mind can come near. I imagine Bethod's men will wander around the lake in the rain until they run out of food, all the while thinking how very strange it is that they

cannot find so large a thing as a library. No,' said the wizard happily, scratching at his beard. 'I would concentrate on our own predicament. What happens, do you think, if we're caught?'

'Bethod will kill us, and in the most unpleasant manner he can think of. Unless he has it in mind to be merciful, and let us off with a warning.'

'That doesn't seem likely.'

'I've been thinking the same thing. Our best chance is to make for the Whiteflow, try to get across the river into Angland, and trust to luck we aren't seen.' Logen didn't like trusting to luck, the very word left a sour taste. He peered up at the cloudy sky. 'We could do with some bad weather. A healthy downpour could hide us nicely.' The skies had been pissing on him for weeks, but now that he needed rain they refused to produce a drop.

Malacus Quai was looking over his shoulder at them, his eyes big and round with worry. 'Shouldn't we try to move faster?'

'Perhaps,' said Logen, patting the neck of his horse, 'but that would tire the horses, and we may need all the speed we can get later. We could hide in the day and travel by night, but then we risk getting lost. We're better as we are. Move slowly and hope we aren't seen.' He frowned at the hilltop. 'Hope we haven't been seen already.'

'Hmm,' said Bayaz, 'then this might be the best time to tell you. That witch Caurib isn't half the fool I pretended she was.'

Logen felt a sinking sensation. 'No?'

'No, for all her paint and gold and chat about the utmost north, she knows what she is about. The long eye, they call it. An old trick, but effective. She has been watching us.'

'She knows where we are?'

'She knows when we left, more than likely, and in what direction we were heading.'

'That does nothing for our chances.'

'I should say not.'

'Shit.' Logen caught some movement in the trees to their left, and he snatched hold of the hilt of his sword. A couple of birds took to the skies. He waited, heart in his mouth. Nothing. He let his hand drop back. 'We should have killed them while we had the chance. All three of them.'

'But we didn't, and there it is.' Bayaz looked over at Logen. 'If they do catch us, what's your plan?'

‘Run. And hope our horses are the faster.’

‘And this one?’ asked Bayaz.

The wind blew keenly through the hollow in spite of the trees, making the flames of the campfire flicker and dance. Malacus Quai hunched his shoulders and drew his blanket tight around them. He peered at the short stem that Bayaz was holding up to him, forehead crinkled with concentration.

‘Erm . . .’ This was the fifth plant, and the miserable apprentice had yet to get one of them right. ‘Is that . . . er . . . Ilyith?’

‘Ilyith?’ echoed the wizard, his face giving no clue as to whether it was the right answer. He was merciless as Bethod where his apprentice was concerned.

‘Perhaps?’

‘Hardly.’ The apprentice closed his eyes and sighed for the fifth time that evening. Logen felt for him, he really did, but there was nothing to be done. ‘Ursilum, in the old tongue, the round-leafed kind.’

‘Yes, yes, of course, Ursilum, it was at the end of my tongue the whole time.’

‘If the name was at the end of your tongue, then the uses of the plant cannot be far behind, eh?’

The apprentice narrowed his eyes and looked hopefully up towards the night sky, as though the answer might be written in the stars. ‘Is it . . . for aches in the joints?’

‘No, it is decidedly not. I am afraid your aching joints will still be troubling you.’ Bayaz turned the stem slowly round in his fingers. ‘Ursilum has no uses, not that I know of. It’s just a plant.’ And he tossed it away into the bushes.

‘Just a plant,’ echoed Quai, shaking his head. Logen sighed and rubbed his tired eyes.

‘I’m sorry, Master Ninefingers, are we boring you?’

‘What does it matter?’ asked Logen, throwing his hands up in the air. ‘Who cares about the name of a plant with no use?’

Bayaz smiled. ‘A fair point. Tell us, Malacus, what does it matter?’

‘If a man seeks to change the world, he should first understand it.’ The apprentice trotted the words out as if by rote, evidently relieved to be asked

a question he knew the answer to. ‘The smith must learn the ways of metals, the carpenter the ways of wood, or their work will be of but little worth. Base magic is wild and dangerous, for it comes from the Other Side, and to draw from the world below is fraught with peril. The Magus tempers magic with knowledge, and thus produces High Art, but like the smith or the carpenter, he should only seek to change that which he understands. With each thing he learns, his power is increased. So must the Magus strive to learn all, to understand the world entire. The tree is only as strong as its root, and knowledge is the root of power.’

‘Don’t tell me, Juvens’ *Principles of Art*?’

‘The very first lines,’ said Bayaz.

‘Forgive me for saying so, but I’ve been on this world for more than thirty years, and I’ve yet to understand a single thing that’s happened. To know the world completely? To understand everything? That’s quite a task.’

The Magus chuckled. ‘An impossible one, to be sure. To truly know and understand even a blade of grass is the study of a lifetime, and the world is ever changing. That is why we tend to specialise.’

‘So what did you choose?’

‘Fire,’ said Bayaz, gazing happily into the flames, the light dancing on his bald head. ‘Fire, and force, and will. But even in my chosen fields, after countless long years of study, I remain a novice. The more you learn, the more you realise how little you know. Still, the struggle itself is worthwhile. Knowledge is the root of power, after all.’

‘So with enough knowledge, you Magi can do anything?’

Bayaz frowned. ‘There are limits. And there are rules.’

‘Like the First Law?’ Master and apprentice glanced up at Logen as one. ‘It’s forbidden to speak with devils, am I right?’ It was plain that Quai didn’t remember his fevered outburst, his mouth was open with surprise. Bayaz’ eyes only narrowed a little, with the faintest trace of suspicion.

‘Why, yes you are,’ said the First of the Magi. ‘It is forbidden to touch the Other Side direct. The First Law must apply to all, without exception. As must the Second.’

‘Which is?’

‘It is forbidden to eat the flesh of men.’

Logen raised an eyebrow. ‘You wizards get up to some strange stuff.’

Bayaz smiled. ‘Oh, you don’t know the half of it.’ He turned to his apprentice, holding up a lumpy brown root. ‘And now, Master Quai, would you be good enough to tell me the name of this?’

Logen couldn’t help grinning to himself. He knew this one.

‘Come, come, Master Quai, we don’t have all night.’

Logen wasn’t able to stand the apprentice’s misery any longer. He leaned toward him, pretending to poke at the fire with a stick, coughed to conceal his words and whispered, ‘Crow’s Foot,’ under his breath. Bayaz was a good distance away, and the wind was still rustling in the trees. There was no way the Magus could have heard him.

Quai played his part well. He continued to peer at the root, brow knitted in thought. ‘Is it Crow’s Foot?’ he ventured.

Bayaz raised an eyebrow. ‘Why, yes it is. Well done, Malacus. And can you tell me its uses?’

Logen coughed again. ‘Wounds,’ he whispered, looking carelessly off into the bushes, one hand shielding his mouth. He might not know too much about plants, but on the subject of wounds he had a wealth of experience.

‘I believe it’s good for wounds,’ said Quai slowly.

‘Excellent, Master Quai. Crow’s Foot is correct. And it is good for wounds. I am glad to see we are making some progress after all.’ He cleared his throat. ‘It does seem curious that you should use that name however. They only call this Crow’s Foot north of the mountains. I certainly never taught you that name. I wonder who it is you know, from that part of the world?’ He glanced over at Logen. ‘Have you ever considered a career in the magical arts, Master Ninefingers?’ He narrowed his eyes at Quai once more. ‘I may have space for an apprentice.’

Malacus hung his head. ‘Sorry, Master Bayaz.’

‘You are indeed. Perhaps you could clean the pots for us. That task may be better suited to your talents.’

Quai reluctantly shrugged off his blanket, collected the dirty bowls and shuffled off through the brush towards the stream. Bayaz bent over the pot on the fire, adding some dried-up leaves to the bubbling water. The flickering light of the flames caught the underside of his face, the steam curled around his bald head. All in all, he looked quite the part.

‘What is that?’ asked Logen, reaching for his pipe. ‘Some spell? Some potion? Some great work of High Art?’

‘Tea.’

‘Eh?’

‘Leaves of a certain plant, boiled up in water. It is considered quite a luxury in Gurkhul.’ He poured some of the brew out into a cup. ‘Would you like to try it?’

Logen sniffed at it suspiciously. ‘Smells like feet.’

‘Suit yourself.’ Bayaz shook his head and sat back down beside the fire, wrapping both hands around the steaming cup. ‘But you’re missing out on one of nature’s greatest gifts to man.’ He took a sip and smacked his lips in satisfaction. ‘Calming to the mind, invigorating to the body. There are few ills a good cup of tea won’t help with.’

Logen pressed a lump of chagga into the bowl of his pipe. ‘How about an axe in the head?’

‘That’s one of them,’ admitted Bayaz with a grin. ‘Tell me, Master Ninefingers, why all the blood between you and Bethod? Did you not fight for him many times? Why do you hate each other so?’

Logen paused as he was sucking smoke from the pipe, let his breath out. ‘There are reasons,’ he said stiffly. The wounds of that time were still raw. He didn’t like anyone picking at them.

‘Ah, reasons.’ Bayaz looked down at his tea-cup. ‘And what of your reasons? Does this feud not cut both ways?’

‘Perhaps.’

‘But you are willing to wait?’

‘I’ll have to be.’

‘Hmm. You are very patient, for a Northman.’

Logen thought of Bethod, and his loathsome sons, and the many good men they’d killed for their ambitions. The men he’d killed for their ambitions. He thought of the Shanka, and his family, and the ruins of the village by the sea. He thought of all his dead friends. He sucked at his teeth and stared at the fire.

‘I’ve settled a few scores in my time, but it only led to more.

Vengeance can feel fine, but it’s a luxury. It doesn’t fill your belly, or keep the rain off. To fight my enemies I need friends behind me, and I’m clean out of friends. You have to be realistic. It’s been a while since my ambitions went beyond getting through each day alive.’

Bayaz laughed, his eyes glittering in the firelight. ‘What?’ asked Logen, handing the pipe across to him.

‘No offence, but you are an endless source of surprises. Not at all what I was expecting. You are quite the riddle.’

‘Me?’

‘Oh yes! The Bloody-Nine,’ he whispered, opening his eyes up wide. ‘That’s one bastard of a reputation you’re carrying, my friend. The stories they tell! One bastard of a name! Why, mothers scare their children with it!’ Logen said nothing. There was no denying it. Bayaz sucked slowly on the pipe, then blew out a long plume of smoke. ‘I’ve been thinking about the day that Prince Calder paid us a visit.’

Logen snorted. ‘I try not to spare him too much thought.’

‘Nor I, but it wasn’t his behaviour that interested me, it was yours.’

‘It was? I don’t remember doing a thing.’

Bayaz pointed the stem of the pipe at Logen from across the fire. ‘Ah, but that is my point exactly. I have known many fighting men, soldiers and generals and champions and whatnot. A great fighter must act quickly, decisively, whether with his own arm or with an army, for he who strikes first often strikes last. So fighters come to rely on their baser instincts, to answer always with violence, to become proud and brutal.’ Bayaz passed the pipe back to Logen. ‘But whatever the stories, you are not such a one.’

‘I know plenty who’d disagree.’

‘Perhaps, but the fact remains, Calder slighted you, and you did nothing. So you know when you should act, and act quickly, but you also know when not to. That shows restraint, and a calculating mind.’

‘Perhaps I was just afraid.’

‘Of him? Come now. You didn’t seem afraid of Scale and he’s a deal more worrying. And you walked forty miles with my apprentice over your back, and that shows courage, and compassion too. A rare combination, indeed. Violence and restraint, calculation and compassion – and you speak to the spirits too.’

Logen raised an eyebrow. ‘Not often, and only when there’s no one else around. Their talk is dull, and not half so flattering as yours.’

‘Hah. That’s true. The spirits have little to say to men, I understand, though I have never spoken with them; I have not the gift. Few have these

days.’ He took another swallow from his cup, peering at Logen over the rim. ‘I can scarcely think of another one alive.’

Malacus stumbled from the trees, shivering, and set the wet bowls down. He grabbed his blanket, wrapped it tightly around him, then peered hopefully at the steaming pot on the fire. ‘Is that tea?’

Bayaz ignored him. ‘Tell me, Master Ninefingers, in all the time since you arrived at my library, you have never once asked me why I sent for you, or why now we are wandering through the North in peril of our lives. That strikes me as odd.’

‘Not really. I don’t want to know.’

‘Don’t want to?’

‘All my life I’ve sought to know things. What’s on the other side of the mountains? What are my enemies thinking? What weapons will they use against me? What friends can I trust?’ Logen shrugged. ‘Knowledge may be the root of power, but each new thing I’ve learned has left me worse off.’ He sucked again on the pipe, but it was finished. He tapped the ashes out onto the ground. ‘Whatever it is you want from me I will try to do, but I don’t want to know until it’s time. I’m sick of making my own decisions. They’re never the right ones. Ignorance is the sweetest medicine, my father used to say. I don’t want to know.’

Bayaz stared at him. It was the first time Logen had seen the First of the Magi look at all surprised. Malacus Quai cleared his throat. ‘I’d like to know,’ he said in a small voice, looking hopefully up at his master.

‘Yes,’ murmured Bayaz, ‘but you don’t get to ask.’

It was around midday that it all went wrong. Logen was just starting to think that they might make it to the Whiteflow, maybe even live out the week. It felt as if he lost his concentration for just a moment. Unfortunately, it was the one moment that mattered.

Still, it was well done, you had to give them that. They’d chosen their spot carefully, and tied rags around their horse’s hooves, to muffle the sound. Threetrees might have seen it coming, if he’d been with them, but he had an eye for the ground like no other. The Dogman might have smelled them, if he’d been there, but he had the nose for it. The fact was, neither of them were there. The dead are no help at all.

There were three horsemen, waiting for them as they rounded a blind corner, well armed and armoured, dirty faces but clean weapons, veterans each man. The one on the right was thickset and powerful-looking, with almost no neck. The one on the left was tall and gaunt with small, hard eyes. Both of them had round helmets, coats of weathered mail, and long spears lowered and ready. Their leader sat on his horse like a bag of turnips, slouched in the saddle with the ease of the expert horseman. He nodded to Logen. 'Ninefingers! The Brynn! The Bloody-Nine! It's right good to see you again.'

'Blacktoe,' muttered Logen, forcing a friendly smile onto his face. 'It'd warm my heart to see you too, if things were different. '

'But they are as they are.' The old warrior's eyes moved slowly over Bayaz, Quai, and Logen as he spoke, taking in their weapons, or the lack of them, working out his game. A stupider opponent could have evened up the odds, but Blacktoe was a Named Man, and no fool. His eyes came to rest on Logen's hand as it crept slowly across his body towards the hilt of his sword, and he shook his head slowly. 'None of your tricks, Bloody-Nine. You can see we've got you.' And he nodded over at the trees behind them.

Logen's heart sank even lower. Two more riders had appeared and were trotting forwards to complete the trap, their muffled hooves barely making a sound on the soft ground by the road. Logen chewed his lip. Blacktoe was right, damn him. The four horsemen closed in, lowered spear-points swaying, faces cold, minds set to the task. Malacus Quai stared at them with frightened eyes, his horse shying back. Bayaz smiled pleasantly as though they were his oldest friends. Logen would have liked a touch of the wizard's composure. His own heart was hammering, his mouth was sour.

Blacktoe nudged his horse forward, one hand gripping the shaft of his axe, the other resting on his knee, not even using the reins. He was a masterful horseman, famous for it. That's what happens when a man loses all his toes to the frost. Riding is quicker than walking, that has to be admitted, but when it came to fighting Logen preferred to keep his feet firmly on the ground. 'Better be coming with us now,' said the old warrior, 'better all round.'

Logen could hardly agree, but the odds were stacked high against him. A sword may have a voice, as Bayaz had said, but a spear is a damn good thing for poking a man off a horse, and there were four of them closing in

around him. He was caught – outnumbered, off-guard, and with the wrong tools for the task. Yet again. Best to play for time, and hope some chance might show itself. Logen cleared his throat, doing his best to take the fear out of his voice. ‘Never thought you’d make your peace with Bethod, Blacktoe, not you.’

The old warrior scratched at his long, matted beard. ‘I was one of the last, truth be told, but I knelt in the end, same as all the rest. Can’t say I liked it any, but there it is. Best let me have the blade, Ninefingers.’

‘What about Old Man Yawl? You telling me he bows to Bethod? Or did you just find a master to suit you better?’

Blacktoe didn’t get upset by the jibe, not in the least. He just looked sad, and tired. ‘Yawl’s dead, as though you didn’t know. Most of ’em are. Bethod doesn’t suit me much at all as a master, and nor do his sons. No man likes licking Scale’s fat arse, or Calder’s skinny one, you should know that. Now give up the sword, the day’s wasting and we’ve ground to cover. We can talk just as well with you unarmed.’

‘Yawl’s dead?’

‘Aye,’ said Blacktoe suspiciously. ‘He offered Bethod a duel. Didn’t you hear? The Feared done for him.’

‘Feared?’

‘Where’ve you been, under a mountain?’

‘More or less. What’s this Feared?’

‘I don’t know what he is.’ Blacktoe leaned from his saddle and spat in the grass. ‘I heard he’s not a man at all. They say that bitch Caurib dug him out from under a hill. Who knows? Leastways, he’s Bethod’s new champion, and far nastier even than the last, no offence.’

‘None at all,’ said Logen. The man with no neck had moved in close. A little too close perhaps, the point of his spear was hovering only a foot or two away. Close enough for Logen to grab a hold of. Maybe. ‘Old Man Yawl was a strong hand.’

‘Aye. That’s why we followed him. But it done him no good. This Feared broke him. Broke him bad, like he was no more’n a dog. Left him alive, if you could call it that, so we could learn from his mistake, but he didn’t live long. Most of us knelt right then, those with wives and sons to think on. No sense in putting it off. There’s a few of them still, up in the mountains, who won’t bow to Bethod. That moon-worshipping madman Crummocki-Phail

and his hillmen, and a few beside. But not many. And those there are, Bethod's got plans for.' Blacktoe held out a big, calloused hand. 'Better let me have the blade, Bloody-Nine. Left hand only, if you please, slow as slow and none of your tricks. Better all round.'

So that was it. Out of time. Logen wrapped the three fingers of his left hand round the hilt of his sword, the cold metal pressing into his palm. The big man's spear point edged a little closer. The tall one had relaxed a little, confident they had him. His spear was pointing up into the air, unready. There was no telling what the two behind were doing. The desire to glance over his shoulder was almost irresistible, but Logen forced himself to look ahead.

'I always had respect for you, Ninefingers, even though we stood on different sides. I've no feud with you. But Bethod wants vengeance, he's drunk on it, and I swore to serve.' Blacktoe looked him sadly in the eye. 'I'm sorry it's me. For what it's worth.'

'Likewise,' muttered Logen, 'I'm sorry it's you.' He slid the sword slowly from the scabbard. 'For what it's worth,' and he snapped his arm out, smashing the sword's pommel into Blacktoe's mouth. The old warrior gave a squawk as the dull metal crunched into his teeth and tumbled backwards out of the saddle, his axe flying from his hand and clattering into the road. Logen grabbed hold of the shaft of the big man's spear, just below the blade.

'Go!' he bellowed at Quai, but the apprentice only stared back, blinking. The man with no neck pulled hard at the spear, nearly jerking Logen out of the saddle, but he kept his grip. He reared up in the stirrups, raising the sword high above his head. Neckless took one hand from his spear, his eyes going wide, and held it up on an instinct. Logen swung the sword down with all his strength.

He was shocked by the sharpness of it. It took the big man's arm off just below the elbow then struck into his shoulder, cleaving through the fur and the mail beneath and splitting him to his stomach, near in half. Blood showered across the road, spattering in the face of Logen's horse. It was trained for riding but not for war and it reared and span around, kicking and plunging in a panic. It was the best Logen could do to stay on top of the damn thing. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Bayaz smack Quai's horse

on the rump, and it sped off with the apprentice bouncing in the saddle, the packhorse galloping along behind.

Then everything was a mess of plunging and snorting beasts, clashing and scraping metal, curses and cries. Battle. A familiar place, but no less terrifying for that. Logen clung to the reins with his right hand as his horse bucked and thrashed, swinging the sword wildly round his head, more to scare his enemies than hurt them. Every moment he expected the jolt and searing pain as he was stuck through with a spear, then the ground to rush up and smack him in the face.

He saw Quai and Bayaz galloping away down the road, hotly pursued by the tall man, his spear couched under his arm. He saw Blacktoe rolling to his feet, spitting blood, scrambling for his axe. He saw the two men who'd come from behind fighting for control of their own twisting horses, spears waving in their hands. He saw the body of the one he'd just killed loll in half and topple slowly out of the saddle, blood pouring out over the muddy ground.

Logen squawked as he felt a spear-point dig into the back of his shoulder, and he was shoved forward, almost over his horse's head. Then he realised he was facing down the road, and still alive. He dug his heels into the flanks of his horse and it sped away, sending mud flying from its hooves and into the faces of the men behind. He fumbled the sword across into his right hand, nearly dropping the reins and falling into the road. He shrugged his shoulder but the wound didn't feel too bad – he could still move the arm alright.

'I'm still alive. Still alive.' The road flashed by beneath him, the wind stinging his eyes. He was making ground on the tall man – the rags on his horse's hooves were slowing him down now, slipping on the muddy ground. Logen gripped the hilt of the sword as hard as he could, raised it behind him. The head of his enemy snapped round, but too late. There was a hollow bonk of metal on metal as sword smashed into helmet, leaving a deep dent and sending the tall man sprawling. His head bounced once against the road, foot still caught in one stirrup, then he came free and tumbled over and over on the grass, arms and legs flopping. His riderless horse galloped on, eyes rolling at Logen as he passed.

'Still alive.' Logen looked over his shoulder. Blacktoe was back in the saddle and galloping after him, axe raised above his head, tangled hair

flying out behind. The two other spearmen were with him, urging their horses forwards, but there was still some distance between them. Logen laughed. Perhaps he'd make it after all. He waved his sword at Blacktoe as the road entered a wood in the valley's bottom.

'I'm still alive!' he screamed at the top of his voice, and then his horse pulled up so suddenly that Logen was almost flung over its head. It was only by throwing one arm round its neck that he kept his seat at all. As soon as he fell back into the saddle he saw the problem, and it was a bad one.

Several tree trunks had been hauled across the road, their branches chopped off and the stumps filed down to vicious points, sticking out in all directions. Two more mailed Carls stood in front, spears at the ready. Even the best of horsemen couldn't have jumped that barrier, and Logen wasn't the best of horsemen. Bayaz and his apprentice had reached the same decision. Both sat still on their horses before the barricade, the old man looking puzzled, the young one simply scared.

Logen fingered the grip of his sword and cast desperately around, peering into the trees for some way out. He saw more men now. Archers. One, then two, then three of them, creeping slowly forward on both sides of the road, arrows nocked and strings drawn back.

Logen turned round in the saddle, but Blacktoe and his two companions were trotting up, there was no escape that way. They reined in a few strides away, well out of reach of Logen's sword. His shoulders slumped. The chase was done. Blacktoe leaned over and spat some blood onto the ground. 'Alright, Bloody-Nine, that's as far as you go.'

'Funny thing,' muttered Logen, looking down at the long grey blade of the sword, dashed and spattered with red. 'All that time I fought for Bethod against you, and now you fight for him against me. Seems we're never on the same side, and he's the only winner. Funny thing.'

'Aye,' mumbled Blacktoe through his bloody lips, 'funny.' But no one was laughing. Blacktoe and his Carls had faces hard as death, Quai looked on the verge of tears. Only Bayaz, for reasons beyond understanding, still had his customary good humour. 'Alright, Ninefingers, get off the horse. Bethod wants you alive, but he'll take you dead, if he has to. Down! Now!'

Logen's thoughts began to turn to how they might escape, once he'd given up. Blacktoe wasn't like to make a mistake once he had them. Logen would likely be kicked half to death for the fight he'd given them already, if they

didn't take his kneecaps off. They'd be trussed up tight like chickens for the slaughter. He pictured himself flung down on the stones with half a mile of chain around him, Bethod smiling down from his throne, Calder and Scale laughing, probably poking at him with something sharp.

Logen looked around. He looked at the cold arrowheads and the cold spear-points, and the cold eyes of the men pointing them. There was no way out of this little spot.

'Alright, you win.' Logen threw his sword down, point first. He had it in mind that it would bite into the soil and stand there, swaying back and forth, but it toppled over and clattered against the dirt. It was that sort of day. He slowly swung one leg over the saddle and slid down into the road.

'That's better. Now the rest of you.' Quai instantly slithered off his horse and stood there, glancing nervously up at Bayaz, but the Magus made no move. Blacktoe frowned and hefted his axe. 'You too, old man.'

'I prefer to ride.' Logen winced. That was not the right answer. Any moment now Blacktoe would give the order. The bowstrings would sing and the First of the Magi would drop into the road, stuck full of arrows, probably still with that infuriating smile on his dead face.

But the order never came. There was no word of command, no strange incantation, no arcane gestures. The air around Bayaz' shoulders seemed to shimmer, like the air above the land on a hot day, and Logen felt a strange tugging at his guts.

Then the trees exploded in a wall of searing, blinding, white hot flame. Trunks burst and branches snapped with deafening cracks, venting plumes of brilliant fire and scalding steam. One burning arrow shot high up into the air over Logen's head, and then the archers were gone, boiled away into the furnace.

Logen choked and gasped, reeled back in shock and terror, arm up to ward his face from the blistering heat. The barricade was sending up great gouts of fire and blinding sparks, the two men who had been standing near were rolling and thrashing, wreathed in hungry flames, their screams lost in the deafening roar.

The horses plunged and reeled, snorting with mad fear. Blacktoe was flung to the ground for the second time, his flaming axe flying from his hands, and his horse stumbled and fell, crashing down on top of him. One of his companions was even less lucky – thrown straight into the sheets of

fire by the road, his despairing cry quickly cut off. Only one stayed upright, and he was lucky enough to be wearing gloves. By some miracle he kept hold of the burning shaft of his spear.

How he had the presence of mind to charge with the world on fire around him, Logen would never know. Strange things can happen in a fight. He chose Quai as his target, bearing down on him with a snarl, the flaming spear aimed at his chest. The witless apprentice stood there helpless, rooted to the spot. Logen barrelled into him, snatching up his sword, sending Quai rolling across the road with his hands over his head, then he chopped mindlessly at the horse's legs as it flashed past him.

The blade was torn from his fingers and went skittering away, then a hoof slammed into Logen's injured shoulder and clubbed him into the dirt. The breath was knocked from him and the burning world span crazily around. His blow had its effect though. A few strides further down the road the horse's hacked front legs gave way and it stumbled, carried helplessly forward, tumbled and pitched into the flames, horse and rider vanishing together.

Logen cast about on the ground for the sword. Sizzling leaves whipped across the road, stinging his face and his hands. The heat was a great weight pressing down on him, pulling the sweat out of his skin. He found the bloody grip of the sword, seized hold of it with his torn fingers. He lurched up, staggered round, shouting meaningless sounds of fury, but there was no one left to fight. The flames were gone, as suddenly as they'd arrived, leaving Logen coughing and blinking in the curling smoke.

The silence seemed complete after the roaring noise, the gentle breeze felt icy cold. A wide circle of the trees around them had been reduced to charred and shattered stumps, as though they had burned for hours. The barricade was a sagging heap of grey ash and black splinters. Two corpses lay sprawled nearby, barely recognisable as men, burned down to the bones. The blackened blades of their spears lay in the road, the shafts vanished. Of the archers there was no sign at all. They were soot blown away on the wind. Quai lay motionless on his face with his hands over his head, and beyond him Blacktoe's horse lay sprawled out on its side, one leg silently twitching, the others still.

'Well,' said Bayaz, the muffled noise making Logen jump. He'd somehow expected there would never be another sound again. 'That's that.' The First

of the Magi swung a leg over his saddle and slid down into the road. His horse stood there, calm and obedient. It hadn't moved the whole time. 'There now, Master Quai, do you see what can be achieved with a proper understanding of plants?'

Bayaz sounded calm, but his hands were trembling. Trembling badly. He looked haggard, ill, old, like a man who'd dragged a cart ten miles. Logen stared at him, swaying silently back and forth, the sword dangling from his hand.

'So that's Art, is it?' His voice sounded very small and far away.

Bayaz wiped the sweat from his face. 'Of a sort. Hardly very subtle. Still,' and he poked at one of the charred bodies with his boot, 'subtlety is wasted on the Northmen.' He grimaced, rubbed at his sunken eyes and peered up the road. 'Where the hell did those horses get to?'

Logen heard a ragged groan from the direction of Blacktoe's fallen mount. He stumbled towards it, tripped and fell to his knees, stumbled towards it again. His shoulder was a ball of pain, his left arm numb, his fingers ripped and bleeding, but Blacktoe was in worse shape. Much worse. He was propped up on his elbows, legs crushed under his horse right to the hips, hands burned to swollen tatters. He had a look of profound puzzlement on his bloody face as he tried, unsuccessfully, to drag himself from under the horse.

'You've fucking killed me,' he whispered, staring open-mouthed at the wreckage of his hands. 'I'm all done. I'll never make it back, and even if I could, what for?' He gave a despairing laugh. 'Bethod ain't half so merciful as he used to be. Better you kill me now, before it starts to hurt. Better all round.' And he slumped back and lay in the road.

Logen looked up at Bayaz, but there was no help there. 'I'm not much at healing,' snapped the wizard, glancing round at the circle of blasted stumps. 'I told you we tend to specialise.' He closed his eyes and bent over, hands resting on his knees, breathing hard.

Logen thought of the floor in Bethod's hall, and the two princes, laughing and poking. 'Alright,' he muttered, standing up and hefting the sword. 'Alright.'

Blacktoe smiled. 'You were right, Ninefingers. I never should have knelt to Bethod. Never. Shit on him and his Feared. It would have been better to

die up in the mountains, fighting him to the last. There might have been something fine in that. I just had enough. You can see that, can't you?'

'I can see that,' muttered Logen. 'I've had enough myself.'

'Something fine,' said Blacktoe, staring far up into the grey skies, 'I just had enough. So I reckon I earned this. Fair is fair.' He lifted his chin. 'Well then. Get it done, lad.'

Logen raised the sword.

'I'm glad it's you, Ninefingers,' hissed Blacktoe through gritted teeth, 'for what it's worth.'

'I'm not.' Logen swung the blade down.

The scorched stumps were still smouldering, smoke curling up into the air, but all was cold now. Logen's mouth tasted salty, like blood. Perhaps he bit his tongue somewhere. Perhaps it was someone else's. He threw the sword down and it bounced and clattered, shedding red specks across the dirt. Quai gaped around for a moment, then he folded up and coughed puke into the road. Logen stared down at Blacktoe's headless corpse. 'That was a good man. Better than me.'

'History is littered with dead good men.' Bayaz knelt stiffly and picked up the sword, wiped the blade on Blacktoe's coat, then he squinted up the road, peering through the haze of smoke. 'We should be moving. Others might be on their way.'

Logen looked at his bloody hands, slowly turning them over and over. They were his hands, no doubt. There was the missing finger. 'Nothing's changed,' he mumbled to himself.

Bayaz straightened up, brushing the dirt from his knees. 'When has it ever?' He held out the sword out to Logen, hilt first. 'I think you'll still be needing this.'

Logen stared at the blade for a moment. It was clean, dull grey, just as it had always been. Unlike him, it showed not so much as a scratch from the hard use it had seen that day. He didn't want it back. Not ever.

But he took it anyway.

PART II

‘Life – the way it really is – is a battle not between good and bad, but between bad and worse’

Joseph Brodsky

What Freedom Looks Like

The point of the shovel bit into the ground with the sharp scrape of metal on earth. An all too familiar sound. It didn't bite in far, for all the effort put behind it, as the soil was rocky hard and baked by the sun.

But she wasn't to be deterred by a little hard soil.

She had dug too many holes, and in ground worse for digging than this.

When the fighting is over, you dig, if you're still alive. You dig graves for your dead comrades. A last mark of respect, however little you might have had for them. You dig as deep as you can be bothered, you dump them in, you cover them up, they rot away and are forgotten. That's the way it's always been.

She flicked her shoulder and a sent a shovelful of sandy soil flying. Her eyes followed the grains of dirt and little stones as they broke apart in the air, then fell across the face of one of the soldiers. One eye stared at her reproachfully. The other had one of her arrows snapped off in it. A couple of flies were buzzing lazily around his face. There would be no burial for him, the graves were for her people. He and his bastard friends could lie out in the merciless sun.

After all, the vultures have to eat.

The blade of the shovel swished through the air and bit again into the soil. Another clump of dirt tumbled away. She straightened up and wiped the sweat from her face. She squinted up at the sky. The sun was blazing, straight above, sucking whatever moisture remained out of the dusty landscape, drying the blood on the rocks. She looked at the two graves beside her. One more to go. She would finish this one, throw the earth on top of those three fools, rest for a moment, then away.

Others would be coming for her soon enough.

She stuck the shovel into the earth, took hold of the water skin and pulled the stopper out. She took a few lukewarm swallows, even allowed herself the luxury of pouring a trickle out into her grimy hand and splashing it on her face. The early deaths of her comrades had at least put a stop to the endless squabbling over water.

There would be plenty to go round now.

‘Water . . .’ gasped the soldier by the rocks. It was surprising, but he was still alive. Her arrow had missed his heart but it had killed him still – just a little less quickly than she had intended. He had managed to drag himself as far as the rocks, but his crawling days were over. The stones around him were coated in dark blood. The heat and that arrow would do for him soon, however tough he was.

She wasn’t thirsty, but there was water to spare and she wouldn’t be able to carry it all. She took a few more swallows, letting it slosh out of her mouth and down her neck. A rare treat out here in the Badlands, to let water fall. Shining drops spattered onto the dry earth, turning it dark. She splashed some more on her face, licked her lips, and looked over at the soldier.

‘Mercy . . .’ he croaked, one hand clasped to his chest where the arrow was sticking out of it, the other stretched weakly towards her.

‘Mercy? Hah!’ She pushed the stopper back into the skin, then tossed it down next to the grave. ‘Don’t you know who I am?’ She grabbed hold of the handle of the shovel, the point of its blade bit once more into the earth.

‘Ferro Maljinn!’ came a voice from somewhere behind her, ‘I know who you are!’

A most unwelcome development.

She swung the shovel again, mind racing. Her bow was lying just out of reach on the ground by the first grave she had dug. She threw some dirt away, her sweating shoulders prickling at the unseen presence. She glanced over at the dying soldier. He was staring at a point behind her, and that gave her a good idea where this new arrival was standing.

She dug the point of the shovel in again, then let go and sprang forward out of the hole, rolling across the dirt, snatching up her bow as she moved, notching an arrow, drawing back the string in one smooth motion. An old man was standing about ten strides away. He was making no move forward, was holding no weapon. He was just standing, looking at her with a benign smile.

She let the arrow fly.

Now Ferro was about as deadly with a bow as it’s possible to be. The ten dead soldiers could have testified to that, if they’d been able. Six of them had her arrows sticking out of them, and in that fight she hadn’t missed once. She couldn’t remember missing at close range, however quickly the

shot had been taken, and she'd killed men ten times further away than this smiling old bastard was now.

But this time she missed.

The arrow seemed to curve in the air. A bad feather maybe, but it still didn't seem quite right. The old man didn't flinch, not even a hair. He simply stood, smiling, exactly where he'd always stood, and the arrow missed him by a few inches and disappeared off down the hillside.

And that gave everyone time to consider the situation.

He was a strange one, this old man. Very dark-skinned, black as coal, which meant he was from the far south, across the wide and shelterless desert. That's a journey not lightly taken, and Ferro had rarely seen such people. Tall and thin with long, sinewy arms and a simple robe wrapped round him. There were strange bangles round his wrists, stacked up so they covered half his fore-arms, glittering dark and light in the savage sun.

His hair was a mass of grey ropes about his face, some hanging down as low as his waist, and there was a grey stubble on his lean, pointed jaw. He had a big water skin wrapped around his chest, and a bunch of leather bags hanging from a belt around his waist. Nothing else. No weapon. That was the strangest thing of all, for a man out here in the Badlands. No one came to this god-forsaken place except those who were running, and those sent to hunt them. In either case, they should be well armed.

He was no soldier of Gurkhul, he was no scum come looking for the money on her head. He was no bandit, no escaped slave. What was he then? And why was he here? He must have come for her. He could be one of them.

An Eater.

Who else would wander the Badlands without a weapon? She hadn't realised they wanted her that badly.

He stood there motionless, the old man, smiling at her. She reached slowly for another arrow, and his eyes followed her without any worry.

'That really isn't necessary,' he said, in a slow, deep voice.

She nocked the arrow to her bow. The old man didn't move. She shrugged her shoulders and took her time aiming. The old man smiled on, not a care in the world. She let the arrow fly. It missed him by a few inches again, this time on the other side, and shot off down the hillside.

Once was a possibility, she had to admit that, but twice was wrong. If Ferro knew one thing, and one thing only, she knew how to kill. The old fool should have been stuck through and bleeding out his last into the stony soil. Now, simply by standing still and smiling, he seemed to be saying, 'You know less than you think. I know more.'

That was very galling.

'Who are you, you old bastard?'

'They call me Yulwei.'

'Old bastard will do for you!' She tossed her bow down on the ground, let her arms drop to her sides so that her right hand was hidden from him by her body. She twisted her wrist and the curved knife dropped out of her sleeve and into her waiting palm. There are many ways to kill a man, and if one way fails you must try another.

Ferro had never been one to give up at the first stumble.

Yulwei began to move slowly towards her, his bare feet padding on the rocks, bangles jingling softly together. That was very strange, now she thought about it. If he made a noise every time he moved, how had he managed to sneak up on her?

'What do you want?'

'I want to help you.' He came forward, until he was just over an arm's length away, then he stopped and stood, grinning at her.

Now Ferro was fast as a snake with a knife and twice as deadly, as the last of those soldiers could have testified, had he been able. The blade was a shining blur in the air, swung with all her strength and all her fury behind it. If he had been standing where she thought he was, his head would have been hanging off. Only he wasn't. He was standing about a stride to the left.

She threw herself at him with a fighting scream, ramming the glittering point of the knife into his heart. But she stabbed only air. He was back where he had been before, motionless and smiling all the while. Very strange. She padded round him, cautious, sandaled feet scuffing in the dust, left hand circling in the air in front of her, right hand gripped tight round the handle of the knife. She had to be careful – there was magic here.

'There is no need to get angry. I am here to help.'

'Fuck your help,' she hissed back at him.

'But you need it, and badly. They are coming for you, Ferro. There are soldiers in the hills, many soldiers.'

‘I’ll outrun them.’

‘There are too many. You cannot outrun them all.’

She glanced round at the punctured bodies. ‘Then I’ll give them to the vultures.’

‘Not this time. They are not alone. They have help.’ On the word ‘help’ his deep voice dropped even lower.

Ferro frowned. ‘Priests?’

‘Yes, and more besides.’ His eyes went very wide. ‘An Eater,’ he whispered. ‘They mean to take you alive. The Emperor wants to make an example of you. He has it in mind to put you on display.’

She snorted. ‘Fuck the Emperor.’

‘I heard you already did.’

She growled and raised the knife again, but it was not a knife. There was a hissing snake in her hand, a deadly snake, with its mouth open to bite. ‘Ugh!’ She threw it on the ground, stamped her foot down on its head, but she stamped on her knife instead. The blade snapped with a sharp crack.

‘They will catch you,’ said the old man. ‘They will catch you, and they will break your legs with hammers in the city square, so you can never run again. Then they will parade you through the streets of Shaffa, naked, sitting backwards on an ass, with your hair shaved off, while the people line the streets and shout insults at you.’

She frowned at him, but Yulwei did not stop. ‘They will starve you to death in a cage before the palace, cooking in the hot sun, while the good people of Gurkhul taunt you and spit on you and throw dung at you through the bars. Perhaps they will give you piss to drink, if you are lucky. When you finally die they will let you rot, and the flies will eat you bit by bit, and all the other slaves will see what freedom looks like, and decide they are better off as they are.’

Ferro was bored with this. Let them come, and the Eater too. She wouldn’t die in a cage. She would cut her own throat, if it came to that. She turned her back on him with a scowl and snatched up the shovel, started digging away furiously at the last grave. Soon it was deep enough.

Deep enough for the scum who’d be rotting in it.

She turned around. Yulwei was kneeling down by the dying soldier, giving him water from the skin round his chest.

‘Fuck!’ she shouted, striding over, her fingers locked around the handle of the shovel.

The old man got to his feet as she came close. ‘Mercy ...’ croaked the soldier, stretching out his hand.

‘I’ll give you mercy!’ The edge of the shovel bit deep into the soldier’s skull. The body twitched briefly then was still. She turned to the old man with a look of triumph. He stared back sadly. There was something in his eyes. Pity, maybe.

‘What do you want, Ferro Maljinn?’

‘What?’

‘Why did you do that?’ Yulwei pointed down at the dead man. ‘What do you want?’

‘Vengeance.’ She spat out the word.

‘On all of them? On the whole nation of Gurkhul? Every man, woman and child?’

‘All of them!’

The old man looked round the corpses. ‘Then you must be very happy with today’s work.’

She forced a smile onto her face. ‘Yes.’ But she wasn’t very happy. She couldn’t remember what it felt like. The smile seemed strange, unfamiliar, all lop-sided.

‘And is vengeance all you think of, every minute of every day, your only desire?’

‘Yes.’

‘Hurting *them*? Killing *them*? Ending *them*?’

‘Yes!’

‘You want nothing for yourself?’

She paused. ‘What?’

‘For yourself. What do *you* want?’

She stared at the old man suspiciously, but no reply came to her. Yulwei shook his head sadly. ‘It seems to me, Ferro Maljinn, that you are as much a slave as you ever were. Or ever could be.’ He sat down, cross-legged on a rock.

She stared at him for a moment, confused. Then the anger bubbled up again, hot and reassuring. ‘If you came to help me, you can help me bury

them!' She pointed over at the three bloody corpses, lined up next to the graves.

'Oh no. That is your work.'

She turned away from the old man, cursing under her breath, and moved over to her one-time companions. She took Shebed's corpse under the arms and hauled him over to the first grave, his heels making two little grooves in the dust. When she made it to the hole she rolled him in. Alugai was next. A stream of dry soil ran over him as he came to rest in the bottom of his grave.

She turned to Nasar's carcass. He had been killed by a sword cut across the face. Ferro thought it was something of an improvement to his looks.

'That one looks a good sort,' said Yulwei.

'Nasar.' She laughed without amusement. 'A raper, a thief, a coward.' She hawked up some phlegm and spat into his dead face. It splattered softly against his forehead. 'Much the worst of the three.' She looked down at the graves. 'But they were all of them shit.'

'Nice company you keep.'

'The hunted don't have the luxury of choosing their companions. ' She stared at Nasar's bloody face. 'You take what's offered.'

'If you disliked them so much, why don't you leave them for the vultures, like you have these others?' Yulwei swept his arm over the broken soldiers on the ground.

'You bury your own.' She kicked Nasar into the hole. He rolled forward, arms flopping, and dropped into the grave face down. 'That's the way it's always been.'

She grabbed hold of the shovel and started to heap the stony earth onto his back. She worked in silence, the sweat building up on her face, then dripping off onto the ground. Yulwei watched her as the holes filled up. Three more piles of dirt in the wasteland. She threw the shovel away and it bounced off one of the corpses and clattered among the stones. A small cloud of black flies buzzed angrily off the body, then returned.

Ferro picked up her bow and arrows and slung them over her shoulder. She took the water skin, checked its weight carefully, then shouldered that also. Then she picked over the bodies of the soldiers. One of them, he looked like the leader, had a fine curved sword. He hadn't even managed to draw it before her arrow had caught him in the throat. Ferro drew it now, and she tested it with a couple of sweeps through the air. It was very good:

well balanced, the long blade glittering deadly sharp, bright metal on the hilt catching the sun. He had a knife as well that matched it. She took the weapons and stuck them through her belt.

She picked over the other bodies, but there wasn't much to take. She cut her arrows from the corpses where she could. She found some coins and tossed them away. They would only weigh her down, and what would she buy out here in the Badlands? Dirt?

That was all there was, and it was free.

They had a few scraps of food with them, but not enough even for another day. That meant there must be others, probably lots of them, and not far away. Yulwei was telling the truth, but it made no difference to her.

She turned and started to walk southward, down off the hill and towards the great desert, leaving the old man behind.

'That's the wrong way,' he said.

She stopped, squinting at him in the bright sun. 'Aren't the soldiers coming?'

Yulwei's eyes sparkled. 'There are many ways of staying unnoticed, even out here in the Badlands.'

She looked to the north, out over the featureless plain below. Out towards Gurkhul. There wasn't a hill, or a tree, or scarcely a bush for miles. Nowhere to hide. 'Unnoticed, even by an Eater?'

The old man laughed. 'Especially by those arrogant swine. They're not half as clever as they think they are. How do you think I got here? I came through them, between them, around them. I go where I please, and I take who I please with me.'

She shaded her eyes with her hand, and squinted southward. The desert stretched away into the far distance, and beyond. Ferro could survive here in the wilderness, just about, but out there in that crucible of changing sands and merciless heat?

The old man seemed to read her thoughts. 'There are always the endless sands. I have crossed them before. It can be done. But not by you.'

He was right, damn him. Ferro was lean and tough as a bowstring, but that just meant she would walk in circles a little longer before pitching on her face. The desert was preferable to the cage before the palace as a place to die, but not by much. She wanted to stay alive.

There were still things to do.

The old man sat there, cross-legged, smiling. What was he? Ferro trusted no one, but if he meant to deliver her to the Emperor, he could have knocked her on the head while she was digging, instead of announcing his arrival. He had magic, she had seen that for herself, and some chance was better than none.

But what would he want in return? The world had never given Ferro anything for free, and she didn't expect it to begin now. She narrowed her eyes. 'What do you want from me, Yulwei?'

The old man laughed. That laugh was becoming very annoying. 'Let us just say that I will have done you a favour. Later on, you can do me one in return.'

That answer was horribly thin on the details, but when your life's on the table you have to take whatever's offered. She hated to place herself in the power of another, but it seemed she had no choice.

Not if she wanted to live out the week, that is.

'What do we do?'

'We must wait for nightfall.' Yulwei glanced at the twisted bodies scattered about the ground, and wrinkled his nose. 'But perhaps not here.'

Ferro shrugged and sat herself down on the middle grave. 'Here will do,' she said, 'I've a mind to watch the vultures eat.'

Overhead the clear night sky was scattered with bright stars, and the air had turned cool, cold even. Down on the dark and dusty plain below, fires were burning, a curved line of fires that seemed to hem them in against the edge of the desert. She, Yulwei, the ten corpses and the three graves were trapped on the hillside. Tomorrow, as the first light crept over the arid land, the soldiers would leave those fires and creep carefully towards the hills. If Ferro was still there when they arrived, she would be killed for sure, or worse still captured. She could not fight that many on her own, even supposing there was no Eater with them.

She hated to admit it, but her life was in Yulwei's hands now.

He squinted up at the starry sky. 'It is time,' he said.

They scrambled down the rocky hillside in the darkness, picking their way carefully among the boulders and the odd, scrubby, half-dead bush. Northward, towards Gurkhul. Yulwei moved surprisingly fast and she was forced to half-run to keep up, eyes fixed on the ground to find her footing

among the dry rocks. When they finally reached the base of the hill and she looked up, she saw that Yulwei was leading her toward the left hand edge of the line, where the fires were most numerous.

'Wait,' she whispered, grabbing his shoulder. She pointed over to the right hand side. There were fewer fires there, and it would be easier to slip between them. 'What about that way?'

She could just see Yulwei's teeth smiling white in the starlight. 'Oh no, Ferro Maljinn. That is where most of the soldiers are . . . and our other friend.' He was making no attempt to keep his voice down, and it was making her jumpy. 'That is where they expect you to come through, if you choose to go north. But they do not expect you. They think you will go south into the desert to die, rather than risk being captured, as indeed you would have done, had I not been here.'

Yulwei turned and moved off and she crept after him, keeping low to the ground. As they drew nearer to the fires she saw that the old man had been right. There were figures sitting around some of them, but they were thinly spread. The old man strode confidently toward four fires on the far left, only one of them manned. He made no effort to stay low, his bangles jingled softly together, his bare feet flapped loud on the dry earth. They were almost close enough to see the features of the three men round the fire. Yulwei would surely be seen at any moment. She hissed at him to grab his attention, sure that she would be heard.

Yulwei turned round, looking puzzled in the faint light from the flames. 'What?' he said. She winced, waiting for the soldiers to leap up, but they chattered on regardless. Yulwei looked over at them. 'They will not see us, nor hear us either, unless you start shouting in their ears. We are safe.' He turned and walked on, giving the soldiers a wide berth. Ferro followed, still keeping low and quiet, if only out of habit.

As Ferro came closer she began to make out the words of the soldier's conversation. She slowed, listening. She turned. She started to move towards the fire. Yulwei looked round. 'What are you doing?' he asked.

Ferro looked at the three of them. A big, tough-looking veteran, a thin, weaselly type, and an honest-seeming young man, who didn't look much like a soldier. Their weapons were lying around, sheathed, wrapped up, unready. She circled them warily, listening.

‘They say she’s not right in the head,’ the thin one was whispering at the young one, trying to scare him, ‘they say she’s killed a hundred men, or more. If you’re a good looking fella, she cuts your fruits off while you’re still alive,’ he grabbed hold of his crotch, ‘and eats them in front of you!’

‘Ah, stop your mouth,’ said the big one, ‘she won’t be coming near us.’ He pointed over to where the fires were sparser, his voice dropping to a whisper. ‘She’ll be going to *him*, if she comes this way at all.’

‘Well, I hope she doesn’t,’ said the young one, ‘live and let live, say I.’

The thin man frowned. ‘And what about all the good men she’s killed? And women and children too? Shouldn’t they have been let live?’ Ferro’s teeth ground together. She’d never killed children, that she could think of.

‘Well, it’s a shame for them, of course. I’m not saying she shouldn’t be caught.’ The young soldier glanced around nervously. ‘Just maybe not by us.’

The big man let go a laugh at that, but the thin one didn’t look amused. ‘You a coward?’

‘No!’ said the young man, angrily, ‘but I got a wife and a family depending on me, and I could do without being killed out here, that’s all.’ He grinned. ‘We’re expecting another child. Hoping for a son this time.’

The big man nodded. ‘My son’s nearly grown now. They get old so quick.’

Talk of children, and families, and hopes only made the fury in Ferro’s chest squeeze harder. Why should they be allowed a life, when she had nothing? When them and their kind had taken everything from her? She slid the curved knife out of its sheath.

‘What are you doing, Ferro?’ hissed Yulwei.

The young man looked round. ‘Did you hear something?’

The big one laughed. ‘I think I heard you shit yourself.’ The thin one chuckled to himself, the young man smiled, embarrassed. Ferro crept right up behind him. She was just a foot or two away, brightly lit by the fire, but none of the soldiers even glanced at her. She raised the knife.

‘Ferro!’ shouted Yulwei. The young man sprang to his feet, he peered out across the dark plain, squinting, brow furrowed. He looked Ferro right in the face, but his eyes were focused far behind her. She could smell his breath. The blade of the knife glittered an inch or less from his stubbly throat.

Now. Now was the time. She could kill him quickly, and take the other two as well before the alarm was raised. She knew she could do it. They were unprepared, and she was ready. Now was the time.

But her hand didn't move.

'What's got up your arse?' asked the big soldier. 'There's nothing out there.'

'Could've sworn I heard something,' said the young man, still looking right in her face.

'Wait!' shouted the thin one, jumping to his feet and pointing. 'There she is! Right in front of you!' Ferro froze for an instant, staring at him, then he and the big man started to laugh. The young soldier looked sheepish, turned around and sat down.

'I thought I heard something, that's all.'

'There's no one out there,' said the big man. Ferro began to back slowly away. She felt sick, her mouth full of sour spit, her head thumping. She pushed the knife back into its sheath, turned and stumbled off with Yulwei following silently behind.

When the light of the fires and the sound of the talking had faded into the distance she stopped and dropped down on the hard ground. A cold wind blew up across the barren plain. It blew stinging dust in her face, but she hardly noticed. The hate and the fury were gone, for the time being, but they had left a hole, and she had nothing else to fill it with. She felt empty and cold and sick and alone. She hugged herself, rocking slowly back and forth, and closed her eyes. But the darkness held no comfort.

Then she felt the old man's hand press onto her shoulder.

Now normally she would have twisted away, thrown him off, killed him if she could. But the strength was all gone. She looked up, blinking. 'There's nothing left of me. What am I?' She pressed one hand on her chest, but she barely felt it. 'I have nothing inside.'

'Well. It's strange that you should say that.' Yulwei smiled up at the starry sky. 'I was just starting to think there might be something in there worth saving.'

The King's Justice

As soon as he reached the Square of Marshals, Jezal realised there was something wrong. It was never half this busy for a meeting of the Open Council. He glanced over the knots of finely dressed people as he hurried by, slightly late and out of breath from his long training session: voices were hushed, faces tense and expectant.

He shouldered his way through the crowd to the Lord's Round, glancing suspiciously up at the guards flanking the inlaid doors. They at least seemed the same as ever, their heavy visors giving nothing away. He crossed the ante-chamber, vivid tapestries flapping slightly in the draught, slipped through the inner doors and passed into the vast, cool space beyond. His footsteps made tapping echoes in the gilded dome as he hurried down the aisle towards the high table. Jalenhorm was standing beneath one of the tall windows, face splashed with coloured light from the stained glass, frowning at a bench with a metal rail along its base which had been placed to one side of the floor.

'What's going on?'

'Haven't you heard?' Jalenhorm's voice was whispery with excitement. 'Hoff's let it be known there'll be some great matter to discuss.'

'What is it? Angland? The Northmen?'

The big man shook his head. 'Don't know, but we'll soon see.'

Jezal frowned. 'I don't like surprises.' His eye came to rest on the mysterious bench. 'What's that for?'

At that moment the great doors were swung open and a stream of councillors began to flood down the aisle. The usual mixture, Jezal supposed, if a little more purposeful. The younger sons, the paid representatives . . . he caught his breath. There was a tall man at the front, richly dressed even in this august company, with a weighty golden chain across his shoulders and a weighty frown across his face.

'Lord Brock himself,' whispered Jezal.

'And there's Lord Isher.' Jalenhorm nodded at a sedate old man just behind Brock, 'and Heugen, and Barezin. It's something big. It has to be.'

Jezal took a deep breath as four of the Union's most powerful noblemen arranged themselves on the front row. He had never seen the Open Council half so well attended. On the councillors' half-circle of benches there was barely an empty seat. High above them, the public gallery was an unbroken ring of nervous faces.

Now Hoff blustered through the doors and down the aisle, and he was not alone. On his right a tall man flowed along, slender and proud-looking with a long, spotless white coat and a shock of white hair. Arch Lector Sult. On his left walked another man, leaning heavily on a stick, slightly bent in a robe of black and gold with a long grey beard. High Justice Marovia. Jezal could hardly believe his eyes. Three members of the Closed Council, here.

Jalenhorm hurried to take his place as the clerks deposited their burdens of ledgers and papers on the polished tabletop. The Lord Chamberlain threw himself down in their midst and immediately called for wine. The head of his Majesty's Inquisition swept into a high chair on one side of him, smiling faintly to himself. High Justice Marovia lowered himself slowly into another, frowning all the while. The volume of the anxious whispering in the hall rose a step, the faces of the great magnates on the front row were grim and suspicious. The Announcer took his place before the table, not the usual brightly dressed imbecile, but a dark, bearded man with a barrel chest. He lifted his staff high, then beat it against the tiles, fit to wake the dead.

'I call this meeting of the Open Council of the Union to order!' he bellowed. The hubbub gradually died away.

'There is but one matter for discussion this morning,' said the Lord Chamberlain, peering sternly at the house from beneath his heavy brows, 'a matter of the King's Justice.' There were scattered mutterings. 'A matter concerning the royal licence for trade in the city of Westport.' The noise increased: angry whispers, uncomfortable shufflings of noble arses on their benches, the familiar scratching of quills on the great ledgers. Jezal saw Lord Brock's brows draw together, the corners of Lord Heugen's mouth turn down. They did not seem to like the taste of this. The Lord Chamberlain sniffed and took a swig of wine, waiting for the muttering to die away. 'I am not best qualified to speak on this matter, however—'

'No indeed!' snapped Lord Isher sharply, shifting in his seat on the front row with a scowl.

Hoff fixed the old man with his eye. ‘So I call on a man who is! My colleague from the Closed Council, Arch Lector Sult.’

‘The Open Council recognises Arch Lector Sult!’ thundered the Announcer, as the head of the Inquisition made his graceful way down the steps of the dais and onto the tiled floor, smiling pleasantly at the angry faces turned towards him.

‘My Lords,’ he began, in a slow, musical voice, ushering his words out into space with smooth movements of his hands, ‘for the past seven years, ever since our glorious victory in the war with Gurkhul, an exclusive royal licence for trade in the city of Westport has been in the hands of the honourable Guild of Mercers.’

‘And a fine job they’ve done of it!’ shouted Lord Heugen.

‘They won us that war!’ growled Barezin, pounding the bench beside him with a meaty fist.

‘A fine job!’

‘Fine!’ came the cries.

The Arch Lector nodded as he waited for the noise to fade. ‘Indeed they have,’ he said, pacing across the tiles like a dancer, his words scratching their way across the pages of the books. ‘I would be the last to deny it. A fine job.’ He spun suddenly around, the tails of his white coat snapping, his face twisted into a brutal snarl. ‘A fine job of dodging the King’s taxes!’ he screamed. There was a collective gasp.

‘A fine job of slighting the King’s law!’ Another gasp, louder.

‘A fine job of high treason!’ There was a storm of protest, of fists shaken in the air and papers thrown to the floor. Livid faces stared down from the public gallery, florid ones ranted and bellowed from the benches before the high table. Jezal stared about him, unsure if he could have heard correctly.

‘How dare you, Sult!’ Lord Brock roared at the Arch Lector as he swished back up the steps of the dais, a faint smile clinging to his lips.

‘We demand proof!’ bellowed Lord Heugen. ‘We demand justice!’

‘The King’s Justice!’ came cries from the back.

‘You must supply us with proof!’ shouted Isher, as the noise began to fade.

The Arch Lector twitched out his white gown, the fine material billowing around him as he swung himself smoothly back into his chair. ‘Oh but that is our intention, Lord Isher!’

The heavy bolt of a small side door was flung back with an echoing bang. There was a rustling as Lords and proxies twisted round, stood up, squinted over to see what was happening. People in the public gallery peered out over the parapet, leaning dangerously far in their eagerness to see. The hall fell quiet. Jezal swallowed. There was a scraping, tapping, clinking sound beyond the doorway, then a strange and sinister procession emerged from the darkness.

Sand dan Glokta came first, limping as always and leaning heavily on his cane, but with his head held high and a twisted, toothless grin on his hollow face. Three men shuffled behind him, chained together by their hands and bare feet, clinking and rattling their way towards the high table. Their heads were shaved bare and they were dressed in brown sackcloth. The clothing of the penitent. Confessed traitors.

The first of the prisoners was licking his lips, eyes darting here and there, pale with terror. The second, shorter and thicker-set, was stumbling, dragging his left leg behind him, hunched over with his mouth hanging open. As Jezal watched, a thin line of pink drool dangled from his lip and spattered on the tiles. The third man, painfully thin and with huge dark rings round his eyes, stared slowly around, blinking, eyes wide but apparently taking nothing in. Jezal recognised the man behind the three prisoners straight away: the big albino from that night in the street. Jezal rocked his weight from one foot to the other, feeling suddenly cold and uncomfortable.

The purpose of the bench was now made clear. The three prisoners slumped down on it, the albino knelt and snapped their manacles shut around the rail along its base. The chamber was entirely silent. Every eye was fixed on the crippled Inquisitor, and his three prisoners.

‘Our investigation began some months ago,’ said Arch Lector Sult, immensely smug at having the assembly so completely under his control. ‘A simple matter of some irregular accounting, I won’t bore you with the details.’ He smiled at Brock, at Isher, at Barezin. ‘I know you all are very busy men. Who could have thought then, that such a little matter would lead us here? Who would suppose that the roots of treason could run so very deep?’

‘Indeed,’ said the Lord Chamberlain impatiently, looking up from his goblet. ‘Inquisitor Glokta, the floor is yours.’

The Announcer struck his staff on the tiles. ‘The Open Council of the Union recognises Sand dan Glokta, Inquisitor Exempt!’

The cripple waited politely for the scratching of the clerk’s quills to finish, leaning on his cane in the centre of the floor, seemingly unmoved by the importance of the occasion. ‘Rise and face the Open Council,’ he said, turning to the first of his prisoners.

The terrified man sprang up, his chains rattling, licking his pale lips, goggling at the faces of the Lords in the front row. ‘Your name?’ demanded Glokta.

‘Salem Rews.’

Jezal felt a catch in his throat. Salem Rews? He knew the man! His father had had dealings with him in the past, at one time he had been a regular visitor to their estate! Jezal studied the terrified, shaven-headed traitor with increasing horror. He cast his mind back to the plump, well-dressed merchant, always ready with a joke. It was him, no doubt. Their eyes met for an instant and Jezal looked anxiously away. His father had talked with that man in their hallway! Had shaken hands with him! Accusations of treason are like illnesses – you can catch them just by being in the same room! His eyes were drawn inevitably back to that unfamiliar, yet horribly familiar face. How dare he be a traitor, the bastard?

‘You are a member of the honourable Guild of Mercers?’ continued Glokta, putting a sneering accent into the word ‘honourable’.

‘I was,’ mumbled Rews.

‘What was your role within the Guild?’ The shaven-headed Mercer stared desperately about him. ‘Your role?’ demanded Glokta, his voice taking on a hard edge.

‘I conspired to defraud the King!’ cried the merchant, wringing his hands. A wave of shock ran round the hall. Jezal swallowed sour spit. He saw Sult smirking across at High Justice Marovia. The old man’s face was stony blank, but his fists were clenched tight on the table before him. ‘I committed treason! For money! I smuggled, and I bribed, and I lied . . . we were all at it!’

‘All at it!’ Glokta leered round at the assembly. ‘And if any of you should doubt it, we have ledgers, and we have documents, and we have numbers. There is a room in the House of Questions stuffed with them. A room full of

secrets, and guilt, and lies.' He slowly shook his head. 'Sorry reading, I can tell you.'

'I had to do it!' screamed Rews. 'They made me! I had no choice!'

The crippled Inquisitor frowned at his audience. 'Of course they made you. We realise you were but a single brick in this house of infamy. An attempt was made on your life recently, was it not?'

'They tried to kill me!'

'Who tried?'

'It was this man!' wailed Rews, voice cracking, pointing a trembling finger at the prisoner next to him, pulling away as far as the chains that linked them would allow. 'It was him! Him!' The manacles rattled as he waved his arm, spit flying from his mouth. There was another surge of angry voices, louder this time. Jezal watched the head of the middle prisoner sag and he slumped sideways, but the hulking albino grabbed him and hauled him back upright.

'Wake up, Master Carpi!' shouted Glokta. The lolling head came slowly up. An unfamiliar face, strangely swollen and badly pocked with acne-scars. Jezal noticed with disgust that his four front teeth were missing. Just like Glokta's.

'You are from Talins, yes, in Styria?' The man nodded slowly, stupidly, like someone half asleep. 'You are paid to kill people, yes?' He nodded again. 'And you were hired to murder ten of his Majesty's subjects, among them this confessed traitor, Salem Rews?' A trickle of blood ran slowly out from the man's nose and his eyes started to roll back in his head. The albino shook him by the shoulder and he came round, nodding groggily. 'What became of the other nine?' Silence. 'You killed them, did you not?' Another nod, a strange clicking sound coming from the prisoner's throat.

Glokta frowned slowly around the rapt faces of the Council. 'Villem dan Robb, customs official, throat cut ear to ear.' He slid a finger across his neck and a woman in the gallery squealed. 'Solimo Scandi, Mercer, stabbed in the back four times.' He thrust up four fingers, then pressed them to his stomach as though sickened. 'The bloody list goes on. All murdered, for nothing but a bigger profit. Who hired you?'

'Him,' croaked the killer, turning his swollen face to look at the gaunt man with the glassy eyes, slumped on the bench next to him, heedless of his surroundings. Glokta limped over, cane tapping on the tiles.

‘What is your name?’

The prisoner’s head snapped up, his eyes focusing on the twisted face of the Inquisitor above him. ‘Gofred Hornlach!’ he answered instantly, voice shrill.

‘You are a senior member of the Guild of Mercers?’

‘Yes!’ he barked, blinking mindlessly up at Glokta.

‘One of Magister Kault’s deputies, in fact?’

‘Yes!’

‘Have you conspired with other Mercers to defraud his Majesty the King? Did you hire an assassin to murder ten of his Majesty’s subjects?’

‘Yes! Yes!’

‘Why?’

‘We were worried they would tell what they knew . . . tell what they knew . . . tell . . .’ Hornlach’s empty eyes stared off towards one of the coloured windows. His mouth slowly stopped moving.

‘Tell what they knew?’ prompted the Inquisitor.

‘About the treasonous activities of the Guild!’ the Mercer blurted, ‘about our treasons! About the activities of the guild . . . treasonous ... activities ...’

Glokta cut in sharply. ‘Were you acting alone?’

‘No! No!’

The Inquisitor rapped his cane down before him and leaned forward. ‘Who gave the orders?’ he hissed.

‘Magister Kault!’ shouted Hornlach instantly, ‘he gave the orders!’ The audience gasped. Arch Lector Sult smirked a little wider. ‘It was the Magister!’ The quills scratched mercilessly. ‘It was Kault! He gave the orders! All the orders! Magister Kault!’

‘Thank you, Master Hornlach.’

‘The Magister! He gave the orders! Magister Kault! Kault! Kault!’

‘Enough!’ snarled Glokta. His prisoner fell silent. The room was still.

Arch Lector Sult lifted his arm and pointed towards the three prisoners. ‘There is your proof, my Lords!’

‘This is a sham!’ bellowed Lord Brock, leaping to his feet. ‘This is an insult!’ Few voices joined him in support however, and those that did were half-hearted. Lord Heugen was notable for his careful silence, keenly studying the fine leather of his shoes. Barezin had shrunk back into his seat, looking half the size he had been a minute before. Lord Isher was staring off

at the wall, fingering his heavy, golden chain, looking bored, as though the fate of the Guild of Mercers was of interest to him no longer.

Brock appealed to the High Justice himself, motionless in his tall chair at the high table. ‘Lord Marovia, I beg of you! You are a reasonable man! Do not allow this . . . travesty!’

The hall fell silent, waiting for the old man’s reply. He frowned and stroked his long beard. He glanced across at the grinning Arch Lector. He cleared his throat. ‘I feel your pain, Lord Brock, indeed I do, but it seems that this is not a day for reasonable men. The Closed Council has examined the case and is well satisfied. My hands are tied.’

Brock worked his mouth, tasting defeat. ‘This is not justice!’ he shouted, turning round to address his peers. ‘These men have plainly been tortured!’

Arch Lector Sult’s mouth twisted with scorn. ‘How would you have us deal with traitors and criminals?’ he cried in a piercing voice. ‘Would you raise a shield, Lord Brock, for the disloyal to hide behind?’ He thumped the table, as if it too might be guilty of high treason. ‘I for one will not see our great nation handed over to its enemies! Neither enemies without, nor enemies within!’

‘Down with the Mercers!’ came a cry from the public balcony.

‘Hard justice for traitors!’

‘The King’s Justice!’ bellowed a fat man near the back. There was a surge of anger and agreement from the floor, and calls for harsh measures and stiff penalties.

Brock looked round for his allies on the front row, but found none. He bunched his fists. ‘This is no justice!’ he shouted, pointing at the three prisoners. ‘This is no proof!’

‘His Majesty disagrees!’ bellowed Hoff, ‘and does not require your permission!’ He held up a large document. ‘The Guild of Mercers is hereby dissolved! Their licence revoked by Royal decree! His Majesty’s Commission for Trade and Commerce will, over the coming months, review applications for trade rights with the city of Westport. Until such time as suitable candidates are found, the routes will be managed by capable, *loyal*, hands. The hands of His Majesty’s Inquisition.’

Arch Lector Sult humbly inclined his head, oblivious to the furious cries from representatives and public gallery alike.

‘Inquisitor Glokta!’ continued the Lord Chamberlain, ‘the Open Council thanks you for your diligence, and asks that you perform one more service in this matter.’ Hoff held out a smaller paper. ‘This is a warrant for the arrest of Magister Kault, bearing the King’s own signature. We would ask that you serve it forthwith.’ Glokta bowed stiffly and took the paper from the Lord Chamberlain’s outstretched hand. ‘You,’ said Hoff, turning his eye on Jalenhorm.

‘Lieutenant Jalenhorm, my Lord!’ shouted the big man, stepping smartly forward.

‘Whatever,’ snapped Hoff impatiently, ‘take twenty of the King’s Own and escort Inquisitor Glokta to the Mercers’ Guildhall. Ensure that nothing and no one leaves the building without his orders!’

‘At once, my Lord!’ Jalenhorm crossed the floor and ran up the aisle toward the exit, holding the hilt of his sword in one hand to stop it knocking against his leg. Glokta limped after him, cane tapping on the steps, the warrant for the arrest of Magister Kault crumpled in his tightly clenched fist. The monstrous albino had pulled the prisoners to their feet meanwhile, and was leading them, rattling and lolling, off towards the door by which they had entered.

‘Lord Chamberlain!’ shouted Brock, with one last effort. Jezal wondered how much money he must have made from the Mercers. How much he had hoped still to make. A very great deal, evidently.

But Hoff was unmoved. ‘That concludes our business for today, my Lords!’ Marovia was on his feet before the Lord Chamberlain had finished speaking, evidently keen to be away. The great ledgers were thumped shut. The fate of the honourable Guild of Mercers was sealed. Excited babbling filled the air once more, gradually rising in volume and soon joined by clattering and stamping as the representatives began to rise and leave the room. Arch Lector Sult remained seated, watching his beaten adversaries file reluctantly off the front row. Jezal met the desperate eyes of Salem Rews one last time as he was led towards the small door, then Practical Frost jerked at the chain and he was lost in the darkness beyond.

Outside, the square was even busier than before, the dense throng growing ever more excited as the news of the dissolution of the Guild of Mercers spread to those who had not been within. People stood, disbelieving, or

hurried here and there: scared, surprised, confused. Jezal saw one man staring at him, staring at anyone, face pale, hands trembling. A Mercer perhaps, or a man in too deep with the Mercers, deep enough to be ruined along with them. There would be many such men.

Jezal felt a sudden tingling. Ardee West was leaning casually against the stones a little further on. They had not met in some time, not since that drunken outburst of hers, and he was surprised how pleased he was to see her. Probably she had been punished long enough, he told himself. Everyone deserved the chance to apologise. He hastened towards her with a broad smile on his lips. Then he noticed who she was with.

'That little bastard!' he muttered under his breath.

Lieutenant Brint was chatting freely in his cheap uniform, leaning closer to Ardee than Jezal thought was appropriate, underlining his tedious points with flamboyant gestures of his arms. She was nodding, smiling, then she tipped her head back and laughed, slapping the Lieutenant playfully on the chest. Brint laughed as well, the ugly little shit. They laughed together. For some reason Jezal felt a sharp pang of fury.

'Jezal, how are you!' shouted Brint, still giggling.

He stepped up close. 'That's Captain Luthar!' he spat, 'and how I am is none of your concern! Don't you have a job to do?'

Brint's mouth hung stupidly open for a moment, then his brows drew into a surly frown. 'Yes, sir,' he muttered, turning and stalking off. Jezal watched him go with a contempt even more intense than usual.

'Well that was charming,' said Ardee. 'Are those the manners you should use before a lady?'

'I really couldn't say. Why? Was there one watching?'

He turned to look at her and caught, just for a moment, a self-satisfied smirk. Quite a nasty expression, as though she had enjoyed his outburst. He wondered for a silly instant whether she might have arranged the meeting, have placed herself and that idiot where Jezal would see them, hoping to arouse his jealousy . . . then she smiled at him, and laughed, and Jezal felt his anger fading. She looked very fine, he thought, tanned and vibrant in the sunlight, laughing out loud, not caring who heard. Very fine. Better than ever, in fact. A chance meeting was all, what else could it be? She fixed him with those dark eyes and his suspicions vanished. 'Did you have to be so hard on him?' she asked.

Jezal fixed his jaw. ‘Jumped-up, arrogant nobody, he’s probably nothing more than some rich man’s bastard. No blood, no money, no manners—’

‘More than me, of all three.’

Jezal cursed his big mouth. Rather than dragging an apology from her he was now in need of giving one himself. He sought desperately for some way out of this self-made trap. ‘Oh, but he’s an absolute moron!’ he whined.

‘Well,’ and Jezal was relieved to see one corner of Ardee’s mouth curl up in a sly smile, ‘he is at that. Shall we walk?’ She slipped her hand through his arm before he had the chance to answer, and started to lead him off towards the Kingsway. Jezal allowed himself to be guided between the frightened, the angry, the excited people.

‘So is it true?’ she asked.

‘Is what true?’

‘That the Mercers are finished?’

‘So it seems. Your old friend Sand dan Glokta was in the thick of it. He gave quite the performance, for a cripple.’

Ardee looked down at the floor. ‘You wouldn’t want to get on the wrong side of him, crippled or no.’

‘No.’ Jezal’s mind went back to Salem Rews’ terrified eyes, staring desperately at him as he vanished into the darkness of the archway. ‘No, you wouldn’t.’

A silence descended on them as they strolled down the avenue, but it was a comfortable one. He liked walking with her. It no longer seemed important whether anyone apologised. Perhaps she had been right about the fencing anyway, just a little. Ardee seemed to read his thoughts. ‘How’s the swordplay going?’ she asked.

‘Not bad. How’s the drinking going?’

She raised a dark eyebrow. ‘Excellent well. If only there was a Contest for that every year, I’d soon come to the attention of the public.’ Jezal laughed, looking down at her as she walked beside him, and she smiled back. So clever, so sharp, so fearless. So damn fine looking. Jezal wondered if there had ever been a woman quite like her. If only she had the right blood, he thought to himself, and some money. A lot of money.

Means of Escape

‘**O**pen the door, in the name of His Majesty!’ thundered Lieutenant Jalenhorm for the third time, hammering at the wood with his meaty fist. *The great oaf. Why do big men tend to have such little brains? Perhaps they get by on brawn too often, and their minds dry up like plums in the sun.*

The Mercers’ Guildhall was an impressive building in a busy square not far from the Agriont. A substantial crowd of onlookers had already gathered around Glokta and his armed escort: curious, fearful, fascinated, growing all the time. *They can smell blood, it seems.* Glokta’s leg was throbbing from the effort of hurrying down here, but he doubted that the Mercers would be taken entirely by surprise. He glanced round impatiently at the armoured guardsmen, at the masked Practicals, at the hard eyes of Frost, at the young officer beating on the door.

‘Open the—’

Enough of this foolishness. ‘I think they heard you, Lieutenant,’ said Glokta crisply, ‘but are choosing not to answer. Would you be so kind as to break the door down?’

‘What?’ Jalenhorm gawped at him, and then at the heavy double doors, firmly secured. ‘How will I—’

Practical Frost hurtled past. There was a deafening crack and a tearing of wood as he crashed into one of the doors with his burly shoulder, tearing it off its hinges and sending it crashing onto the floor of the room beyond.

‘Like so,’ muttered Glokta as he stepped through the archway, the splinters still settling. Jalenhorm followed him, looking dazed, a dozen armoured soldiers clattering behind.

An outraged clerk blocked the corridor beyond. ‘You can’t just – oof!’ he cried, as Frost flung him out of the way and his face crunched into the wall.

‘Arrest that man!’ shouted Glokta, waving his cane at the dumbstruck clerk. One of the soldiers grabbed him roughly with gauntleted fists and shoved him tumbling out into the daylight. Practicals began to pour through the broken doors, heavy sticks in their hands, eyes fierce above their masks. ‘Arrest everyone!’ shouted Glokta over his shoulder, limping down the

corridor as fast as he could, following Frost's broad back into the bowels of the building.

Through an open door Glokta saw a merchant in colourful robes, face covered with a sheen of sweat as he desperately heaped documents onto a blazing fire. 'Seize him!' screamed Glokta. A pair of Practicals leaped past into the room and began clubbing the man with their sticks. He fell with a cry, upsetting a table and kicking over a pile of ledgers. Loose papers and bits of burning ash fluttered through the air as the sticks rose and fell.

Glokta hurried on, crashes and cries spreading out into the building around him. The place was full of the smell of smoke, and sweat, and fear. *The doors are all guarded, but Kault might have a secret means of escape. He's a slippery one. We must hope we are not too late. Curse this leg of mine! Not too late . . .*

Glokta gasped and winced in pain, tottering as someone clutched at his coat. 'Help me!' shrieked the man, 'I am innocent! ' Blood on a plump face. Fingers clutched at Glokta's clothes, threatening to drag him to the floor.

'Get him off me!' shouted Glokta, beating at him weakly with his cane, clawing at the wall in his efforts to stay upright. One of the Practicals leaped forward and clubbed the man across the back.

'I confess!' the merchant whimpered as the stick rose again, then it cracked down on his head. The Practical caught hold of his slumping body under the arms and dragged him back towards the door. Glokta hurried on, Lieutenant Jalenhorm wide-eyed at his shoulder. They reached a broad staircase, and Glokta eyed it with hatred. *My old enemies, always here ahead of me.* He laboured up as best he could, waving Practical Frost forward with his free hand. A baffled merchant was dragged past them and away, squawking something about his rights, heels kicking against the stairs.

Glokta slipped and nearly fell on his face, but someone caught him by the elbow and kept him upright. It was Jalenhorm, a look of confusion still splattered across his heavy, honest face. *So big men have their uses after all.* The young officer helped him up the rest of the steps. Glokta did not have the energy to refuse him. *Why bother? A man should know his limitations. There's nothing noble in falling on your face. I should know that.*

There was a large ante-chamber at the top of the stairs, richly decorated with a thick carpet and colourful hangings on the walls. Two guards stood

before a large door with their swords drawn, dressed in the livery of the Guild of Mercers. Frost was facing them, hands rolled into white fists. Jalenhorm pulled out his own sword as he reached the landing, stepping forward to stand next to the albino. Glokta had to smile. *The tongueless torturer and the flower of chivalry. An unlikely alliance.*

'I have a warrant for Kault, signed by the King himself.' Glokta held out the paper so the guards could see it. 'The Mercers are finished. You have nothing to gain by getting in our way. Put up your swords! You have my word, you will not be harmed!'

The two guards glanced at each other uncertainly. 'Put them up!' shouted Jalenhorm, edging a little closer.

'Alright!' One of the men bent down and slid his sword along the boards. Frost caught it under one foot.

'And you!' shouted Glokta to the other one. 'Now!' The guard obeyed, throwing his sword to the floor and putting up his hands. A moment later Frost's fist crunched into the point of his jaw, knocking him cold and sending him crashing into the wall.

'But—' shouted the first guard. Frost grabbed him by the shirt and flung him down the stairs. He turned over and over, banging on the steps, flopping to the bottom, lying still. *I know what that feels like.*

Jalenhorm was standing motionless and blinking, his sword still raised. 'I thought you said—'

'Never mind about that. Frost, look for another way in.'

'Thhh.' The albino padded away down the corridor. Glokta gave him a moment, then he edged forward and tried the door. The handle turned, much to his surprise, and the door swung open.

The room was opulence itself, near as big as a barn. The carving on the high ceiling was caked in gold leaf, the spines of the books on the shelves were studded with precious stones, the monstrous furniture was polished to a mirror shine. All was over-sized, over-embellished, over-expensive. *But who needs taste when you have money?* There were several big windows of the new design, large panes with little lead between them, offering a splendid view of the city, the bay, the ships within it. Magister Kault sat smiling at his vast gilt desk before the middle window in his fabulous robes of office, partly overshadowed by an enormous cabinet, the arms of the honourable Guild of Mercers etched into its doors.

Then he has not got away. I have him. I . . . Tied around the thick leg of the cabinet was a rope. Glokta followed it with his eyes as it snaked across the floor. The other end was tied around the Magister's neck. *Ah. So he does have a means of escape, after all.*

'Inquisitor Glokta!' Kault gave a squeaky, nervous laugh. 'What a pleasure to finally meet you! I've been hearing all about your investigations!' His fingers twitched at the knot on the rope, making sure it was tied securely.

'Is your collar too tight, Magister? Perhaps you should remove it?'

Another squeak of merriment. 'Oh, I don't think so! I don't intend to be answering any of your questions, thank you!' Out of the corner of his eye, Glokta saw a side door edging open. A big white hand appeared, fingers curling slowly round the door frame. *Frost. There is still hope of catching him, then. I must keep him talking.*

'There are no questions left to answer. We know it all.'

'Do you indeed?' giggled the Magister. The albino edged silently into the room, keeping to the shadows near the wall, hidden from Kault by the bulk of the cabinet.

'We know about Kalyne. About your little arrangement.'

'Imbecile! We had no arrangement! He was far too honourable to be bought! He would never take a mark from me!' *Then how . . .* Kault smiled a sick little smile. 'Sult's secretary,' he said, giggling again. 'Right under his nose, and yours too, cripple!' *Fool, fool – the secretary carried the messages, he saw the confession, he knew everything! I never trusted that smarmy shit. Kalyne was loyal, then.*

Glokta shrugged. 'We all make mistakes.'

The Magister gave a withering sneer. 'Mistakes? That's all you've made, dolt! The world is nothing like you think it is! You don't even know what side you're on! You don't even know what the sides are!'

'I am on the side of the King, and you are not. That is all I need to know.' Frost had made it to the cabinet and was pressed against it, pink eyes staring intently, trying to see round the corner without being seen. *Just a little longer, just a little further . . .*

'You know nothing, cripple! Some small business with tax, some petty bribery, that's all we were guilty of!'

'And the trifling matter of nine murders.'

‘We had no choice!’ screamed Kault. ‘We never had any choices! We had to pay the bankers! They loaned us the money, and we had to pay! We’ve been paying them for years! Valint and Balk, the bloodsuckers! We gave them everything, but they always wanted more!’

Valint and Balk? Bankers? Glokta threw an eye over the ridiculous opulence. ‘You seem to be keeping your head above water.’

‘Seem! Seem! All dust! All lies! The bankers own it all! They own us all! We owe them thousands! Millions!’ Kault giggled to himself. ‘But I don’t suppose they’ll ever get it now, will they?’

‘No. I don’t suppose they will.’

Kault leaned across the desk, the rope hanging down and brushing the leather top. ‘You want criminals, Glokta? You want traitors? Enemies of King and state? Look in the Closed Council. Look in the House of Questions. Look in the University. Look in the banks, Glokta!’ He saw Frost, edging round the cabinet no more than four strides away. His eyes went wide and he started up from his chair.

‘Get him!’ screamed Glokta. Frost sprang forward, lunged across the desk, caught hold of the flicking hem of Kault’s robe of office as the Magister span round and hurled himself at the window. *We have him!*

There was a sickening rip as the robe tore in Frost’s white fist. Kault seemed frozen in space for a moment as all that expensive glass shattered around him, shards and splinters glittering through the air, then he was gone. The rope snapped taut.

‘Thhhhh!’ hissed Frost, glaring at the broken window.

‘He jumped!’ gasped Jalenhorm, his mouth hanging open.

‘Clearly.’ Glokta limped over to the desk and took the ripped strip of cloth from Frost’s hands. Close up it scarcely seemed magnificent at all: brightly coloured but badly woven.

‘Who would have thought?’ muttered Glokta to himself. ‘Poor quality.’ He limped to the window and peered through the shattered hole. The head of the honourable Guild of Mercers was swinging slowly back and forth, twenty feet below, his torn, gold-embroidered gown flapping around him in the breeze. *Cheap clothes and expensive windows. If the cloth had been stronger we would have got him. If the window had more lead, we would have got him. Lives hinge on such chances.* Beneath him in the street a horrified crowd was already gathering: pointing, babbling, staring up at the

hanging body. A woman screamed. *Fear, or excitement? They sound the same.*

'Lieutenant, would you be so good as to go down and disperse that crowd? Then we can cut our friend loose and take him back with us.' Jalenhorm looked at him blankly. 'Dead or alive, the King's warrant must be served.'

'Yes, of course.' The burly officer wiped sweat from his forehead and made, somewhat unsteadily, for the door.

Glokta turned back to the window and peered down at the slowly swinging corpse. Magister Kault's last words echoed in his mind.

Look in the Closed Council. Look in the House of Questions. Look in the University. Look in the banks, Glokta!

Three Signs

West crashed onto his arse, one of his steels skittering out of his hands and across the cobbles. ‘That’s a touch!’ shouted Marshal Varuz, ‘A definite touch! Well fought, Jezal, well fought!’

West was starting to tire of losing. He was stronger than Jezal, and taller, with a better reach, but the cocky little bastard was quick. Damn quick, and getting quicker. He knew all of West’s tricks now, more or less, and if he kept improving at this rate he’d soon be beating him every time. Jezal knew it too. He had a smile of infuriating smugness on his face as he offered his hand to West and helped him up from the ground.

‘We’re getting somewhere now!’ Varuz slapped his stick against his leg in delight. ‘We may even have ourselves a champion, eh, Major?’

‘Very likely, sir,’ said West, rubbing at his elbow, bruised and throbbing from his fall. He looked sidelong at Jezal, basking in the warmth of the Marshal’s praise.

‘But we must not grow complacent!’

‘No, sir!’ said Jezal emphatically.

‘No indeed,’ said Varuz, ‘Major West is a capable fencer, of course, and you are privileged to have him as a partner but, well,’ and he grinned at West, ‘fencing is a young man’s game, eh, Major?’

‘Of course it is, sir,’ muttered West. ‘A young man’s game.’

‘Bremer dan Gorst, I expect, will be a different sort of opponent, as will the others at this year’s Contest. Less of the veteran’s cunning, perhaps, but more of the vigour of youth, eh West?’ West, at thirty, was still feeling somewhat vigorous, but there was no purpose in arguing. He knew he’d never been the most gifted swordsman in the world. ‘We have made great progress this past month, great progress. You have a chance, if you can maintain your focus. A definite chance! Well done! I will see you both tomorrow.’ And the old Marshal strutted from the sunny courtyard.

West walked over to his fumbled steel, lying on the cobbles by the wall. His side was still aching from the fall, and he had to bend awkwardly to get it. ‘I have to be going, myself,’ he grunted as he straightened up, trying to hide his discomfort as best he could.

‘Important business?’

‘Marshal Burr has asked to see me.’

‘Is it to be war then?’

‘Perhaps. I don’t know.’ West looked Jezal up and down. He was avoiding West’s eye for some reason. ‘And you? What have you got in mind for today?’

Jezal fiddled with his steels. ‘Er, nothing planned . . . not really. ’ He glanced up furtively. For such a good card player, the man was a useless liar.

West felt a niggling of worry. ‘Ardee wouldn’t be involved in your lack of plans would she?’

‘Erm ...’

The niggling became a cold throbbing. ‘Well?’

‘Maybe,’ snapped Jezal, ‘well . . . yes.’

West stepped right up to the younger man. ‘Jezal,’ he heard himself saying, slowly through gritted teeth, ‘I hope you’re not planning to fuck my sister.’

‘Now look here—’

The throbbing boiled over. West’s hands gripped hold of Jezal by his shoulders. ‘No, *you* look!’ he snarled. ‘I’ll not have her trifled with, you understand? She’s been hurt before, and I’ll not see her hurt any more! Not by you, not by anyone! I won’t stand for it! She’s not one of your games, you hear me?’

‘Alright,’ said Jezal, face suddenly pale. ‘Alright! I’ve no designs on her! We’re just friends is all. I like her! She doesn’t know anyone here and . . . you can trust me . . . there’s no harm in it! Ah! Get off me!’

West realised he was squeezing Jezal’s arms with all his strength. How had that happened? He’d only meant to have a quiet word, and now he’d gone way too far. Hurt before . . . damn it! He should never have said that! He let go suddenly, drew back, swallowing his fury. ‘I don’t want you seeing her any more, do you hear me?’

‘Now hold on West, who are you to—’

West’s anger began to pulse again. ‘Jezal,’ he growled, ‘I’m your friend, so I’m asking you.’ He stepped forward again, closer than ever. ‘And I’m her brother, so I’m warning you. Stay away! No good can come of it!’

Jezal shrank back against the wall. ‘Alright . . . alright! She’s your sister!’

West turned and stalked towards the archway, rubbing the back of his neck, his head thumping.

Lord Marshal Burr was sitting and staring out of the window when West arrived at his offices. A big, grim, beefy man with a thick brown beard and a simple uniform. West wondered how bad the news would be. If the Marshal's face was anything to go by it was very bad indeed.

'Major West,' he said, glaring up from under his heavy brows. 'Thank you for coming.'

'Of course, sir.' West noticed three roughly-made wooden boxes on a table by the wall. Burr saw him looking at them.

'Gifts,' he said sourly, 'from our friend in the north, Bethod.'

'Gifts?'

'For the King, it seems.' The Marshal scowled and sucked at his teeth. 'Why don't you have a look at what he sent us, Major?'

West walked over to the table, reached out and cautiously opened the lid of one of the boxes. An unpleasant smell flowed out, like well-rotted meat, but there was nothing inside but some brown dirt. He opened the next box. The smell was worse. More brown dirt, caked around the inside, and some hair, some strands of yellow hair. West swallowed, looked up at the frowning Lord Marshal. 'Is this all, sir?'

Burr snorted. 'If only. The rest we had to bury.'

'Bury?'

The Marshal picked up a sheet of paper from his desk. 'Captain Silber, Captain Hoss, Colonel Arinhorm. Those names mean anything to you?'

West felt sick. That smell. It reminded him of Gurkhul somehow, of the battlefield. 'Colonel Arinhorm, I know,' he mumbled, staring at the three boxes, 'by reputation. He's commander of the garrison at Dunbrec.'

'Was,' corrected Burr, 'and the other two commanded small outposts nearby, on the frontier.'

'The frontier?' mumbled West, but he already guessed what was coming.

'Their heads, Major. The Northmen sent us their heads.' West swallowed, looking at the yellow hairs stuck to the inside of the box. 'Three signs, they said, when it was time.' Burr got up from his chair and stood, looking out of the window. 'The outposts were nothing: wooden buildings mostly, a

palisade wall, ditches and so on, lightly manned. Little strategic importance. Dunbrec is another matter.'

'It commands the fords on the Whiteflow,' said West numbly, 'the best way out of Angland.'

'Or in. A vital point. Considerable time and resources were spent on the defences there. The very latest designs were used, our finest architects. A garrison of three hundred men, with stores of weapons and food to stand a year of siege. It was considered impregnable, the lynchpin of our plans for the defence of the frontier.' Burr frowned, deep grooves appearing across the bridge of his nose. 'Gone.'

West's head had started hurting again. 'When, sir?'

'When is the question. It must have been at least two weeks ago, for these "gifts" to have reached us. I am being called defeatist,' said Burr sourly, 'but I guess that the Northmen are loose and that, by now, they have overrun half of northern Angland. A mining community or two, several penal colonies, nothing so far of major importance, no towns to speak of, but they are coming, West, and fast, you may be sure of that. You don't send heads to your enemy, then wait politely for a reply.'

'What is being done?'

'Precious little! Angland is in uproar, of course. Lord Governor Meed is raising every man, determined to march out and beat Bethod on his own, the idiot. Varying reports place the Northmen anywhere and everywhere, with a thousand men or a hundred thousand. The ports are choked with civilians desperate to escape, rumours are rife of spies and murderers loose in the country, and mobs seek out citizens with Northern blood and beat them, rob them, or worse. Put simply, it is chaos. Meanwhile we sit here on our fat arses, waiting.'

'But . . . weren't we warned? Didn't we know?'

'Of course!' Burr threw his broad hand up in the air, 'but no one took it very seriously, would you believe! Damn painted savage stabs himself on the floor of the Open Council, challenges us before the King, and nothing is done! Government by committee! Everyone pulling their own way! You can only react, never prepare!' The Marshal coughed and burped, spat on the floor. 'Gah! Damn it! Damn indigestion!' He sat back in his chair, rubbing his stomach unhappily.

West hardly knew what to say. 'How do we proceed?' he mumbled.

‘We’ve been ordered north immediately, meaning as soon as anyone can be bothered to supply me with men and arms. The King, meaning that drunkard Hoff, has commanded me to bring these Northmen to heel. Twelve regiments of the King’s Own – seven of foot and five of horse, to be fleshed out with levies from the aristocracy, and whatever the Anglanders haven’t squandered before we get there.’

West shifted uncomfortably in his chair. ‘That should be an overwhelming force.’

‘Huh,’ grunted the Marshal. ‘It better be. It’s everything we have, more or less, and that worries me.’ West frowned. ‘Dagoska, Major. We cannot fight the Gurkish and the Northmen both at once.’

‘But surely, sir, the Gurkish, they wouldn’t risk another war so soon? I thought it was all idle talk?’

‘I hope so, I hope so.’ Burr pushed some papers absently around his desk. ‘But this new Emperor, Uthman, is not what we were expecting. He was the youngest son, but when he heard of his father’s death . . . he had all his brothers strangled. Strangled them himself, some say. Uthman-ul-Dosht, they are calling him. Uthman the Merciless. He has already declared his intention to recapture Dagoska. Empty talk, perhaps. Perhaps not.’ Burr pursed his lips. ‘They say he has spies everywhere. He might even now be learning of our troubles in Angland, might even now be preparing to take advantage of our weakness. We must be done quickly with these Northmen. Very quickly. Twelve regiments and levies from the noblemen. And from that point of view it could not be a worse time.’

‘Sir?’

‘This business with the Mercers. A bad business. Some of the big noblemen got stung. Brock, Isher, Barezin, and others. Now they’re dragging their feet with the levies. Who knows what they’ll send us, or when? Bunch of half-starved, unarmed beggars probably, an excuse to clean the scrapings from their land. A useless crowd of extra mouths to feed, and clothe, and arm, and we are desperately short of good officers.’

‘I have some good men in my battalion.’

Burr twitched impatiently. ‘Good men, yes! Honest men, enthusiastic men, but not experienced! Most of those who fought in the South did not enjoy it. They have left the army, and have no intention of returning. Have you seen how young the officers are these days? We’re a damn finishing

school! And now His Highness the Prince has expressed his interest in a command. He doesn't even know which end of a sword to hold, but he is set on glory and I cannot refuse him!'

'Prince Raynault?'

'If only!' shouted Burr. 'Raynault might actually be of some use! It's Ladisla I'm talking of! Commanding a division! A man who spends a thousand marks a month on clothes! His lack of discipline is notorious! I've heard it said that he's forced himself on more than one servant in the palace, but that the Arch Lector was able to silence the girls.'

'Surely not,' said West, although he had actually heard such a rumour himself.

'The heir to the throne, in harm's way, when the King is in poor health? A ludicrous notion!' Burr got up, burping and wincing. 'Damn this stomach!' He stalked over to the window and frowned out across the Agriont.

'They think it will be easily settled,' he said quietly. 'The Closed Council. A little jaunt in Angland, done with before the first snow falls. In spite of this shock with Dunbrec. They never learn. They said the same about our war with the Gurkish, and that nearly finished us. These Northmen are not the primitives they think. I fought with Northern mercenaries in Starikland: hard men used to hard lives, raised on warfare, fearless and stubborn, expert at fighting in the hills, in the forests, in the cold. They do not follow our rules, or even understand them. They will bring a violence and a savagery to the battlefield that would make the Gurkish blush.' Burr turned away from the window, back to West. 'You were born in Angland, weren't you, Major?'

'Yes, sir, in the south, near Ostenhorm. My family's farm was there, before my father died . . .' He trailed off.

'You were raised there?'

'Yes.'

'You know the land then?'

West frowned. 'In that region, sir, but I have not been back for—'

'Do you know these Northmen?'

'Some. There are still many living in Angland.'

'You speak their tongue?'

'Yes, a little, but they speak many—'

‘Good. I am putting together a staff, good men I can rely on to carry out my orders, and see to it that this army of ours does not fall apart before it even comes into contact with the enemy.’

‘Of course, sir.’ West racked his brains. ‘Captain Luthar is a capable and intelligent officer, Lieutenant Jalenhorm—’

‘Bah!’ shouted Burr, waving his hand in frustration, ‘I know Luthar, the boy’s a cretin! Just the sort of bright-eyed child that I was talking about! It’s you I need, West.’

‘Me?’

‘Yes, you! Marshal Varuz, the Union’s most famous soldier no less, has given you a glowing report. He says you are a most committed, tenacious, and hard-working officer. The very qualities I need! As a Lieutenant you fought in Gurkhul under Colonel Glokta, did you not?’

West swallowed. ‘Well, yes.’

‘And it is well known you were first through the breach at Ulrioch.’

‘Well, among the first, I was—’

‘You have led men in the field, and your personal courage is beyond question! There is no need to be modest, Major, you are the man for me!’ Burr sat back, a smile on his face, confident he had made his point. He burped again, holding up his hand. ‘My apologies . . . damn indigestion!’

‘Sir, may I be blunt?’

‘I am no courtier, West. You must always be blunt with me. I demand it!’

‘An appointment on a Lord Marshal’s staff, sir, you must understand. I am a gentleman’s son. A commoner. As commander of a battalion, I already have difficulty gaining the respect of the junior officers. The men I would have to give orders to if I were on your staff, sir, senior men with good blood . . .’ He paused, exasperated. The Marshal gazed blankly at him. ‘They will not permit it!’

Burr’s eyebrows drew together. ‘Permit it?’

‘Their pride will not allow it, sir, their—’

‘Damn their pride!’ Burr leaned forward, his dark eyes fixed on West’s face. ‘Now listen to me, and listen carefully. Times are changing. I don’t need men with good blood. I need men who can plan, and organise, give orders, and follow them. There will be no room in my army for those who cannot do as they are told, I don’t care how noble they are. As a member of my staff you represent me, and I will not be slighted or ignored.’ He burped

suddenly, and smashed the table with his fist. ‘I will see to it!’ he roared. ‘Times are changing! They may not smell it yet, but they soon will!’

West stared dumbly back. ‘In any case,’ and Burr waved a dismissive hand, ‘I am not consulting with you, I am informing you. This is your new assignment. Your King needs you, your country needs you, and that is all. You have five days to hand over command of your battalion.’ And the Lord Marshal turned back to his papers.

‘Yes, sir,’ muttered West.

He fumbled the door shut behind him with numb fingers, walked slowly down the hallway, staring at the floor. War. War in the North. Dunbrec fallen, the Northmen loose in Angland. Officers hurried around him. Someone brushed past, but he hardly noticed. There were people in danger, mortal danger! People he knew maybe, neighbours from home. There was fighting even now, inside the Union’s borders! He rubbed his jaw. This war could be a terrible thing. Worse than Gurkhul had been, even, and he would be at the heart of it. A place on a Lord Marshal’s staff. Him? Collem West? A commoner? He still could hardly believe it.

West felt a sneaking, guilty glow of satisfaction. It was for just such an appointment that he had been working like a dog all these years. If he did well there was no telling where he might go. This war was a bad thing, a terrible thing, no doubt. He felt himself grinning. A terrible thing. But it just might be the making of him.

The Theatrical Outfitter's

The deck creaked and shifted beneath his feet, the sail-cloth flapped gently, sea birds crowed and called in the salty air above.

'I never thought to see such a thing,' muttered Logen.

The city was a huge white crescent, stretching all round the wide blue bay, sprawling across many bridges, tiny in the distance, and onto rocky islands in the sea. Here and there green parks stood out from the confusion of buildings, the thin grey lines of rivers and canals shone in the sun. There were walls too, studded with towers, skirting the distant edge of the city and striking boldly through the jumble of houses. Logen's jaw hung stupidly open, his eyes darted here and there, unable to take in the whole.

'Adua,' murmured Bayaz. 'The centre of the world. The poets call her the city of white towers. Beautiful, isn't she, from a distance?' The Magus leaned towards him. 'Believe me, though, she stinks when you get close.'

A vast fortress rose up from within the city, its sheer white walls towering above the carpet of buildings outside, bright sunlight glinting on shining domes within. Logen had never dreamed of a man-made thing so great, so proud, so strong. One tower in particular rose high, high over all the others, a tapering cluster of smooth, dark pillars, seeming to support the very sky.

'And Bethod means to make war on this?' he whispered. 'He must be mad.'

'Perhaps. Bethod, for all his waste and pride, understands the Union.' Bayaz nodded towards the city. 'They are jealous of one another, all those people. It may be a union in name, but they fight each other tooth and nail. The lowly squabble over trifles. The great wage secret wars for power and wealth, and they call it government. Wars of words, and tricks, and guile, but no less bloody for that. The casualties are many.' The Magus sighed. 'Behind those walls they shout and argue and endlessly bite one another's backs. Old squabbles are never settled, but thrive, and put down roots, and the roots grow deeper with the passing years. It has always been so. They are not like you, Logen. A man here can smile, and fawn, and call you friend, give you gifts with one hand and stab you with the other. You will find this a strange place.'

Logen already found it the strangest thing he had ever seen. There was no end to it. As their boat slipped into the bay the city seemed to grow more vast than ever. A forest of white buildings, speckled with dark windows, embracing them on all sides, covering the hills in roofs and towers, crowding together, wall squashed to wall, pressing up against the water on the shoreline.

Ships and boats of all designs vied with each other in the bay, sails billowing, crewmen crying out over the noise of the spray, hurrying about the decks and crawling through the rigging. Some were smaller even than their own little two-sailed boat. Some were far larger. Logen gawped, amazed, as a huge vessel ploughed through the water towards them, shining spray flying from its prow. A mountain of wood, floating by some magic in the sea. The ship passed, leaving them rocking in its wake, but there were more, many more, tethered to the countless wharves along the shore.

Logen, shielding his eyes against the bright sun with one hand, began to make out people on the sprawling docks. He began to hear them too, a faint din of voices crying and carts rattling and cargoes clattering to the ground. There were hundreds of tiny figures, swarming among the ships and buildings like black ants. 'How many live here?' he whispered.

'Thousands.' Bayaz shrugged. 'Hundreds of thousands. People from every land within the Circle of the World. There are Northmen here, and dark-skinned Kantics from Gurkhul and beyond. People from the Old Empire, far to the west, and merchants of the Free Cities of Styria. Others too, from still further away – the Thousand Islands, distant Suljuk, and Thond, where they worship the sun. More people than can be counted – living, dying, working, breeding, climbing one upon the other. Welcome,' and Bayaz spread his arms wide to encompass the monstrous, the beautiful, the endless city, 'to civilisation!'

Hundreds of thousands. Logen struggled to understand it. Hundreds . . . of thousands. Could there be so many people in the world? He stared at the city, all around him, wondering, rubbing his aching eyes. What might a hundred thousand people look like?

An hour later he knew.

Only in battle had Logen ever been so squashed, hemmed, pressed by other people. It was like a battle, here on the docks – the cries, the anger, the crush, the fear and confusion. A battle in which no mercy was shown,

and which had no end and no winners. Logen was used to the open sky, the air around him, his own company. On the road, when Bayaz and Quai had ridden close beside him, he'd felt squeezed. Now there were people on every side, pushing, jostling, shouting. Hundreds of them! Thousands! Hundreds of thousands! Could they really all be people? People like him with thoughts and moods and dreams? Faces loomed up and flashed by – surly, anxious, frowning, gone in a sickening whirl of colour. Logen swallowed, blinked. His throat was painfully dry. His head span. Surely this was hell. He knew he deserved to be here, but he didn't remember dying.

'Malacus!' he hissed desperately. The apprentice looked round. 'Stop a moment!' Logen pulled at his collar, trying to let some air in. 'I can't breathe!'

Quai grinned. 'It might just be the smell.'

It might at that. The docks smelled like hell, and no mistake. The reek of stinking fish, sickly spices, rotting fruit, fresh dung, sweating horses and mules and people, mingled and bred under the hot sun and became worse by far than any one alone.

'Move!' A shoulder knocked Logen roughly aside and was gone. He leaned against a grimy wall and wiped sweat from his face.

Bayaz was smiling. 'Not like the wide and barren North, eh, Ninefingers?'

'No.' Logen watched the people milling past – the horses, the carts, the endless faces. A man stared suspiciously at him as he passed. A boy pointed at him and shouted something. A woman with a basket gave him a wide berth, staring fearfully up as she hurried by. Now he had a moment to think, they were all looking, and pointing, and staring, and they didn't look happy.

Logen leaned down to Malacus. 'I am feared and hated throughout the North. I don't like it, but I know why.' A sullen group of sailors stared at him with hard eyes, muttering to each other under their breath. He watched them, puzzled, until they disappeared behind a rumbling wagon. 'Why do they hate me here?'

'Bethod has moved quickly,' muttered Bayaz, frowning out at the crowds. 'His war with the Union has already begun. We will not find the North too popular in Adua, I fear.'

'How do they know where I'm from?'

Malacus raised an eyebrow. 'You stick out somewhat.'

Logen flinched as a pair of laughing youths flashed by him. ‘I do? Among all this?’

‘Only like a huge, scarred, dirty gatepost.’

‘Ah.’ He looked down at himself. ‘I see.’

Away from the docks the crowds grew sparser, the air cleaner, the noise faded. It was still teeming, stinking, and noisy, but at least Logen could take a breath.

They passed across wide paved squares, decorated with plants and statues, where brightly-painted wooden signs hung over doors – blue fish, pink pigs, purple bunches of grapes, brown loaves of bread. There were tables and chairs out in the sun where people sat and ate from flat pots, drank from green glass cups. They threaded through narrow alleys, where rickety-looking wood and plaster buildings leaned out over them, almost meeting above their heads, leaving only a thin strip of blue sky between. They wandered down wide, cobbled roads, busy with people and lined with monstrous white buildings. Logen blinked and gaped at all of it.

On no moor, however foggy, in no forest, however dense, had Logen ever felt so completely lost. He had no idea now in what direction the boat was, though they’d left it no more than half an hour ago. The sun was hidden behind the towering buildings and everything looked the same. He was terrified he’d lose track of Bayaz and Quai in the crowds, and be lost forever. He hurried after the back of the wizard’s bald head, following him into an open space. A great road, bigger than any they’d seen so far, bounded on either side by white palaces behind high walls and fences, lined with ancient trees.

The people here were different. Their clothes were bright and gaudy, cut in strange styles that served no purpose. The women hardly seemed like people at all – pale and bony, swaddled in shining fabric, flapping at themselves in the hot sun with pieces of cloth stretched over sticks.

‘Where are we?’ he shouted at Bayaz. If the wizard had answered that they were on the moon, Logen would not have been surprised.

‘This is the Middleway, one of the city’s main thoroughfares! It cuts through the very centre of the city to the Agriont!’

‘Agriont?’

‘Fortress, palace, barracks, seat of government. A city within the city. The heart of the Union. That’s where we’re going.’

‘We are?’ A group of sour young men stared suspiciously at Logen as he passed them. ‘Will they let us in?’

‘Oh yes. But they won’t like it.’

Logen struggled on through the crowds. Everywhere the sun twinkled on the panes of glass windows, hundreds of them. Carleon had a few glass windows in the grandest buildings, at least before they’d sacked the city. Precious few afterwards, it had to be admitted. Precious little of anything. The Dogman had loved the sound the glass made as it broke. He’d prodded at the windows with a spear, a great big smile on his face, delighted by the crash and tinkle.

That had hardly been the worst of it. Bethod had given the city to his Carls for three days. That was his custom, and they loved him for it. Logen had lost his finger in the battle the day before, and they’d closed the wound with hot iron. It throbbed, and throbbed, and the pain had made him savage. As though he’d needed an excuse for violence back then. He remembered the stink of blood, and sweat, and smoke. The sounds of screaming, and crashing, and laughter.

‘Please . . .’ Logen tripped, nearly fell. There was something clinging to his leg. A woman, sitting on the ground beside a wall. Her clothes were dirty, ragged, her face was pale, pinched with hunger. She had something in her arms. A bundle of rags. A child. ‘Please . . .’ Nothing else. The people laughed and chattered and surged around them, just as if they weren’t there. ‘Please ...’

‘I don’t have anything,’ he muttered. No more than five strides away a man in a tall hat sat at a table and chuckled with a friend as he tucked into a steaming plate of meat and vegetables. Logen blinked at the plate of food, at the starving woman.

‘Logen! Come on!’ Bayaz had taken him by the elbow and was drawing him away.

‘But shouldn’t we—’

‘Haven’t you noticed? They’re everywhere! The King needs money, so he squeezes the nobles. The nobles squeeze their tenants, the tenants squeeze the peasants. Some of them, the old, the weak, the extra sons and daughters,

they get squeezed right out the bottom. Too many mouths to feed. The lucky ones make thieves or whores, the rest end up begging.'

'But—'

'Clear the road!' Logen stumbled to the wall and pressed himself against it, Malacus and Bayaz beside him. The crowds parted and a long column of men tramped by, shepherded by armoured guards. Some were young, mere boys, some were very old. All were dirty and ragged, and few of them looked healthy. A couple were clearly lame, hobbling along as best they could. One near the front had only one arm. A passer-by in a fabulous crimson jacket held a square of cloth over his wrinkled nose as the beggars shuffled past.

'What are these?' Logen whispered to Bayaz. 'Law-breakers?'

The Magus chuckled. 'Soldiers.'

Logen stared at them – filthy, coughing, limping, some without boots. 'Soldiers? These?'

'Oh yes. They go to fight Bethod.'

Logen rubbed at his temples. 'A clan once sent their poorest warrior, a man called Forley the Weakest, to fight me in a duel. They meant it by way of surrender. Why does this Union send their weakest?' Logen shook his head grimly. 'They won't beat Bethod with such as these.'

'They will send others.' Bayaz pointed out another, smaller gathering. 'Those are soldiers too.'

'Those?' A group of tall youths, dressed in gaudy suits of red or bright green cloth, a couple with outsize hats. They were at least wearing swords, of a kind, but they hardly looked like fighting men. Fighting women, maybe. Logen frowned, staring from one group to the other. The dirty beggars, the gaudy lads. It was hard for him to say which were the stranger.

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A tiny bell jingled as the door opened, and Logen followed Bayaz through the low archway, Malacus behind him. The shop was dim after the bright street and it took Logen's eyes a moment to adjust. Leaning against a wall were sheets of wood, childishly daubed with pictures of buildings, forests, mountains. Strange clothes were draped over stands beside them – flowing

robes, lurid gowns, suits of armour, enormous hats and helmets, rings and jewellery, even a heavy crown. Weapons occupied a small rack, swords and spears richly decorated. Logen stepped closer, frowning. They were fakes. Nothing was real. The weapons were painted wood, the crown was made of flaking tin, the jewels were coloured glass.

'What is this place?'

Bayaz was casting an eye over the robes by the wall. 'A theatrical outfitter's.'

'A what?'

'The people of this city love spectacle. Comedy, drama, theatre of all kinds. This shop provides equipment for the mounting of plays.'

'Stories?' Logen poked at a wooden sword. 'Some people have too much time on their hands.'

A small, plump man emerged from a door at the back of the shop, looking Bayaz, Malacus and Logen over suspiciously. 'Can I help you, gentlemen?'

'Of course.' Bayaz stepped forward, switching effortlessly to the common tongue. 'We are mounting a production, and require some costumes. We understand you are the foremost theatrical outfitter's in all of Adua.'

The shopkeeper smiled nervously, taking in their grimy faces and travel stained clothes. 'True, true, but . . . er . . . quality is expensive, gentlemen.'

'Money is no object.' Bayaz took out a bulging purse and tossed it absently on the counter. It sagged open, heavy golden coins scattering across the wood.

The shopkeeper's eyes lit with an inner fire. 'Of course! What precisely did you have in mind?'

'I need a magnificent robe, suitable for a Magus, or a great sorcerer, or some such. Something of the arcane about it, certainly. Then we'll have something similar, if less impressive, for an apprentice. Finally we need something for a mighty warrior, a prince of the distant North. Something with fur, I imagine.'

'Those should be straightforward. I will see what we have.' The shopkeeper disappeared through the door behind the counter.

'What is all this shit?' asked Logen.

The wizard grinned. 'People are born to their station here. They have commoners, to fight, and farm the land, and do the work. They have gentry, to trade, and build and do the thinking. They have nobility, to own the land

and push the others around. They have royalty . . .' Bayaz glanced at the tin crown '. . . I forget exactly why. In the North you can rise as high as your merits will take you. Only look at our mutual friend, Bethod. Not so here. A man is born in his place and is expected to stay there. We must seem to be from a high place indeed, if we are to be taken seriously. Dressed as we are we wouldn't get past the gates of the Agriont.'

The shopkeeper interrupted him by reappearing through the door, his arms heaped with bright cloth. 'One mystical robe, suitable for the most powerful of wizards! Used last year for a Juvens in a production of *The End of the Empire*, during the spring festival. It is, if I may say so, some of my best work.' Bayaz held the shimmering swathe of crimson cloth up to the faint light, gazing at it admiringly. Arcane diagrams, mystical lettering, and symbols of sun, moon and stars, glittered in silver thread.

Malacus ran a hand over the shining cloth of his own absurd garment. 'I don't think you'd have laughed me off so quickly, eh, Logen, if I'd arrived at your campfire dressed in this?'

Logen winced. 'I reckon I might've.'

'And here we have a splendid piece of barbarian garb.' The shopkeeper hefted a black leather tunic onto the counter, set with swirls of shiny brass, trimmed with pointless tissues of delicate chain-mail. He pointed at the matching fur cloak. 'This is real sable!' It was a ludicrous piece of clothing, equally useless for warmth or protection.

Logen folded his arms across his old coat. 'You think I'm going to wear that?'

The shopkeeper swallowed nervously. 'You must forgive my friend,' said Bayaz. 'He is an actor after the new fashion. He believes in losing himself entirely in his role.'

'Is that so?' squeaked the man, looking Logen up and down. 'Northmen are . . . I suppose . . . topical.'

'Absolutely. I do declare, Master Ninefingers is the very best at what he does.' The old wizard nudged Logen in the ribs. 'The very best. I have seen it.'

'If you say so.' The shopkeeper looked far from convinced. 'Might I enquire what you will be staging?'

'Oh, it's a new piece.' Bayaz tapped the side of his bald head with a finger. 'I am still working on the details.'

‘Really?’

‘Indeed. More a scene than an entire play.’ He glanced back at the robe, admiring the way the light glittered on the arcane symbols. ‘A scene in which Bayaz, the First of the Magi, finally takes up his seat on the Closed Council.’

‘Ah,’ the shopkeeper nodded knowingly. ‘A political piece. A biting satire, perhaps? Will it be comic, or dramatic in tone?’

Bayaz glanced sidelong at Logen. ‘That remains to be seen.’

Barbarians at the Gate

Jezal flashed along the lane beside the moat, feet pounding on the worn cobblestones, the great white wall sliding endlessly by on his right, one tower after another, as he made his daily circuit of the Agriont. Since he had cut down on the drinking the improvement in his stamina had been impressive. He was scarcely even out of breath. It was early and the streets of the city were nearly empty. The odd person would look up at him as he ran by, maybe even call out some word of encouragement, but Jezal barely noticed them. His eyes were fixed on the sparkling, lapping water in the moat, and his mind was elsewhere.

Ardee. Where else was it ever? He had supposed, after that day when West had warned him off, after he had stopped seeing her, that his thoughts would soon return to other matters, and other women. He had applied himself to his fencing with a will, attempted to show an interest in his duties as an officer, but he found himself unable to concentrate, and other women seemed now pale, flat, tedious creatures. The long runs, the monotonous exercises with bar and beam, gave his mind ample opportunity to wander. The tedium of peacetime soldiering was even worse: reading boring papers, standing guard on things that needed no guarding. His attention would inevitably slip, and then she would be there.

Ardee in wholesome peasant garb, flushed and sweaty from hard work in the fields. Ardee in the finery of a princess, glittering with jewels. Ardee bathing in forest pools, while he watched from the bushes. Ardee proper and demure, glancing shyly up at him from beneath her lashes. Ardee a whore by the docks, beckoning to him from a grimy doorway. The fantasies were infinite in variety, but they all ended the same way.

His hour-long circuit of the Agriont was complete and he thumped across the bridge and back in through the south gate.

Jezal treated the guards to their daily share of indifference, trotted through the tunnel and up the long ramp into the fortress, then turned towards the courtyard where Marshal Varuz would be waiting. All the while, Ardee was rubbing up against the back of his mind.

It was hardly as though he had nothing else to think about. The Contest was close now, very close. Soon he would fight before the cheering crowds, his family and friends among them. It might make his reputation . . . or sink it. He should have been lying awake at night, tense and sweating, worrying endlessly about forms, and training, and steels. And yet somehow that wasn't what he thought about in bed.

Then there was a war on. It was easy to forget, here in the sunny lanes of the Agriont, that Angland had been invaded by hordes of slavering barbarians. He would be going north soon, to lead his company in battle. There, surely, was a thought to keep a man occupied. Was not war a deadly business? He could be hurt, or scarred, or killed even. Jezal tried to conjure up the twisting, twitching, painted face of Fenris the Feared. Legions of screaming savages descending upon the Agriont. It was a terrible business alright, a dangerous and frightening business.

Hmmm.

Ardee came from Angland. What if, say, she were to fall into the hands of the Northmen? Jezal would rush to her rescue, of course. She would not be hurt. Well, not badly. Perhaps her clothes a little torn, like so? No doubt she would be frightened, grateful. He would be obliged to comfort her, of course. She might even faint? He might have to carry her, her head pressed against his shoulder. He might have to lay her down and loosen her clothes. Their lips might touch, just brush gently, hers might part a little, then . . .

Jezal stumbled in the road. There was a pleasant swelling building in his crotch. Pleasant, but hardly compatible with a brisk run. He was nearly at the courtyard now, and this would never do at fencing practice. He glanced desperately around for a distraction, and nearly choked on his tongue. Major West was standing by the wall, dressed to fence and watching him approach with an unusually grim expression. For an instant, Jezal wondered if his friend might be able to tell what he had been thinking. He swallowed guiltily, felt the blood rushing to his face. West couldn't know, he couldn't. But he was most unhappy about something.

'Luthar,' he grunted.

'West.' Jezal stared down at his shoes. They had not been getting on too well since West joined Lord Marshal Burr's staff. Jezal tried to be happy for him, but could not escape the feeling that he was better qualified for the post. He had excellent blood after all, whether he had experience in the field

or not. Then Ardee was still lurking between them, that unpleasant and needless warning. Everyone knew that West had been first through the breach at Ulrioch. Everyone knew that he had the devil of a temper. That had always seemed exciting to Jezal, until he got on the wrong end of it.

'Varuz is waiting.' West unfolded his arms and strode off towards the archway, 'and he's not alone.'

'Not alone?'

'The Marshal feels you need to get used to an audience.'

Jezal frowned. 'I'm surprised anyone cares in the present climate, what with the war and all.'

'You'd be surprised. Fighting and fencing and all things martial are very much the flavour. Everyone's wearing a sword these days, even if they've never drawn one in their lives. There's an absolute fever about the Contest, believe me.'

Jezal blinked as they passed into the bright courtyard. A stand of temporary seating had been hastily erected along one wall, packed from one end to the other with people, three score or more.

'And here he is!' shouted Marshal Varuz. There was a ripple of polite applause. Jezal felt himself grinning – there were some very important people in amongst the crowd. He spotted Marovia, the Lord High Justice, stroking his long beard. Lord Isher was not far away from him, looking slightly bored. Crown Prince Ladisla himself was lounging on the front row, shining in a shirt of gossamer chain-mail and clapping enthusiastically. The people on the benches behind had to lean over to see round the waving plume on his magnificent hat.

Varuz handed Jezal his steels, still beaming. 'Don't you dare make me look a fool!' he hissed. Jezal coughed nervously, looking up at the rows of expectant people. His heart sank. Inquisitor Glokta's toothless grin leered at him from the crowd, and on the row behind him . . . Ardee West. She was wearing an expression that she never had in his daydreams: one third sullen, one third accusing, one third simply bored. He glanced away, staring toward the opposite wall, inwardly cursing his own cowardice. He seemed unable to meet anyone's eye these days.

'This bout will be fought with half-edged steels!' thundered the Lord Marshal. 'The best of three touches!' West already had his swords drawn and was making his way to the circle, marked out with white chalk in the

carefully shaved grass. Jezal's heart was hammering loud as he fumbled his own steels out of their sheaths, acutely aware of all those eyes upon him. He took his mark opposite West, pushing his feet cautiously into the grass. West raised his steels, Jezal did the same. They faced each other for a moment, motionless.

'Begin!' shouted Varuz.

It quickly became clear that West had no mind to roll over for him. He came on with more than his usual ferocity, harrying Jezal with a flurry of heavy cuts, their steels clashing and scraping rapidly together. He gave ground, still uncomfortable under the watchful eyes of all those people, damned important people some of them, but as West pushed him back towards the edge of the circle, his nerves began to fade, his training took over. He ducked away, making room for himself, parrying the cuts with left and right, dodging and dancing, too fast to catch.

The people faded, even Ardee was gone. The blades moved by themselves, back and forth, up and down. There was no need for him to look at them. He turned his attention to West's eyes, watched them flicker from the ground to the steels to Jezal's dancing feet, trying to guess his intentions.

He felt the lunge coming even before it was begun. He feinted one way then turned the other, slipping smoothly round behind West as he blundered past. It was a simple matter for him to apply his foot to the seat of his opponent's trousers and shove him out of the circle.

'A touch!' shouted Marshal Varuz.

There was a ripple of laughter as the Major sprawled on his face. 'A touch on the arse!' guffawed the Crown Prince, his plume waving back and forth with merriment. 'One to Captain Luthar!' West didn't look half so intimidating with his face in the dirt. Jezal gave a little bow to the audience, risked a smile in Ardee's direction as he rose. He was disappointed to see she wasn't even looking at him. She was watching her brother struggle in the dust with a faint, cruel grin.

West got slowly to his feet. 'A good touch,' he muttered through gritted teeth as he stepped back into the circle. Jezal took his own mark, barely able to suppress his smile.

'Begin!' shouted Varuz.

West came on strongly again, but Jezal was warming to his task now. The sounds of the audience muttered and swelled as he danced this way and that. He began to work the odd flourish into his movements, and the onlookers responded, ‘oohs’ and ‘aahs’ floating up as he flicked West’s efforts away. He had never fenced so well, never moved so smoothly. The bigger man was starting to tire a little, the snap was going out of his cuts. Their long steels clashed together, scraped. Jezal twisted his right wrist and tore West’s blade from his fingers, stepped in and slashed at him with his left.

‘Gah!’ West winced and dropped his short steel, hopping away and grabbing his forearm. A few drops of blood pattered across the ground.

‘Two to nothing!’ shouted Varuz.

The Crown Prince jumped up, his hat tumbling off, delighted by the sight of blood. ‘Excellent!’ he squawked, ‘capital!’ Others joined him on their feet, clapping loudly. Jezal basked in their approval, smiling wide, every muscle tingling with happiness. He understood now what he had been training for.

‘Well fought, Jezal,’ muttered West, a trickle of blood running down his forearm. ‘You’ve got too good for me.’

‘Sorry about the cut.’ Jezal grinned. He wasn’t sorry in the least.

‘It’s nothing. Just a scratch.’ West strode away, frowning and holding his wrist. Nobody paid much attention to his exit, Jezal least of all. Sporting events are all about the winners.

Lord Marovia was the first to get up from the benches and offer his congratulations. ‘What a promising young man,’ he said, smiling warmly at Jezal, ‘but do you think he can beat Bremer dan Gorst?’

Varuz gave Jezal a fatherly clap on the shoulder. ‘I’m sure he can beat anyone, on the right day.’

‘Hmm. Have you seen Gorst fence?’

‘No, though I hear he is most impressive.’

‘Oh, indeed – he is a devil.’ The High Justice raised his bushy eyebrows. ‘I look forward to seeing them meet. Have you ever considered a career in the law, Captain Luthar?’

Jezal was taken by surprise. ‘Er, no, your Worship, that is . . . I am a soldier.’

‘Of course you are. But battles and so forth can play hell with the nerves. If you should ever change your mind, perhaps I might have a place for you. I can always find a use for promising men.’

‘Er, thank you.’

‘Until the Contest then. Good luck, Captain,’ he threw over his shoulder as he shuffled away. The implication was that he thought Jezal would need a great deal of it. His Highness Prince Ladisla was more optimistic.

‘You’re my man, Luthar!’ he shouted, poking the air with his fingers as though they were fencing steels. ‘I’m going to double my bet on you!’

Jezal bowed obsequiously. ‘Your Highness is too kind.’

‘You’re my man! A soldier! A fencing man should fight for his country, eh, Varuz? Why isn’t this Gorst a soldier?’

‘I believe he is, your Highness,’ said the Lord Marshal gently. ‘He is a kinsman of Lord Brock, and serves with his personal guard.’

‘Oh.’ The Prince seemed confused for a moment, but soon perked up. ‘But you’re my man!’ he shouted at Jezal, poking once more with his fingers, the feather on his hat waving this way and that. ‘You’re the man for me!’ He danced off towards the archway, decorative chain-mail gleaming.

‘Very impressive.’ Jezal whipped round, took an ungainly step back. Glokta, leering at him from his blind side. For a cripple, he had an uncanny knack of sneaking up on a man. ‘What a happy chance for everyone that you didn’t give it up after all.’

‘I never had any intention of doing so,’ snapped Jezal frostily.

Glokta sucked at his gums. ‘If you say so, Captain.’

‘I do.’ Jezal turned rudely away, hoping that he never had occasion to speak to the loathsome man again. He found himself staring straight into Ardee’s face, no more than a foot away.

‘Gah,’ he stammered, stepping back again.

‘Jezal,’ she said, ‘I haven’t seen you in a while.’

‘Er . . .’ He glanced nervously around. Glokta was shambling away. West was long gone. Varuz was busy holding forth to Lord Isher and a few others still remaining in the courtyard. They were unobserved. He had to speak to her. He ought to tell her straight out that he could not see her anymore. He owed her that much. ‘Er ...’

‘Nothing to say to me?’

‘Er . . .’ He turned swiftly on his heel and walked away, his shoulders prickling with shame.

The tedium of guard duty at the south gate seemed, after all that unexpected excitement, almost a mercy. Jezal was quite looking forward to standing idly by, watching people file in and out of the Agriont, listening to Lieutenant Kaspa’s mindless babble. At least, he was until he got there.

Kaspa and the usual complement of armoured soldiers were clustered around the outer gates, where the old bridge across the moat passed between the two massive, white rendered towers of the gatehouse. As Jezal marched down to the end of the long tunnel he saw that there was someone with them. A small, harassed-looking fellow wearing spectacles. Jezal recognised him vaguely. Morrow he was called, some crony of the Lord Chamberlain. He had no reason to be here.

‘Captain Luthar, what a happy chance!’ Jezal jumped. It was that lunatic, Sulfur, sitting cross-legged on the ground behind him, his back against the sheer wall of the gatehouse.

‘What the hell’s he doing here?’ snapped Jezal. Kaspa opened his mouth to speak, but Sulfur got in first.

‘Don’t mind me, Captain, I’m simply waiting for my master.’

‘Your master?’ He dreaded to think what manner of an idiot this idiot might serve.

‘Indeed. He should be here very shortly.’ Sulfur frowned up at the sun. ‘He is already somewhat tardy, if the truth be told.’

‘Really?’

‘Yes.’ The madman broke into a friendly smile once more. ‘But he’ll be along, Jezal, you can depend on it.’

First-name terms was too much to take. He hardly knew the man, and what he knew he didn’t like. He opened his mouth to give him a piece of his mind, but Sulfur suddenly jumped up, grabbing his stick from the wall and brushing himself down.

‘Here they are!’ he said, looking out across the moat. Jezal followed the idiot’s eyes with his own.

A magnificent old man was striding purposefully across the bridge, bald head held high, a fabulous gown of shimmering red and silver flowing about him in the breeze. At his heels came a sickly-looking youth, head a

little bowed as if in awe of the older man, holding a long staff out before him in upturned palms. A great brute of a man in a heavy fur cloak followed behind them, a good half head taller than the other two.

'What the . . .' Jezal trailed off. He seemed to recognise the old man from somewhere. Some lord perhaps, from the Open Council? Some foreign ambassador? Certainly he had an air of majesty. Jezal racked his brains as they approached, but could not place him.

The old man stopped before the gatehouse, swept Jezal, Kaspa, Morrow and the guards imperiously with glittering green eyes. 'Yoru,' he said.

Sulfur stepped forward, bowing low. 'Master Bayaz,' he murmured, in hushed tones of deep respect.

And that was it. That was why Jezal knew the man. He bore a definite resemblance to the statue of Bayaz in the Kingsway. The statue Jezal had run past so many times. A little fatter perhaps, but that expression: stern, wise, effortlessly commanding, was just the same. Jezal frowned. For the old man to be called by that name? He didn't like it. He didn't like the look of the lanky young man with the staff either. He liked the look of the old man's other companion even less.

West had often told Jezal that the Northmen found in Adua, usually skulking dishevelled by the docks or dirty drunk in gutters, were by no means typical of their people. Those that lived free in the far North, fighting, feuding, feasting, and doing whatever Northmen did, were of quite a different kind. A tall, fierce, handsome people, Jezal had always imagined, with a touch of romance about them. Strong, yet graceful. Wild, yet noble. Savage, yet cunning. The kind of men whose eyes are fixed always on the far horizon.

This was not one of those.

Never in his life had Jezal seen a more brutish-looking man. Even Fenris the Feared had seemed civilised by comparison. His face was like a whipped back, criss-crossed with ragged scars.

His nose was bent, pointing off a little sideways. One ear had a big notch out of it, one eye seemed a touch higher than the other, surrounded by a crescent-shaped wound. His whole face, in fact, was slightly beaten, broken, lop-sided, like that of a prize fighter who has fought a few bouts too many. His expression too, was that of one punch-drunk. He gawped up at

the gatehouse, forehead furrowed, mouth hanging open, staring about him with a look of near animal stupidity.

He wore a long fur cloak, and a leather tunic set with gold, but this height of barbaric splendour only made him look more savage, and there was no missing the long, heavy sword at his belt. The Northman scratched at a big pink scar through the stubble on his cheek as he peered up at the sheer walls above, and Jezal noticed one of his fingers was missing. As though any further evidence of a life of violence and savagery was necessary.

To let this hulking primitive into the Agriont? While they were at war with the Northmen? It was unthinkable! But Morrow was already sidling forward. 'The Lord Chamberlain is expecting you, gentlemen,' he gushed as he bowed and scraped his way towards the old man, 'if you would care to follow me—'

'One moment.' Jezal grabbed the under-secretary by the elbow and pulled him aside. 'Him too?' he asked incredulously, nodding over at the primitive in the cloak. 'We are at war, you know!'

'Lord Hoff was most specific!' Morrow shook his arm free, spectacles flashing. 'Keep him here if you wish, but you can explain it to the Lord Chamberlain!'

Jezal swallowed. That idea was not at all appealing. He glanced up at the old man, but could not look him in the eye for long. He had a mysterious air, an air of knowing something no one else could guess, and it was most unsettling.

'You . . . must . . . leave . . . your . . . weapons . . . here!' he shouted, speaking as slowly and clearly as possible.

'Happy to.' The Northman pulled the sword from his belt and held it out. It weighed heavily in Jezal's hands: a big, plain, brutal-looking weapon. He followed it with a long knife, then knelt and pulled another from his boot. He took a third from the small of his back, and then produced a thin blade from inside his sleeve, heaping them into Jezal's outstretched arms. The Northman smiled broadly. It was truly a hideous sight, the ragged scars twisting and puckering, making his face more lop-sided than ever.

'You can never have too many knives,' he growled in a deep, grinding voice. Nobody laughed, but he did not seem to care.

'Shall we go?' asked the old man.

'Without delay,' said Morrow, turning to leave.

‘I’ll come with you.’ Jezal dumped his armload of weapons into Kaspa’s hands.

‘That really isn’t necessary, Captain,’ whined Morrow.

‘I insist.’ Once he was delivered to the Lord Chamberlain, the Northman could murder whomever he pleased: it would be someone else’s problem. But until he got there Jezal might be blamed for whatever mischief he got up to, and he was damned if he was going to let that happen.

The guards stood aside, the strange procession passed through the gate. Morrow was first, whispering obsequious nothings over his shoulder to the old man in the splendid robe. The pale youth was next, followed by Sulfur. The nine-fingered Northman lumbered along at the back.

Jezal followed with his thumb in his belt, close to the hilt of his sword so he could get to it quickly, watching the savage intently for any sudden moves. After following him for a short while though, Jezal had to admit, the man gave no appearance of having murder in mind. If anything he looked curious, bemused, and somewhat embarrassed. He kept slowing, staring up at the buildings around him, shaking his head, scratching his face, muttering under his breath. He would occasionally horrify passers-by by smiling at them, but he seemed to present no greater threat and Jezal began to relax, at least until they reached the Square of Marshals.

The Northman stopped suddenly. Jezal fumbled for his sword, but the primitive’s eyes were locked ahead, gazing at a fountain nearby. He moved slowly towards it, then cautiously raised a thick finger and poked at the glittering jet. Water splashed into his face and he blundered away, almost knocking Jezal down. ‘A spring?’ he whispered. ‘But how?’

Mercy. The man was like a child. A six and a half foot child with a face like a butcher’s block. ‘There are pipes!’ Jezal stamped on the paving. ‘Beneath . . . the . . . ground!’

‘Pipes,’ echoed the primitive quietly, staring at the frothing water.

The others had moved some way ahead, close to the grand building in which Hoff had his offices. Jezal began to step away from the fountain, hoping to draw the witless savage with him. To Jezal’s relief he followed, shaking his head and muttering ‘pipes’ to himself, over and over.

They entered the cool darkness of the Lord Chamberlain’s ante-room. There were people seated on the benches around the walls, some of them giving the impression of having been waiting a very long time. They all

stared as Morrow ushered the peculiar group straight into Hoff's offices. The spectacled secretary opened the heavy double doors and stood by while first the old bald man, then his crony with the stick, then the madman Sulfur, and finally the nine-fingered primitive walked in past him.

Jezal made to follow them, but Morrow stood in the doorway and blocked his path. 'Thank you so much for your help, Captain,' he said with a thin smile. 'You may return to the gate.' Jezal peered over his shoulder into the room beyond. He saw the Lord Chamberlain frowning behind a long table. Arch Lector Sult was beside him, grim and suspicious. High Justice Marovia was there too, a smile on his wrinkled face. Three members of the Closed Council.

Then Morrow shut the door in his face.

Next

‘**I** notice you have a new secretary,’ said Glokta, as though just in passing. The Arch Lector smiled. ‘Of course. The old one was not to my liking. He had a loose tongue, you know.’ Glokta paused, his wine glass halfway to his mouth. ‘He had been passing our secrets on to the Mercers,’ continued Sult carelessly, as if it was common knowledge. ‘I had been aware of it for some time. You needn’t worry though, he never learned anything I didn’t want him to know.’

Then . . . you knew who our traitor was. You knew all along. Glokta’s mind turned the events of the last few weeks around, pulled them apart and put them back together in this new light, trying them different ways until they fit, all the while struggling to conceal his surprise. *You left Rews’ confession where you knew your secretary would see it. You knew the Mercers would find out who was on the list, and you guessed what they would do, knowing it would only play into your hands and give you the shovel with which to bury them. Meanwhile, you steered my suspicions towards Kalyne when you knew who the leak was all along. The whole business unfolded precisely according to your plan.* The Arch Lector was looking back at him with a knowing smile. *And I bet you guess what I’m thinking right now. I have been almost as much a piece in this game as that snivelling worm of a secretary.* Glokta stifled a giggle. *How fortunate for me that I was a piece on the right side. I never suspected a thing.*

‘He betrayed us for a disappointingly small sum of money,’ continued Sult, his lip curling with distaste. ‘I daresay Kault would have given him ten times as much, if he had only had the wit to ask. The younger generation really have no ambition. They think they are a great deal cleverer than they are.’ He studied Glokta with his cool blue eyes. *I am part of the younger generation, more or less. I am justly humbled.*

‘Your secretary has been disciplined?’

The Arch Lector placed his glass carefully down on the table top, the base barely making a sound on the wood. ‘Oh yes. Most severely. It really isn’t necessary to spare him any further thought.’ *I bet it isn’t. Body found floating by the docks* . . . ‘I must say, I was greatly surprised when you fixed

on Superior Kalyne as the source of our leak. The man was from the old guard. A few indulgences to look the other way over trifling matters, of course, but to betray the Inquisition? To sell our secrets to the Mercers?' Sult snorted. 'Never. You allowed your personal dislike for the man to cloud your judgement.'

'He seemed the only possibility,' muttered Glokta, but immediately regretted it. *Foolish, foolish. The mistake is made. Better just to keep your mouth shut.*

'Seemed?' The Arch Lector clicked his tongue in profound disapproval. 'No, no, no, Inquisitor. Seemed is not good enough for us. In future, we'll have just the facts, if you please. But don't feel too badly about it – I allowed you to follow your instincts and, as things have turned out, your blunder has left our position much the stronger. Kalyne has been removed from office,' *Body found floating* . . . 'and Superior Goyle is on his way from Angland to assume the role of Superior of Adua.'

Goyle? Coming here? That bastard, the new Superior of Adua? Glokta could not prevent his lip from curling.

'The two of you are not the greatest of friends, eh, Glokta?'

'He is a jailer, not an investigator. He is not interested in guilt or innocence. He is not interested in truth. He tortures for the thrill of it.'

'Oh, come now, Glokta. Are you telling me you feel no thrill when your prisoners spill their secrets? When they name the names? When they sign the confession?'

'I take no pleasure in it.' *I take no pleasure in anything.*

'And yet you do it so very well. In any case, Goyle is coming, and whatever you may think of him, he is one of us. A most capable and trustworthy man, dedicated to the service of crown and state. He was once a pupil of mine, you know.'

'Really?'

'Yes. He had your job . . . so there is some future in it after all!' The Arch Lector giggled at his own joke. Glokta gave a thin smile of his own. 'All in all, things have worked out very nicely, and you are to be congratulated on your part in it. A job well done.' *Well enough done that I am still alive, at least.* Sult raised his glass and they drank a joyless toast together, eyeing each other suspiciously over the rims of their glasses.

Glokta cleared his throat. ‘Magister Kault mentioned something interesting before his unfortunate demise.’

‘Go on.’

‘The Mercers had a partner in their schemes. A senior partner, perhaps. A bank.’

‘Huh. Turn a merchant over and there’s always a banker underneath. What of it?’

‘I believe these bankers knew about it all. The smuggling, the fraud, the murders even. I believe they encouraged it, maybe ordered it, so that they could get a good return on their loans. May I begin an investigation, your Eminence?’

‘Which bank?’

‘Valint and Balk.’

The Arch Lector seemed to consider a moment, staring at Glokta through his hard, blue eyes. *Does he already know about these particular bankers? Does he already know much more than me? What did Kault say? You want traitors, Glokta? Look in the House of Questions—*

‘No,’ snapped Sult. ‘Those particular bankers are well connected. They are owed too many favours, and without Kault it will be difficult to prove anything. We got what we needed from the Mercers, and I have a more pressing task for you.’

Glokta looked up. *Another task?* ‘I was looking forward to interviewing the prisoners we took at the Guildhall, your Eminence, it may be that—’

‘No.’ The Arch Lector swatted Glokta’s words away with his gloved hand. ‘That business could drag on for months. I will have Goyle handle it.’ He frowned. ‘Unless you object?’

So I plough the field, sow the seed, water the crop, then Goyle reaps the harvest? Some justice. He humbly bowed his head. ‘Of course not, your Eminence.’

‘Good. You are probably aware of the unusual visitors we received yesterday.’

Visitors? For the past week Glokta had been in agony with his back. Yesterday he had struggled out of bed to watch that cretin Luthar fence, but otherwise he had been confined to his tiny room, virtually unable to move. ‘I hadn’t noticed,’ he said simply.

‘Bayaz, the First of the Magi.’ Glokta gave his thin smile again, but the Arch Lector was not laughing.

‘You’re joking, of course.’

‘If only.’

‘A charlatan, your Eminence?’

‘What else? But a most extraordinary one. Lucid, reasonable, clever. The deception is elaborate in the extreme.’

‘You have spoken with him?’

‘I have. He is remarkably convincing. He knows things, things he shouldn’t know. He cannot be simply dismissed. Whoever he is, he has funding, and good sources of information.’ The Arch Lector frowned deep. ‘He has some renegade brute of a Northman with him.’

Glokta frowned. ‘A Northman? It hardly seems their style. They strike me as most direct.’

‘My very thoughts.’

‘A spy for the Emperor then? The Gurkish?’

‘Perhaps. The Kantics love a good intrigue, but they tend to stick to the shadows. These theatricals don’t seem to have their mark. I suspect our answer may lie closer to home.’

‘The nobles, your Eminence? Brock? Isher? Heugen?’

‘Perhaps,’ mused Sult, ‘perhaps. They’re annoyed enough. Or there’s our old friend, the High Justice. He seemed a little too pleased about it all. He’s plotting something, I can tell.’

The nobles, the High Justice, the Northmen, the Gurkish – it could be any one of them, or none – but why? ‘I don’t understand, Arch Lector. If they are simply spies, why go to all this trouble? Surely there are easier ways to get into the Agriont?’

‘This is the thing.’ Sult gave as bitter a grimace as Glokta had ever seen. ‘There is an empty seat on the Closed Council, there always has been. A pointless tradition, a matter of etiquette, a chair reserved for a mythical figure, in any case dead for hundreds of years. Nobody ever supposed that anyone would come forward to claim it.’

‘But he has?’

‘He has! He has demanded it!’ The Arch Lector got to his feet and strode around the table. ‘I know! Unthinkable! Some spy, some liar from who knows where, privy to the workings of the very heart of our government!

But he has some dusty papers, so it falls to *us* to discredit *him*! Can you believe it?'

Glokta could not. *But there hardly seems any purpose to saying so.*

'I have asked for time to investigate,' continued Sult, 'but the Closed Council will not be put off indefinitely. We have only a week or two to expose this so-called Magus for the fraud he is. In the mean time, he and his companions are making themselves at home in an excellent suite of rooms in the Tower of Chains, and there is nothing we can do to prevent them wandering the Agriont, causing whatever mischief they please!' *There is something we could do . . .*

'The Tower of Chains is very high. If somebody were to fall—'

'No. Not yet. We have already pushed our luck as far as it will go in certain circles. For the time being at least, we must tread carefully.'

'There is always the possibility of an interrogation. If we were to arrest them, I could soon find out who they are working for—'

'Tread carefully, I said! I want you to look into this Magus, Glokta, and his companions. Find out who they are, where they come from, what they are after. Above all, find out who is behind them, and why. We must discredit this would-be Bayaz before he can do any damage. After that you can use whatever means you please.' Sult turned and moved away to the window.

Glokta got up awkwardly, painfully from his chair. 'How shall I begin?'

'Follow them!' shouted the Arch Lector impatiently. 'Watch them! See who they speak to, what they are about. You're the Inquisitor, Glokta!' he snapped, without even looking round. 'Ask some questions!'

Better than Death

‘We’re looking for a woman,’ said the officer, staring at them suspiciously. ‘ An escaped slave, a killer. Very dangerous.’

‘A woman, master?’ asked Yulwei, his brow wrinkled with confusion. ‘Dangerous, master?’

‘Yes, a woman!’ The officer waved his hand impatiently. ‘Tall, with a scar, hair cropped short. Well-armed, most likely, with a bow.’ Ferro stood there, tall and scarred, hair cropped short, bow over her shoulder, and looked down at the dusty ground. ‘She is wanted, by the highest of authorities! A thief and a murderer, many times over!’

Yulwei gave a humble smile and spread his hands. ‘We have seen no such person master. I and my son are unarmed, as you can see.’ Ferro looked down uncomfortably at the curved blade of the sword stuck through her belt, shining in the bright sun. The officer didn’t seem to notice though. He swatted at a fly as Yulwei blathered on. ‘Neither one of us would know what to do with such a thing as a bow, I can assure you. We trust in God to protect us, master, and in the Emperor’s matchless soldiers.’

The officer snorted. ‘Very wise, old man. What’s your business here?’

‘I am a merchant, on my way to Dagoska, to purchase spices,’ and he gave a grovelling bow, ‘with your kind permission.’

‘Trading with the pinks are you? Damn Union!’ The officer spat in the dust. ‘Still, a man has to make a living, I suppose, if a shameful one. Trade while you can, the pinks will be gone soon, swept back into the ocean!’ He puffed out his chest with pride. ‘The Emperor, Uthman-ul-Dosht, has sworn it! What do you think of that, old man?’

‘Oh, it will be a great day, a great day,’ said Yulwei, bowing low again, ‘may God bring it to us soon, master!’

The officer looked Ferro up and down. ‘Your son looks a strong lad. Perhaps he’d make a soldier.’ He took a step towards her and grabbed hold of her bare arm. ‘That’s a strong arm. That arm could draw a bow, I’d say, if it were taught. What do you say, boy? A man’s work, fighting for the glory of God, and your Emperor! Better than grubbing for a pittance!’ Ferro’s

flesh crawled where his fingers touched her skin. Her other hand crept towards her knife.

'Alas,' said Yulwei quickly, 'my son was born . . . simple. He scarcely speaks.'

'Ah. A shame. The time may come when we need every man. Savages they may be, but these pinks can fight.' The officer turned away and Ferro scowled after him. 'Very well, you may go!' He waved them on. The eyes of his soldiers, lounging in the shade of the palms around the road, followed them as they walked past, but without much interest.

Ferro held her tongue until the encampment had dwindled into the distance behind them, then she rounded on Yulwei. 'Dagoska?'

'To begin with,' said the old man, staring off across the scrubby plain. 'And then north.'

'North?'

'Across the Circle Sea to Adua.'

Across the sea? She stopped in the road. 'I'm not fucking going there!'

'Must you make everything so difficult, Ferro? Are you that happy here in Gurkhul?'

'These northerners are mad, everyone knows it! Pinks, Union, or whatever. Mad! Godless!'

Yulwei raised an eyebrow at her. 'I didn't know you were so interested in God, Ferro.'

'At least I know there is one!' she shouted, pointing at the sky. 'These pinks, they don't think like us, like real people! We've no business with their kind! I'd rather stay among the Gurkish! Besides, I've scores to settle here.'

'What scores? Going to kill Uthman?'

She frowned. 'Perhaps I will.'

'Huh.' Yulwei turned and headed off up the road. 'They're looking for you, Ferro, in case you hadn't noticed. You wouldn't get ten strides without my help. They've still got that cage waiting, remember? The one in front of the palace? They are anxious to fill it.' Ferro ground her teeth. 'Uthman is the Emperor now. Ul-Dosht, they call him. The mighty! The merciless! Greatest Emperor for a hundred years, they are saying already. Kill the Emperor!' Yulwei chuckled to himself. 'You're quite a character alright. Quite a character.'

Ferro scowled as she followed the old man up the hill. She wasn't looking to be anyone's character. Yulwei could make these soldiers see whatever he pleased, and that was a smart trick, but she'd be damned if she was going north. What business did she have with those godless pinks?

Yulwei was still chuckling away as she drew level with him. 'Kill the Emperor.' He shook his head. 'He'll just have to wait until you get back. You owe me, remember?'

Ferro grabbed him by the sinewy arm. 'I don't remember you saying anything about crossing the sea!'

'I don't remember your asking, Maljinn, and you should be glad you didn't!' He peeled her fingers gently away. 'Your corpse might be drying nicely in the desert, instead of grumbling in my ear, all sleek and healthy – think on that a while.'

That shut her up for the time being. She walked along in silence, scowling out across the scrubby landscape, sandals crunching on the dry dirt of the road. She looked sidelong at the old man. He'd saved her life with his tricks, that couldn't be denied.

But she'd be damned if she was going north.

The fortress was concealed in a rocky cove, but from where they were, high up on the bluff with the fierce sun behind them, Ferro could see the shape of it well enough. A high wall enclosed neat rows of buildings, enough to make a small town. Next to the them, built out into the water, were long wharves. Moored to the wharves were ships.

Huge ships.

Towers of wood, floating fortresses. Ferro had never seen ships half that size. Their masts were a dark forest against the bright water behind. Ten were docked below them, and further out in the bay two more were cutting slowly through the waves, great sails billowing, tiny figures crawling on the decks and in amongst the spider's web of ropes above.

'I see twelve,' murmured Yulwei, 'but your eyes are the sharper.'

Ferro looked out across the water. Further round the curving shore, twenty miles away perhaps, she could see another fortress, another set of wharves. 'There are more over there,' she said, 'eight or nine, and those ones are bigger.'

'Bigger than these?'

‘A lot bigger.’

‘God’s breath!’ muttered Yulwei to himself. ‘The Gurkish never built ships so big before, not half so big, nor half so many. There is not the wood in all the South for such a fleet. They must have bought it from the north, from the Styrians, maybe.’

Ferro cared nothing for boats, or wood, or the north. ‘So?’ ‘With a fleet this size, the Gurkish will be a power at sea. They could take Dagoska from the bay, invade Westport even.’

The pointless names of far-away places. ‘So?’

‘You don’t understand, Ferro. I must warn the others. We must make haste, now!’ He pushed himself up from the ground and hurried back towards the road.

Ferro grunted. She watched the big wooden tubs moving back and forth in the bay for a moment longer, then she got up and followed Yulwei. Great ships or tiny ships, it meant nothing to her. The Gurkish could take all the pinks in the world for slaves as far as she was concerned.

If that meant they left the real people alone.

‘Out of the way!’ The soldier spurred his horse right at them, raising his whip.

‘A thousand pardons, master!’ whined Yulwei, grovelling to the ground, scuttling off into the grass beside the road, pulling Ferro reluctantly by the elbow. She stood in the scrub, watching the column shamble slowly by. Thin figures, ragged, dirty, vacant, hands bound tightly, hollow eyes on the ground. Men and women, all ages, children even. A hundred or more. Six guards rode alongside them, easy in their tall saddles, whips rolled up in their hands.

‘Slaves.’ Ferro licked her dry lips.

‘The people of Kadir have risen up,’ said Yulwei, frowning at the miserable procession. ‘They wished no longer to be part of the glorious nation of Gurkhul, and thought the death of the Emperor might be their chance to leave. It seems they were wrong. The new Emperor is harder even than the last, eh, Ferro?

Their rebellion has failed already. It seems your friend Uthman has taken slaves as punishment.’

Ferro watched a scrawny girl limping slowly, bare feet trailing in the dust. Thirteen years old? It was hard to tell. Her face was dirty and listless. There was a scabby cut across her forehead, others on the back of her arm. Whip marks. Ferro swallowed, watched the girl toiling along. An old man, just in front of her, tripped and sprawled face first into the road, making the whole column stumble to a halt.

'Move!' barked one of the riders, spurring his horse forward. 'On your feet!' The old man struggled in the dust. 'Move!' The soldier's whip cracked, leaving a long red mark across the man's scrawny back. Ferro twitched and winced at the sound, and her back began to tingle.

Where the scars were.

Almost as if she'd been whipped herself.

No one whips Ferro Maljinn and lives. Not any more. She shrugged the bow off her shoulder.

'Peace, Ferro!' hissed Yulwei, grabbing her by the arm. 'There's nothing you can do for them!'

The girl bent down, helping the old slave to his feet. The whip cracked again, catching them both, and there was a yelp of pain. Was it the girl or the man who had cried out?

Or had it been Ferro herself?

She shook Yulwei's hand off, reaching for an arrow. 'I can kill this bastard!' she snarled. The soldier's head snapped round to look at them, curious. Yulwei seized hold of her hand.

'What then?' he hissed. 'If you killed all six of them, what then? Have you food and water for a hundred slaves? Eh? You have it well concealed! And when the column is missed? Eh? And their guards found slaughtered? What then, killer? Will you hide a hundred slaves out here? Because I cannot!'

Ferro stared into Yulwei's black eyes, her teeth grinding together, her breath snorting fast through her nose. She wondered whether or not to try and kill him again.

No.

He was right, damn him. Slowly, she pushed the anger back, as far down as it would go. She shoved the arrow away, and turned back towards the column. She watched the old slave stumble on, and the girl after him, fury gnawing at her guts like hunger.

‘You!’ called the soldier, nudging his horse over towards them.

‘You’ve done it now!’ hissed Yulwei, then he bowed to the guard, smiling, scraping. ‘My apologies master, my son is . . .’

‘Shut your mouth, old man!’ The soldier looked down at Ferro from his saddle. ‘Well, boy, do you like her?’

‘What?’ she hissed, through gritted teeth.

‘No need to be shy,’ chuckled the soldier, ‘I’ve seen you looking. ’ He turned towards the column. ‘Hold them up there!’ he shouted, and the slaves stumbled to a halt. He leaned from his saddle and grabbed the scrawny girl under the armpit, dragging her roughly out of the column.

‘She’s a good one,’ he said, pulling her towards Ferro. ‘Bit young, but she’s ready. Clean up nice, she will. Bit of a limp but that’ll heal, we’ve been driving ’em hard. Good teeth . . . show him your teeth, bitch!’ The girl’s cracked lips curled back slowly. ‘Good teeth. What do you say boy? Ten in gold for her! It’s a good price!’

Ferro stood there, staring. The girl looked dumbly back with big, dead eyes.

‘Look,’ said the soldier, leaning down from his saddle. ‘She’s worth twice that, and there’s no danger in it! When we get to Shaffa, I’ll tell them she died out here in the dust. No one will wonder at that, it happens all the time! I get ten, and you save ten! Everyone wins!’

Everyone wins. Ferro stared up at the guard. He pulled his helmet off, wiped his forehead with the back of his hand. ‘Peace, Ferro,’ whispered Yulwei.

‘Alright, eight!’ Shouted the soldier. ‘She’s got a nice smile! Show him a smile, bitch!’ The corner of the girl’s mouth twitched slightly. ‘There, see! Eight, and you’re stealing from me!’

Ferro’s fists were clenched, nails digging into her palms. ‘Peace, Ferro,’ whispered Yulwei, with a warning note in his voice.

‘God’s teeth but you drive a bargain boy! Seven, and that’s my last offer. Seven, damn it!’ The soldier waved his helmet around in frustration. ‘Use her gently, in five years she’ll be worth more! It’s an investment!’

The soldier’s face was just a few feet away. She could see each tiny bead of sweat forming on his forehead, each stubbly hair on his cheeks, each blemish, nick, and pore on his skin. She could smell him, almost.

The truly thirsty will drink piss, or salt water, or oil, however bad for them, so great is their need to drink. Ferro had seen it often in the badlands. That was the extent of her need to kill this man now. She wanted to tear him with her bare hands, to choke the life from him, to rip his face with her teeth. The desire was almost too strong to resist. ‘Peace!’ hissed Yulwei.

‘I can’t afford her,’ Ferro heard herself saying.

‘You might have said so before, boy, and saved me the trouble!’ The soldier stuck his helmet back on. ‘Still, I can’t blame you for looking. She’s a good one.’ He reached down and grabbed the girl under the arm, dragging her back towards the others. ‘They’ll get twenty for her in Shaffa!’ he shouted over his shoulder. The column moved on. Ferro watched the girl until the slaves disappeared over a rise, stumbling, limping, shambling towards slavery.

She felt cold now, cold and empty. She wished she had killed the guard, whatever the cost. Killing him could have filled that empty space, if only for a while. That was how it worked. ‘I walked in a column like that,’ she said slowly.

Yulwei gave a long sigh. ‘I know, Ferro, I know, but fate has chosen you for saving. Be grateful for it, if you know how.’

‘You should have let me kill him.’

‘Eugh,’ clucked the old man in disgust, ‘I do declare, you’d kill the whole world if you could. Is there anything but killing in you Ferro?’

‘There used to be,’ she muttered, ‘but they whip it out of you. They whip you until they’re sure there’s nothing left.’ Yulwei stood there, with that pitying look on his face. Strange, how it didn’t make her angry any more.

‘I’m sorry, Ferro. Sorry for you and for them.’ He stepped back into the road, shaking his head. ‘But it’s better than death.’

She stayed for a moment, watching the dust rising from the distant column.

‘The same,’ she whispered to herself.

Sore Thumb

Logen leaned against the parapet, squinted into the morning sun, and took in the view. He'd done the same, it felt long ago now, from the balcony of his room at the library. The two views could hardly have been more different. Sunrise over the jagged carpet of buildings on the one hand, hot and glaring bright and full of distant noise. The cold and misty valley on the other, soft and empty and still as death. He remembered that morning, remembered how he'd felt like a different man. He certainly felt a different man now. A stupid man. Small, scared, ugly, and confused.

'Logen.' Malacus stepped out onto the balcony to stand beside him, smiled up at the sun and out over the city to the sparkling bay, already busy with ships. 'Beautiful, isn't it?'

'If you say so, but I'm not sure I see it. All those people.' Logen gave a sweaty shiver. 'It's not right. It frightens me.'

'Frightened? You?'

'Always.' Logen had barely slept since they arrived. It was never properly dark here, never properly quiet. It was too hot, too close, too stinking. Enemies might be terrifying, but enemies could be fought, and put an end to. Logen could understand their hatred. There was no fighting the faceless, careless, rumbling city. It hated everything. 'This is no place for me. I'll be glad to leave.'

'We might not be leaving for a while.'

'I know.' Logen took a deep breath. 'That's why I'm going to go down and look at this Agriont, and find out what I can about it. Some things have to be done. It's better to do them than to live with the fear of them. That's what my father used to tell me.'

'Good advice. I'll come with you.'

'You will not.' Bayaz was in the doorway, glaring out at his apprentice. 'Your progress over the last few weeks has been a disgrace, even for you.' He stepped through into the open air. 'I suggest that while we are idle, waiting on His Majesty's pleasure, you should take the opportunity to study. Another such chance may be a long time coming.'

Malacus hurried back inside with no backward glances. He knew better than to dawdle with his master in this mood. Bayaz had lost all his good humour as soon as they arrived at the Agriont, and it didn't look like coming back. Logen could hardly blame him, they'd been treated more like prisoners than guests. He didn't know much about manners, but he could guess the meaning of hard stares from everyone and guards outside the door.

'You wouldn't believe how it's grown,' growled Bayaz, frowning out at the great sweep of city. 'I remember when Adua was barely more than a huddle of shacks, squeezed in round the House of the Maker like flies round a fresh turd. Before there was an Agriont. Before there was a Union, even. They weren't half so proud in those days, I can tell you. They worshipped the Maker like a god.'

He noisily hawked up a lump of phlegm and spat it out into the air. Logen watched it clear the moat and vanish somewhere in amongst the white buildings below. 'I gave them this,' hissed Bayaz. Logen felt the unpleasant creeping sensation that always seemed to accompany the old wizard's displeasure. 'I gave them freedom, and this is the thanks I get? The scorn of clerks? Of swollen-headed old errand-boys?' A trip down into the suspicion and madness below began to seem like a merciful release. Logen edged towards the door and ducked back into the room beyond.

If they were prisoners here then Logen had been in some harder cells, he had to admit. Their round living room was fit for a King, to his mind at least: heavy chairs of dark wood with delicate carvings, thick hangings on the walls showing woods and hunting scenes. Bethod would most likely have felt at home in such a room. Logen felt like an oaf there, always on his toes in case he broke something. A tall jar stood on a table in the chamber's centre, its sides painted with bright flowers. Logen eyed it suspiciously as he made for the long stair down into the Agriont.

'Logen!' Bayaz was framed in the doorway, frowning after him. 'Take care. The place may seem strange, but the people are stranger still.'

The water frothed and gurgled, spurting up in a narrow jet from a metal tube carved like a fish's mouth, then splashing back down into a wide stone basin. A fountain, the proud young man had called it. Pipes, beneath the earth, he'd said. Logen pictured underground streams, coursing just beneath

his feet, washing at the foundations of the place. The thought made him feel slightly dizzy.

The square was vast – a great plain of flat stones, hemmed in by sheer cliffs of white buildings. Hollow cliffs, covered with pillars and carvings, glittering with tall windows, crawling with people. Something strange seemed to be happening today. All around the distant edges of the square an enormous, sloping structure of wooden beams was being built. An army of workmen swarmed over it, hacking and bludgeoning, swinging at pegs and joints, hurling bad-tempered shouts at each other. All around them were mountains of planks and logs, barrels of nails, stacks of tools, enough to build ten mighty halls, and more besides. In places the structure was already far above the ground, its uprights soaring into the air like the masts of great ships, as high as the monstrous buildings behind.

Logen stood, hands on hips, gawping at the enormous wooden skeleton, but its purpose was a mystery. He stepped up to a short muscular man in a leather apron, sawing furiously at a plank. 'What's this?'

'Eh?' The man didn't even look up from his task.

'This. What's it for?'

The saw bit through the wood, the off-cut clattered to the ground. The carpenter hefted the rest of the plank onto a pile nearby. He turned round, eyeing Logen suspiciously, wiping sweat from his glistening forehead.

'Stands. Seating.' Logen stared vacantly back at him. How could something stand and sit at once? 'For the Contest!' the carpenter shouted in his face. Logen backed slowly away. Gibberish. Nonsense words. He turned and hurried off, keeping well clear of the huge wooden structures and the men clambering over them.

He blundered out onto a broad lane, a deep gorge between looming white buildings. Statues faced each other down either side, much larger than life, frowning over the heads of the many people hurrying between. The nearest of the carvings seemed strangely familiar. Logen walked over to it, looked it up and down, then grinned to himself. The First of the Magi had gained some weight since it was sculpted. Too much good eating at the library, maybe. Logen turned towards a small man with a black hat, walking by with a big book under his arm.

'Bayaz,' he said, pointing up at the statue. 'Friend of mine.' The man stared at him, at the statue, back at him, and hurried away.

The carvings marched on down either side of the avenue. Kings of the Union, Logen guessed, stood in line on the left. Some carried swords, some scrolls or tiny ships. One had a dog at his feet, another a sheaf of wheat under his arm, but otherwise there wasn't much to tell them apart. They all had the same tall crowns and the same stern frowns. You wouldn't have thought to look at them that they'd ever said a stupid word, or done a stupid thing, or had to take a shit in all their lives.

Logen heard rapid footsteps thumping up behind him, and he turned just in time to see the proud young man from the gate, pounding down the avenue, shirt soaked through with sweat. Logen wondered where he might be going in such a hurry, but he was damned if he was going to run to catch up with him, not in this heat. Anyway, there were plenty more mysteries that needed solving.

The lane opened out into a great, green space, scooped out from the country by giant hands and dropped in amongst the tall buildings, but like no countryside that Logen had ever seen. The grass was a smooth, even blanket of vivid green, shaved almost to the ground. There were flowers, but growing in rows and circles and straight lines of bright colour. There were lush bushes and trees, all squeezed and fenced and clipped into unnatural shapes. There was water, too – streams bubbling over stone steps, a great flat pond with sad-looking trees trailing round its edge.

Logen wandered through this square-edged greenery, boots crunching on a path made of tiny grey stones. There were lots of people gathered here, squeezed in together to enjoy the sun. They sat in boats on the miniature lake, rowing gently round and round, going nowhere. They lazed on the lawns, ate, drank and babbled to one another. Some of them would point at Logen and shout, or whisper, or slope away.

They were a strange-seeming crowd, especially the women. Pale and ghostly, swaddled in elaborate dresses, hair scraped up and piled and stuck through with pins and combs and great weird feathers or useless tiny hats. They seemed like the big jar in the round chamber – too thin and delicate to be any use, and further spoiled by too much decoration. But it had been a long time, and he smiled at them cheerfully, on the off chance. Some looked shocked, others gasped in horror. Logen sighed. The old magic was still there.

Further on, in another wide square, Logen stopped to watch a group of soldiers practice. These weren't beggars, or girlish youths, these were solid-looking men wearing heavy armour, breastplates and greaves polished mirror bright, long spears shouldered. They stood together, each man the same as the one beside, in four squares of maybe fifty men each, still as the statues in the avenue.

At a bellow from a short man in a red jacket – their chief, Logen reckoned – the whole crowd turned, levelled their spears and began to advance across the square, heavy boots tramping together. Each man the same, armed the same, moving the same. It was quite a sight, all that shining metal moving steadily in bristling squares, spear points glittering, like some great square hedgehog with two hundred legs. Deadly enough, no doubt, on a big flat space, against an imaginary enemy right in front. How it would work on broken rocks, in the tipping rain, in a tangled wood, Logen was less sure. Those men would tire quickly, in all that weight of armour, and if the squares could be broken, what would they do? Men who were used to always having others at their shoulder? Could they fight alone?

He plodded on, through wide courtyards and neat gardens, past gurgling fountains and proud statues, down clean lanes and broad avenues. He wandered up and down narrow stairways, across bridges over streams, over roads, over other bridges. He saw guards in a dozen different splendid liveries, guarding a hundred different gates and walls and doors, every one eyeing him with the same deep suspicion. The sun climbed in the sky, the tall white buildings slid by until Logen was footsore and half lost, his neck aching from looking always upwards.

The only constant was the monstrous tower which loomed high, high over everything else, making the greatest of the great buildings seem mean. It was always there, glimpsed out of the corner of your eye, peering over the tops of the roofs in the distance. Logen's footsteps dragged him slowly closer and closer to it, until he came to a neglected corner of the citadel in its very shadow.

He found an old bench beside a ragged lawn near a great crumbling building, coated with moss and ivy, its steep roofs sagging in the middles and missing tiles. He slumped down, puffing out his cheeks, and frowned up at that enormous shape beyond the walls, cut out dark against the blue, a man made mountain of dry, stark, dead stones. No plants clung to that

looming mass, not even a clump of moss in the cracks between the great blocks. The House of the Maker, Bayaz had called it. It looked like no house that Logen had ever seen. There were no roofs above, no doors or windows in those naked walls. A cluster of mighty, sharp-edged tiers of rock. What need could there ever be to build a thing so big? Who was this Maker anyway? Was this all he made? A great big, useless house?

'You mind if I sit?' There was a woman looking down at Logen, more what he would have called a woman than those strange, ghostly things in the park. A pretty woman in a white dress, face framed by dark hair.

'Do I mind? No. It's a funny thing, but no one else wants to sit with me.'

She dropped down at the far end of the bench, resting her chin on her hands, her elbows on her knees, gazing up without interest at the looming tower. 'Perhaps they're afraid of you.'

Logen watched a man hurry past with a sheaf of papers under his arm, staring at him with wide eyes. 'I'm starting to think the same thing.'

'You do look a little dangerous.'

'Hideous is the word you're looking for.'

'I usually find the words I'm looking for, and I say dangerous.'

'Well, looks can lie.'

She lifted an eyebrow, looking him slowly up and down. 'You must be a man of peace then.'

'Huh . . . not entirely.' They looked at each other sidelong. She didn't seem afraid, or scornful, or even interested. 'Why aren't you scared?'

'I'm from Angland, I know your people. Besides,' and she let her head drop onto the back of the bench, 'no one else will talk to me. I'm desperate.'

Logen stared at the stump of his middle finger, waggled it back and forth as far as it would go. 'You'd have to be. I'm Logen.'

'Good for you. I'm nobody.'

'Everybody's somebody.'

'Not me. I'm nothing. I'm invisible.'

Logen frowned at her, turned sideways to him, lounging back on the bench in the sun, her long smooth neck stretched out, chest rising and falling gently. 'I see you.'

She rolled her head to look at him. 'You . . . are a gentleman.'

Logen snorted with laughter. He'd been called a lot of things in his time, but never that. The young woman didn't join him in his amusement. 'I don't belong here,' she muttered to herself.

'Neither one of us.'

'No. But this is my home.' She got up from the bench. 'Goodbye, Logen.'

'Fare you well, nobody.' He watched her turn and walk slowly away, shaking his head. Bayaz had been right. The place was strange, but the people were stranger still.

Logen woke with a painful start, blinked and stared wildly about him. Dark. Not quite entirely dark, of course, there was still the ever-present glow of the city. He thought he'd heard something, but there was nothing now. It was hot. Hot and close and strangling, even with the sticky draught from the open window. He groaned, threw the damp blankets down around his waist, rubbed the sweat from his chest and wiped it on the wall behind him. The light nagged at his eyelids. And that was not the worst of his problems. Say one thing for Logen Ninefingers, say that he needs to piss.

Unfortunately, you couldn't just piss in a pot in this place. They had a special thing, like a flat wooden shelf with a hole in it, in a little room. He'd peered down into that hole when they first arrived, wondering what it could be for. It seemed like a long way down, and it smelled bad. Malacus had explained it to him. A pointless and barbaric invention. You had to sit there, on the hard wood, an unpleasant draught blowing round your fruits. But that was civilisation, so far as Logen could tell. People with nothing better to do, dreaming up ways to make easy things difficult.

He floundered out of bed and picked his way to where he remembered the door being, bent over with his arms feeling about in front of him. Too light to sleep, but too dark to actually see anything. 'Fucking civilisation,' he muttered to himself as he fumbled with the latch on the door, sliding his bare feet cautiously into the big circular room at the centre of their chambers.

It was cool in here, very cool. The cold air felt good on his bare skin after the damp heat of his bedroom. Why wasn't he sleeping in here, instead of that oven next door? He squinted at the shadowy walls, face all screwed up with the painful fuzz of sleep, trying to work out which blurry door led to the pissing-shelf. Knowing his luck he'd probably blunder into Bayaz' room

and accidentally piss on the First of the Magi while he was asleep. That would be just the thing to sweeten the wizard's temper.

He took a step forward. There was a clunk and a rattle as his leg barged into the corner of the table. He cursed, grabbing at his bruised shin – then he remembered the jar. He lunged and caught it by the rim just before it fell. His eyes were adjusting to the half-light now, and he could just make out the flowers painted on the cold, shiny surface. He moved to put it back on the table, but then it occurred to him. Why go any further when he had a perfectly good pot right there? He glanced furtively round the room, swinging the jar into position . . . then froze.

He was not alone.

A tall, slender figure, vague in the half-light. He could just make out long hair, blowing gently in the breeze from the open window. He strained against the darkness, but he couldn't see the face.

'Logen . . .' A woman's voice, soft and low. He didn't like the sound of it one bit. It was cold in the room, very cold. He took a firm grip on the jar.

'Who are you?' he croaked, voice suddenly loud in the dead stillness. Was he dreaming? He shook his head, squeezed the jar in his hand. It all felt real. Horribly real.

'Logen . . .' The woman moved silently towards him. Soft light from the window caught the side of her face. A white cheek, a shadowy eye-socket, the corner of a mouth, then sunk in darkness again. There was something familiar . . . Logen's mind fumbled for it as he backed away, eyes fixed on her outline, keeping the table between them.

'What do you want?' He had a cold feeling in his chest, a bad feeling. He knew he should be shouting for help, raising the others, but somehow he had to know who it was. Had to know. The air was freezing, Logen could almost see his breath smoking before his face. His wife was dead, he knew that, dead and cold and gone back to the mud, long ago and far away. He'd seen the village, burned to ashes, full of corpses. His wife was dead . . . and yet . . .

'Thelfi?' he whispered.

'Logen . . .' Her voice! Her voice! His mouth dropped open. She reached out for him, through the light from the window. Pale hand, pale fingers, long, white nails. The room was icy, icy cold. 'Logen!'

‘You’re dead!’ He raised the jar, ready to smash it down on her head. The hand reached out, fingers spreading wide.

Suddenly, the room was bright as day. Brighter. Brilliant, searing bright. The murky outlines of the doors, the furniture, were transformed into hard white edges, black shadows. Logen squeezed his eyes shut, shielded them with his arm, dropped back gasping against the wall. There was a deafening crash like a landslide, a tearing and splintering like a great tree falling, a stink of burning wood. Logen opened one eye a crack, peered out from between his fingers.

The chamber was strangely altered. Dark, once more, but less dark than before. Light filtered in through a great ragged hole in the wall where the window used to be. Two of the chairs had gone, a third teetered on three legs, broken edges glowing faintly, smouldering like sticks that had been a long time in a fire. The table, standing right beside him just a moment before, was sheared in half on the other side of the room. Part of the ceiling had been torn away from the rafters and the floor was littered with chunks of stone and plaster, broken lengths of wood and fragments of glass. Of the strange woman there was no sign.

Bayaz picked his way unsteadily through the wreckage towards the gaping hole in the wall, nightshirt flapping around his thick calves, and peered out into the night. ‘It’s gone.’

‘It?’ Logen stared at the steaming hole. ‘She knew my name . . .’

The wizard stumbled over to the last remaining intact chair and flung himself into it like a man exhausted. ‘An Eater, perhaps. Sent by Khalul.’

‘A what?’ asked Logen, baffled. ‘Sent by who?’

Bayaz wiped sweat from his face. ‘You wanted not to know.’

‘That’s true.’ Logen couldn’t deny it. He rubbed at his chin, staring out of the ragged patch of night sky, wondering whether now might be a good time to change his mind. But by then it was too late. There was a frantic hammering at the door.

‘Get that, would you?’ Logen stumbled stupidly through the debris and slid back the bolt. An angry-looking guard shouldered his way past, a lamp in one hand, drawn sword in the other.

‘There was a noise!’ The light from his lamp swept over the wreckage, found the ragged edge of the ripped plaster, the broken stone, the empty night sky beyond. ‘Shit,’ he whispered.

‘We had an uninvited guest,’ muttered Logen.

‘Er . . . I must notify . . .’ the guard looked thoroughly confused ‘. . . somebody.’ He tripped and nearly fell over a fallen beam as he backed towards the door. Logen heard his footsteps rattling away down the stairs.

‘What’s an Eater?’ There was no reply. The wizard was asleep, eyes closed, a deep frown on his face, chest moving slowly. Logen looked down. He was surprised to see he still had the pot, beautiful and delicate, clasped tightly in his right hand. He carefully swept clear a space on the floor and set the jar down, in amongst the wreckage.

One of the doors banged open and Logen’s heart jumped. It was Malacus, wild-eyed and staring, hair sticking up off his head at all angles. ‘What the . . .’ He stumbled to the hole and peered gingerly out into the night. ‘Shit!’

‘Malacus, what’s an Eater?’

Quai’s head snapped round to look at Logen, his face a picture of horror. ‘It’s forbidden,’ he whispered, ‘to eat the flesh of men ...’

Questions

Glokta heaped porridge into his mouth as fast as he could, hoping to get half a meal's worth down before his gorge began to rise. He swallowed, coughed, shuddered. He shoved the bowl away, as though its very presence offended him. *Which, in fact, it does.* 'This had better be important, Severard,' he grumbled.

The Practical scraped his greasy hair back with one hand. 'Depends what you mean by important. It's about our magical friends.'

'Ah, the First of the Magi and his bold companions. What about them?'

'There was some manner of a disturbance at their chambers last night. Someone broke in, they say. There was a fight of some sort. Seems as if some damage was done.'

'Someone? Some sort? Some damage?' Glokta gave a disapproving shake of his head. 'Seems? Seems isn't good enough for us, Severard.'

'Well it'll have to be, this time. The guard was a little thin on the details. Looked damn worried, if you ask me.' Severard sprawled a little deeper into his chair, shoulders hunching up around his ears. 'Someone needs to go and look into it, might as well be us. You can get a good look at them, close up. Ask them some questions, maybe.'

'Where are they?'

'You'll love this. The Tower of Chains.'

Glokta scowled as he sucked a few bits of porridge from his empty gums. *Of course. And right at the top, I bet. Lots of steps.* 'Anything else?'

'The Northman went for a stroll yesterday, walked in circles round half the Agriont. We watched him, of course.' The Practical sniffed and adjusted his mask. 'Ugly bastard.'

'Ah, the infamous Northman. Did he commit any outrages? Rape and murder, buildings aflame, that type of thing?'

'Not much, being honest. A tedious morning for everyone. Wandered around and gawped at things. He spoke to a couple of people.'

'Anyone we know?'

'No one important. One of the carpenters working on the stands for the Contest. A clerk on the Kingsway. There was some girl near the University.

He spoke to her for a while.'

'A girl?'

Severard's eyes grinned. 'That's right, and a nice-looking one too. What was her name?' He snapped his fingers. 'I made sure I found it out. Her brother's with the King's Own . . . West, something West ...'

'Ardee.'

'That's the one! You know her?'

'Hmm.' Glokta licked at his empty gums. *She asked me how I was. I remember.* 'What did they have to talk about?'

The Practical raised his eyebrows. 'Probably nothing. She's from Angland though, not been in the city long. Might be some connection. You want me to bring her in? We could soon find out.'

'No!' snapped Glokta. 'No. No need. Her brother used to be a friend of mine.'

'Used to be.'

'No one touches her, Severard, you hear?'

The Practical shrugged. 'If you say so, Inquisitor. If you say so.'

'I do.'

There was a pause. 'So we're done with the Mercers then, are we?' Severard sounded almost wistful.

'It would seem so. They're finished. Nothing but some cleaning up to do.'

'Some lucrative cleaning up, I daresay.'

'I daresay,' said Glokta sourly. 'But his Eminence feels our talents will be better used elsewhere.' *Like watching fake wizards.* 'Hope you didn't lose out on your little property by the docks.'

Severard shrugged. 'I wouldn't be surprised if you need somewhere away from prying eyes again, before too long. It'll still be there. At the right price. Shame to leave a job half done is all.'

True. Glokta paused for a moment, considering. *Dangerous.*

The Arch Lector said go no further. Very dangerous, to disobey, and yet I smell something. It niggles, to leave a loose end, whatever his Eminence might say. 'There might be one more thing.'

'Really?'

'Yes, but keep it subtle. Do you know anything about banks?'

'Big buildings. They lend people money.'

Glokta gave a thin smile. ‘I had no idea you were such an expert. There’s one in particular I’m interested in. Name of Valint and Balk.’

‘Never heard of them, but I can ask around.’

‘Just keep it discreet, Severard, do you understand me? No one can know about this. I mean it.’

‘Discretion is what I’m all about, chief, ask anyone. Discreet. That’s me. Known for it.’

‘You’d better be, Severard. You had better be.’ *Or it could be both our heads.*

Glokta sat, wedged into the embrasure with his back against the stones and his left leg stretched out in front of him – a searing, pulsing furnace of pain. He expected pain of course, every moment of every day. *But this is something just a bit special.*

Every breath was a rattling moan through rigid jaws. Every tiniest movement was a mighty task. He remembered how Marshal Varuz had made him run up and down these steps when he was training for the Contest, years ago. *I took them three at a time, up and down without a second thought. Now look at me. Who would have thought it could come to this?*

His trembling body ran with sweat, his stinging eyes ran with tears, his burning nose dripped watery snot. *All this water flowing out of me, and yet I’m thirsty as hell. Where’s the sense in that?* Where was the sense in any of it? *What if someone should come past, and see me like this? The terrifying scourge of the Inquisition, flopped on his arse in a window, barely able to move? Will I force a nonchalant smile onto this rigid mask of agony? Will I pretend that all is well? That I often come here, to sprawl beside the stairs? Or will I weep and scream and beg for help?*

But no one passed. He lay there, wedged in that narrow space, three-quarters of the way up the Tower of Chains, the back of his head resting on the cool stones, his trembling knees drawn up in front of him. *Sand dan Glokta, master swordsman, dashing cavalry officer, what glorious future might he have in front of him? There was a time when I could run for hours. Run and run and never tire.* He could feel a trickle of sweat running down his back. *Why do I do this? Why the hell would anyone do this? I could stop today. I could go home to mother. But then what?*

Then what?

‘Inquisitor, I’m glad you’re here.’

Good for you, bastard. I’m not. Glokta leaned against the wall at the top of the stairs, such teeth as he had grinding against his gums.

‘They’re inside, it’s quite a mess . . .’ Glokta’s hand trembled, the tip of his cane rattling against the stones. His head swam. The guard was blurry and dim through his twitching eyelids. ‘Are you alright?’ He loomed forwards, one arm outstretched.

Glokta looked up. ‘Just get the fucking door, fool!’

The man jumped away, hurried to the door and pushed it open. Every part of Glokta longed to give up and sprawl on his face, but he willed himself upright. He forced one foot before the other, forced his breath to come even, forced his shoulders back and his head high, and swept imperiously past the guard, every part of his body singing with pain. What he saw beyond the doors almost broke his veneer of composure however.

Yesterday these were some of the finest rooms in the Agriont. They were reserved for the most honoured of guests, the most important of foreign dignitaries. Yesterday. A gaping hole was ripped out of one wall where the window should have been, the sky beyond blinding bright after the darkness of the stairwell. A section of the ceiling had collapsed, broken timbers and shreds of plaster hanging down into the room. The floor was strewn with chunks of stone, splinters of glass, torn fragments of coloured cloth. The antique furniture had been smashed to scattered pieces, broken edges charred and blackened as if by fire. Only one chair, half a table, and a tall ornamental jar, strangely pristine in the middle of the rubble-strewn floor, had escaped the destruction.

In the midst of this expensive wreckage stood a confused and sickly-seeming young man. He looked up as Glokta picked his way through the rubble round the doorway, tongue darting nervously over his lips, evidently on edge. *Has anyone ever looked more of a fraud?*

‘Er, good morning?’ The young man’s fingers twitched nervously at his gown, a heavy thing, stitched with arcane symbols. *And doesn’t he look uncomfortable in it? If this man is a wizard’s apprentice, I am the Emperor of Gurkhul.*

‘I am Glokta. From his Majesty’s Inquisition. I have been sent to investigate this . . . unfortunate business. I was expecting someone older.’

‘Oh, yes, sorry, I am Malacus Quai,’ stammered the young man, ‘apprentice to great Bayaz, the First of the Magi, great in high art and learned in deep—’ *Kneel, kneel before me! I am the mighty Emperor of Gurkhul!*

‘Malacus . . .’ Glokta cut him off rudely ‘. . . Quai. You are from the Old Empire?’

‘Why yes,’ the young man brightened slightly at that. ‘Do you know my —’

‘No. Not at all.’ The pale face sagged. ‘Were you here last night?’

‘Er, yes, I was asleep, next door. I’m afraid I didn’t see anything though . . .’ Glokta stared at him, intent and unblinking, trying to work him out. The apprentice coughed and looked at the floor, as if wondering what to clean up first. *Can this really make the Arch Lector nervous? A miserable actor. His whole manner reeks of deception.*

‘Someone saw something, though?’

‘Well, erm, Master Ninefingers, I suppose—’

‘Ninefingers?’

‘Yes, our Northern companion.’ The young man brightened. ‘A warrior of great renown, a champion, a prince among his—’

‘You, from the Old Empire. He, a Northman. What a cosmopolitan band you are.’

‘Well yes, ha ha, we do, I suppose—’

‘Where is Ninefingers now?’

‘Still asleep I think, er, I could wake him—’

‘Would you be so kind?’ Glokta tapped his cane on the floor. ‘It was quite a climb, and I would rather not come back later.’

‘No, er, of course . . . sorry.’ He hastened over to one of the doors and Glokta turned away, pretending to examine the gaping wound in the wall while grimacing in agony and biting his lip to keep from wailing like a sick child. He seized hold of the broken stones at the edge of the hole with his free hand, squeezing them as hard as he could.

As the spasm passed he began to take more interest in the damage. Even this high up the wall was a good four feet thick, solidly built from rubble bonded with mortar, faced with cut stone blocks. It would take a rock from

a truly mighty catapult to make such a breach, or a team of strong workmen going night and day for a week. *A giant siege engine or a group of labourers would doubtless have attracted the attention of the guards. So how was it made?* Glokta ran his hand over the cracked stones. He had once heard rumours that in the far south they made a kind of blasting powder. *Could a little powder have done this?*

The door opened and Glokta turned to see a big man ducking under the low lintel, buttoning his shirt with slow, heavy hands. A thoughtful kind of slowness. *As if he could move quickly but doesn't see the point.* His hair was a tangled mass, his lumpy face badly scarred. The middle finger of his left hand was missing. *Hence Ninefingers. How very imaginative.*

'Sleeping late?'

The Northman nodded. 'Your city is too hot for me – it keeps me up at night and makes me sleepy in the day.'

Glokta's leg was throbbing, his back was groaning, his neck was stiff as a dry branch. It was all he could do to keep his agony a secret. He would have given anything to sprawl in that one undamaged chair and scream his head off. *But I must stand, and trade words with these charlatans.* 'Could you explain to me what happened here?'

Ninefingers shrugged. 'I needed to piss in the night. I saw someone in the room.' He had little trouble with the common tongue, it seemed, even if the content was hardly polite.

'Did you see who this someone was?'

'No. It was a woman, I saw that much.' He worked his shoulders, clearly uncomfortable.

'A woman, really?' *This story becomes more ridiculous by the second.* 'Anything else? Can we narrow our search beyond half the population?'

'It was cold. Very cold.'

'Cold?' *Of course, why not? On one of the hottest nights of the year.*

Glokta stared into the Northman's eyes for a long time, and he stared back. Dark, cool blue eyes, deeply set. *Not the eyes of an idiot. He may look an ape, but he doesn't talk like one. He thinks before he speaks, then says no more than he has to. This is a dangerous man.*

'What is your business in the city, Master Ninefingers?'

'I came with Bayaz. If you want to know his business you can ask him. Honestly, I don't know.'

‘He pays you then?’

‘No.’

‘You follow him out of loyalty?’

‘Not exactly.’

‘But you are his servant?’

‘No. Not really.’ The Northman scratched slowly at his stubbly jaw. ‘I don’t know what I am.’

A big, ugly liar is what you are. But how to prove it? Glokta waved his cane around the shattered chamber. ‘How did your intruder cause so much damage?’

‘Bayaz did that.’

‘He did? How?’

‘Art, he calls it.’

‘Art?’

‘Base magic is wild and dangerous,’ intoned the apprentice pompously, as though he were saying something of great importance, ‘for it comes from the Other Side, and to touch the world below is fraught with peril. The Magus tempers magic with knowledge, and thus produces High Art, but like the smith or the—’

‘The Other Side?’ snapped Glokta, putting a sharp end to the young moron’s stream of drivel. ‘The world below? Hell, do you mean? Magic? Do you know any magic, Master Ninefingers?’

‘Me?’ The Northman chuckled. ‘No.’ He thought about it for a moment and then added, almost as an afterthought, ‘I can speak to the spirits though.’

‘The spirits, is that so?’ *For pity’s sake.* ‘Perhaps they could tell us who this intruder was?’

‘I’m afraid not.’ Ninefingers shook his head sadly, either missing Glokta’s sarcasm or choosing to ignore it. ‘There are none left awake in this place. They are sleeping here. They have been for a long time.’

‘Ah, of course.’ *Well past spirits’ bedtime. I tire of this nonsense.* ‘You come from Bethod?’

‘You could say that.’ It was Glokta who was surprised. He had expected at best a sharp intake of breath, a hurried effort at concealment, not a frank admission. Ninefingers did not even blink however. ‘I was once his champion.’

‘Champion?’

‘I fought ten duels for him.’

Glokta groped for words. ‘Did you win?’

‘I was lucky.’

‘You realise, of course, that Bethod has invaded the Union?’

‘I do.’ Ninefingers sighed. ‘I should have killed that bastard long ago, but I was young then, and stupid. Now I doubt I’ll get another chance, but that’s the way of things. You have to be . . . what’s the word for it?’

‘Realistic,’ said Quai.

Glokta frowned. A moment ago, he had teetered on the brink of making sense of all this nonsense, but the moment had slipped away and things made less sense than ever. He stared at Ninefingers, but that scarred face held no answers, only more questions. *Talking with spirits? Bethod’s champion but his enemy? Assaulted by a mysterious woman in the dead of night? And he doesn’t even know why he’s here? A clever liar tells as much truth as he can, but this one tells so many lies I hardly know where to begin.*

‘Ah, we have a guest!’ An old man stepped into the room, thickset and stocky with a short grey beard, vigorously rubbing his bald head with a cloth. *So this is Bayaz.* He threw himself down in the one intact chair, moving with none of the grace one would expect from an important historical figure. ‘I must apologise. I was taking advantage of the bath. A very fine bath. I have been bathing every day since we arrived here at the Agriont. I grew so besmirched with the dirt of the road that I have positively seized upon the opportunity to be clean again.’ The old man rubbed his hand over his hairless scalp with a faint hissing sound.

Glokta mentally compared his features to those of Bayaz’ statue in the Kingsway. *There is hardly anything uncanny about the resemblance. Half as commanding and a great deal shorter. Given an hour I could find five old men who looked more convincing. If I took a razor to Arch Lector Sult, I could do better.* Glokta glanced at his shiny pate. *I wonder if he takes a razor to that every morning?*

‘And you are?’ asked the supposed Bayaz.

‘Inquisitor Glokta.’

‘Ah, one of His Majesty’s Inquisitors. We are honoured!’

‘Oh no, the honour is mine. You, after all, are the legendary Bayaz, First of the Magi.’

The old man glared back at him, his green eyes prickly hard. ‘Legendary is perhaps a shade too much, but I am Bayaz.’

‘Your companion, Master Ninefingers, was just describing last night’s events to me. A colourful tale. He claims that you caused . . . all this.’

The old man snorted. ‘I am not in the habit of welcoming uninvited guests.’

‘So I see.’

‘Alas, there was some damage to the suite. In my experience one should act quickly and decisively. The pieces can always be picked up afterward.’

‘Of course. Forgive my ignorance, Master Bayaz, but how, precisely, was the damage caused?’

The old man smiled. ‘You can understand that we do not share the secrets of our order with just anyone, and I am afraid that I already have an apprentice.’ He indicated the unconvincing youth.

‘We met. In simple terms then, perhaps, that I might understand?’

‘You would call it magic.’

‘Magic. I see.’

‘Indeed. It is, after all, what we Magi are best known for.’

‘Mmm. I don’t suppose you would be kind enough to demonstrate, for my benefit?’

‘Oh no!’ The so-called wizard gave a comfortable laugh. ‘I don’t do tricks.’

This old fool is as hard to fathom as the Northman. The one barely speaks, while the other talks and talks but says nothing. ‘I must admit to being somewhat at a loss as to how this intruder got in.’ Glokta glanced round the room, examining the possible means of entrance. ‘The guard saw nothing, which leaves the window.’

He shuffled cautiously to the hole and peered out. There had been a small balcony, but a few stubby splinters of stone were all that remained. Otherwise the wall fell smooth and sheer all the way to the glittering water far, far below. ‘That’s quite a climb to make, especially in a dress. An impossible one, wouldn’t you say? How do you think this woman made it?’

The old man snorted. ‘Do you want me to do your job for you? Perhaps she clambered up the latrine chute!’ The Northman looked deeply troubled by that suggestion. ‘Why don’t you catch her and ask her? Isn’t that what you’re here for?’

Touchy, touchy, and consummately acted. An air of injured innocence so convincing, he almost has me believing this garbage. Almost, but not quite. ‘Therein lies the problem. There is no sign of your mysterious intruder. No body has been recovered. Some wood, small pieces of furniture, the stones from the wall, they were scattered widely in the streets below. But nothing of any intruder, of either sex.’

The old man stared back at him, a hard frown beginning to form on his face. ‘Perhaps the body burned to nothing. Perhaps it was torn apart, into pieces too small to see, or boiled away into the air. Magic is not always precise, or predictable, even in the hands of a master. Such things can happen. Easily. Particularly when I become annoyed.’

‘I fear I must risk your annoyance, though. It has occurred to me that you might not, in fact, be Bayaz, the First of the Magi.’

‘Indeed?’ The old man’s bushy eyebrows drew together.

‘I must at least entertain the possibility . . .’ a tense stillness had settled on the room ‘. . . that you are an impostor.’

‘A fraud?’ snapped the so-called Magus. The pale young man lowered his head and backed quietly away towards the wall. Glokta felt suddenly very alone in the midst of that rubble strewn circle, alone and increasingly unsure of himself, but he soldiered on.

‘It had occurred to me that this whole event might have been staged for our benefit. A convenient demonstration of your magical powers.’

‘Convenient?’ Hissed the bald old man, his voice unnaturally loud. ‘Convenient, say you? It would be convenient if I was left to enjoy a night’s sleep uninterrupted. Convenient if I was now sitting in my old chair on the Closed Council. Convenient if people took my word as law, the way they used to, without asking a lot of damn fool questions!’

The resemblance to the statue on the Kingsway was suddenly much increased. There, now, was the frown of command, the sneer of contempt, the threat of terrible anger. The old man’s words seemed to press on Glokta like a great weight, driving the breath from his body, threatening to crush him to his knees, cutting into his skull, and leaving behind a creeping shred of doubt. He glanced up at the yawning hole in the wall. *Powder? Catapults? Labourers? Is there not a simpler explanation?* The world seemed to shift around him, as it had in the Arch Lector’s study a few days

before, his mind turned the pieces, pulling them apart, putting them together. *What if they are simply telling the truth? What if . . .*

No! Glokta forced the idea from his mind. He lifted his head and gave the old man a sneer of his own to think about. *An aging actor with a shaved head and a plausible manner. Nothing more.* 'If you are as you say, you have nothing to fear from my questions, or from your answers.'

The old man cracked a smile and the strange pressure was suddenly released. 'Your candour at least, Inquisitor, is quite refreshing. No doubt you will do your utmost to prove your theory. I wish you luck. I, as you say, have nothing to fear. I would only ask that you find some proof of this deception before bothering us again.'

Glokta bowed stiffly. 'I will try to do so,' he said, and made for the door.

'There is one more thing!' The old man was looking towards the gaping hole in the wall. 'Would it be possible to find some other chambers? The wind blows rather chill through these.'

'I will look into it.'

'Good. Perhaps somewhere with fewer steps. Damn things play hell with my knees these days.' *Indeed? There, at least, we can agree.*

Glokta gave the three of them one last inspection. The bald old man stared back, his face a blank wall. The lanky youth glanced up anxiously then quickly turned away. The Northman was still frowning towards the latrine door. *Charlatans, impostors, spies. But how to prove it?* 'Good day, gentlemen.' And he limped towards the stairs with as much dignity as he could muster.

Nobility

Jezal scraped the last fair hairs from the side of his jaw and washed the razor off in the bowl. Then he wiped it on the cloth, closed it and placed it carefully on the table, admiring the way the sunlight glinted on the mother-of-pearl handle.

He wiped his face, and then – his favourite part of the day – gazed at himself in the looking glass. It was a good one, newly imported from Visserine, a present from his father: an oval of bright, smooth glass in a frame of lavishly-carved dark wood. A fitting surround for such a handsome man as the one gazing happily back at him. Honestly, handsome hardly did him justice.

'You're quite the beauty aren't you?' Jezal said to himself, smiling as he ran his fingers over the smooth skin of his jaw. And what a jaw it was. He had often been told it was his best feature, not that there was anything whatever wrong with the rest of him. He turned to the right, then to the left, the better to admire that magnificent chin. Not too heavy, not brutish, but not too light either, not womanly or weak. A man's jaw, no doubt, with a slight cleft in the chin, speaking of strength and authority, but sensitive and thoughtful too. Had there ever been a jaw like it? Perhaps some king, or hero of legend, once had one almost as fine. It was a noble jaw, that much was clear. No commoner could ever have had a chin so grand.

It must have come from his mother's side of the family, Jezal supposed. His father had rather a weak chin. His brothers too, come to think of it. You had to feel a little sorry for them, he had got all the looks in his family.

'And most of the talent too,' he murmured happily to himself. He turned away from the mirror with some reluctance, striding into his living room, pulling his shirt on and buttoning it up the front. He had to look his best today. The thought gave him a little shiver of nerves, starting in his stomach, creeping up his windpipe, lodging in his throat.

By now, the gates would be open. A steady flood of people would be filing into the Agriont, taking their seats on the great wooden benches in the Square of Marshals. Thousands of them. Everyone who was anyone, and plenty more who weren't. They were already gathering: shouting, jostling,

excited, waiting for . . . him. Jezal coughed and tried to push the thought from his mind. He had kept himself awake with it for half the night already.

He moved over to the table, where the breakfast tray was sitting. He picked up a sausage absently in his fingertips and took a bite off the end, chewing it without relish. He wrinkled his nose and tossed it back in the dish. He had no appetite this morning. He was just wiping his fingers on the cloth when he noticed something lying on the floor by the door, a slip of paper. He bent and picked it up, unfolded it. A single line, written in a neat, precise hand:

Meet me tonight, at the statue of
Harod the Great near the Four Corners
- A.

'Shit,' he murmured, disbelieving, reading the line over and over. He folded the paper shut, glancing nervously round the room. Jezal could only think of one 'A'. He had pushed her to the back of his mind the last couple of days, he had been spending every spare moment training. This brought it all back though, and no mistake.

'Shit!' He opened the paper and read the line again. Meet me tonight? He could not escape a slight flush of satisfaction at that, and it slowly became a very distinct glow of pleasure. His mouth curled into a gormless grin. Secret meetings in the darkness? His skin prickled with excitement at the prospect. But secrets have a way of coming to the surface, and what if her brother found out? That thought brought on a fresh rush of nerves. He took the slip of paper in both hands, ready to tear it in half, but at the last moment he folded it instead, and slipped it into his pocket.

As Jezal made his way down the tunnel he could already hear the crowd. A strange, echoing murmur, seeming to come out of the very stones. He had heard it before, of course, as a spectator at last year's Contest, but it hadn't made his skin sweat and his guts turn over then. Being part of the audience is a world away from being part of the show.

He slowed for a moment, then stopped, closing his eyes and leaning against the wall, the noise of the crowd rushing in his ears, trying to breathe deep and compose himself.

‘Don’t worry, I know just how you feel.’ Jezal felt West’s consoling hand on his shoulder. ‘I nearly turned around and ran the first time, but it’ll pass as soon as the steels are drawn, believe me.’

‘Yes,’ mumbled Jezal, ‘of course.’ He doubted that West knew exactly how he felt. The man might have been through a couple of Contests before, but Jezal thought it unlikely he had been considering a surreptitious meeting with his best friend’s sister the same night. He wondered whether West would be quite so considerate if he knew the contents of the letter in Jezal’s breast pocket. It did not seem likely.

‘We’d better get moving. Wouldn’t want them to start without us.’

‘No.’ Jezal took one last deep breath, opened his eyes and blew out hard. Then he pushed himself away from the wall and strode rapidly down the tunnel. He felt a sudden surge of panic – where were his steels? He cast about him desperately, then breathed a long sigh. They were in his hand.

There was quite a crowd in the hall at the far end: trainers, seconds, friends, family members and hangers-on. You could tell who the contestants were, though; the fifteen young men with steels clutched tightly in their hands. The sense of fear was palpable, and contagious. Everywhere Jezal looked he saw pale, nervous faces, sweaty foreheads, anxious eyes darting around. It wasn’t helped by the noise of the crowd, ominously loud beyond the closed double doors at the far end of the room, swelling and subsiding like a stormy sea.

There was only one man there who didn’t seem at all bothered by the occasion, leaning against the wall on his own with one foot up on the plaster and his head tipped back, staring down his nose at the assembly through barely open eyes. Most of the contestants were lithe, stringy, athletic. He was anything but. A big, heavy man with hair shaved to dark stubble. He had a great thick neck and a doorstep of a jaw – the jaw of a commoner, Jezal rather thought, but a large and powerful commoner with a mean streak. Jezal might have taken him for someone’s servant but that he had a pair of steels dangling loosely from one hand.

‘Gorst,’ West whispered in Jezal’s ear.

‘Huh. Looks more like a labourer than a swordsman to me.’

‘Maybe, but looks can lie.’ The sound of the crowd was slowly fading, and the nervy chatter within the room subsided along with it. West raised his eyebrows. ‘The King’s address,’ he whispered.

‘My friends! My countrymen! My fellow citizens of the Union!’ came a ringing voice, clearly audible even through the heavy doors.

‘Hoff,’ snorted West. ‘Even here he takes the King’s place. Why doesn’t he just put the crown on and have done with it?’

‘One month ago today,’ came the far-off bellow of the Lord Chamberlain, ‘fellows of mine on the Closed Council put forward the question . . . should there be a Contest this year?’ Boos and shouts of wild disapproval were heard from the crowd. ‘A fair question!’ cried Hoff, ‘for we are at war! A deadly struggle in the North! The very liberties which we hold so dear, the very freedoms which make us the envy of the world, our very way of life, stand threatened by the savage!’

A clerk began making his way around the room, separating the contestants from their families, their trainers, their friends. ‘Good luck,’ said West, clapping Jezal on the shoulder, ‘I’ll see you out there.’ Jezal’s mouth was dry, and he could only nod.

‘And these were brave men who asked the question!’ Boomed out Hoff’s voice from beyond the doors. ‘Wise men! Patriots all! My stalwart colleagues on the Closed Council! I understood why they might think, there should be no Contest this year!’ There was a long pause. ‘But I said to them, no!’

An eruption of manic cheering. ‘No! No!’ screamed the crowd. Jezal was ushered into line along with the other contestants, two abreast, eight pairs. He fussed with his steels as the Lord Chamberlain droned on, though he’d checked them twenty times already.

‘No, I said to them! Should we allow these barbarians, these animals of the frozen North, to tread upon our way of life?

Should we allow this beacon of freedom amidst the darkness of the world to be extinguished? No, I said to them! Our liberty is not for sale at any price! On this, my friends, my countrymen, my fellow citizens of the Union, on this you may depend . . . we will win this war!’

Another great ocean swell of approval. Jezal swallowed, glanced nervously around. Bremer dan Gorst was standing there beside him. The big bastard had the temerity to wink, grinning as if he hadn’t a care in the world. ‘Damn idiot,’ whispered Jezal, but he took care that his lips didn’t move.

‘And so, my friends, and so,’ came Hoff’s final cries, ‘what finer occasion could there be than when we stand upon the very brink of peril? To celebrate the skill, the strength, the prowess, of some of our nation’s bravest sons! My fellow citizens, my countrymen of the Union, I give you your contestants!’

The doors were heaved open and the roar of the crowd beyond rushed into the hall and made the rafters ring: suddenly, deafeningly loud. The front pair of swordsmen began to stride out through the bright archway, then the next pair, then the next. Jezal was sure he would freeze, motionless and staring like a rabbit, but when his turn came his feet stepped off manfully next to Gorst’s, the heels of his highly polished boots clicking across the tiled floor and through the high doorway.

The Square of Marshals was transformed. All around, great banks of seating had been erected, stretching back, and back, and up, and up on all sides, spilling over with a boiling multitude. The contestants filed down a deep valley between the towering stands towards the centre of this great arena, the beams, and struts, and tree-trunk supports like a shadowy forest on either side. Directly before them, seeming very far away, the fencing circle had been laid, a little ring of dry yellow grass in the midst of a sea of faces.

Down near the front Jezal could make out the features of the rich and noble. Dressed in their best, shading their eyes from the bright sun, on the whole fashionably disinterested in the spectacle before them. Further back, higher up, the figures became less distinct, the clothes less fine. The vast majority of the crowd were mere blobs and specks of colour, crammed in around the distant edge of the dizzying bowl, but the commoners made up for their distance with their excitement: cheering, shouting, standing up on their toes and waving their arms in the air. Above them, the tops of the very highest buildings around the square peered over, walls and roofs sticking up like islands in the ocean, the windows and parapets crammed with minuscule onlookers.

Jezal blinked at this great display of humanity. Part of him was aware that his mouth was hanging open, but too small a part to close it. Damn, he felt queasy. He knew he should have eaten something, but it was too late now. What if he puked, right here in front of half the world? He felt that surge of blind panic again. Where did he leave his steels? Where were they? In his

hand. In his hand. The crowd roared, and sighed, and wailed, with a myriad of different voices.

The contestants began to move away from the circle. Not all of them would be fighting today, most would only watch. As though there was a need for extra spectators. They began to make their way towards the front rows, but Jezal was not going with them, more was the pity. He made for the enclosures where the contestants prepared to fight.

He flopped down heavily next to West, closed his eyes and wiped his sweaty forehead as the crowd cheered on. Everything was too bright, too loud, too overpowering. Marshal Varuz was nearby, leaning over the side of the enclosure to shout in someone's ear. Jezal stared across the arena at the occupants of the royal box opposite, hoping vainly for a distraction.

'His Majesty the King seems to be enjoying the proceedings,' whispered West in Jezal's ear.

'Mmm.' The King, in fact, appeared already to have fallen soundly asleep, his crown slipping off at an angle. Jezal wondered idly what would happen if it fell off.

Crown Prince Ladisla was there, fabulously dressed as always, beaming around at the arena with an enormous smile as though everyone was there for him. His younger brother, Prince Raynault, could hardly have looked more different: plain and sober, frowning worriedly at his semi-conscious father. Their mother, the Queen, sat beside them, bolt upright with her chin in the air, studiously pretending that her august husband was wide awake, and that his crown was in no danger of dropping suddenly and painfully into her lap. Between her and Lord Hoff, Jezal's eye was caught by a young woman – very, very beautiful. She was even more expensively dressed than Ladisla, if that was possible, with a chain of huge diamonds round her neck, flashing bright in the sun.

'Who's the woman?' asked Jezal.

'Ah, the Princess Terez,' murmured West. 'The daughter of Grand Duke Orso, Lord of Talins. She's quite the celebrated beauty, and for once it seems that rumour doesn't exaggerate.'

'I thought nothing good ever came from Talins.'

'So I've heard, but I think she might be the exception, don't you?' Jezal was not entirely convinced. Spectacular, no doubt, but there was an icy proud look to her eye. 'I think the Queen has it in mind that she marry

Prince Ladisla.' As Jezal watched, the Crown Prince leant across his mother to favour the Princess with some witless banter, then exploded into laughter at his own joke, slapping his knee with merriment. She gave a frosty little smile, radiating contempt even at this distance. Ladisla seemed not to notice though, and Jezal's attention was soon distracted. A tall man in a red coat was striding ponderously towards the circle. The referee.

'It's time,' murmured West.

The referee held up his arm with a theatrical flourish, two fingers extended, and turned slowly around, waiting for the hubbub to subside. 'Today you will have the pleasure of witnessing *two* bouts of fencing!' he thundered, then thrust up his other hand, three fingers out, as the audience applauded. 'Each the best of *three* touches!' He threw up both arms. '*Four* men will fight before you! Two of them will go home . . . empty handed.' The referee let one arm drop, shook his head sadly, the crowd sighed. 'But two will pass on to the next round!' The crowd bellowed their approval.

'Ready?' asked Marshal Varuz, leaning forwards over Jezal's shoulder.

What a damn fool question. What if he wasn't ready? What then? Call the whole thing off? Sorry everyone, I'm not ready? See you next year? But all Jezal could say was, 'Mmm.'

'The time has come!' cried the referee, turning slowly around in the centre of the arena, 'for our first bout!'

'Jacket!' snapped Varuz.

'Uh.' Jezal fumbled with the buttons and pulled his jacket off, rolling up his shirt-sleeves mechanically. He glanced sideways and saw his opponent making similar preparations. A tall, thin young man with long arms and weak, slightly dewy eyes. Hardly the most intimidating looking of adversaries. Jezal noticed his hands were trembling slightly as he took his steels from his second.

'Trained by Sepp dan Vissen, and hailing from Rostod, in Starikland . . .' the referee paused for the greatest effect '. . . Kurtis dan Broya!' There was a wave of enthusiastic clapping. Jezal snorted. These clowns would clap for anyone.

The tall young man got up from his seat and walked purposefully towards the circle, his steels flashing in the sunlight. 'Broya!' repeated the referee, as the gangly idiot took his mark. West pulled Jezal's steels from their sheaths. The metallic ringing of the blades made him want to be sick again.

The referee pointed once more towards the contestant's enclosure. 'And his opponent today! An officer of the King's Own, and trained by none other than Lord Marshal Varuz!' There was scattered applause and the old soldier beamed happily. 'Hailing from Luthar in Midderland but resident here in the Agriont . . . Captain Jezal dan Luthar!' Another surge of cheering, far louder than Broya had received. There was a flurry of sharp cries above the din. Shouted numbers. Odds being offered. Jezal felt another rush of nausea as he got slowly to his feet.

'Good luck.' West handed Jezal his naked steels, hilts first.

'He doesn't need luck!' snapped Varuz. 'This Broya's a nobody! Just watch his reach! Press him, Jezal, press him!'

It seemed to take forever to reach that ring of short dry grass, the sound of the crowd loud in Jezal's ears but the sound of his heart louder still, turning the grips of his steels round and round in his sweaty palms. 'Luthar!' repeated the referee, smiling wide as he watched Jezal approach.

Pointless and irrelevant questions flitted in and out of his mind. Was Ardee watching, in the crowd, wondering whether he would come to meet her that night? Would he get killed in the war? How did they get the grass for the fencing circle into the Square of Marshals? He glanced up at Broya. Was he feeling the same way? The crowd was quiet now, very quiet. The weight of the silence pressed down on Jezal as he took his mark in the circle, pushed his feet into the dry earth. Broya shrugged his shoulders, shook his head, raised his steels. Jezal needed to piss. Needed to piss so badly. What if he pissed himself right now? A big dark stain spreading across his trousers. The man who pissed himself at the Contest. He would never live it down, not if he lived a hundred years.

'Begin!' thundered the referee.

But nothing happened. The two men stood there, facing each other, steels at the ready. Jezal's eyebrow itched. He wanted to scratch it, but how? His opponent licked his lips, then took a cautious step to his left. Jezal did the same. They circled each other warily, shoes crunching gently on the dry grass: slowly, slowly drawing closer together. And as they came closer, Jezal's world contracted to the space between the points of their long steels. Now it was only a stride. Now it was a foot. Now just six inches separated them. Jezal's whole mind was focused on those two glittering points. Three

inches. Broya jabbed forward, weakly, and Jezal flicked it away without thinking.

The blades rang gently together and, as though that were a signal prearranged with every person in the arena, the shouting began again, scattered calls to begin with:

'Kill him, Luthar!'

'Yes!'

'Jab! Jab!'

But soon dissolving once more into the rumbling, angry sea of the crowd, rising and falling with the movements in the circle.

The more Jezal saw of this lanky idiot, the less daunted he became. His nerves began to subside. Broya jabbed, clumsy, and Jezal barely had to move. Broya cut, without conviction, and Jezal parried, without effort. Broya lunged, positively inept, off-balance and overextended. Jezal stepped around it and jabbed his opponent in the ribs with the blunt point of his long steel. It was all so very easy.

'One for Luthar!' cried the referee, and a surge of cheering ran around the stands. Jezal smiled to himself, basking in the appreciation of the crowd. Varuz had been right, this boob was nothing to worry about. One more touch and he'd be through to the next round.

He returned to his mark and Broya did the same, rubbing his ribs with one hand and staring at Jezal balefully from beneath his brows. Jezal was not intimidated. Angry looks are only any use if you can fight worth a damn.

'Begin!'

They closed quickly this time, and exchanged a cut or two.

Jezal could hardly believe how slowly his opponent was moving. It was as if his swords weighed a ton each. Broya fished around in the air with his long steel, trying to use his reach to pin Jezal down. He had barely used his short steel yet, let alone coordinated the two. Worse still, he was starting to look out of breath, and they'd barely been fencing two minutes. Had he trained at all, this bumpkin? Or had they simply made up the numbers with some servant off the street? Jezal jumped away, danced around his opponent. Broya flapped after him, dogged but incompetent. It was starting to become embarrassing. Nobody enjoys a mismatch, and this dunce's clumsiness was denying Jezal the opportunity to shine.

‘Oh come on!’ he shouted. A surge of laughter flowed around the stands. Broya gritted his teeth and came on with everything he had, but it wasn’t much. Jezal swatted his feeble efforts aside, dodged around them, flowed across the circle while his witless opponent lumbered after, always three steps behind. There was no precision, no speed, no thought. A few minutes before, Jezal had been half-terrified by the prospect of fencing with this gangling fool. Now he was almost bored.

‘Hah!’ he cried, switching suddenly onto the attack, catching his opponent off-balance with a savage cut, sending him stumbling back. The crowd came alive, roaring their support. He jabbed and jabbed again. Broya blocked desperately, all off-balance, reeled backwards, parried one last time then tripped, his arms flailing, short steel flying out of his hand, and pitched out of the circle onto his arse.

There was a wave of laughter, and Jezal could not help but join in. The poor dolt looked quite amusing, knocked on his back with his legs in the air like some sort of turtle.

‘Captain Luthar wins!’ roared the referee, ‘two to nothing!’ The laughter turned to jeering as Broya rolled over. He looked on the verge of tears, the oaf. Jezal stepped forwards and offered his hand, but found himself unable to entirely wipe the smirk off his face. His beaten adversary pointedly ignored his help, pushing himself up from the ground and giving him a look half hating, half hurt.

Jezal shrugged pleasantly. ‘It’s not my fault you’re shit.’

‘More?’ asked Kaspa, holding out the bottle in a wobbly hand, eyes misted over with too much booze.

‘No thanks.’ Jezal pushed the bottle gently away before Kaspa had the chance to pour. He looked blearily bewildered for a moment, then he turned to Jalenhorm.

‘More?’

‘Always.’ The big man slid his glass across the rough table top in a way that said, ‘I am not drunk’, though he clearly was. Kaspa lowered the bottle towards it, squinting at the glass as though it was a great distance away. Jezal watched the neck of the bottle wobbling in the air, then rattling on the edge of the glass. The inevitability of it was almost painful to behold. Wine spilled out across the table, splashing into Jalenhorm’s lap.

‘You’re drunk!’ complained the big man, staggering to his feet and brushing at himself with big, drunken hands, knocking his stool over in the process. A few of the other patrons eyed their table with evident disdain.

‘Alwaysh,’ giggled Kaspa.

West looked up briefly from his glass. ‘You’re both drunk.’

‘Not our fault.’ Jalenhorm groped for his stool. ‘It’s him!’ He pointed an unsteady finger at Jezal.

‘He won!’ gurgled Kaspa. ‘You won, didn’t you, and now we got to celebrate!’

Jezal wished they didn’t have to celebrate quite so much. It was becoming embarrassing.

‘My cousin Ariss wa’ there – saw whole thing. She was ver’ impressed.’ Kaspa flung his arm round Jezal’s shoulder. ‘Think she’s quite shmitten with you . . . shmitten . . . shmitten.’ He worked his wet lips in Jezal’s face, trying to get his mouth round the word. ‘She’s ver’ rich you know, ver’ rich indeed. Shmitten.’

Jezal wrinkled his nose. He had not the slightest interest in that ghostly simpleton of a cousin, however rich she was, and Kaspa’s breath stank. ‘Good . . . lovely.’ He disentangled himself from the Lieutenant and shoved him away, none too gently.

‘So, when are we starting on this business in the North?’ demanded Brint, a little too loud, as though he for one couldn’t wait to get underway. ‘Soon I hope, home before winter, eh, Major?’

‘Huh,’ snorted West, frowning to himself, ‘we’ll be lucky to have left before winter, the rate we’re going.’

Brint looked a little taken aback. ‘Well, I’m sure we’ll give these savages a thrashing, whenever we get there.’

‘Give ’em a thrashing!’ cried Kaspa.

‘Aye.’ Jalenhorm nodded his agreement.

West was not in the mood. ‘I wouldn’t be too sure about that. Have you seen the state of some of these levies? They can hardly walk, let alone fight. It’s a disgrace.’

Jalenhorm dismissed all this with an angry wave of his hand. ‘They’re nothing but fucking savages, the lot of ’em! We’ll knock ’em on their arses, like Jezal did that idiot today, eh, Jezal? Home before winter, everyone says so!’

‘Do you know the land up there?’ asked West, leaning across the table. ‘Forests, mountains, rivers, on and on. Precious little open space to fight in, precious few roads to march on. You’ve got to catch a man before the thrashing can start. Home before winter? Next winter, maybe, if we come back at all.’

Brint’s eyes were wide open and horrified. ‘You can’t mean that!’

‘No . . . no, you’re right.’ West sighed and shook himself. ‘I’m sure it’ll all turn out fine. Glory and promotions all round. Home before winter. I’d take a coat with you though, just in case.’

An uneasy silence descended on the group. West had that hard frown on his face that he got sometimes, the frown that said they’d get no more fun out of him tonight. Brint and Jalenhorm looked puzzled and surly. Only Kaspa maintained his good humour, and he was lolling back in his chair, eyes half closed, blissfully unaware of his surroundings.

Some celebration.

Jezal himself felt tired, annoyed, and worried. Worried about the Contest, worried about the war . . . worried about Ardee. The letter was still there, folded up in his pocket. He glanced sidelong at West, then quickly away. Damn, he felt guilty. He had never really felt guilty before, and he didn’t like it one bit. If he didn’t meet her, he would feel guilty for leaving her on her own. If he did, he’d feel guilty for breaking his word to West. It was a dilemma alright. Jezal chewed at his thumb-nail. What the hell was it about this damn family?

‘Well,’ said West sharply, ‘I have to be going. Early start tomorrow.’

‘Mmm,’ muttered Brint.

‘Right,’ said Jalenhorm.

West looked Jezal right in the eye. ‘Can I have a word?’ His expression was serious, grave, angry even. Jezal’s heart lurched. What if West had found out about the letter? What if Ardee had told him? The Major turned away, moved over towards a quiet corner. Jezal stared around, desperately seeking for some way out.

‘Jezal!’ called West.

‘Yes, yes.’ He got up with the greatest reluctance and followed his friend, flashing what he hoped was an innocent-seeming smile. Perhaps it was something else. Nothing to do with Ardee. Please let it be something else.

‘I don’t want anyone else to know about this . . .’ West looked round to make sure no one was watching. Jezal swallowed. Any moment now he would get a punch in the face. At least one. He had never been punched in the face, not properly. A girl slapped him pretty hard once, but that was hardly the same. He prepared himself as best he could, gritting his teeth, wincing slightly. ‘Burr has set a date. We’ve got four weeks.’

Jezal stared back. ‘What?’

‘Until we embark.’

‘Embark?’

‘For Angland, Jezal!’

‘Oh, yes . . . Angland, of course! Four weeks you say?’

‘I thought you ought to know, since you’re busy with the Contest, so you’d have time to get ready. Keep it to yourself, though.’

‘Yes, of course.’ Jezal wiped his sweaty forehead.

‘You alright? You look pale.’

‘I’m fine, fine.’ He took a deep breath. ‘All this excitement, you know, the fencing and . . . everything.’

‘Don’t worry, you did well today.’ West clapped him on the shoulder. ‘But there’s a lot more to do. Three more bouts before you can call yourself a champion, and they’ll only get harder. Don’t get lazy, Jezal – and don’t get too drunk!’ he threw over his shoulder as he made for the door. Jezal breathed a long sigh of relief as he returned to the table where the others were sitting. His nose was still intact.

Brint had already started to complain, now he could see that West wasn’t coming back. ‘What the hell was all that?’ he asked, frowning and jabbing his thumb at the door. ‘I mean to say, well, I know he’s supposed to be the big hero and all of that but, well, I mean to say!’

Jezal stared down at him. ‘What do you mean to say?’

‘Well, to talk that way! It’s, it’s defeatist!’ The drink was lending him courage now, and he was warming to his topic. ‘It’s . . . well, I mean to say . . . it’s cowardly talk is what it is!’

‘Now, look here, Brint,’ snapped Jezal, ‘he fought in three pitched battles, and he was first through the breach at Ulrioch! He may not be a nobleman, but he’s a damn courageous fellow! Added to that he knows soldiering, he knows Marshal Burr, and he knows Angland! What do you know, Brint?’ Jezal curled his lip. ‘Except how to lose at cards and empty a wine bottle?’

‘That’s all a man needs to know in my book,’ laughed Jalenhorm nervously, doing his best to calm the situation. ‘More wine!’ he bellowed at no one in particular.

Jezal dropped down on his stool. If the company had been subdued before West left, it was even more so now. Brint was sulking. Jalenhorm was swaying on his stool. Kaspa had fallen soundly asleep, sprawled out on the wet table top, his breathing making quiet slurping sounds.

Jezal drained his wine glass, and stared round at the unpromising faces. Damn, he was bored. It was a fact, he was only now beginning to realise, that the conversation of the drunk is only interesting to the drunk. A few glasses of wine can be the difference between finding a man a hilarious companion or an insufferable moron. He wondered if he himself was as tedious drunk as Kaspa, or Jalenhorm, or Brint.

Jezal gave a thin smile as he looked over at the sulking bastard. If he were King, he mused, he would punish poor conversation with death, or at least a lengthy prison term. He stood up from his chair.

Jalenhorm stared up at him. ‘What you doing?’

‘Better get some rest,’ snapped Jezal, ‘need to train tomorrow.’ It was the most he could do not to just run out of the place.

‘But you won! Ain’t you going to celebrate?’

‘First round. I’ve still three more men to beat, and they’ll all be better than that oaf today.’ Jezal took his coat from the back of the chair and pulled it over his shoulders.

‘Suit self,’ said Jalenhorm, then slurped noisily from his glass.

Kaspa raised his head from the table for a moment, hair on one side plastered to his skull with spilled wine. ‘Going sho shoon?’

‘Mmm,’ said Jezal as he turned and stalked out.

There was a cold wind blowing in the street outside. It made him feel even more sober than before. Painfully sober. He badly needed some intelligent company, but where could he find it at this time of night? There was only one place he could think of.

He slipped the letter out of his pocket and read it in the dim light from the tavern’s windows, just one more time. If he hurried he might still catch her. He began to walk slowly towards the Four Corners. Just to talk, that was all. He needed someone to talk to . . .

No. He forced himself to stop. Could he truly pretend that he wanted to be her friend? A friendship between a man and a woman was what you called it when one had been pursuing the other for a long time, and had never got anywhere. He had no interest in that arrangement.

What then? Marriage? To a girl with no blood and no money? Unthinkable! He imagined bringing Ardee home to meet his family. Here is my new wife, father! Wife? And her connections are? He shuddered at the thought.

But what if they could find something in between, where everyone would be comfortable? His feet began slowly to move. Not friendship, not marriage, but some looser arrangement? He strode down the road towards the Four Corners. They could meet discreetly, and talk, and laugh, somewhere with a bed maybe . . .

No. No. Jezal stopped again and slapped the side of his head in frustration. He couldn't let that happen, even supposing she would. West was one thing, but what if other people found out? It wouldn't hurt his reputation any, of course, but hers would be ruined. Ruined. His flesh crept at the thought. She didn't deserve that, surely. It wasn't good enough to say it was her problem. Not good enough. Just so he could have a little fun? The selfishness of it. He was amazed that it had never occurred to him before.

So he had reasoned himself into a corner then, just as he had done ten times already today: nothing good could come from seeing her. They would be away to war soon anyway, and that would put an end to his ridiculous pining. Home to bed then, and train all day tomorrow. Train and train until Marshal Varuz had battered her out of his thoughts. He took a deep breath, squared his shoulders, turned and set off towards the Agriont.

The statue of Harod the Great loomed out of the darkness on a marble plinth almost as tall as Jezal, seeming far too big and grand for its quiet little square near the Four Corners. He had been jumping at shadows all the way here, avoiding people, doing his best to be inconspicuous. There weren't many people around though. It was late, and most likely Ardee would have given up waiting a long time ago, provided she was even there to begin with.

He crept nervously around the statue, peering into the shadows, feeling an absolute fool. He had walked through this square many times before and

never given it a second thought. Was it not a public space after all? He had as much right as anyone to be here, but somehow he still felt like a thief.

The square was empty. That was a good thing. All for the best. There was nothing to gain, everything to lose, and so forth. So why did he feel so completely crushed? He stared up at Harod's face, locked into that stony frown that sculptors reserve for the truly great. He had a fine, strong jaw, did Harod, almost the equal of Jezal's own.

'Wake up!' hissed a voice by his ear. Jezal let vent to a girlish squeal, scrambled away, tripped, only stayed upright by clawing at King Harod's enormous foot. There was a dark figure behind him, a hooded figure.

Laughter. 'No need to piss yourself.' Ardee. She pushed back her hood. Light from a window slanted across the bottom part of her face, catching her lop-sided smile. 'It's only me.'

'I didn't see you,' he mumbled pointlessly, quickly releasing his desperate grip on the huge stone foot and doing his best to appear at ease. He had to admit it was a poor start. He had no talent for this cloak-and-dagger business. Ardee seemed quite comfortable, though. It made him wonder whether she hadn't done it all before.

'You've been pretty hard to see yourself, lately,' she said.

'Well, er,' he muttered, heart still thumping from the shock, 'I've been busy, what with the Contest and all . . .'

'Ah, the all-important Contest. I saw you fight today.'

'You did?'

'Very impressive.'

'Er, thank you, I—'

'My brother said something, didn't he?'

'What, about fencing?'

'No, numbskull. About me.'

Jezal paused, trying to work out the best way to answer that one. 'Well he —'

'Are you scared of him?'

'No!' Silence. 'Alright, yes.'

'But you came anyway. I suppose I should be flattered.' She walked slowly around him, looking him up and down, from feet to forehead and back again. 'You took your time, though. It's late. I'll have to be getting home soon.'

There was something about the way she was looking at him which was not helping to calm his thumping heart. Quite the opposite. He had to tell her that he could not see her any more. It was the wrong thing to do. For both of them. Nothing good could come from it . . . nothing good . . .

He was breathing quick, tense, excited, unable to take his eyes away from her shadowy face. He had to tell her, now. Wasn't that why he came? He opened his mouth to speak, but the arguments all seemed a long way away now, applying at a different time and to different people, intangible and weightless.

'Ardee . . .' he began.

'Mmm?' She stepped towards him, head cocked on one side. Jezal tried to move away, but the statue was at his back. She came closer still, lips slightly parted, her eyes fixed on his mouth. What was so wrong in it, anyway?

Closer still, her face turned up towards his. He could smell her – his head was full of the scent of her. He could feel her warm breath on his cheek. What could be wrong with this?

Her fingertips were cold against his skin, brushing the side of his face, tracing the line of his jaw, curling through his hair and pulling his head down towards her. Her lips touched his cheek, soft and warm, then his chin, then his mouth. They sucked gently at his. She pressed herself up against him, her other hand slipped round his back. Her tongue lapped at his gums, at his teeth, at his tongue, and she made little sounds in her throat. So did he, perhaps – he really wasn't sure. His whole body was tingling, hot and cold at once, his mind was in his mouth. It was as if he'd never kissed a girl before. What could be wrong with this? Her teeth nipped at his lips, almost painful, but not quite.

He opened his eyes: breathless, trembling, weak at the knees. She was looking up at him. He could see her eyes gleaming in the darkness, watching him carefully, studying him.

'Ardee . . .'

'What?'

'When can I see you again?' His throat was dry, his voice sounded hoarse. She looked down at the ground with a little smile. A cruel smile, as though she'd called his bluff and won a pile of money from him. He didn't care.

'When?'

‘Oh, I’ll let you know.’

He had to kiss her again. Shit on the consequences. Fuck West. Damn it all. He bent down towards her, closed his eyes.

‘No, no, no.’ She pushed his mouth away from hers. ‘You should have come sooner.’ She broke away from him and turned around, with the smile still on her lips, and walked slowly away. He watched her, silent, frozen, fascinated, his back against the cold stone base of the statue. He had never felt like this before. Not ever.

She glanced back, just once, as if to check that he was still watching. His chest constricted, almost painfully, just to see her look at him, then she rounded a corner and was gone.

He stood there for a moment, his eyes wide open, just breathing. Then a cold gust of wind blew through the square and the world pressed back in upon him. Fencing, the war, his friend West, his obligations. One kiss, that was all. One kiss, and his resolve had leaked away like piss from a broken chamber pot. He stared around, suddenly guilty, confused, and scared. What had he done here?

‘Shit,’ he said.

Dark Work

A burning thing can make all kind of smells. A live tree, fresh and sappy, smells different ablaze to a dead one, dry and withered. A pig alight and a man smell much the same, but there's another story. This burning that the Dogman smelled now, that was a house. He knew it, sure as sure. A smell he knew better than he'd have liked. Houses don't burn on their own too often. Usually there's some violence in it. That meant men around, most likely, and ready for a fight, so he crept right careful down between the trees, slid on his belly to the edge, and peered out through the brush.

He saw it now, right enough. Black smoke in a tall pillar, rising up from a spot down near the river. A small house, still smoking, but burned down to the low stone walls. There'd been a barn too, but nothing more now than a pile of black sticks and black dirt. A couple of trees and a patch of tilled earth. It was a poor enough living at the best of times, farming this far north. Too cold to grow much – a few roots maybe, and some sheep to herd. A pig or two, if you were lucky.

Dogman shook his head. Who'd want to burn out folks as poor as this? Who'd want to steal this stubborn patch of land? Some men just like to burn, he reckoned. He eased out a touch further, looking right and left down the valley for some sign of the ones as did this, but a few stringy sheep spread out across the valley sides was all he could see moving. He wriggled back into the brush.

His heart sank as he sneaked back towards the camp. Voices raised, and arguing, as ever. He wondered for a minute whether to just go past and keep on going, he was that sick of the endless bickering. He decided against it in the end, though. It ain't much of a scout who leaves his people behind.

'Why don't you shut your hole, Dow?' Tul Duru's rumbling voice. 'You wanted south, and when we went south all you did was moan about the mountains! Now we're out o' the mountains you grumble on your empty belly all day and all night! I've had my fill of it, you whining dog!'

Now came Black Dow's nasty growl. 'Why should you get twice as much to eat, just 'cause you're a great fat pig?'

'You little bastard! I'll crush you like the worm y'are!'

‘I’ll cut your neck while you sleep you great pile o’ meat! Then we’ll all have plenty to eat! At least we’d all be rid of your fucking snoring! I know now why they named you Thunderhead, you rumbling sow!’

‘Shut your holes the pair of you!’ Dogman heard Threetrees roaring, loud enough to wake the dead. ‘I’m sick of it!’

He could see them now, the five of them. Tul Duru and Black Dow, bristling up to one another, Threetrees in between them with his hands up, Forley sat watching, just looking sad, and Grim, not even watching, checking his shafts.

‘Oy!’ hissed Dogman, and they all snapped round to look at him.

‘It’s the Dogman,’ said Grim, barely looking up from his arrows. There was no understanding that man. He spoke nothing at all for days on end, then when he did speak it was to say what they could all see already.

Forley was keen to distract the lads, as always. It was a hard guess how long they’d keep from killing each other without him around. ‘What did you find, Dogman?’ he asked.

‘What do you know, I found five stupid fucking bastards out in the woods!’ he hissed, stepping out from the trees. ‘I could hear them from a mile away! And they were Named Men these, would you believe, men who should have known better! Fighting among themselves as always! Five stupid bastards—’

Threetrees raised his hand. ‘Alright, Dogman. We should know better.’ And he glowered at Tul and Dow. They glowered at each other, but they said nothing more. ‘What did you find?’

‘There’s fighting going on hereabouts, or something like it. I seen a farm burning.’

‘Burning, say you?’ asked Tul.

‘Aye.’

Threetrees frowned. ‘Take us to it, then.’

*

The Dogman hadn’t seen this from up in the trees. Couldn’t have. Too smoky and too far to see this. He saw it now though, right up close, and it made him sick. They all saw it.

‘This is some dark work here alright,’ said Forley, looking up at the tree. ‘Some dark work.’

‘Aye,’ mumbled Dogman. He couldn’t think of ought else to say. The branch creaked as the old man swung slowly round, his bare feet dangling near the earth. Might have been he tried to fight, he’d got two arrows through him. The woman was too young to be his wife. His daughter, maybe. The Dogman guessed the two young ones were her children. ‘Who’d hang a child?’ he muttered.

‘I can think of some black enough,’ said Tul.

Dow spat on the grass. ‘Meaning me?’ he growled, and the two of ’em were off again like hammer on anvil. ‘I burned some farms, and a village or two an’ all, but there were reasons, that was war. I let the children live.’

‘I heard different,’ said Tul. Dogman closed his eyes and sighed.

‘You think I give a dog’s arse for what you heard?’ Dow barked. ‘Might be my name’s blacker than I deserve, you giant shit!’

‘I know what you deserve, you bastard!’

‘Enough!’ growled Threetrees, frowning up at the tree. ‘Have you no respect? The Dogman’s right. We’re out of the mountains now and there’s trouble brewing. There’ll be no more of this squabbling. No more. Quiet and cold from now on, like the winter-time. We’re Named Men with men’s work to do.’

Dogman nodded, happy to hear some sense at last. ‘There’s fighting nearby,’ he said, ‘there has to be.’

‘Uh,’ said Grim, though it was hard to say exactly what he was agreeing with.

Threetrees’ eye was still fixed on the swinging bodies. ‘You’re right. We need to put our minds on that now. On that and nothing else. We’ll track the crowd as did this and see what they’re fighting for. We’ll do no good until we know who’s fighting who.’

‘Whoever did this fights for Bethod,’ said Dow. ‘You can tell just by the looking.’

‘We’ll see. Tul and Dow, cut these folks down and bury ’em. Maybe that task’ll put some steel back in you.’ The two of them scowled at each other, but Threetrees paid ’em no mind. ‘Dogman, you go and sniff out those as did this. Sniff ’em out, and we’ll pay ’em a visit tonight. A visit like they paid to these folks here.’

‘Aye,’ said Dogman, keen to get on and do it. ‘We’ll pay ’em a visit.’

The Dogman couldn’t work it out. If they were in a fight these lot, afraid of being caught out by an enemy, they weren’t making too much of an effort to cover their tracks. He followed them simple as could be, five of them he reckoned. Must’ve strolled nice and easy away from the burning farm, down through the valley beside the river and off into the woods. The tracks were so clear he got a little worried time to time, thinking they must be playing some trick on him, watching out there in the trees, waiting to hang him from a branch. Seemed they weren’t though, ’cause he caught up to them just before nightfall.

First of all he smelled their meat – mutton roasting. Next he heard their voices – talking, shouting, laughing, making not the meanest attempt to stay quiet, easy to hear even with the river bubbling beside. Then he saw them, sitting round a great big fire in a clearing, a sheep’s carcass skinned on a spit above it, taken from those farmers no doubt. The Dogman crouched down in the bushes, nice and still like they should have been. He counted five men, or four and a boy about fourteen years. They were all just sitting, no one standing guard, no caution at all. He couldn’t work it out.

‘They’re just sitting there,’ he whispered when he got back to the others. ‘Just sitting. No guard, no nothing.’

‘Just sitting?’ asked Forley.

‘Aye. Five of ’em. Sitting and laughing. I don’t like it.’

‘I don’t like it neither,’ said Threetrees, ‘but I like what I saw at that farm still less.’

‘Weapons,’ hissed Dow. ‘Weapons, it has to be.’

For once, Tul agreed with him. ‘Weapons, chief. Let’s give ’em a lesson.’

Not even Forley spoke up for staying out of a fight this time, but Threetrees thought it out for a bit still, taking his moment, not to be hurried. Then he nodded. ‘Weapons it is.’

*

You won’t see Black Dow in the dark, not if he don’t want to be seen. You won’t hear him neither, but the Dogman knew he was there as he crept down through the trees. You fight with a man for long enough, you get an

understanding. You learn how he thinks and you come to think the same way. Dow was there.

The Dogman had his task. He could see the outline of the one on the far right, his back a black shape against the fire. Dogman didn't spare too much thought for the others yet. He spared no thought for anything but his task. Once you choose to go, or your chief chooses for you, you go all the way, and never look back 'til the task's done. The time you spend thinking is the time you'll get killed in. Logen taught him that and he'd taken it right to heart. That's the way it has to be.

Dogman crept closer, and closer still, feeling the warmth of the fire on his face, feeling the hard metal of the knife in his hand. By the dead he needed to piss, as always. The task wasn't but a stride away now. The boy was facing him – if he'd have looked up fast from his meat he'd have seen the Dogman coming, but he was too busy eating.

'Gurgh!' shouted one of the others. That meant Dow'd got to him, and that meant he was finished. Dogman leaped forward and stabbed his task in the side of the neck. He reared up for a moment, clutching at his cut throat, took a stumble forward and fell over. One of the others jumped up, dropping his half-chewed leg of mutton on the ground, then an arrow stuck him through the chest. Grim, out by the river. He looked surprised a minute, then he sank down on his knees, face twisted up with pain.

That left but two, and the boy was still sitting there, staring at the Dogman, mouth half open with a bit of meat hanging out of it. The last of them was stood up, breathing quick, with a long knife in his hand. He must have had it out for eating with.

'Drop the blade!' bellowed Threetrees. The Dogman saw the old boy now, striding towards them, the firelight catching the metal rim of his big round shield. The man chewed on his lip, eyes flicking from Dogman to Dow as they moved slowly to either side of him. Now he saw the Thunderhead, looming out of the darkness in the trees, seeming too big to be a man, his great huge sword glinting over his shoulder. That was enough for him. He threw his knife down in the dirt.

Dow jumped forward, grabbed his wrists and tied them tight behind him, then shoved him down on his knees beside the fire. The Dogman did the same with the boy, his teeth clenched tight, not saying a word. The whole thing was done in an instant, quiet and cold like Threetrees said. There was

blood on Dogman's hands, but that was the work and couldn't be helped. The others were making their way over now. Grim came sloshing through the river, throwing his bow across his shoulder. He gave the one he shot a kick as he came past, but the body didn't move.

'Dead,' said Grim. Forley was at the back, peering at the two prisoners. Dow was staring at the one he'd tied, staring at him hard.

'I know this one 'ere,' he said, sounding quite pleased about it too. 'Groa the Mire, ain't it? What a chance! You've been gnawing at the back of my mind for some time.'

The Mire scowled down at the ground. A cruel-looking sort, the Dogman thought, the type that might hang farmers, if there was one. 'Aye, I'm the Mire. No need to ask your names! When they find you've killed some o' the King's collectors you'll be dead men all!'

'Black Dow, they call me.'

The Mire's head came up, his mouth wide open. 'Oh fuck,' he whispered.

The boy kneeling next to him stared round with big eyes. 'Black Dow? You what? Not the same Black Dow as . . . oh fuck.'

Dow nodded slowly, with that nasty smile spreading across his face, that killing smile. 'Groa the Mire. You've all kind of work to pay for. I've had you in my mind, and now you're in my eye.' He patted him on the cheek. 'And in my hand too. What a happy chance.'

The Mire snatched his face away, as far as he could, trussed up like he was. 'I thought you were in hell, Black Dow, you bastard!'

'So did I, but I was only north o' the mountains. We've questions for you, Mire, before you get what's due. Who's this king? What is it you're collecting for him?'

'Fuck your questions!'

Threetrees hit him on the side of his head, hard, where he couldn't see it coming. When he turned round to look, Dow cracked him on the other side. Back and forth his head went, till he was soft enough to talk.

'What's the fight?' asked Threetrees.

'We ain't fighting!' spat the Mire through his broken teeth. 'You might as well be dead, you bastards! You don't know what's happened, do yer?' Dogman frowned. He didn't like the sound of this. Sounded like things had changed while they were gone, and he'd never yet seen a change for the better.

‘I’ll do the questions here,’ said Threetrees. ‘You just keep your tiny mind on the answers to ’em. Who’s still fighting? Who won’t kneel to Bethod?’

The Mire laughed, even tied up like he was. ‘There’s no one left! The fighting’s over! Bethod’s King now. King of all the North! Everyone kneels to him—’

‘Not us,’ rumbled Tul Duru, leaning down. ‘What about Old Man Yawl?’

‘Dead!’

‘What about Sything, or Rattleneck?’

‘Dead and dead, you stupid fucks! The only fighting now’s down south! Bethod’s gone to war with the Union! Aye! And we’re giving ’em a beating too!’

The Dogman wasn’t sure whether to believe it. King? There’d never been a king in the North before. There’d never been a need for one, and Bethod was the last one he’d have chosen. And making war on the Union? That was a fool’s errand, surely. There were always more southerners.

‘If there’s no fighting here,’ asked the Dogman, ‘what you killing for?’

‘Fuck yourself!’

Tul slapped him in the face, hard, and he fell on his back. Dow put in a kick of his own, then dragged him up straight again.

‘What did you kill ’em for?’ asked Tul.

‘Taxes!’ shouted the Mire, with blood trickling out of his nose.

‘Taxes?’ asked the Dogman. A strange word alright, he barely knew the meaning of it.

‘They wouldn’t pay!’

‘Taxes for who?’ asked Dow.

‘For Bethod, who do you think? He took all this land, broke the clans up and took it for his own! The people owe him! And we collect!’

‘Taxes, eh? That’s a fucking southern fashion and no mistake!

And if they can’t pay?’ asked Dogman, feeling sick to his guts. ‘You hang ’em, do you?’

‘If they won’t pay we can do as we please with ’em!’

‘As you please?’ Tul grabbed him round the neck, squeezing with his great big hand ’til the Mire’s eyes were half popping out. ‘As you please? Does it please you to hang ’em?’

‘Alright, Thunderhead,’ said Dow, peeling Tul’s big fingers away, and pushing him gently back. ‘Alright, big lad, this ain’t for you, to kill a man tied up.’ And he patted him on the chest, pulling out his axe. ‘It’s for work like this you bring along a man like me.’

The Mire had more or less got over his throttling now. ‘Thunderhead?’ he coughed, looking round at them. ‘It’s the whole lot of you, ain’t it! You’re Threetrees, and Grim, and that’s the Weakest there! So you don’t kneel, eh? Good for fuckin’ you! Where’s Ninefingers? Eh?’ jeered the Mire. ‘Where’s the Bloody-Nine?’

Dow turned round, running his thumb down the edge of his axe. ‘Gone back to the mud, and you’re joining him. We’ve heard enough.’

‘Let me up, bastard!’ shouted the Mire, struggling at his ropes. ‘You’re no better’n me, Black Dow! You’ve killed more folk than the plague! Let me up and give me a blade! Come on! You scared to fight me, you coward? Scared to give a fair chance are yer?’

‘Call me coward, would you?’ growled Dow. ‘You who’s killed children for the sport of it? You had a blade and you let it drop. That was your chance and you should have took it. The likes o’ you don’t deserve another. If you’ve anything to say worth hearing you best say it now.’

‘Shit on yer!’ screamed the Mire, ‘Shit on the pack of—’

Dow’s axe cracked him hard between the eyes and knocked him on his back. He kicked a little then that was it. Not a one of them shed too big a tear for that bastard – even Forley gave no more than a wince when the blade went in. Dow leaned over and spat on his corpse, and the Dogman hardly blamed him. The boy was something more of a problem, though. He stared down at the body with big, wide eyes, then he looked up.

‘You’re them, ain’t ya,’ he said, ‘them as Ninefingers beat.’

‘Aye, boy,’ said Threetrees, ‘we’re them.’

‘I heard stories, stories about you. What you going to do with me?’

‘Well, there’s the question, ain’t it,’ Dogman muttered to himself. Shame was, he already knew the answer.

‘He can’t stay with us,’ said Threetrees. ‘We can’t take the baggage and we can’t take the risk.’

‘He’s just a lad,’ said Forley. ‘We could let him go.’ It was a nice thought, but it wasn’t holding much water, and they all knew it. The boy looked hopeful, but Tul put an end to that.

‘We can’t trust him. Not here. He’d tell someone we were back, and then we’d be hunted. Can’t do it. Besides, he had his part in that work at the farm.’

‘But what choice did I ’ave?’ asked the boy. ‘What choice? I wanted to go south! Go south and fight the Union, and earn myself a name, but they sent me here, to get taxes. My chief says do a thing, I got to do it, don’t I?’

‘You do,’ said Threetrees. ‘No one says you could’ve done different. ’

‘I didn’t want no part of it! I told him to let the young ones be! You got to believe me!’

Forley looked down at his boots. ‘We do believe you.’

‘But you’re going to fuckin’ kill me anyway?’

Dogman chewed at his lip. ‘Can’t take you with us, can’t leave you be.’

‘I didn’t want no part of it.’ The boy hung his head. ‘Don’t hardly seem fair.’

‘It ain’t,’ said Threetrees. ‘It ain’t fair at all. But there it is.’

Dow’s axe hacked into the back of the lad’s skull and he sprawled out on his face. The Dogman winced and looked away. He knew Dow did it that way so they wouldn’t have to look at the boy’s face. A good idea most likely, and he hoped it helped the others, but face up or face down was all the same to him. He felt almost as sick as he had back at the farm.

It wasn’t the worst day he’d ever had, not by a long way. But it was a bad one.

The Dogman watched ’em filing down the road from a good spot up in the trees where no one could see him. He made sure it was downwind from ’em too, cause being honest, he was smelling a bit ripe. It was a strange old procession. On the one hand they looked like fighting men, off to a weapon-take and then to battle. On the other hand they were all wrong. Old weapons mostly, and odds and sods of mixed up armour. Marching, but loose and ragged. Most of ’em too old to be prime fighters, grey hair and bald heads, and a lot of the rest too young for beards, hardly more than boys.

Seemed to the Dogman like nothing made sense in the North no more. He thought on what the Mire had said before Dow killed him. War with the Union. Were these lot off to war? If they were then Bethod must have been scraping the pot.

‘What’s to do, Dogman?’ asked Forley, as he stepped back into the camp. ‘What’s happening down there?’

‘Men. Armed, but none too well. Five score or more. Young and old mostly, heading south and west,’ and the Dogman pointed off down the road.

Threetrees nodded. ‘Towards Angland. He means it then, Bethod. He’s making war on the Union, all the way. No amount of blood’s enough for that one. He’s taking every man can hold a spear.’ That was no surprise, in its way. Bethod had never been one for half measures. He was all or nothing, and didn’t care who got killed along the road. ‘Every man,’ muttered Threetrees to himself. ‘If the Shanka come over the mountains now ...’

Dogman looked round. Frowning, worried, dirty faces. He knew what Threetrees was saying, they could all see it. If the Shanka came now, with no one left in the North to fight ’em, that business at the farm would be the best of it.

‘We got to warn someone!’ shouted Forley, ‘we got to warn them!’

Threetrees shook his head. ‘You heard the Mire. Yawl’s gone, and Rattleneck, and Sything. All dead and cold, and gone back to the mud. Bethod’s King now, King of the Northmen.’ Black Dow scowled and gobbed in the dirt. ‘Spit all you like Dow, but facts is facts. There’s no one left to warn.’

‘No one but Bethod himself,’ muttered the Dogman, miserable at having to say it.

‘Then we got to tell him!’ Forley looked round them all, desperate. ‘He may be a heartless bastard but at least he’s a man! He’s better than the Flatheads ain’t he? We got to tell someone!’

‘Hah!’ barked Dow. ‘Hah! You think he’ll listen to us, Weakest? You forgotten what he told us? Us and Ninefingers too? Never come back! You forgotten how close he come to killing us? You forgotten how much he hates each one of us?’

‘Fears us,’ said Grim.

‘Hates and fears us,’ muttered Threetrees, ‘and he’s wise to. Because we’re strong. Named men. Known men. The type of men that others will follow.’

Tul nodded his big head. ‘Aye, there’ll be no welcome for us at Carleon I’m thinking. No welcome without a spike on the end of it.’

‘I’m not strong!’ shouted Forley. ‘I’m the Weakest, everyone knows that! Bethod’s got no reason to fear me, nor to hate me neither. I’ll go!’

Dogman looked at him, surprised. They all did. ‘You?’ asked Dow.

‘Aye, me! I may be no fighter, but I’m no coward neither! I’ll go and talk to him. Maybe he’ll listen.’ Dogman stood and stared. It was so long since any one of them had tried to talk their way out of a fix he’d forgotten it could be done.

‘Might be he’ll listen,’ muttered Threetrees.

‘He might listen,’ said Tul. ‘Then he might bloody kill you, Weakest!’

Dogman shook his head. ‘It’s quite a chance.’

‘Maybe, but it’s worth the doing, ain’t it?’

They all looked at each other, worried. It was some bones that Forley was showing, no doubt, but the Dogman didn’t much like the sound of this for a plan. He was a thin thread to hang your hopes on, was Bethod. A mighty thin thread.

But like Threetrees said, there was no one else.

Words and Dust

Kurster pranced around the outside of the circle, his long golden hair bouncing on his shoulders, waving to the crowd, blowing kisses to the girls. The audience cheered and howled and whooped as the lithe young man made his flashy rounds. He was an Aduan, an officer of the King's Own. *A local boy, and so very popular.*

Bremer dan Gorst was leaning against the barrier, watching his opponent dance through barely open eyes. His steels were unusually heavy-looking, weighty and worn and well-used, too heavy to be quick perhaps. Gorst himself looked too heavy to be quick, come to that, a great thick-necked bull of a man, more like a wrestler than a swordsman. He looked the underdog in this bout. The majority of the crowd seemed to think so. *But I know better.*

Nearby a bet-maker was shouting odds, taking money from the babbling people around him. Nearly all of the bets were for Kurster. Glokta leaned across from his bench. 'What odds are you giving on Gorst now?'

'On Gorst?' asked the bet-maker, 'evens.'

'I'll take two hundred marks.'

'Sorry, friend, I can't cover that.'

'A hundred then, at five to four.'

The bet-maker thought about it for a moment, looking skywards as he worked out the sums in his head. 'Done.'

Glokta sat back as the referee introduced the contestants, watching Gorst roll up his shirt-sleeves. The man's forearms were thick as tree trunks, heavy cords of muscle squirming as he worked his meaty fingers. He stretched his thick neck to one side and the other, then he took his steels from his second and loosed a couple of practice jabs. Few in the crowd noticed. They were busy cheering Kurster as he took his mark. But Glokta saw. *Quicker than he looks. A lot, lot quicker. Those heavy steels no longer seem so clumsy.*

'Bremer dan Gorst!' shouted the referee, as the big man trudged to his mark. The applause was meagre indeed. This lumbering bull was no one's idea of a swordsman.

‘Begin!’

It wasn’t pretty. From the very start Gorst swung his heavy long steel in great heedless sweeps, like a champion woodsman chopping logs, giving throaty growls with every blow. It was a strange sight. One man was in a fencing contest, the other seemed to think he was fighting to the death. *You only have to touch him, man, not split him in half!* But as Glokta watched, he realised the mighty cuts were not nearly so clumsy as they seemed. They were well-timed, and highly accurate. Kurster laughed as he danced away from the first great swing, smiled as he dodged the third, but by the fifth his smile was long gone. *And it doesn’t look like coming back.*

It wasn’t pretty at all. *But the power is undeniable.* Kurster ducked desperately under another great arcing cut. *That one was hard enough to take his head off, blunted steels or no.*

The crowd’s favourite did his best to seize the initiative, jabbing away for all he was worth, but Gorst was more than equal to it. He grunted as he turned the jabs efficiently away with his short steel, then growled again as he brought his long whistling around and over. Glokta winced as it smashed into Kurster’s sword with a resounding crash, snapping the man’s wrist back and nearly tearing the steel from his fingers. He stumbled back from the force of it, grimacing with pain and shock.

Now I realise why Gorst’s steels seem so worn. Kurster dodged around the circle, trying to escape the onslaught, but the big man was too quick. *Far too quick.* Gorst had the measure of him now, anticipating every movement, harrying his opponent with relentless blows. There was no escape.

Two heavy thrusts drove the hapless officer back towards the edge of the circle, then a scything cut ripped his long steel from his hand and embedded it, wobbling wildly back and forth, in the turf. He staggered for a moment, eyes wide, his empty hand trembling, then Gorst was on him, letting go a roar and ramming full-tilt into his defenceless ribs with a heavy shoulder.

Glokta spluttered with laughter. *I never saw a swordsman fly before.* Kurster actually turned half a somersault, shrieking like a girl as he tumbled through the air, crashing to the ground with his limbs flopping and sliding away on his face. He finally came to rest in the sand outside the circle, a good three strides from where Gorst had hit him, groaning weakly.

The crowd was in shock, so quiet that Glokta’s cackling had to be audible on the back row. Kurster’s trainer rushed from his enclosure and gently

turned his stricken student over. The young man kicked weakly, whimpered and clutched at his ribs. Gorst watched for a moment, emotionless, then shrugged and strolled back to his mark.

Kurster's trainer turned to the referee. 'I am sorry,' he said, 'but my pupil cannot continue.'

Glokta could not help himself. He had to clamp his mouth shut with his hands. His whole body was shaking with laughter. Each gurgle caused a painful spasm in his neck, but he didn't care. It seemed the majority of the crowd had not found the spectacle quite so amusing. Angry mutterings sprang up all around him. The grumbling turned to boos as Kurster was helped from the circle, draped between his trainer and his second, then the boos to a chorus of angry shouts.

Gorst swept the audience with his lazy, half-open eyes, then shrugged again and trudged slowly back to his enclosure. Glokta was still sniggering as he limped from the arena, his purse a good deal heavier than when he arrived. He hadn't had that much fun in years.

The University stood in a neglected corner of the Agriont, directly in the shadow of the House of the Maker, where even the birds seemed old and tired. A huge, ramshackle building, coated in half-dead ivy, its design plainly from an earlier age. It was said to be one of the oldest buildings in the city. *And it looks it.*

The roofs were sagging in the middle, a couple of them close to outright collapse. The delicate spires were crumbling, threatening to topple off into the unkempt gardens below. The render on the walls was tired and grimy, and in places whole sections had fallen away to reveal the bare stones and crumbling mortar beneath. In one spot a great brown stain flared out down the wall from a section of broken guttering. There had been a time when the study of sciences had attracted some of the foremost men in the Union, when this building had been among the grandest in the city. *And Sult thinks the Inquisition is out of fashion.*

Two statues flanked the crumbling gate. Two old men, one with a lamp, one pointing at something in a book. *Wisdom and progress or some such rubbish.* The one with the book had lost his nose some time during the past century, the other was leaning at an angle, his lamp stuck out despairingly as though clutching for support.

Glokta raised his fist and hammered on the ancient doors. They rattled, moved noticeably, as if they might at any moment drop from their hinges. Glokta waited. Waited some time.

There was a sudden clatter of bolts being drawn back, and one half of the door wobbled open a few inches. An ancient face wedged itself into the gap and squinted out at him, lit underneath by a meagre taper clutched in a withered hand. Dewy old eyes peered up and down. 'Yes?'

'Inquisitor Glokta.'

'Ah, from the Arch Lector?'

Glokta frowned, surprised. 'Yes, that's right.' *They cannot be half so cut off from the world as they appear. He seems to know who I am.*

It was perilously dark within. Two enormous brass candelabras stood on either side of the door, but they were stripped of candles and had long gone unpolished, shining dully in the weak light from the porter's little taper. 'This way, sir,' wheezed the old man, shambling off, bent nearly double. Even Glokta had little trouble keeping up with him as he crept away through the gloom.

They shuffled together down a shadowy hallway. The windows on one side were ancient, made with tiny panes of glass so dirty that they would have let in little enough light on the sunniest of days. They let in none whatever as the sullen evening came on. The flickering candleflame danced over dusty paintings on the opposite wall, pale old men in dark gowns of black and grey, gazing wild-eyed from their flaking frames, flasks and cog-wheels and pairs of compasses clutched in their aged hands.

'Where are we going?' asked Glokta, after they had shambled through the murk for several minutes.

'The Adepti are at dinner,' wheezed the porter, glancing up at him with eyes infinitely tired.

The University's dining hall was an echoing cavern of a room, lifted one degree above total darkness by a few guttering candles. A small fire flickered in an enormous fireplace, casting dancing shadows among the rafters. A long table stretched the length of the floor, polished by long years of use, flanked by rickety chairs. It could easily have accommodated eighty but there were only five there, crowded up at one end, huddled in around the fireplace. They looked over as the taps of Glokta's cane echoed through the hall, pausing in their meals and peering over with great interest. The

man at the head of the table got to his feet and hurried over, holding the hem of his long black gown up with one hand.

'A visitor,' wheezed the porter, waving his candle in Glokta's direction.

'Ah, from the Arch Lector! I am Silber, the University Administrator!' And he shook Glokta's hand. His companions had meanwhile lurched and tottered to their feet as though the guest of honour had just arrived.

'Inquisitor Glokta.' He stared round at the eager old men. *A good deal more deference than I was expecting, I must say. But then, the Arch Lector's name opens all kinds of doors.*

'Glokta, Glokta,' mumbled one of the old men, 'seems that I remember a Glokta from somewhere.'

'You remember everything from somewhere, but you never remember where,' quipped the administrator, to half-hearted laughter. 'Please let me make the introductions.'

He went round the four black-gowned scientists, one by one. 'Saurizin, our Adeptus Chemical.' A beefy, unkempt old fellow with burns and stains down the front of his robe and more than one bit of food in his beard. 'Denka, the Adeptus Metallic.' The youngest of the four by a considerable margin, though by no means a young man, had an arrogant twist to his mouth. 'Chayle, our Adeptus Mechanical.' Glokta had never seen a man with so big a head but so small a face. His ears, in particular, were immense, and sprouting grey hairs. 'And Kandelau, the Adeptus Physical.' A scrawny old bird with a long neck and spectacles perched on his curving beak of a nose. 'Please join us, Inquisitor,' and the administrator indicated an empty chair, wedged in between two of the Adepti.

'A glass of wine then?' wheedled Chayle, a prim smile on his tiny mouth, already leaning forward with a decanter and sloshing some into a glass.

'Very well.'

'We were just discussing the relative merits of our various fields of study,' murmured Kandelau, peering at Glokta through his flashing spectacles.

'As always,' lamented the Administrator.

'The human body is, of course, the only area worthy of true scrutiny,' continued the Adeptus Physical. 'One must appreciate the mysteries within, before turning one's attention to the world without. We all have a body, Inquisitor. Means of healing it, and of harming it, are of paramount interest to us all. It is the human body that is my area of expertise.'

‘Bodies! Bodies!’ whined Chayle, pursing his little lips and pushing food around his plate. ‘We are trying to eat!’

‘Quite so! You are unsettling the Inquisitor with your ghoulish babble!’

‘Oh, I am not easily unsettled.’ Glokta leered across the table, giving the Adeptus Metallic a good view of his missing teeth. ‘My work for the Inquisition demands a more than passing knowledge of anatomy.’

There was an uncomfortable silence, then Saurizin took hold of the meat plate and offered it out. Glokta looked at the red slices, glistening on the plate. He licked at his empty gums. ‘Thank you, no.’

‘Is it true?’ asked the Adeptus Chemical, peering over the meat, voice hushed. ‘Will there be more funds? Now that this business with the Mercers is settled, that is?’

Glokta frowned. Everyone was staring at him, waiting for his reply. One of the old Adepti had his fork frozen halfway to his mouth. *So that’s it. Money. But why would they be expecting money from the Arch Lector?* The heavy meat plate was beginning to wobble. *Well . . . if it gets them listening.* ‘Money might be made available, depending, of course, on results.’

A hushed murmur crept around the table. The Adeptus Chemical carefully set down the plate with a trembling hand. ‘I have been having a great deal of success with acids recently ...’

‘Hah!’ mocked the Adeptus Metallic. ‘Results, the Inquisitor asked for, results! My new alloys will be stronger than steel when they are perfected!’

‘Always the alloys!’ sighed Chayle, turning his tiny eyes towards the ceiling. ‘No one appreciates the importance of sound mechanical thinking!’

The other three Adepti rounded fiercely on him, but the Administrator jumped in first. ‘Gentlemen, please! The Inquisitor is not interested in our little differences! Everyone will have time to discuss their latest work and show its merits. This is not a competition, is it Inquisitor?’ Every eye turned toward Glokta. He looked slowly round at those old, expectant faces, and said nothing.

‘I have developed a machine for—’

‘My acids—’

‘My alloys—’

‘The mysteries of the human body—’

Glokta cut them off. ‘Actually, it is in the area of . . . I suppose you would call them explosive substances, that I am currently taking a particular

interest—’

The Adeptus Chemical jumped from his seat. ‘That would be my province!’ he cried, staring in triumph at his colleagues. ‘I have samples! I have examples! Please follow me, Inquisitor!’ And he tossed his cutlery onto his plate and set off towards one of the doors.

Saurizin’s laboratory was precisely as one would have expected, almost down to the last detail. A long room with a barrel-vaulted ceiling, blackened in places with circles and streaks of soot. Shelves covered most of the wall-space, brimming with a confusion of boxes, jars, bottles, each filled with its own powders, fluids, rods of strange metal. There was no apparent order to the positions of the various containers, and most had no labels.
Organisation does not appear to be a priority.

The benches in the middle of the room were even more confused, covered in towering constructions of glass and old brown copper: tubes, flasks and dishes, lamps – one with a naked flame burning. All gave the appearance of being ready at any moment to collapse, dousing anyone unfortunate enough to stand nearby with lethal, boiling poisons.

The Adeptus Chemical rummaged in amongst this mess like a mole in its warren. ‘Now then,’ he mumbled to himself, pulling at his dirty beard with one hand, ‘blasting powders are somewhere here ...’

Glokta limped into the room after him, glancing suspiciously around at the mess of tubing that covered every surface. He wrinkled his nose. There was a revolting, acrid smell to the place.

‘Here it is!’ crowed the Adeptus, brandishing a dusty jar half-full of black granules. He cleared a space on one of the benches, shoving the clinking and clanking glass and metal out of the way with a sweep of his meaty forearm. ‘This stuff is terribly rare, you know, Inquisitor, terribly rare!’ He pulled out the stopper and tipped a line of black powder onto the wooden bench. ‘Few men have been fortunate enough to see this stuff in action! Very few! And you are about to become one of them!’

Glokta took a cautious step back, the size of the ragged hole in the wall of the Tower of Chains still fresh in his mind. ‘We are safe, I hope, at this distance?’

‘Absolutely,’ murmured Saurizin, gingerly holding a burning taper out at arm’s length and touching it to one end of the line of powder. ‘There is no

danger whatso—’

There was a sharp pop and a shower of white sparks. The Adeptus Chemical leaped back, nearly blundering into Glokta and dropping his lighted taper on the floor. There was another pop, louder, more sparks. A foul-smelling smoke began to fill the laboratory. There was a bright flash and a loud bang, a weak fizzling, and that was all.

Saurizin flapped the long sleeve of his gown in front of his face, trying to clear the thick smoke that had now thrown the whole chamber into gloom. ‘Impressive, eh, Inquisitor?’ he asked, before dissolving into a fit of coughing.

Not really. Glokta ground the still-flaming taper out under his boot and stepped through the murk towards the bench. He brushed aside a quantity of grey ash with the side of his hand. There was a long, black burn on the surface of the wood, but nothing more. The foul-smelling fumes were indeed the most impressive effect, already clawing at the back of Glokta’s throat. ‘It certainly produces a great deal of smoke,’ he croaked.

‘It does,’ coughed the Adeptus proudly, ‘and reeks to high heaven.’

Glokta stared at that blackened smear on the bench. ‘If one had a large enough quantity of this powder, could it be used to, say, knock a hole through a wall?’

‘Possibly . . . if one could accumulate a large enough quantity, who knows what could be done? As far as I know no one has ever tried.’

‘A wall, say, four feet thick?’

The Adeptus frowned. ‘Perhaps, but you’d need barrels of the stuff! Barrels! There isn’t that much in the whole Union, and the cost, even if it could be found, would be colossal! Please understand, Inquisitor, that the components must be imported from the distant south of Kanta, and are rarities even there. I would be happy to look into the possibility, of course, but I would need considerable funding—’

‘Thank you again for your time.’ Glokta turned and began to limp through the thinning smoke towards the door.

‘I have made some significant progress with acids recently!’ cried the Adeptus, voice cracking. ‘You really should see those as well!’ He took a shuddering breath. ‘Tell the Arch Lector . . . significant progress!’ He dissolved into another fit of coughing, and Glokta shut the door tightly behind him.

A waste of my time. Our Bayaz could not have smuggled barrels of powder into that room. Even then, how much smoke, how great a smell would it have made? A waste of my time.

Silber was lurking in the hallway outside. 'Is there anything else that we can show you, Inquisitor?'

Glokta paused for a moment. 'Does anyone here know anything about magic?'

The Administrator's jaw muscles clenched. 'A joke of course. Perhaps—'

'Magic, I said.'

Silber narrowed his eyes. 'You must understand that we are a scientific institution. The practice of magic, so called, would be most . . . inappropriate.'

Glokta frowned at the man. *I'm not asking you to get your wand out, fool.* 'From a historical standpoint,' he snapped, 'the Magi, and so on. Bayaz!'

'Ah, from a historical standpoint, I see.' Silber's taut face relaxed slightly. 'Our library contains a wide range of ancient texts, some of them dating back to the period when magic was considered . . . less remarkable.'

'Who can assist me?'

The Administrator raised his brows. 'I am afraid that the Adeptus Historical is, ah, something of a relic.'

'I need to speak with him, not fence with him.'

'Of course, Inquisitor, this way.'

Glokta grabbed the handle of an ancient-looking door, studded with black rivets, began to turn it. He felt Silber seize his arm.

'No!' he snapped, guiding Glokta away down a corridor beside. 'The stacks are down here.'

The Adeptus Historical seemed indeed to be a part of ancient history himself. His face was a mask of lined and sagging half-transparent skin. Sparse hairs, snowy white, stuck unkempt from his head. There were only a quarter as many as there should have been, but each was four times longer than you would expect, hence his eyebrows were thin, yet sprouted out to impressive length in all directions, like the whiskers of a cat. His mouth hung slack, weak, and toothless, hands were withered gloves, several sizes too big. Only his eyes showed any trace of life, peering up at Glokta and the administrator as they approached.

‘Visitors, is it?’ croaked the old man, apparently talking to a large black crow perched on his desk.

‘This is Inquisitor Glokta!’ bellowed the Administrator, leaning down towards the old man’s ear.

‘Glokta?’

‘From the Arch Lector!’

‘Is it?’ The Adeptus Historical squinted up with his ancient eyes.

‘He’s somewhat deaf,’ Silber murmured, ‘but no one knows these books like he does.’ He thought about it for a moment, peering round at the endless stacks, disappearing into the gloom. ‘No one else knows these books at all.’

‘Thank you,’ said Glokta. The Administrator nodded and strode off towards the stairs. Glokta took a step towards the old man and the crow leaped from the table and scrambled into the air, shedding feathers, flapping madly around the ceiling. Glokta hobbled painfully back. *I was sure the damn thing was stuffed.* He watched it suspiciously until it clattered to a halt on top of one of the shelves and perched there motionless, staring at him with its beady yellow eyes.

Glokta pulled out a chair and dropped into it. ‘I need to know about Bayaz.’

‘Bayaz,’ muttered the ancient Adeptus. ‘The first letter in the alphabet of the old tongue, of course.’

‘I didn’t know that.’

‘The world’s brimming full of what you don’t know, young man.’ The bird gave a sudden harsh caw, horribly loud in the dusty silence of the stacks. ‘Brimming full.’

‘Then let’s begin my education. It’s the man Bayaz, I need to know about. The First of the Magi.’

‘Bayaz. The name great Juvens gave to his first apprentice. One letter, one name. First apprentice, first letter of the alphabet, you understand?’

‘I’m just about keeping up. Did he really exist?’

The ancient Adeptus scowled. ‘Unquestionably. Did you not have a tutor as a young man?’

‘I did, unfortunately.’

‘Did he not teach you history?’

‘He tried, but my mind was on fencing and girls.’

‘Ah. I lost interest in such things a long time ago.’

‘So did I. Let us return to Bayaz.’

The old man sighed. ‘Long ago, before there was a Union, Midderland was made of many petty kingdoms, often at war with one another, rising and falling with the passing years. One of these was ruled by a man called Harod, later to become Harod the Great. You’ve heard of him, I assume?’

‘Of course.’

‘Bayaz came to Harod’s throne room, and promised to make him King of all Midderland if he did as he was told. Harod, being young and headstrong, did not believe him, but Bayaz broke the long table with his Art.’

‘Magic, eh?’

‘So the story goes. Harod was impressed—’

‘Understandable.’

‘—and he agreed to accept the advice of the Magus—’

‘Which was?’

‘To make his capital here, in Adua. To make peace with certain neighbours, war with others, and when and how to do it.’ The old man squinted across at Glokta. ‘Are you telling this story or am I?’

‘You are.’ *And you’re taking your time about it.*

‘Bayaz was good as his word. In time Midderland was unified, Harod became its first High King, the Union was born.’

‘Then what?’

‘Bayaz served as Harod’s chief counsellor. Our laws and statutes, the very structure of our government, all are said to be his inventions, little changed since those ancient days. He established the Councils, Closed and Open, he formed the Inquisition. On Harod’s death he left the Union, promising one day to return.’

‘I see. How much of this is true, do you think?’

‘Hard to say. Magus? Wizard? Magician?’ The old man looked at the flickering candle flame. ‘To a savage, that candle might be magic. It’s a fine line indeed, between magic and trickery, eh? But this Bayaz was a cunning mind in his day, that’s a fact.’

This is all useless. ‘What about before?’

‘Before what?’

‘Before the Union. Before Harod.’

The old man shrugged. ‘Record-keeping was hardly a priority during the dark ages. The whole world was in chaos after the war between Juvens and his brother Kanedias—’

‘Kanedias? The Master Maker?’

‘Aye.’

Kanedias. He stares down from the walls of my little room in the cellars beneath Severard’s charming town house. Juvens dead, his eleven apprentices, the Magi, marching to avenge him. I know this tale.

‘Kanedias,’ murmured Glokta, the image of that dark figure with the flames behind clear in his mind. ‘The Master Maker. Was he real?’

‘Hard to say. He’s in the ground between myth and history, I suppose. Probably there’s some grain of truth in it. Someone must have built that big bloody tower, eh?’

‘Tower?’

‘The House of the Maker!’ The old man gestured at the room around them. ‘And they say he built all this as well.’

‘What, this library?’

The old man laughed. ‘The whole Agriont, or at least the rock on which it stands. The University too. He built it, appointed the first Adepti to help him with his works, whatever they were, to look into the nature of things. We here are the Maker’s disciples, yes, though I doubt they know it upstairs. He is gone but the work continues, eh?’

‘After a fashion. Where did he go?’

‘Hah. Dead. Your friend Bayaz killed him.’

Glokta raised an eyebrow. ‘Did he really?’

‘So the story goes. Have you not read *The Fall of the Master Maker*?’

‘That rubbish? I thought it was all invention.’

‘So it is. Sensational claptrap, but based on writings from the time.’

‘Writings? Such things survive?’

The old man narrowed his eyes. ‘Some.’

‘Some? You have them here?’

‘One in particular.’

Glokta fixed the old man with his eye. ‘Bring it to me.’

The ancient paper crackled as the Adeptus Historical carefully unrolled the scroll and spread it out on the table. The parchment was yellow and

crumpled, edges rough with age, scrawled with a dense script: strange characters, utterly unintelligible to Glokta's eye.

'What is it written in?'

'The old tongue. Few can read this now.' The old man pointed to the first line. 'An account of the fall of Kanedias, this says, the third of three.'

'Third of three?'

'Of three scrolls, I presume.'

'Where are the other two?'

'Lost.'

'Huh.' Glokta peered into the endless darkness of the stacks.

It's a wonder anything can be found down here. 'What does this one say?'

The ancient librarian peered down at the strange writing, poorly illuminated by the single flickering candle, his trembling forefinger tracing across the parchment, his lips moving silently. 'Great was their fury.'

'What?'

'That's how it begins. Great was their fury.' He began slowly to read. 'The Magi pursued Kanedias, driving his faithful before them. They broke his fortress, laying ruin to his buildings and killing his servants. The Maker himself, sore wounded in the battle with his brother Juvens, took refuge in his House.' The old man unrolled a little more. 'Twelve days and twelve nights, the Magi threw their wrath against the gates, but could not mark them. Then Bayaz found a way inside . . .' The Adeptus swept his hand over the parchment in frustration. Damp, or something, had blurred the characters in the next section. 'I can't make this out . . . something about the Maker's daughter?'

'You sure?'

'No!' snapped the old man. 'There's a whole section missing!'

'Ignore it then! What's the next thing you can be sure of?'

'Well, let's see . . . Bayaz followed him to the roof, and cast him down.' The old man noisily cleared his throat. 'The Maker fell burning, and broke upon the bridge below. The Magi searched high and low for the Seed, but could not find it.'

'Seed?' asked Glokta, baffled.

'That's all that's written.'

'What the hell does it mean?'

The old man sagged back in his chair, evidently enjoying this rare opportunity to hold forth on his area of expertise. ‘The end of the age of myth, the beginning of the age of reason. Bayaz, the Magi, they represent order. The Maker is a god-like figure: superstition, ignorance, I don’t know. There must be some truth to him. After all, someone built that big bloody tower,’ and he wheezed with breathy laughter.

Glokta could not be bothered to point out that the Adeptus had made the very same joke a few minutes before. *And it wasn’t funny then. Repetition – the curse of the old.* ‘What about this Seed?’

‘Magic, secrets, power? It’s all a metaphor.’

I will not impress the Arch Lector with metaphors. Especially bad ones. ‘Is there no more?’

‘It goes on a bit, let’s see.’ He looked back at the symbols. ‘He broke on the bridge, they searched for the Seed ...’

‘Yes, yes.’

‘Patience, Inquisitor.’ His withered finger traced across the characters. ‘They sealed up the House of the Maker. They buried the fallen, Kanedias and his daughter among them. That’s all.’ He peered at the page, his finger hovering over the last few letters. ‘And Bayaz took the key. That’s all.’

Glokta’s eyebrows went up. ‘What? What was that last bit?’

‘They sealed the gates, they buried the fallen, and Bayaz took the key.’

‘The key? The key to the House of the Maker?’

The Adeptus Historical squinted back at the page. ‘That’s what it says.’

There is no key. That tower has stood sealed for centuries, everyone knows it. Our impostor will have no key, that’s sure. Slowly, Glokta began to smile. *It is thin, it is very thin, but with the right setting, the right emphasis, it might be enough. The Arch Lector will be pleased.*

‘I’ll be taking this.’ Glokta pulled the ancient scroll over and started to roll it up.

‘What?’ The eyes of the Adeptus were wide with horror. ‘You can’t!’ He staggered up from his chair, even more painfully than Glokta might have done. His crow scrambled up with him, flapping around near the ceiling and croaking in a fury, but Glokta ignored them both. ‘You can’t take it! It’s irreplaceable,’ wheezed the old man, making a hopeless grab for the scroll.

Glokta spread his arms out wide. ‘Stop me! Why don’t you? I’d like to see it! Can you imagine? We two cripples, floundering around in the stacks

with a bird loosing its droppings on us, tugging this old piece of paper to and fro?' He giggled to himself. 'That wouldn't be very dignified, would it?'

The Adeptus Historical, exhausted by his pitiful efforts, crumpled back into his chair, breathing hard. 'No one cares about the past any more,' he whispered. 'They don't see that you can't have a future without a past.'

How very deep. Glokta slipped the rolled-up parchment into his coat and turned to leave.

'Who's going to look after the past, when I'm gone?'

'Who cares?' asked Glokta as he stalked towards the steps, 'as long as it isn't me.'

The Remarkable Talents of Brother Longfoot

The cheering had woken Logen every morning for a week. It started early, ripping him from his sleep, loud as a battle close at hand. He'd thought it was a battle when he first heard it, but now he knew it was just their damn stupid sport. Closing the window brought some relief from the noise, but the heat soon became unbearable. It was sleep a little, or sleep not at all. So he left the window open.

Logen rubbed his eyes, cursing, and hauled himself from his bed. Another hot, tedious day in the City of White Towers. On the road, in the wild, he'd be alert as soon as his eyes opened, but here things were different. The boredom and the heat were making him slow and lazy. He stumbled across the threshold into the living room, yawning wide and rubbing at his jaw with one hand. He stopped.

There was someone in there, a stranger. Standing at the window, bathed in sunlight with his hands clasped behind him. A small, slight man, with hair shaved close to his knobbly skull and strange, travel-worn clothes – faded, baggy cloth wrapped round and round his body.

Before Logen had a chance to speak, the man turned and sprang nimbly over to him. 'And you are?' he demanded. His smiling face was deeply tanned and weather-beaten, like the creased leather on a favourite pair of boots. It made it impossible to guess his age. He could have been anywhere from twenty-five to fifty.

'Ninefingers,' muttered Logen, taking a cautious step back towards the wall.

'Ninefingers, yes.' The little man pressed forwards and seized Logen's hand in both of his, gripping it tightly. 'It is an honour and privilege most profound,' he said, closing his eyes and bowing his head, 'to make your acquaintance!'

'You've heard of me?'

'Alas, no, but all God's creatures are worthy of the deepest respect.' He bowed his head again. 'I am Brother Longfoot, a traveller of the illustrious order of Navigators. There are few lands beneath the sun upon which my feet have not trodden.' He pointed down towards his well-worn boots then

spread his arms wide. ‘From the mountains of Thond to the deserts of Shamir, from the plains of the Old Empire to the silver waters of the Thousand Isles, all the world is my home! Truly!’

He spoke the northern tongue well, better than Logen himself perhaps. ‘And the North too?’

‘One brief visit, in my youth. I found the climate somewhat harsh.’

‘You speak the language well enough.’

‘There are few tongues that I, Brother Longfoot, cannot speak. An effortless skill with languages is but one among my many remarkable talents.’ The man beamed. ‘God has truly blessed me,’ he added.

Logen wondered if this might be some elaborate joke. ‘What brings you here?’

‘I have been sent for!’ His dark eyes sparkled.

‘Sent for?’

‘Indeed I have! By Bayaz, the First of the Magi! I have been sent for, and I have come! That is my way! A most generous contribution to the coffers of the order has been made in return for my remarkable talents, but I would have come without it. Indeed. Without it!’

‘Really?’

‘Indeed!’ The small man stepped away and started to stride around the room at a terrific pace, rubbing his hands together. ‘The challenge of this assignment spoke as much to the pride of the order, as to its well-documented greed! And it was I! I who was selected, from all the Navigators within the Circle of the World, for this task! I, Brother Longfoot! I, and no other! Who in my position, of my reputation, could resist such a challenge?’

He stopped before Logen and looked up at him expectantly, as if waiting for an answer to his question. ‘Er—’

‘Not I!’ shouted Longfoot, setting off on another circuit of the room. ‘I did not resist it! Why would I? That would not be my way! To journey to the very edge of the World? What a tale that will make! What an inspiration to others! What an—’

‘The edge of the World?’ asked Logen suspiciously.

‘I know!’ The strange man clapped him on the arm. ‘We are equally excited!’

‘This must be our Navigator.’ Bayaz emerged from his room.

‘I am indeed. Brother Longfoot, at your service. And you are, I presume, none other than my illustrious employer, Bayaz, the First of the Magi.’

‘I am he.’

‘It is an honour and a privilege most profound!’ cried Longfoot, springing forward and seizing the Magus by the hand, ‘to make your acquaintance!’

‘Likewise. I trust your journey was a pleasant one.’

‘Journeys are always pleasant to me! Always! It is the time between them that I find trying. Indeed it is!’ Bayaz frowned over at Logen but he could only shrug his shoulders. ‘May I ask how long it will be until we begin our journey? I am most keen to embark!’

‘Soon, I hope, the last member of our expedition will arrive. We will need to charter a ship.’

‘Of course! It shall be my particular pleasure to do so! What shall I tell the captain of our course?’

‘West across the Circle Sea, to Stariksa, then on to Calcis in the Old Empire.’ The little man smiled and bowed low. ‘You approve?’

‘I do, but ships rarely pass to Calcis now. The Old Empire’s endless wars have made the waters dangerous thereabouts. Piracy, alas, is rife. It may be difficult to find a captain willing.’

‘This should help.’ Bayaz tossed his ever-bulging purse onto the table.

‘It should indeed.’

‘Make sure the ship is fast. Once we are ready I do not wish to waste a day.’

‘On that you may depend,’ said the Navigator, scooping up the heavy bag of coins. ‘To sail in slow vessels is not my way! No! I will find for you the fastest ship in all Adua! Yes! She shall fly like the breath of God! She shall skip over the waves like—’

‘Merely fast will do.’

The little man inclined his head. ‘The time of departure?’

‘Within the month.’ Bayaz looked at Logen. ‘Why don’t you go with him?’

‘Uh?’

‘Yes!’ shouted the Navigator, ‘we will go together!’ He grabbed Logen by the elbow and began to pull him towards the door.

‘I will expect some change, Brother Longfoot!’ called Bayaz, from behind.

The Navigator turned in the doorway. ‘There will be change, on that you may depend. An eye for value, a flair for barter, a dauntless purpose in negotiation! These are but three,’ and he smiled broadly, ‘of my remarkable talents!’

‘It is a fabulous place, this Adua. Truly. Few cities are its equal. Shaffa, perhaps, is larger, but so very dusty. None could deny that Westport and Dagoska have their sights. Some think of Ospria, on its mountain slopes, as the most beautiful city of the world, but Brother Longfoot’s heart, it must be said, belongs to great Talins. Have you been there, Master Ninefingers, have you seen that noble settlement?’

‘Er . . .’ Logen was busy trying to keep up with the little man, dodging between the endless flow of people.

Longfoot stopped so suddenly that Logen almost piled into him. The Navigator turned, his hands raised, a faraway look in his eye. ‘Talins at sunset, seen from the ocean! I have witnessed many remarkable things, believe me, but I declare that to be the most beautiful sight in all the world. The way the sun gleams on the myriad canals, on the glinting domes of the Grand Duke’s citadel, on the graceful palaces of the merchant princes! Where now does the shining sea end, and the shining city begin? Ah! Talins!’ He turned and charged off once more and Logen hurried after him.

‘But this Adua is a fine place, certainly, and growing every year. Things have changed a great deal here since my last visit, indeed they have. Once there were only noblemen and commoners. The noblemen owned the land so they had the money and therefore the power. Ha. Simple, you see?’

‘Well—’ Logen was having trouble seeing much further than Longfoot’s back.

‘But now they have trade, and so much of it. Merchants, and bankers, and so forth. Everywhere. Armies of them. Now commoners can be rich, you see? And a rich commoner has power. Is he a commoner now, or a nobleman? Or is he something else? Ha. Very complicated all of a sudden, no?’

‘Er—’

‘So much wealth. So much money. But so much poverty too, eh? So many beggars, so many poor. Hardly healthy, so rich and so poor, so close together, but it’s a fine place still, and always growing.’

‘I find it too crowded,’ mumbled Logen as a shoulder barged past him, ‘and too hot.’

‘Bah! Crowded? Do you call this crowded? You should see the great temple in Shaffa at morning prayer! Or the grand square before the Emperor’s palace when new slaves are up for auction! And hot? Do you call this hot? In Ul-Saffayn, in the far south of Gurkhul, it gets so hot during the summer months that you can cook an egg on your doorstep. Truly! This way.’ He ducked through the passing crowds towards a narrow sidestreet. ‘This way is the quickest!’

Logen caught him by the arm. ‘Down there?’ He peered into the gloom. ‘You sure?’

‘Can you doubt it?’ demanded Longfoot, suddenly horrified. ‘Can it be that you could doubt it? Among all my remarkable talents, it is my skill at navigation that is paramount! It is for that talent, above all, that the First of the Magi has made so generous a contribution to the coffers of the order! Could it be that you . . . but wait.’ He held up his hand and began to smile again, then tapped Logen on the chest with his forefinger. ‘*You* do not know Brother Longfoot. Not yet. You are watchful and cautious, I see it, fine qualities in their place. I cannot expect you to have *my* unshakeable faith in my abilities. No! That would not be fair. Unfairness is not an admirable quality. No! Unfairness is not my way.’

‘I meant—’

‘I shall convince you!’ shouted Longfoot. ‘Indeed I shall! You will come to trust my word before your own! Yes! This way is the quickest!’ And he strode off down the dingy alleyway with remarkable speed, Logen struggling to keep up though his legs were a good half-foot longer.

‘Ah, the back streets!’ called the Navigator over his shoulder as they passed down dark and grimy lanes, the buildings crowding in ever closer. ‘The back streets, eh?’ The alleys grew narrower, darker, and dirtier still. The little man turned to the left and the right, never pausing for an instant to consider his course. ‘Do you smell that? Do you smell that, Master Ninefingers? It smells like . . .’ he rubbed his thumbs and fingertips together as he strode along, searching for the words ‘ . . . mystery! Adventure!’

It smelled like shit to Logen. A man lay on his face in the gutter, dead drunk perhaps, or maybe simply dead. Other men passed by, limping and haggard, or standing in threatening groups in doorways, handing round bottles. There were women here too.

'Four marks and I'll give you a blessing, Northman!' one of them called to Logen as they passed. 'A blessing you won't soon forget! Three, then!'

'Whores,' whispered Longfoot, shaking his head, 'and cheap ones too. You like women?'

'Well—'

'You should go to Ul-Nahb my friend! Ul-Nahb on the shores of the Southern Sea! You could buy a bed-slave there. Indeed you could! They cost a fortune, but they train these girls for years!'

'You can buy a girl?' asked Logen, mystified.

'Boys too, if your taste bends that way.'

'Eh?'

'They train them for years, truly. It's a whole industry down there. You want skilled? Do you? These girls have skills you wouldn't believe! Or visit Sipani! There are places in that city – phew! The women are beautiful, beautiful every one! Truly! Like princesses! And clean,' he muttered, peering at one of the scruffy women by the roadside.

A bit of dirt didn't bother Logen any. Skilled and beautiful all sounded too complicated to him. One girl caught his eye as they passed, leaning against a door-frame with one arm up. Watching them pass with a half-hearted smile. Logen found her pretty, in a desperate sort of a way. Prettier than he was anyway, and it had been a long time. You have to be realistic about these things.

Logen stopped in the street. 'Bayaz wanted change?' he muttered.

'He did. He was most specific on the subject.'

'There's money to spare, then?'

Longfoot raised one eyebrow. 'Well, perhaps, let me see ...'

He pulled out the purse with a flourish and opened it, rooting around inside. There was a loud jingling of coins.

'You think that's a good idea?' Logen glanced nervously up and down the street. Several faces had turned towards them.

‘What’s that?’ asked the Navigator, still poking around in the purse. He pulled some coins out, holding them up to the light and peering at them, then pressed them into Logen’s palm.

‘Subtlety isn’t one of your talents, is it?’ Some of the shabby men in the alley began to move slowly, curiously towards them, two from in front, one from behind.

‘No indeed!’ laughed Longfoot. ‘No indeed! I am a straight-talking man, that is my way! Yes indeed! I am a . . . ah.’ He had noticed the shadowy figures sidling towards them now. ‘Ah. This is unfortunate. Oh dear.’

Logen turned to the girl. ‘Do you mind if we . . .’ She slammed the door shut in his face. Other doors up and down the street began to close. ‘Shit.’ he said. ‘How are you at fighting?’

‘God has seen fit to bless me with many remarkable talents,’ murmured the navigator, ‘but combat is not one of them.’

One of the men had an ugly squint. ‘That’s a big purse for a little man,’ he said, as he came close.

‘Well, er . . .’ murmured Longfoot, creeping behind Logen’s shoulder.

‘An awful big load for a little man to carry,’ said the other.

‘Why not let us help you with it?’

Neither one of them had weapons ready, but by the way their hands were moving Logen knew they had them. There was a third man behind him too, he could sense him moving forwards now. Close. Closer than the other two. If he could deal with that one first, the one behind, his chances might be good. He couldn’t risk looking round, that would spoil the surprise. He’d simply have to hope for the best. As always.

Logen gritted his teeth and flung his elbow backwards. It hit the man behind in the jaw with a heavy crunch, and Logen caught his wrist in his other hand, which was lucky, because he had a knife out and ready. Logen smashed him in the mouth with his elbow again, tearing the blade from his limp fingers as he dropped into the street, head smacking against the dirty cobbles. He whipped round, half expecting to get stabbed in the back, but the other two hadn’t moved too quick. They had knives of their own out, and one had taken a half-step towards him, but he paused when he saw that Logen had the blade up, ready to fight.

It was a meagre kind of a weapon, six inches of rusty iron without even a cross-piece, but it was better than nothing. A lot better. Logen waved it

around in the air in front of him, just to make sure that everyone could see it. Felt good. His odds were much improved.

'Right then,' said Logen, 'who's next?'

The other two moved apart, trying to get to either side of him, weighing their knives in their hands, but they didn't seem in any great rush to come on.

'We can take him!' whispered the squinter, but his friend didn't look too sure.

'Or, you can have this.' Logen opened up his clenched fist, showing the coins that Longfoot had given him. 'And leave us be. This much I can spare.' He swished the knife around a bit more, just to add some weight to his words. 'This is what you're worth to me – this much, no more. What's it to be?'

The one with the squint spat on the ground. 'We can take him!' he hissed again. 'You go first!'

'You fucking go!' shouted the other.

'Just take what I'm offering,' said Logen, 'then we none of us have to go.'

The one that he'd elbowed groaned and rolled over in the road, and the reminder of his fate seemed to decide them. 'Alright, you fucking northern bastard, alright, we'll take it!'

Logen grinned. He thought about throwing the coins at the one with the squint then stabbing him while he was distracted. That's what he'd have done in his youth, but he decided against. Why bother? Instead he opened his fingers and tossed the money into the road behind him, moving towards the nearest wall. He and the two thieves circled each other cautiously, each step taking them closer to the coins and him closer to escape. Soon they'd swapped places, and Logen backed away down the street, still holding the knife in front of him. When they were ten paces apart the two men squatted down and began to pick the scattered coins up from the ground.

'I'm still alive,' Logen whispered to himself as he quickened his pace.

That had been lucky, he knew. It's a fool who thinks that any fight is too small to be the death of him, however tough he is. Lucky that he caught the one behind just right. Lucky that the other two had been slow. But then he'd always been lucky with fights. Lucky at getting out of them alive. Not so lucky with the getting into them. Still, he felt good about this day's work. Glad he hadn't killed anybody.

Logen felt a hand clap him on the back, and he span round, knife at the ready.

'Only me!' Brother Longfoot held up his hands. Logen had nearly forgotten the Navigator was there. He must have stayed behind him the whole time, perfectly silent. 'Well handled Master Ninefingers, well handled! Truly! I see that you are not without some talents of your own! I am looking forward to travelling with you, I am indeed! The docks are this way!' he shouted, already moving off.

Logen took one last look back at the two men, but they were still grubbing around on the ground, so he threw the knife away and hurried to catch up to Longfoot. 'Do you Navigators never fight?'

'Some among us do, oh yes, with empty hands and weapons of all kinds. Most deadly, some of them, but not I. No. That is not my way.'

'Never?'

'Never. My skills lie elsewhere.'

'I would have thought your travels would bring you across many dangers.'

'They do,' said Longfoot brightly, 'they do indeed. That is when my remarkable talent for hiding is at its most useful.'

Her Kind Fight Everything

Night. Cold. The salt wind was keen on the hilltop, and Ferro's clothes were thin and ragged. She hugged her arms and hunched up her shoulders, staring sourly down towards the sea. Dagoska was a cloud of pin-prick lights in the distance, huddled around the steep rock between the great, curving bay and the glistening ocean. Her eyes could make out the vague, tiny shapes of walls and towers, black against the dark sky, and the thin neck of dry earth that joined the city to the land. An island, almost. Between them and Dagoska there were fires. Camps around the roads. Many camps.

'Dagoska,' whispered Yulwei, perched on a rock beside her. 'A little splinter of the Union, stuck into Gurkhul like a thorn. A thorn in the Emperor's pride.'

'Huh,' grunted Ferro, hunching her shoulders still further.

'The city is watched. Many soldiers. More than ever. It might be difficult to deceive so many.'

'Perhaps we should go back,' she muttered hopefully.

The old man ignored her. '*They* are here as well. More than one.'

'Eaters?'

'I must go closer. Find a way in. Wait here for me.' He paused, waiting for her to reply. 'You will wait?'

'Alright!' she hissed, 'alright, I'll wait!'

Yulwei slipped off his rock and away down the slope, padding across the soft earth, almost invisible in the inky blackness. When the sound of his jingling bangles had faded into the night, she turned away from the city, took a deep breath, and scurried down the slope southwards, back into Gurkhul.

Now Ferro could run. Fast as the wind, hours at a stretch. She'd spent a lot of time running. When she made it to the base of the hill she ran, feet flying across the open ground, breath coming quick and fierce. She heard water beyond, slid down a bank and splashed into the shallows of a slow moving river. She floundered on, knee-deep in the cold water.

Let the old bastard track me through this, she thought.

After a while she made a bundle of her weapons and held them above her head as she swam across, forcing against the current with one arm. She flapped out on the other side and ran on along the bank, wiping the water from her dripping face.

Time passed slowly and light began to creep into the sky. Morning was coming. The river babbled beside her, her sandals beating out a rapid rhythm in the stubbly grass. She left the river behind, running on across the flat landscape, turning now from black to grey. A clump of scrubby trees loomed up.

She crashed between the trunks and slithered down into the bushes, her breath rasping. She shivered in the half-light, heart pounding in her chest. It was silent beyond the trees. Good. She reached inside her clothes and pulled out some bread and a strip of meat, soggy from the swim but still edible. She smiled. She had been keeping half of everything that Yulwei gave her for the last few days.

'Stupid old bastard,' she chuckled to herself between choking mouthfuls, 'thought he could get the better of Ferro Maljinn, did he?'

Damn she was thirsty. No help for that now, she could find water later. She was tired though, very tired. Even Ferro got tired. She would rest here for a moment, just a moment. Get the strength back in the legs, then on, on to . . . she twitched, annoyed. She could think about the where later. Wherever was best for vengeance. Yes.

She crawled through the bushes, sat back against one of the trees. Her eyes closed slowly, by themselves. Just rest for a moment now. Vengeance later.

'Stupid old bastard,' she muttered. Her head dropped sideways.

'Brother!'

Ferro woke with a start, head knocking against the tree. It was light, too light. Another bright, hot day. How long had she been sleeping? 'Brother!' A woman's voice, not far off. 'Where are you?'

'Over here!' Ferro froze, every muscle tensing. A man's voice, deep and strong. And close. She heard horse's hooves, moving slowly, several horses, and near.

'What are you doing, brother?'

‘She’s close!’ shouted the man again. Ferro’s throat tightened. ‘I can smell her!’ Ferro felt in the bushes for her weapons, shoved the sword and the knife through her belt, tucked the other knife up her one, torn sleeve. ‘I can taste her, sister! She’s very close!’

‘But where?’ The woman’s voice drew nearer. ‘Do you think she can hear us?’

‘Perhaps she can!’ laughed the man. ‘Are you there, Maljinn?’ She threw her quiver over her shoulder and snatched up her bow. ‘We are waiting . . .’ he sang, getting closer still, just beyond the trees now. ‘Come out, Maljinn, come out and greet us . . .’

She bolted away, crashing through the bushes, sprinting across the open ground with desperate speed.

‘There she is!’ cried the woman from behind. ‘Look at her go!’

‘Get her, then!’ shouted the man.

The scrubby grassland stretched away unbroken before her. Nowhere to run to. She span around with a snarl, nocking an arrow to her bow. Four horsemen were spurring towards her, Gurkish soldiers, sun glinting on their tall helmets and the cruel heads of their spears. Behind them, further back, were two other riders: a man and a woman. ‘Stop! In the name of the Emperor!’ one of the horsemen shouted.

‘Fuck your Emperor!’ Her arrow caught the first of the soldiers through his neck and he tumbled backwards from the saddle with a shocked gurgle, his spear flying out of his hand.

‘Good shot!’ cried the woman. The second rider took an arrow in his chest. His breastplate slowed it, but it still went deep enough to kill. He screamed, dropping his sword in the grass, clutching at the shaft, rolling in the saddle.

The third never even made a sound. He got one in the mouth, at no more than ten strides away. The point went right through his skull and knocked his helmet off, but by then the fourth was on her. She threw the bow to the ground and rolled away as the soldier thrust at her with his spear, then she pulled the sword from her belt, spitting on the grass.

‘Alive!’ shouted the woman, nudging her horse lazily forwards. ‘We need her alive!’

The soldier turned his snorting mount and urged it cautiously towards Ferro. He was a big man, with a thick growth of dark stubble on his jaw. ‘I

hope you've made your peace with God, girl,' he said.

'Fuck your God!' She scuttled out of the way, dodging, moving, staying close to the ground. The soldier jabbed at her with his spear, keeping her at a distance, his horse's hooves pawing at the ground, kicking dust in Ferro's face.

'Poke her!' she heard the woman shouting behind her.

'Yes, poke her!' cried her brother through his giggling. 'But not too hard! We want her alive!' The soldier snarled as he spurred his horse forward. Ferro ducked and scrambled in front of its kicking legs. The spear point jabbed, cutting a gash in her arm. She swung the sword with all her strength.

The curved blade found the gap between the plates of the soldier's armour, took his leg off just below the knee and opened a huge wound in the horse's side. Man and beast screamed together, fell together to the ground. Dark blood bubbled out across the dirt.

'She got him!' The woman sounded mildly disappointed.

'Up, man!' laughed her brother, 'up and at her! There's still a chance!' The soldier thrashed on the ground. Ferro's sword hacked into his face, putting a sharp end to his screams. Nearby the second rider was still in his saddle, face twisted, gasping his last breaths, hand clutched around the bloody shaft of her arrow. His horse put its head down and started nibbling at the dry grass by its hooves.

'That's all of them,' said the woman.

'I know.' Her brother sighed deep. 'Must one do everything oneself?'

Ferro glanced up at them as she pushed the bloody sword back through her belt. They were sitting carelessly on their horses not far off, the sun bright behind them, smiles on their cruel, handsome faces. They were dressed like lords, silk flapping round them in the breeze, heavy with jewellery, but neither one was armed. Ferro scrambled for her bow.

'Be careful, brother,' said the woman, examining her fingernails. 'She fights well.'

'Like a devil! But she is no match for me, sister, have no fear.' He sprang down from his saddle. 'So then, Maljinn, shall we . . .'

The arrow stuck him through the chest, deep through, with a hollow thud.

'. . . begin?' The shaft quivered, its point glittering behind him, dry and bloodless. He began to walk towards her. Her next arrow caught him

through the shoulder, but he only came on faster, breaking into a run, bounding forward with enormous strides. She dropped the bow, fingers fumbling for the grip of her sword. Too slow. His outstretched arm caught her across the chest with terrible force, slamming her into the earth.

'Oh, well done, brother!' The woman clapped her hands with delight. 'Well done!'

Ferro rolled coughing in the dust. She saw the man watching her as she struggled to her feet, the sword clutched in both hands. She swung it at him, a great overhead arc. It bit deep into the earth. Somehow he had already danced aside. A foot came out of nowhere and sank into her stomach. She doubled over, powerless, the air driven from her body. Her fingers twitched, the sword was left stuck in the ground, her knees wobbled.

'And now . . .' Something crunched into her nose. Her legs buckled and the ground hit her hard in the back. She rolled groggily to her knees, the world turning over around her. There was blood on her face. She blinked and shook her head, trying to stop the world from spinning. The man was moving towards her, tipping, blurry. He jerked her arrow out of his chest and tossed it away. There was no blood, just a little dust. Just dust, curling in the air.

An Eater. He had to be.

Ferro stumbled up, pulling the knife from her belt. She thrust at him, missed, thrust again, missed again. Her head was swimming. She screamed, slashing at him with all her might.

He caught her wrist in his hand. Their faces were less than a foot apart. His skin was perfect, smooth, like dark glass. He looked young, almost like a child, but his eyes were old. Hard eyes. He watched her – curious, amused, like a boy who found an interesting beetle. 'She doesn't give up, does she, sister?'

'Very fierce! The Prophet will be delighted with her!'

The man sniffed at Ferro and wrinkled his nose. 'Ugh. She'd better be washed first.'

She butted him in the face. His head snapped back but he only giggled. He caught her round the throat with his free hand, shoved her out to arm's length. She clawed at his face but his arm was too long, she couldn't reach. He was prising her fingers from the handle of the knife. His grip was iron

around her neck. She couldn't breathe. She bared her teeth, struggling, snarling, thrashing. All in vain.

'Alive, brother! We want her alive!'

'Alive,' murmured the man, 'but not unharmed.'

The woman giggled. Ferro's feet left the ground, kicking at the air. She felt one of her fingers snap and the knife dropped to the grass. The hand gripped tighter round her neck, and she tore at it with broken nails. All in vain. The bright world began to turn dark.

Ferro heard the woman laughing, far away. A face swam out of the darkness, a hand stroked Ferro's cheek. The fingers were soft, warm, gentle.

'Be still, child,' whispered the woman. Her eyes were dark and deep. Ferro could feel her breath, hot and fragrant on her face. 'You are hurt, you must rest. Be still now . . . sleep.' Ferro's legs were heavy as lead. She kicked weakly, one last time, then her body sagged. Her heart beat slow . . .

'Rest now.' Ferro's eyelids began to droop, the woman's beautiful face grew blurred.

'Sleep.' Ferro bit down hard on her tongue, and her mouth turned salty.

'Be still.' Ferro spat blood in the woman's face.

'Gah!' she shouted in disgust, wiping blood from her eyes. 'She fights me!'

'Her kind fight everything,' came the man's voice, just behind Ferro's ear.

'Now listen to me, whore!' hissed the woman, clutching Ferro's jaw with steely fingers and yanking her face this way and that. 'You are coming with us! With us! One way or another! You hear me?'

'She goes nowhere.' Another voice, deep and mellow. It seemed familiar. Ferro blinked, shook her head groggily. The woman had turned, looking at an old man, not far away. Yulwei. His bangles jingled as he padded softly across the grass. 'Are you alive, Ferro?'

'Gugh,' she croaked.

The woman sneered at Yulwei. 'Who are you, old bastard?'

Yulwei sighed. 'I am an old bastard.'

'Get you gone, dog!' shouted the man. 'We come from the Prophet. From Khalul himself!'

'And she comes with us!'

Yulwei looked sad. 'I cannot change your minds?'

They laughed together. ‘Fool!’ cried the man. ‘Our minds never change!’ He let go of one of Ferro’s arms, took a wary step forwards, dragging her with him.

‘A shame,’ said Yulwei, shaking his head. ‘I would have had you carry my respects to Khalul.’

‘The Prophet does not walk with the likes of you, beggar!’

‘I might surprise you. We knew each other well, long ago.’

‘I will give our master your respects then,’ jeered the woman, ‘with the news of your recent death!’ Ferro twisted her wrist, felt the knife drop into her palm.

‘Oh, Khalul would enjoy that news, but he will not receive it yet. The two of you have cursed yourselves. You have broken the Second Law. You have eaten the flesh of men, and there must be a reckoning.’

‘Old fool!’ sneered the woman. ‘Your laws do not apply to us!’

Yulwei slowly shook his head. ‘The word of Euz governs all. There can be no exceptions. Neither one of you will leave this place alive.’ The air around the old man shimmered, twisted, blurred. The woman gave a gurgle and dropped suddenly to the earth, more than falling – melting, flopping, dark silk flapping around her collapsing body.

‘Sister!’ The man let go of Ferro, sprang at Yulwei, arms outstretched. He got no further than a stride. He gave a sudden, shrill scream and dropped to his knees, clutching at his head. Ferro forced her stumbling feet forward, grabbed hold of his hair with her broken hand and drove the knife into his neck. Dust blew out into the wind. A fountain of dust. Flames flickered around his mouth, charring his lips black, licking burning hot at her fingers. She dropped on top of him, bearing him back onto the ground, choking, snorting. The blade opened up his stomach, scraped against his ribs, snapped off in his chest. Fire licked out. Fire and dust. She hacked at the body mindlessly with the broken knife, long after it had stopped moving.

She felt a hand on her shoulder. ‘He is dead, Ferro. They both are dead.’ She saw it was true. The man lay on his back, staring up at the sky, face charred round his nose and mouth, dust blowing from the gaping wounds.

‘I killed him.’ Her voice cracked and broken in her throat.

‘No, Ferro. I did that. They were young Eaters, weak and foolish. Still, you are lucky they wanted only to catch you.’

‘I am lucky,’ she mumbled, dribbling bloody spit onto the Eater’s corpse. She dropped the broken knife, crawled away on all fours. The body of the woman lay next to her, if you could call it that. A shapeless, lumpy mass of flesh. She saw long hair, and an eye, and lips.

‘What did you do?’ she croaked through her bloody mouth.

‘I turned her bones to water. And burned him from the inside. Water for one, fire for the other. Whatever works, for their kind.’ Ferro rolled over on the grass, looked up at the bright sky. She held her hand in front of her face, shook it. One of her fingers flopped back and forth.

Yulwei’s face appeared above, staring down at her. ‘Does it hurt?’

‘No,’ she whispered, letting her arm drop back to the earth. ‘It never does.’ She blinked up at Yulwei. ‘Why does it never hurt?’

The old man frowned. ‘They will not stop seeking for you, Ferro. Do you see now, why you have to come with me?’

She nodded slowly. The effort was immense. ‘I see,’ she whispered. ‘I see . . .’ The world grew dark again.

She Loves Me . . . Not

‘Ah!’ cried Jezal, as the point of Filio’s steel dug hard into his shoulder. He stumbled back, wincing and cursing, and the Styrian smiled at him and flourished his steels.

‘A touch to Master Filio!’ bellowed the referee. ‘That’s two each!’ There was some scattered clapping as Filio strutted back to the contestant’s enclosure with an irritating smile across his face. ‘Slippery bastard,’ Jezal hissed to himself as he followed. He should have seen that lunge coming. He had been careless, and he knew it.

‘Two apiece?’ hissed Varuz, as Jezal flopped down into his chair, breathing hard. ‘Two apiece? Against this nobody? He’s not even from the Union!’

Jezal knew better than to point out that Westport was supposed to be a part of the Union these days. He knew what Varuz meant, and so did everyone else in the arena. The man was an outsider as far as they were concerned. He grabbed the cloth from West’s outstretched hands and wiped his sweaty face. Five touches was a long match, but Filio looked far from exhausted. He was springing up and down on his toes as Jezal glanced across, nodding his head to the noisy Styrian advice spilling from his trainer.

‘You can beat him!’ West murmured, as he handed Jezal the water bottle. ‘You can beat him, and then it’s the final.’ The final. That meant Gorst. Jezal wasn’t entirely sure he wanted any of that.

But Varuz was in no doubt. ‘Just damn well beat him!’ hissed the Marshal, as Jezal took a swig from the bottle, swilled it round in his mouth. ‘Just beat him!’ Jezal spat half out into the bucket and swallowed the rest. Just beat him. Easy to say, but he was a devious bastard, this Styrian.

‘You can do it!’ said West again, rubbing Jezal’s shoulder. ‘You’ve come this far!’

‘Kill him! Just kill him!’ Marshal Varuz stared into Jezal’s eyes. ‘Are you a nobody, Captain Luthar? Did I waste my time on you? Or are you somebody? Eh? Now’s the time to decide!’

‘Gentlemen, please!’ called the referee, ‘the deciding touch!’

Jezal blew out hard, took his steels from West, got to his feet. He could hear Filio's trainer shouting encouragements over the swelling noise of the crowd. 'Just kill him!' shouted Varuz one last time, then Jezal was off on his way to the circle.

The deciding touch. The decider. In so many ways. Whether Jezal would be in the final or not. Whether he would be somebody or not. He was tired though, very tired. He had been fencing solidly for nearly half an hour, in the heat, and that takes it out of you. He was sweating again already. He could feel it leaking out of his face in big drops.

He moved towards his mark. A bit of chalk on some dry grass. Filio was standing there waiting, still smiling, anticipating his triumph. The little shit. If Gorst could club those others around the circle, then surely Jezal could grind this fool's face in the turf. He squeezed the grips of his steels and concentrated on that nauseating little smile. He wished for a moment that the steels weren't blunted, until it occurred to him that he might be the one who got stabbed.

'Begin!'

Jezal sorted through his cards, shuffling them this way and that in his hands, barely even looking at the symbols on them, barely caring whether he kept them out of sight of the others.

'I'll raise you ten,' said Kaspa, sliding some coins across the table with a look that said . . . oh, something probably, Jezal didn't care what, he really wasn't concentrating. There was a lengthy pause.

'It's your bet, Jezal,' grumbled Jalenhorm.

'It is? Oh, er . . .' He scanned across the meaningless symbols, unable to take any of it too seriously. 'Erm, oh . . . I'll fold.' He tossed the cards on to the table. He was down today, well down, for the first time in he couldn't remember how long. Ever probably. He was too busy thinking about Ardee: wondering how he could bed her without doing either one of them lasting harm, most particularly without his being killed by West. He was still no closer to an answer, unfortunately.

Kaspa swept up the coins, smiling broadly at his most unlikely victory. 'So that was well fought today, Jezal. A close one, but you came through, eh?'

'Uh,' said Jezal. He took his pipe from the table.

‘I swear, I thought he had you for a minute there, but then,’ and he snapped his fingers under Brint’s nose, ‘just like that! Knocked him right over. The crowd loved it! I laughed so hard I nearly wet myself, I swear!’

‘Do you reckon you can beat Gorst?’ asked Jalenhorm.

‘Uh.’ Jezal shrugged, lighting the pipe and leaning back in his chair, looking up at the grey sky and sucking on the stem.

‘You seem pretty calm about it all,’ said Brint.

‘Uh.’

The three officers glanced at each other, disappointed by the failure of their chosen topic. Kaspa picked another. ‘Have you fellows seen the Princess Terez yet?’

Brint and Jalenhorm sighed and gasped, then the three of them prattled their gormless appreciation of the woman. ‘Have I seen her? Have I ever!’

‘They call her the jewel of Talins!’

‘The rumours didn’t lie where she’s concerned!’

‘I hear the marriage to Prince Ladisla is a fixed thing.’

‘The lucky bastard!’ And so on.

Jezal stayed where he was, sat back in his chair, blowing smoke at the sky. He wasn’t so sure about Terez, from the little he’d seen. Beautiful from a distance, no doubt, but he imagined that her face would feel like glass to the touch: cold, hard and brittle. Nothing like Ardee’s . . .

‘Still,’ Jalenhorm was spouting, ‘I have to say, Kaspa, my heart still belongs to your cousin Ariss. Give me a Union girl any day over one of these foreigners.’

‘Give you her money, you mean,’ murmured Jezal, head still tipped back.

‘No!’ complained the big man. ‘She’s a perfect lady! Sweet, demure, well-bred. Ah!’ Jezal smiled to himself. If Terez was cold glass, then Ariss was a dead fish. Kissing her would be like kissing an old rag, he imagined: limp and tedious. She couldn’t kiss the way Ardee did. No one could . . .

‘Well, they’re both of them beauties, no doubt,’ Brint was blathering, ‘fine women to dream about, if dreams are all you’re after . . .’ He leaned forward to a conspiratorial distance, smirking shiftily round as though he had something secret and exciting to say. The other two edged their chairs forward, but Jezal stayed where he was. He had no interest at all in hearing about whatever whore that idiot was bedding.

‘Have you met West’s sister?’ murmured Brint. Jezal’s every muscle stiffened. ‘She’s not the equal of those two of course, but she’s really quite pretty in a common sort of way and . . . I think she’d be willing.’ Brint licked his lips and nudged Jalenhorm in the ribs. The big man grinned guiltily like a schoolboy at a dirty joke. ‘Oh yes, she strikes me as the willing type.’ Kaspa giggled. Jezal put his pipe down on the table, noticing that his hand was trembling slightly. The other was gripping the arm of his chair so hard that his knuckles were white.

‘I do declare,’ said Brint, ‘if I didn’t think the Major would stick me with his sword, I’d be tempted to stick his sister with mine, eh?’ Jalenhorm spluttered with laughter. Jezal felt one of his eyes twitching as Brint turned his smirk towards him. ‘Well, Jezal, what do you think? You’ve met her haven’t you?’

‘What do I think?’ His voice seemed to come from a terribly long way away as he stared at those three grinning faces. ‘I think you should watch your mouth, you son of a fucking whore.’

He was on his feet now, teeth gritted so tight together they felt like they might crack apart. The three smiles blinked and faded. Jezal felt Kaspa’s hand on his arm. ‘Come on, he only meant—’

Jezal ripped his arm away, seized the edge of the table and flung it over. Coins, cards, bottles, glasses, flew through the air and spilled out across the grass. He had his sword in his other hand, still sheathed luckily, leaning right down over Brint, spraying spit in his face. ‘Now you fucking listen to me, you little bastard!’ he snarled, ‘I hear anything more like that, anything, and you won’t have to worry about West!’ He pressed the grip of his steel into Brint’s chest. ‘I’ll carve you like a fucking chicken!’

The three men stared up at him, aghast, their mouths wide open, their astonishment at this sudden display of violence equalled only by Jezal’s own.

‘But—’ said Jalenhorm.

‘What?’ screamed Jezal, seizing a fistful of the big man’s jacket and dragging him half out of his chair. ‘What d’you fucking say?’

‘Nothing,’ he squeaked, his hands raised, ‘nothing.’ Jezal let him drop. The fury was draining fast. He had half a mind to apologise, but when he saw Brint’s ashen face all he could think of was ‘she strikes me as the willing type’.

‘Like! A! Fucking! Chicken!’ he snarled again, then turned on his heel and stalked off. Halfway to the archway he realised he had left his coat behind, but he could hardly go back for it now. He made it into the darkness of the tunnel, took a couple of steps down it then sagged against the wall, breathing hard and trembling as if he’d just run ten miles. He understood now what it meant to lose one’s temper, and no mistake. He had never even realised that he had one before, but there could be no doubt now.

‘What the hell was that about?’ Brint’s shocked voice echoed quietly down the tunnel, only just audible over the thumping of Jezal’s heart. He had to hold his breath to hear.

‘Damned if I know.’ Jalenhorm, sounding even more surprised. There was the rattle and scrape of the table being put straight. ‘Never knew he had such a temper.’

‘I suppose he must have a lot to think about,’ said Kaspa, uncertainly, ‘what with the Contest and all ...’

Brint cut him off. ‘That’s no excuse!’

‘Well they’re close, aren’t they? Him and West? What with all the fencing together and what have you, maybe he knows the sister or something . . . I don’t know!’

‘There is another explanation,’ Jezal could hear Brint saying, voice tense as though he was about to deliver a punchline. ‘Perhaps he’s in love with her!’ The three of them burst out laughing. It was a good joke alright. Captain Jezal dan Luthar, in love, and with a girl whose station in life was so far beneath his own. What a ridiculous idea! What an absurd notion! What a joke!

‘Oh shit.’ Jezal put his head in his hands. He didn’t feel like laughing. How the hell had she done this to him? How? What was it about her? She was fine to look at, of course, and clever, and funny, and all those things, but that was no explanation. ‘I cannot see her again,’ he whispered to himself, ‘I will not!’ And he thumped his hand against the wall. His resolve was iron. It always was.

Until the next note came under his door.

He groaned and slapped the side of his head. Why did he feel like this? Why did he . . . he couldn’t even bring himself to think the word . . . like her so much? Then it came to him. He knew why.

She didn’t like him.

Those mocking half-smiles. Those sidelong glances he caught sometimes. Those jokes that went just a little too close to the bone. Not to mention the occasional examples of outright scorn. She liked his money, maybe. She liked his position in the world, of course. She liked his looks, undoubtedly. But, in essence, the woman despised him.

And he'd never had that feeling before. He had always just assumed that everybody loved him, had never really had cause to doubt he was a fine man, worthy of the highest respect. But Ardee didn't like him, he saw it now, and that made him think. Apart from the jaw, of course, and the money and the clothes, what was there to like?

She treated him with the contempt he knew he deserved. And he couldn't get enough of it. 'Strangest thing,' Jezal mumbled to himself, slouching miserably against the wall of the tunnel. 'Strangest thing.'

It made him want to change her mind.

The Seed

‘How are you, Sand?’ Colonel Glokta opened his eyes. It was dark in the room. Damn it, he was late!

‘Damn it!’ he shouted, shoving back the covers and leaping out of bed. ‘I’m late!’ He snatched up his uniform trousers, shoving his legs in, fumbling with his belt.

‘Don’t worry about that, Sand!’ His mother’s voice was half soothing, half impatient. ‘Where is the Seed?’

Glokta frowned over as he pushed his shirt in. ‘I’ve no time for this nonsense, mother! Why do you always think you know what’s best for me?’ He cast around him for his sword, but couldn’t see it. ‘We’re at war you know!’

‘We are indeed.’ The Colonel looked up, surprised. It was the voice of Arch Lector Sult. ‘Two wars. One fought with fire and steel, and another one beneath – an old war, long years in the making.’ Glokta frowned. How ever could he have mistaken that old windbag for his mother? And what was he doing in Glokta’s chambers in any case? Sitting in the chair at the foot of his bed, prattling about old wars?

‘What the hell are you doing in my chambers?’ growled Colonel Glokta, ‘and what have you done with my sword?’

‘Where is the Seed?’ A woman’s voice now, but not his mother’s. Someone else. He did not recognise it. He squinted against the darkness, straining to see who was in the chair. He could make out a vague outline, but the shadows were too deep to tell more.

‘Who are you?’ asked Glokta sternly.

‘Who was I? Or what am I?’ The figure in the chair shifted as it rose slowly, smoothly, from its seat. ‘I was a patient woman, but I am woman no more, and the grinding years have worn my patience thin.’

‘What do you want?’ Glokta’s voice quivered, reedy and weak as he backed away.

The figure moved, stepping through the shaft of moonlight from the window. A woman’s form, slender and graceful, but shadows stuck to the

face. A sudden fear clawed at him and he stumbled back against the wall, raising his arm to fend the woman off.

'I want the Seed.' A pale hand snaked out and closed around his outstretched arm. A gentle touch, but cold. Cold as stone. Glokta trembled, gasped, squeezed shut his eyes. 'I need it. You cannot know the need I have. Where is it?' Fingers plucked at his clothes, quick and deft, seeking, searching, darting in his pockets, in his shirt, brushing his skin. Cold. Cold as glass.

'The Seed?' squeaked Glokta, half paralysed with terror.

'You know what I speak of, broken man. Where is it?'

'The Maker fell . . .' he whispered. The words welled up, he knew not from where.

'I know it.'

'... burning, burning ...'

'I saw it.' The face was close enough for him to feel the breath upon his skin. Cold. Cold as frost.

'. . . he broke upon the bridge below ...'

'I remember it.'

'. . . they searched for the Seed ...'

'Yes . . .' whispered the voice, urgent in his ear, 'where is it?' Something brushed against his face, his cheek, his eyelid, soft and slimy. A tongue. Cold. Cold as ice. His flesh crawled.

'I don't know! They could not find it!'

'Could not?' Fingers closed tight around his throat, squeezing, crushing, choking the air from him. Cold. Cold as iron, and just as hard. 'You think you know pain, broken man? You know nothing!' The icy breath rasped in his ear, the icy fingers squeezed, squeezed. 'But I can show you! I can show you!'

Glokta screamed, thrashed, struggled. He fought his way up, stood for a dizzy instant, then his leg buckled and he plunged into space. The dark room tumbled around him and he crashed to the boards with a sickening crunch, his arm folded beneath him, his forehead cracking against the floor.

He struggled up, clawing at the leg of his bed, pushing himself against the wall, snorting for breath, staring wild-eyed towards the chair, yet barely able to look for fear. A bar of moonlight spilled through the window, cut

across the rumpled bed-clothes and onto the polished wood of the seat. *Empty.*

Glokta cast around the rest of the room, eyes adjusting to the darkness, peering into every shadowy corner. *Nothing. Empty. A dream.*

And now, as the crazy hammering of his heart relaxed, as his ragged breathing slowed, the pain came on. His head thumped, his leg screamed, his arm was throbbing dully. He could taste blood, his eyes stung and wept, his guts heaved, sick and spinning. He whimpered, made an agonising hop towards the bed, then collapsed on the moonlit mattress, exhausted, wet with cold sweat.

There was an urgent knocking at the door. 'Sir? Are you alright? ' Barnam's voice. The knocking came again. *No good. It is locked. Always locked, but I don't think I'll be moving. Frost will have to break it down.* But the door swung open, and Glokta shielded his eyes from the sudden ruddy glow of the old servant's lamp.

'Are you alright?'

'I fell,' mumbled Glokta. 'My arm ...'

The old servant perched on the bed, taking Glokta's hand gently and pushing up the sleeve of his night-shirt. Glokta winced, Barnam clicked his tongue. His forearm had a big pink mark across it, already beginning to swell and redden.

'I don't think it's broken,' said the servant, 'but I should fetch the surgeon, just in case.'

'Yes, yes.' He waved Barnam away with his good hand. 'Fetch him.'

Glokta watched the old servant hurry, stooped, out of the door, heard him creaking along the narrow corridor outside, down the narrow stairs. He heard the front door banging shut. Silence descended.

He looked over at the scroll he had taken from the Adeptus Historical, still rolled up tight on the dresser, waiting to be delivered to Arch Lector Sult. *The Maker fell burning. He broke upon the bridge below. Strange, how parts of the waking world stray into one's dreams. That damned Northman and his intruder. A woman, and cold. That'll be what set me off.*

Glokta rubbed his arm gently, pressing the sore flesh with his fingertips. *Nothing. Just a dream.* And yet something was niggling at him. He looked over at the back of the door. The key was still in the lock, shining orange in the light from the lamp. *Not locked, and yet I must have locked it. Must*

have. I always do. Glokta looked back to the empty chair. *What did that idiot apprentice say? Magic comes from the Other Side. The world below. Hell.*

Somehow, at that moment, after that dream, it did not seem so difficult to believe. The fear was building in him again, now he was alone. He stretched out his good hand towards the chair. It took an age to get there, trembling, shaking. His fingers touched the wood. *Cool, but not cold. Not cold. There is nothing there.* He slowly withdrew his hand, cradled his pulsing arm. *Nothing. Empty.*

A dream.

'What the hell happened to you?'

Glokta sucked sourly at his gums. 'Fell out of bed.' He scratched absently at his wrist through the dressing. Until a moment ago it had been throbbing like hell, but the sight in front of him had pushed the pain into the back of his mind. *I could be worse off. A lot worse.* 'Not a pretty sight. Not at all.'

'You're damn right it's not.' Severard looked as disgusted as was possible with half his face covered. 'I nearly puked when I first saw it. Me!'

Glokta peered down, frowning, at the tangled mess of butchery, supporting himself against a tree-trunk with one hand and pushing some of the ferns aside with the tip of his cane to get a better look. 'Are we even sure it's a man?'

'Might be a woman. Human anyway. That's a foot.'

'Ah, so it is. How was it found?'

'He found it.' Severard nodded over towards a gardener: sat on the ground, pale-faced and staring, and with a small pool of drying vomit on the grass beside him. 'In amongst the trees here, hidden in the bushes. Looks as if whatever killed it tried to hide it, but not long ago. It's fresh.' *It is indeed – barely any smell, and only a couple of flies have arrived. Very fresh, perhaps last night even.*

'It might not have been found for days, except someone asked for one of these trees to be pruned. Blocking out the light or something. You ever see anything like this?'

Glokta shrugged. 'In Angland, once, before you came. One of the convicts tried to escape. He made it a few miles, then succumbed to the cold. A bear

made free with the corpse. That was quite a mess, though not near as bad as this one.'

'I can't see anyone freezing to death last night. It was hot as hell.'

'Mmm,' said Glokta. *If hell is hot. I've always thought it might be cold. Cold as ice.* 'There are few bears within the Agriont in any case. Do we have any idea as to the identity of this . . .' he waved his cane towards the carcass '. . . person?'

'None.'

'Is anyone unaccounted for? Reported missing?'

'Not that I've heard.'

'So we have not the slightest idea even who our victim is? Why the hell are we taking an interest? Don't we have a fake Magus to be watching?'

'That's just it. Their new quarters are right over there.' Severard's gloved finger pointed out a building not twenty strides away. 'I was watching them when this came to light.'

Glokta raised an eyebrow. 'I see. And you suspect some connection, do you?' The Practical shrugged. 'Mysterious intruders in the dead of night, gruesome murders on their very doorstep? Our visitors draw trouble like shit draws flies.'

'Huh,' said Severard, swatting a fly away with his gloved hand. 'I looked into that other thing as well. Your bankers. Valint and Balk.'

Glokta looked up. 'Really? And?'

'And not a lot. An old house. Very old and very well respected. Their notes are good as gold among the merchants. They've got offices all across Midderland, Angland, Starikland, in Westport, in Dagoska. Even outside the Union. Powerful people, by all accounts. All kind of folk owe them money, I reckon. Strange thing though, no one seems ever to have met a Valint or a Balk. Who can tell with banks though, eh? They love secrets. You want me to dig any more?'

It could be dangerous. Very dangerous. Dig too far and we might be digging our own graves. 'No. We'd better leave off. For now. Keep your ears open though.'

'My ears are always open, chief. So who do you like for the Contest?'

Glokta glanced across at the Practical. 'How can you think about that with this in front of you?'

The Practical shrugged. ‘It won’t do ’em any harm, will it?’ Glokta looked back at the mangled body. *I suppose it won’t, at that.* ‘So come on, you should know, Luthar or Gorst?’

‘Gorst.’ *I hope he carves the little bastard in two.*

‘Really? People say he’s a clumsy ox. Lucky is all.’

‘Well, I say he’s a genius,’ said Glokta. ‘In a couple of years they’ll all be fencing like him, if you can call it fencing. You mark my words.’

‘Gorst, eh? Maybe I’ll have a little bet.’

‘You do that. But in the meantime you’d better scrape this mess up and take it to the University. Get Frost to give you a hand, he’s got a strong stomach.’

‘The University?’

‘Well we can’t just leave it here. Some fashionable lady taking a turn in the park could get an awful shock.’ Severard giggled. ‘And I might just know of someone who can shed some light on this little mystery.’

‘This is quite an interesting discovery you’ve made, Inquisitor.’ The Adeptus Physical paused in his work and peered over at Glokta, one eye enormously magnified through his glittering eye-glass. ‘Quite a fascinating discovery,’ he muttered, as he returned to the corpse with his instruments: lifting, prodding, twisting, squinting down at the glistening flesh.

Glokta peered round the laboratory, his lip curling with distaste. Jars of many different sizes lined two of the four walls, filled with floating, pickled lumps of meat. Some of those floating things Glokta recognised as parts of the human body, some he did not. Even he felt slightly uncomfortable in amongst the macabre display. *I wonder how Kandelau came by them all? Do his visitors end up dismembered, floating in a dozen different jars? Perhaps I would make an interesting specimen?*

‘Fascinating.’ The Adeptus loosened the strap of his eye-glass and perched it on top of his head, rubbing at the pink ring it had left behind around his eye. ‘What can you tell me about it?’

Glokta frowned. ‘I came here to find out what *you* can tell *me* about it.’

‘Of course, of course.’ Kandelau pursed his lips. ‘Well, er, as to the gender of our unfortunate friend, er . . .’ he trailed off.

‘Well?’

‘Heh heh, well, er, the organs that would allow one to make an easy determination are . . .’ and he gestured at the meat on the table, harshly lit under the blazing lamps ‘. . . absent.’

‘And that is the sum of your investigation?’

‘Well, there are other things: a man’s third finger is typically longer than his first, not necessarily so with a woman but, heh, our remnant does not have all the digits necessary to make such a judgement. As to gender, therefore, without the fingers, we are quite stumped!’ He giggled nervously at his own joke. Glokta did not.

‘Young or old?’

‘Well, er, again that is quite difficult to determine, I am afraid. The, er,’ and the Adeptus tapped at the corpse with his tongs, ‘teeth here are in good condition and, heh, such skin as remains would appear to be consistent with a younger person but, er, this is really just, heh heh—’

‘So what can you tell me about the victim?’

‘Er, well . . . nothing.’ And he smiled apologetically. ‘But I have made some interesting discoveries as to the cause of death!’

‘Really?’

‘Oh yes, look at this!’ *I would rather not.* Glokta limped cautiously over to the bench, peering down at the spot the old man was indicating.

‘You see here? The shape of this wound?’ The Adeptus prodded at a flap of gristle.

‘No I do not see,’ said Glokta. *It appears all to be one enormous wound to me.*

The old man leaned towards him, his eyes wide. ‘Human,’ he said.

‘We know that it is human! This is a foot!’

‘No! No! These teeth marks, here . . . they are human bites!’

Glokta frowned. ‘Human . . . bites?’

‘Absolutely!’ Kandelau’s beaming smile was quite at odds with the surroundings. *And with the subject matter, I rather think.* ‘This individual was bitten to death by another person, and, heh heh, in all likelihood,’ and he gestured triumphantly at the mess on his table, ‘considering the incomplete nature of the remains . . . partially eaten!’

Glokta stared at the old man for a moment. *Eaten? Eaten? Why must every question answered raise ten more?* ‘This is what you would have me tell the Arch Lector?’

The Adeptus laughed nervously. ‘Well, heh heh, these are the facts, as I see them ...’

‘A person, unidentified, perhaps a man, perhaps a woman, either young or old, was attacked in the park by an unknown assailant, bitten to death within two hundred strides of the King’s palace and partially . . . eaten?’

‘Er . . .’ Kandelau gave a worried glance sideways towards the entrance. Glokta turned to look, and frowned. There was a new arrival there, one that he had not heard enter. A woman, standing in the shadows at the edge of the bright lamp-light with her arms folded. A tall woman with short, spiky red hair and a black mask on her face, staring at Glokta and the Adeptus through narrowed eyes. A Practical. *But not one I recognise, and women are quite a rarity in the Inquisition. I would have thought . . .*

‘Good afternoon, good afternoon!’ A man stepped briskly through the door: gaunt, balding, with a long black coat and a prim little smile on his face. An unpleasantly familiar man. *Goyle, damn him. Our new Superior of Adua, arrived at last. Great news.* ‘Inquisitor Glokta,’ he purred, ‘what an absolute pleasure it is to see you again!’

‘Likewise, Superior Goyle.’ *You bastard.*

Two other figures followed close behind the grinning Superior, making the glaring little room seem quite crowded. One was a dark-skinned, stocky Kantic with a big golden ring through his ear, the other was a monster of a Northman with a face like a stone slab. He almost had to stoop to cram himself through the doorway. Both were masked and dressed from head to toe in Practicals black.

‘This is Practical Vitari,’ chuckled Goyle, indicating the red-haired woman, who had flowed over to the jars and was peering into them, one at a time, tapping on the glass and making the specimens wobble. ‘And these are Practicals Halim,’ the Southerner sidled past Goyle and into the room, busy eyes darting here and there, ‘and Byre.’ The monstrous Northman gazed down at Glokta from up near the ceiling. ‘In his own country they call him the Stone-Splitter, would you believe, but I don’t think that would work here, do you Glokta? Practical Stone-Splitter, can you imagine?’ He laughed softly to himself and shook his head.

And this is the Inquisition? I had no idea the circus was in town. I wonder if they stand on each other’s shoulders? Or jump through flaming hoops?

‘A remarkably diverse selection,’ said Glokta.

‘Oh yes,’ laughed Goyle, ‘I have picked them up wherever my travels have taken me, eh my friends?’

The woman shrugged as she prowled around the jars. The dark-skinned Practical inclined his head. The towering Northman simply stood there.

‘Wherever my travels have taken me!’ chuckled Goyle, just as though everyone else had laughed with him. ‘And I have more besides! It’s been quite a time, I do declare!’ He wiped a tear of mirth from his eye as he moved towards the table in the centre of the room. It seemed that everything was a source of amusement to him, even the thing on the bench. ‘But what’s all this? A body, unless I’m quite mistaken!’ Goyle looked up sharply, his eyes sparkling. ‘A body? A death within the city? As Superior of Adua, surely that falls within my province?’

Glokta bowed. ‘Naturally. I was not aware that you had arrived, Superior Goyle. Also, I felt that the unusual circumstances of this—’

‘Unusual? I see nothing unusual.’ Glokta paused. *What game is this chuckling fool playing?*

‘Surely you would agree that the violence here is . . . exceptional. ’

Goyle gave a flamboyant shrug. ‘Dogs.’

‘Dogs?’ asked Glokta, unable to let that one pass. ‘Domestic pets run mad, do you think, or wild ones which climbed over the walls?’

The Superior only smiled. ‘Whichever you like, Inquisitor. Whichever you like.’

‘I’m afraid it could not possibly be dogs,’ the Adeptus Physical began pompously to explain. ‘I was only just making clear to Inquisitor Glokta . . . these marks here, and on the skin here, do you see? These are human bites, undoubtedly . . .’

The woman sauntered away from the jars, closer and closer to Kandelau, leaning in towards him until her mask was only inches away from his beak of a nose. He slowly trailed off. ‘Dogs,’ she whispered, then barked in his face.

The Adeptus jumped away. ‘Well, I suppose I could have been mistaken . . . of course . . .’ He backed into the enormous Northman’s chest, who had moved with surprising speed to position himself directly behind. Kandelau turned slowly around, staring up with wide eyes.

‘Dogs,’ intoned the giant.

‘Dogs, dogs, dogs,’ hummed the southerner in a thick accent.

‘Of course,’ squeaked Kandelau, ‘dogs, of course, how foolish I’ve been!’

‘Dogs!’ shouted Goyle in delight, throwing his hands in the air. ‘The mystery is solved!’ To Glokta’s amazement, two of the three Practicals began politely to applaud. The woman stayed silent. *I never believed that I would miss Superior Kalyne, but suddenly I am overcome with nostalgia.* Goyle turned slowly round, bowing low. ‘My first day here, and already I warm to the work! You can bury this,’ he said, gesturing to the corpse and smiling broadly at the cringing Adeptus. ‘Best buried, eh?’ He looked over at the Northman. ‘Back to the mud, as you say in your country!’

The massive Practical showed not the slightest sign that anyone had spoken. The Kantic was standing there, turning the ring through his ear round and round. The woman was peering down at the carcass on the table, sniffing at it through her mask. The Adeptus Physical was backed up against his jars, sweating profusely.

Enough of this pantomime. I have work to do. ‘Well,’ said Glokta stiffly, limping for the door, ‘the mystery is solved. You don’t need me any more.’

Superior Goyle turned to look at him, his good humour suddenly vanished. ‘No!’ he hissed, furious little eyes nearly popping out of his head. ‘We don’t . . . need you . . . any more!’

Never Bet Against a Magus

Logen sat in the hot sun, hunched over on his bench, and sweated. The ridiculous clothes did not help with the sweating, or indeed with anything else. The tunic had not been designed to sit down in, and the stiff leather dug painfully into his fruits whenever he tried to move.

'Fucking thing,' he growled, tugging at it for the twentieth time. Quai looked hardly more comfortable in his magical garb – the glittering of the gold and silver symbols only served to make his face look the more ill and pallid, his eyes the more twitchy and bulging. He'd hardly spoken a word all morning. Of the three of them, only Bayaz appeared to be enjoying himself, beaming round at the surging crowds on the benches, the sunlight shining off his tanned pate.

They stood out among the heaving audience like well-rotted fruit, and seemed about as popular. Even though the benches were packed shoulder to shoulder a small, nervous space had built up around the three of them where no one would sit.

The noise was even more crushing than the heat and the crowds. Logen's ears hummed with the din. It was the most he could do to keep from clamping his hands over them and throwing himself under the bench for cover. Bayaz leaned towards him. 'Was this what your duels were like?' He had to shout even though his mouth was barely six inches from Logen's ear.

'Huh.' Even when Logen had fought Rudd Threetrees, when a good part of Bethod's army had drawn up in a great half-circle to watch, shouting and screaming and hammering their weapons against their shields, when the walls of Uffrith above them had been crammed with onlookers, his audience had not been half this size, not half this noisy. No more than thirty men had watched him kill Shama Heartless, kill him then butcher him like a pig. Logen winced and flinched and hunched his shoulders higher at the memory of it. Cutting, and cutting, and licking the blood from his fingers, while the Dogman stared in horror and Bethod laughed and cheered him on. He could taste the blood now, and he shuddered and wiped his mouth.

There had been so many fewer people, and yet the stakes had been so much higher. The lives of the fighters, for one thing, and the ownership of

land, of villages, of towns, the futures of whole clans. When he'd fought Tul Duru, no more than a hundred had watched, but perhaps the whole fate of the North had turned on that bloody half hour. If he'd lost then, if the Thunderhead had killed him, would things be the same? If Black Dow, or Harding Grim, or any of those others had put him in the mud, would Bethod have a golden chain now, and call himself a King? Would this Union be at war with the North? The thought made his head hurt. Even more.

'You alright?' asked Bayaz.

'Mmm,' Logen mumbled, but he was shivering, even in the heat. What were all these people here for? Only to be amused. Few could've found Logen's battles very amusing, except Bethod, perhaps. Few others. 'This isn't like my fights,' he muttered to himself.

'What's that?' asked Bayaz.

'Nothing.'

'Uh.' The old man beamed around at the crowd, scratching at his short grey beard. 'Who do you think will win?'

Logen really didn't much care, but he reckoned that any distraction from his memories was welcome. He peered into the enclosures where the two fighters were getting ready, not far from where he was sitting. The handsome, proud young man they'd met at the gate was one of them. The other was heavy and powerful-looking, with a thick neck and a look almost bored.

He shrugged his shoulders. 'I don't know anything about this business.'

'What, you? The Bloody-Nine? A champion who fought and won ten challenges? The most feared man in the North? No opinion? Surely single combat is the same the world over!'

Logen winced and licked his lips. The Bloody-Nine. That was far in the past, but not far enough for his liking. His mouth still tasted like metal, like salt, like blood. Touching a man with a sword and cutting him open with one are hardly the same things, but he looked the two opponents over again. The proud young man rolled up his sleeves, touched his toes, swivelled his body this way and that, swung his arms round in quick windmills, watched by a stern old soldier in a spotless red uniform. A tall, worried-looking man handed the fighter two thin swords, one longer than the other, and he whisked them around before him in the air with impressive speed, blades flashing.

His opponent stood there, leaning against the wooden side of his enclosure, stretching his bull neck from side to side without much hurry, glancing round with lazy eyes.

'Who's who?' asked Logen.

'The pompous ass from the gate is Luthar. The one who's half asleep is Gorst.'

It was plain who the crowd preferred. Luthar's name could be heard often in the din, and whoops and claps greeted every movement of his thin swords. He looked quick, and deft, and clever, but there was something deadly in that big man's waiting slouch, something dark about his heavy-lidded eyes. Logen would rather have fought Luthar, for all his speed. 'I reckon Gorst.'

'Gorst, really?' Bayaz' eyes sparkled. 'How about a little bet?'

Logen heard a sharp suck of breath from Quai. 'Never bet against a Magus,' whispered the apprentice.

It didn't seem to make much difference to Logen. 'What the hell have I got to bet with?'

Bayaz shrugged. 'Well, let's just say for honour then?'

'If you like.' Logen had never had too much of that, and the little he did have he didn't care about losing.

'Bremer dan Gorst!' The scattered clapping was smothered by an avalanche of hisses and boos as the great ox shambled towards his mark, half-closed eyes on the ground, big, heavy steels dangling from his big, heavy hands. Between his short-cropped hair and the collar of his shirt, where his neck should have been, there was nothing but a thick fold of muscle.

'Ugly bastard,' Jezal murmured to himself, as he watched him go. 'Damn idiot ugly bastard.' But his curses lacked conviction, even to his own ear. He had watched that man fight three bouts and demolish three good opponents. One of them had still to leave his sick bed a week later. Jezal had been training for the last few days specifically to counter Gorst's bludgeoning style: Varuz and West swinging big broom handles at him while he dodged this way and that. More than once one of them had made contact, and Jezal was still smarting from the bruises.

'Gorst?' offered the referee plaintively, doing his best to wheedle some applause from the audience, but they were having none of it. The boos only

became louder, joined by jeers and heckling as Gorst took his mark.

'You clumsy ox!'

'Get back to your farm and pull a plough!'

'Bremer the brute!' and other such.

The people stretched back, and back, and back into obscurity. Everyone was there. Everyone in the world, it looked like. Every commoner in the city round the distant edges. Every gentleman, artisan and trader thronging the middle benches. Every noble man or woman in the Agriont towards the front, from fifth sons of high-born nobodies to the great magnates of the Open and Closed Councils. The Royal box was full: the Queen, the two Princes, Lord Hoff, the Princess Terez. The King even appeared to be awake for once, truly an honour, his goggling eyes staring around in amazement. Out there somewhere were Jezal's father and his brothers, his friends and fellow officers, his entire acquaintance, more or less. Ardee too, he hoped, watching . . .

All in all, it was quite an audience.

'Jezal dan Luthar!' bellowed the referee. The meaningless bibble-babble of the crowd surged into a storm of cheering, a thunderous wave of support. The cries and shouts rang and echoed around the arena, making Jezal's head throb.

'Come on, Luthar!'

'Luthar!'

'Kill the bastard!' and other such.

'Off you go, Jezal,' whispered Marshal Varuz in his ear, clapping him on the back and pushing him gently out towards the circle, 'and good luck!'

Jezal walked in a daze, the noise of the crowd punching at his ears until it seemed his head would split. The training of the last few months flashed through his mind. The running, the swimming, the work with the heavy bar. The sparring, the beam, the endless forms. The punishment, the study, the sweating and the pain. Just so he could stand here. Seven touches. The first to four. It all came down to this.

He took his mark opposite Gorst, and stared into those heavy-lidded eyes. They looked back, cool and calm, seeming almost to stare past him as though he wasn't there. That needled him and he pushed the thoughts out of his head and raised high his noble chin. He would not, *could* not, let this oaf get the better of him. He would show all these people his blood, and his

skill, and his mettle. He was Jezal dan Luthar. He would win. It was an incontestable fact. He knew it.

'Begin!'

The first cut sent him reeling, shattering his confidence, his poise, and nearly his wrist. He had been watching Gorst fence, of course, if you could call it that, so he knew the man would come out swinging, but nothing could have prepared him for that first shattering contact. The crowd gasped with him as he staggered back. All his carefully laid plans, all of Varuz' carefully worded advice, vanished into air. He winced with pain and shock, his arm still vibrating from the force of that mighty blow, his ears still ringing from the crashing noise of it, his mouth hanging open, his knees wobbling.

It was hardly the most promising start, but the next chop followed hard after the first, flashing down with even greater power. Jezal leaped aside and slid away, trying to make room and give himself time. Time to work out some tactic, some trick to stem the pitiless tide of swinging metal. But Gorst was not about to give him time. He was already loosing another throaty growl, his long steel already begun on its next irresistible arc.

Jezal dodged where he could, blocked where he couldn't, his wrists already aching from the ceaseless punishment. To begin with he hoped that Gorst would tire. No one could throw those great lumps of metal around for long the way that he was doing. Soon the fierce pace would take its toll on the big man and he would slow, and droop, and the heavy steels would lose their venom. Then Jezal would fight back doggedly, run his opponent ragged, and win. The crowd would crack the Agriont with their cheers. A classic tale of victory against the odds.

Only Gorst did not tire. The man was a machine. After a few minutes there was still not the slightest sign of weariness in those heavy-lidded eyes. There was barely any emotion of any kind that Jezal could see, during the rare moments when he dared to take his eyes away from the flashing swords. The big long steel swung, swung, swung in its brutal circles, and the short steel was always there to turn away such feeble efforts as Jezal could make in between, never faltering or dropping even an inch. The power of the blows did not decrease, the growls tore from Gorst's throat with as much vigour as ever. The crowd were given nothing to cheer at, and merely muttered angrily. It was Jezal who began to feel his legs slowing, to

feel the sweat springing out of his forehead, to feel his grip on his steels slipping.

He saw it coming from a mile away, but there was nothing he could do about it. He had backed off until he ran out of circle. He had blocked and parried until he lost the feeling in his fingers. This time, when he raised his aching arm and there was the crash of metal on metal, one tired foot slipped and he tumbled squawking from the ring, floundering on his side, his short steel spinning from his twitching fingers. His face slapped against the ground and he took a gritty mouthful of sand. It was a painful and embarrassing fall, but he felt too tired and too battered to be all that disappointed. He was almost relieved that the punishment was over, if only for a moment.

'One to Gorst!' shouted the referee. A light dusting of applause was crushed beneath hoots of derision, but the big man seemed scarcely to notice, shuffling back to his mark with his head down and already preparing for the next touch.

Jezal rolled slowly onto his hands and knees, flexing his aching hands and taking his time getting up. He needed a moment to breathe and make ready, to think up some strategy. Gorst waited for him: big, silent, still. Jezal brushed the sand from his shirt, mind racing. How to beat him? How? He stepped cautiously back to his mark, raised his steels.

'Begin!'

This time Gorst came out even harder, slashing away as if he was scything wheat, making Jezal dance around the circle. One blow passed so close to his left side that he could feel the wind from it on his cheek. The next missed him by a margin no greater on his right. Then Gorst flung a sideways sweep aimed at his head and Jezal saw an opening. He ducked beneath it, sure the blade tore at the hairs on top of his scalp. He closed the distance as the heavy long steel swung away, almost catching the referee in the face on the back-swing, leaving Gorst's right side all but undefended.

Jezal lunged at the big bastard, sure he had finally got through, knowing he had made it one touch apiece. But Gorst caught the thrust on his short steel and forced it just wide, the guards of the two blades scraping then locking together. Jezal cut at him viciously with his short steel but somehow Gorst blocked that too, bringing up his other sword just in time, catching Jezal's blade and holding it just short of his chest.

For a moment their four steels were locked together, hilts grating, their faces just a few inches apart. Jezal was snarling like a dog, teeth bared, the muscles of his face a rigid mask. Gorst's heavy features showed little sign of effort. He looked like a man having a piss: involved in a mundane and faintly distasteful task that must simply be done with as quickly as possible.

For a moment their blades were locked together, Jezal pushing with every grain of strength, each hard-trained muscle flexing: legs straining against the ground, stomach straining to twist his arms, arms straining to push his hands, hands gripped around the hilts of his steels like grim death. Every muscle, every sinew, every tendon. He knew he had the better position, the big man was off balance, if only he could push him back a step . . . an inch . . .

For that moment their steels were locked together, then Gorst dipped his shoulder, and grunted, and flung Jezal away as a child might fling away a boring toy.

He tumbled back, mouth and eyes wide open with surprise, feet kicking at the dirt, all his attention focused on staying upright. He heard Gorst growl again, and was shocked to see the heavy long steel already curving through the air towards him. He was in no position to dodge, and there was no time anyway. He raised his left arm on an instinct, but the thick, blunted blade tore his short steel away like a straw on the wind and crashed into his ribs, hammering the breath from his body in a wail of pain that echoed round and round the silent arena. His legs crumpled under him and he sprawled out on the turf, limbs flopping, sighing like a split bellows.

This time there was not even the shadow of applause. The crowd roared their hatred, booing and hissing at Gorst for all they were worth as he trudged back to his enclosure.

'Damn you, Gorst, you thug!'

'Get up Luthar! Up and at him!'

'Go home, you brute!'

'You damn savage!'

Their hisses turned to half-hearted cheers as Jezal picked himself up off the grass, his whole left side pulsing. He would have screamed with the pain if he had any breath left in him. For all his effort, for all his training, he was utterly outclassed and he knew it. The thought of doing it all again next year made him want to vomit. He did his best to appear undaunted as he

struggled back to his enclosure, but he could not help sagging down heavily in his chair when he got there, dropping his notched steels on the flags and gasping for breath.

West bent over him and pulled up his shirt to check the damage. Jezal peered down gingerly, half expecting to see a great hole caved in his side, but there was only an ugly red welt across his ribs, some bruising already coming up around it.

'Anything broken?' asked Marshal Varuz, peering over West's shoulder.

Jezal fought back the tears as the Major probed his side. 'I don't think so, but damn it!' West threw his towel down in disgust. 'You call this the beautiful sport? Is there no rule against these heavy steels?'

Varuz shook his head grimly. 'They all have to be the same length, but there's no rule for the weight. I mean, why would anyone want heavy ones?'

'Now we know, don't we!' snapped West. 'Are you sure we shouldn't stop this before that bastard takes his head off?'

Varuz ignored him. 'Now look here,' said the old Marshal, leaning down to talk in Jezal's face. 'It's the best of seven touches! First to four! There's still time!'

Time for what? For Jezal to get cut in half, blunted steels or no? 'He's too strong!' Jezal gasped.

'Too strong? No one's too strong for you!' But even Varuz looked doubtful. 'There's still time! You can beat him!' The old Marshal tugged at his moustaches. 'You can beat him!'

But Jezal noticed he did not suggest how.

Glokta was becoming worried he might choke, so convulsive was his laughter. He tried to think of something he would rather see than Jezal dan Luthar being smashed around a fencing circle, and failed. The young man winced as he just barely blocked a raking cut. He had not been handling his left side at all well since he took that blow in the ribs, and Glokta could almost feel his pain. *And my, my, how nice it is to feel someone else's for a change.* The crowd sulked, silent and brooding as Gorst harried their favourite around with his brutal slashes, while Glokta spluttered giggles through his clenched gums.

Luthar was quick and flashy, and he moved well once he saw the steels coming. *A competent fighter. Good enough to win a Contest, no doubt, in a mediocre year. Quick feet, and quick hands, but his mind is not as sharp as it should be. As it needs to be. He is too predictable.*

Gorst was an entirely different proposition. He seemed to be swinging, and swinging, without a thought in his head. But Glokta knew better. *He has a whole new way of doing things. It was all jab, jab in my day. By next year's Contest they'll all be chopping away with these big, heavy steels.* Glokta wondered idly if he could have beaten Gorst, at his best. *It would have been a bout worth seeing anyway – a damn sight better than this mismatch.*

Gorst easily dealt with a couple of limp jabs, then Glokta winced and the crowd hissed as Luthar just barely parried another great butcher's chop, the force of it nearly lifting him off his feet. He had no way to avoid the next swing, pressed against the edge of the circle as he was, and he was forced to jump back into the sand.

'Three to nothing!' shouted the referee.

Glokta shook with merriment as he watched Luthar chop at the ground in frustration, sending up a petulant spray of sand, his face a picture of pale self-pity. *Dear me, Captain Luthar, it will be four to nothing. A whitewash. An embarrassment. Perhaps this will teach that whining little shit some humility. Some men are better off for a good beating. Only look at me, eh?*

'Begin!'

The fourth touch began precisely as the third had ended. *With Luthar taking a hammering.* Glokta could see it, the man was out of ideas. His left arm was moving slowly, painfully, his feet looked heavy. Another numbing blow crashed against his long steel, making him stumble back towards the edge of the circle, off-balance and gasping. Gorst needed only to press his attack a little further. *And something tells me he is not the man to let up when he's ahead.* Glokta grabbed his cane, pushed himself to his feet. Anyone could see it was all over, and he had no wish to be caught in the crush as the disappointed crowds all tried to leave at once.

Gorst's heavy long steel flashed down through the air. *The final blow, surely.* Luthar's only choice was to try and block it and be knocked clean out of the circle. *Or it might just split his fat head. We can hope for that.* Glokta smiled, half turned to leave.

But out of the corner of his eye, somehow, he saw the cut miss. Gorst blinked as his heavy long steel thudded into the turf, then grunted as Luthar caught him across the leg with a left-handed cut. It was the most emotion he had shown all day.

'One to Luthar!' shouted the referee after a brief pause, unable to entirely keep the amazement out of his voice.

'No,' murmured Glokta to himself, as the crowd around him erupted into riotous applause. *No.* He had fought hundreds of touches in his youth, and watched thousands more, but he had never seen anything quite like that, never seen anyone move so quickly. Luthar was a good swordsman, he knew it. *But no one is that good.* He frowned as he watched the two finalists come out from their second break and take their marks.

'Begin!'

Luthar was transformed. He harried Gorst with furious, lightning jabs, giving him no time to get started. It was the big man now who seemed stretched to the limit: blocking, dodging, trying to stay out of reach. It was as though they had sneaked the old Luthar away in the break and replaced him with a different man altogether: a stronger, faster, far more confident twin brother.

So long denied something to cheer for, the crowd whooped and yelled as though they'd split their throats. Glokta did not share their enthusiasm. *Something is wrong here. Something is wrong.* He glanced across the faces nearby, but no one else had sensed anything amiss. They only saw what they wanted to see: Luthar giving the ugly brute a spectacular and well-deserved thrashing. Glokta's eyes scanned across the benches, not knowing what he was looking for.

Bayaz, so-called. Sitting near the front, leaning forward and staring at the two fighters with fixed concentration, his 'apprentice' and the scarred Northman beside him. No one else noticed it, everyone was intent on the fighters before them, but Glokta did. He rubbed his eyes and looked again. *Something wrong.*

'Say one thing for the First of the Magi, say he's a cheating bastard, ' growled Logen.

Bayaz had a little smile at the corner of his mouth as he mopped the sweat from his forehead. 'Who ever said he wasn't?'

Luthar was in trouble again. Bad trouble. Each time he blocked one of those heavy sweeps, his swords snapped back further, his grip seemed slacker. Each time he dodged, he ended up a little further back towards the edge of the yellow circle.

Then, when the end seemed certain, out of the corner of his eye, Logen saw the air above Bayaz' shoulders shimmer, as it had on the road south when the trees burned, and he felt that strange tugging at his guts.

Luthar seemed suddenly to find new vigour. He caught the next great blow on the grip of his short sword. A moment before, it might easily have sent the thing flying from his hand. Now he held it there for an instant, then flung it away with a cry, pushing his opponent off balance and jumping forward, suddenly on the attack.

'If you were caught cheating in a Northern duel,' growled Logen, shaking his head, 'they'd cut the bloody cross into your stomach and pull your guts out.'

'Lucky for me,' murmured Bayaz through gritted teeth, without taking his eyes away from the fighters, 'that we are in the North no longer.' Sweat was already beading his bald scalp again, running down his face in fat drops. His fists were clenched tight and trembling with effort.

Luthar struck furiously, again and again, his swords a flashing blur. Gorst grunted and growled as he turned the blows away, but Luthar was too quick for him now, and too strong. He drove him mercilessly across the circle like a crazy dog might drive a cow.

'Fucking cheating,' growled Logen again, as Luthar's blade flashed and left a bright red line across Gorst's cheek. A few drops of blood spattered across into the crowd on Logen's left, and they exploded into riotous cheering. That, just for a moment, was a shadow of his own duels. The referee's cry of three apiece could hardly be heard at all. Gorst frowned slightly and touched one hand to his face.

Above the din, Logen could just hear Quai's whisper. 'Never bet against a Magus ...'

Jezal knew that he was good, but he had never dreamed he could be *this* good. He was sharp as a cat, nimble as a fly, strong as a bear. His ribs no longer hurt, his wrists no longer hurt, all trace of tiredness had left him, all trace of doubt. He was fearless, peerless, unstoppable. The applause

thundered around him and yet he could hear every word of it, see every detail of every face in the crowd. His heart was pumping tingling fire instead of blood, his lungs were sucking in the very clouds.

He did not bother even to sit in the break, so great was his eagerness to get back into the circle. The chair was an insult to him. He was not listening to what Varuz and West were saying. They were of no importance. Little people, far below. They stared at him: flushed, amazed, as well they might be.

He was the greatest swordsman ever.

That cripple Glokta could not have known how right he was: Jezal had only to try, it seemed, and he could have anything he wanted. He chuckled as he danced back to the mark. He laughed as he heard the crowds cheer. He smiled at Gorst as he stepped back into the circle. All was precisely as it should be. Those eyes were still heavy-lidded, lazy above the little red cut that Jezal had given him, but there was something else there now as well: a trace of shock, of wariness, of respect. As well there might be.

There was nothing that Jezal could not do. He was invincible. He was unstoppable. He was . . .

'Begin!'

. . . completely lost. The pain lanced through his side and made him gasp. Suddenly he was afraid, and tired, and weak again. Gorst growled and unleashed his savage cuts, jarring the steels in Jezal's hands, making him jump like a frightened rabbit. The mastery was gone, the anticipation, the nerve, and Gorst's onslaught was more brutal than ever. He felt a terrible lurch of despair as his long steel was torn from his buzzing fingers, flew through the air and clattered into the barrier. Jezal was bludgeoned to his knees. The crowd gasped. It was all over . . .

. . . It was not over. The blow was arcing down towards him. The final blow. It seemed to drift. Slow, slow, as though through honey. Jezal smiled. It was a simple matter for him to push it away with his short steel. The strength flowed again. He sprang upwards, shoved Gorst away with his empty hand, flicked another swing aside, and then another, his one sword doing the work of two with time to spare. The arena was breathless silent but for the rapid clashing of the steels. Right and left, right and left went the short blade, flashing faster than his eye could follow, faster than his mind could think, seeming almost to be dragging him along behind it.

There was a squeal of metal on metal as it tore Gorst's notched long steel from his hand, then another as it flickered across and did the same with his short. For a moment, all was still. The big man, disarmed and with his heels on the very edge of the circle, looked up at Jezal. The crowd was silent.

Then Jezal slowly lifted his short steel, all of a sudden seeming to weigh a ton, and poked Gorst gently in the ribs with it.

'Huh,' said the big man quietly, raising his eyebrows.

Then the crowd exploded into deafening applause. The noise went on and on, rising and rising, washing over Jezal in waves. Now that it was finished he felt drained beyond description. He closed his eyes, swaying, his sword dropped from his nerveless fingers and he sank to his knees. He was beyond exhaustion. It was as though he had used a whole week's energy in a few moments. Even kneeling was an effort he was not sure he could sustain for long, and if he fell he was not sure he could ever get up again.

But then he felt strong hands taking him under the arms, and felt himself being lifted. The noise of the crowd grew even louder as he was hoisted into the air. He opened his eyes – bleary, blurry colour flashed in front of him as he was turned around. His head rang with the sound. He was up on someone's shoulders. A shaved head. Gorst. The big man had lifted him up, as a father might lift his child, displaying him to the crowd, smiling up at him with a big, ugly grin. Jezal smiled back despite himself. It was a strange moment, all in all.

'Luthar wins!' cried the referee pointlessly, barely audible. 'Luthar wins!'

The cheering had resolved itself into a steady chant of 'Luthar! Luthar! Luthar!' The arena shook with it. Jezal's head swam with it. It was like being drunk. Drunk on victory. Drunk on yourself.

Gorst lowered him back to the circle as the cheering of the crowd began to fade. 'You beat me,' he said, smiling wide. His voice was strangely high and soft, almost like a woman's. 'Fair and square. I'd like to be the first to congratulate you.' And he nodded his big head and smiled again, rubbing at the cut under his eye without the slightest bitterness. 'You deserve it,' he said, holding out his hand.

'Thank you.' Jezal flashed a sour smile and gave the man's big paw as cursory a squeeze as possible, then he turned away towards his enclosure. Of course he fucking deserved it, and he was damned if he would let that bastard bask in his reflected glory a moment longer.

‘Bravely done, my boy, bravely done!’ frothed Marshal Varuz, slapping him on the shoulder as he stumbled back to his chair on wobbly legs. ‘I knew you could do it!’

West grinned as he handed him the towel. ‘They’ll be talking about this for years.’

Other well-wishers crowded in, offering their congratulations, leaning over the barrier. A whirl of smiling faces, and in amongst them the face of Jezal’s father, shining with pride. ‘I knew that you could do it, Jezal! I never doubted! Not for a minute! You’ve brought honour to our family!’ Jezal noticed that his elder brother didn’t look all that pleased about it, though. He had the usual stodgy, envious expression on his face, even at Jezal’s moment of victory. The stodgy, envious bastard. Could he not be happy for his brother, if only for one day?

‘May I too congratulate the winner?’ came a voice from over his shoulder. It was that old idiot, the one from the gate, the one whom Sulfur had called his master. The one who had used the name Bayaz. He had sweat on his bald skull, a lot of it. His face was pale, his eyes sunken. Almost as if he had just done seven touches with Gorst. ‘Well done indeed, my young friend, an almost . . . magical performance.’

‘Thank you,’ muttered Jezal. He was not at all sure who this old man was, or what he was after, but he did not trust him in the least. ‘I am sorry though, I must—’

‘Of course. We will talk later.’ He said it with a disturbing finality, as if it were a thing already arranged. Then he turned away and vanished smoothly into the crowds. Jezal’s father stared after him, ashen-faced now, as though he had seen a ghost.

‘Do you know him, father?’

‘I ...’

‘Jezal!’ Varuz grabbed his arm excitedly. ‘Come! The King wishes to congratulate you!’ He dragged Jezal from his family and towards the circle. A scattering of applause rose up again as they walked together across the dry grass, the scene of Jezal’s victory. The Lord Marshal slung a fatherly arm around his shoulder, and smiled up at the crowds as though the applause was all for him. Everyone wanted a piece of his glory, it seemed, but Jezal was able to shake the old man off as he mounted the steps of the royal box.

Prince Raynault, youngest son of the King, was first in line, humbly dressed, honest and thoughtful-seeming, scarcely looking like royalty at all. ‘Well done!’ he shouted over the roar of the crowd, sounding truly delighted for Jezal’s victory. ‘Well done indeed!’ His older brother was more exuberant.

‘Incredible!’ shouted Crown Prince Ladisla, the sunlight glinting off the golden buttons on his white jacket. ‘Capital! Amazing! Spectacular! I never saw such a thing!’ Jezal grinned and bowed humbly as he went past, hunching his shoulders as the Crown Prince slapped him somewhat too hard on the back. ‘I always knew you’d do it! You were always my man!’

The Princess Terez, only daughter of the Grand Duke Orso of Talins, watched Jezal pass with a tiny, disdainful smile, tapping two languid fingers against her palm in a quarter-hearted imitation of clapping. Her chin was raised painfully high, as though just to be looked at by her was an honour he could never fully appreciate, and certainly did not deserve.

And so he came at last to the high seat of Guslav the fifth, High King of the Union. His head was slumped sideways, squashed down under the sparkling crown. His pasty pale fingers twitched on his crimson silk mantle like white slugs. His eyes were closed, chest rising and falling gently, accompanied by gentle splutterings as spittle issued from his slack lips and ran down his chin, joining the sweat on his bulging jowls and helping it to turn his high collar dark with wet.

Truly, Jezal was in the presence of greatness.

‘Your Majesty,’ murmured Lord Hoff. The head of state did not respond. His wife the Queen looked on, painfully erect, a fixed, emotionless smile plastered across her well-powdered face.

Jezal hardly knew where to look, and settled on his dusty shoes. The Lord Chamberlain coughed loudly. A muscle twitched beneath the sweaty fat on the side of the King’s face, but he did not wake. Hoff winced, and, glancing around to make sure no one was watching too closely, jabbed the royal ribs with his finger.

The King jumped, eyelids suddenly flicking wide open, heavy jowls wobbling, staring at Jezal with wild, bloodshot, red-rimmed eyes.

‘Your Majesty, this is Captain . . .’

‘Raynault!’ exclaimed the King, ‘my son!’

Jezal swallowed nervously, doing his best to maintain a rigid smile of his own. The senile old fool had mistaken him for his younger son. Worse yet, the Prince himself was standing not four paces away. The Queen's wooden grin twitched slightly. Princess Terez' perfect lips twisted with scorn. The Lord Chamberlain gave an awkward cough. 'Er, no, your Majesty, this is ...'

But it was too late. Without any warning, the monarch struggled to his feet and folded Jezal in an enthusiastic embrace, his heavy crown slipping over to one side of his head and one of its jewel-encrusted prongs nearly poking Jezal in the eye. Lord Hoff's jaw opened silently. The two Princes goggled. Jezal could only manage a helpless gurgle.

'My son!' blubbered the King, his voice choked with emotion. 'Raynault, I'm so glad you're back! When I am gone, Ladisla will need your help. He is so weak, and the crown is such a heavy weight! You were always the better suited for it! Such a heavy weight!' he sobbed into Jezal's shoulder.

It was like a hideous nightmare. Ladisla and the real Raynault gawped at each other, then back at their father, both looking sick. Terez was sneering down her nose at her prospective father-in-law with undisguised contempt. From bad to much, much worse. What the hell did one do in such a situation? Could there possibly be any etiquette devised for this? Jezal patted his King awkwardly on his fat back. What else could he do? Shove the senile old idiot over on his arse, with half of his subjects looking on? He was almost tempted to do it.

It was a small mercy that the crowds took the King's embrace for a ringing endorsement of Jezal's fencing abilities, and drowned out his words with a fresh wave of cheering. No one beyond the royal box heard what he said. They all missed the full significance of what was, without doubt, the most embarrassing moment of Jezal's life.

The Ideal Audience

Arch Lector Sult was standing by his huge window when Glokta arrived, tall and imposing as always in his spotless white coat, gazing out across the spires of the University towards the House of the Maker. A pleasant breeze was washing through the great circular room, ruffling the old man's shock of white hair and making the many papers on his enormous desk crackle and flutter.

He turned as Glokta shuffled into the room. 'Inquisitor,' he said simply, holding out his white gloved hand, the great stone on his ring of office catching the bright sunlight from the open window and glittering with purple fire.

'I serve and obey, your Eminence.' Glokta took the hand in his, and grimaced as he bent down to kiss the ring, his cane trembling with the effort of keeping upright. *Damn it if the old bastard doesn't hold his hand a little lower every time, just to watch me sweat.*

Sult poured himself into his tall chair in one smooth motion, elbows on the table top, fingers pressed together before him. Glokta could only stand and wait, his leg burning from the familiar climb through the House of Questions, sweat tickling his scalp, and wait for the invitation to sit.

'Please be seated,' murmured the Arch Lector, then waited while Glokta winced his way into one of the lesser chairs at the round table. 'Now tell me, has your investigation met with any success?'

'Some. There was a disturbance at our visitors' chambers the other night. They claim that—'

'Plainly an attempt to add credence to this outrageous story. Magic!' Sult snorted his disdain. 'Have you discovered how the breach in the wall was really made?'

Magic, perhaps? 'I am afraid not, Arch Lector.'

'That is unfortunate. Some proof of how this particular trick was managed might be of use to us. Still,' and Sult sighed as though he had expected no better, 'one cannot have everything. Did you speak to these . . . people?'

'I did. Bayaz, if I may use the name, is a most slippery talker. Without the aid of anything more persuasive than the questions themselves, I could get

nothing from him. His friend the Northman also bears some study.'

One crease formed across Sult's smooth forehead. 'You suspect some connection with this savage Bethod?'

'Possibly.'

'Possibly?' echoed the Arch Lector sourly, as though the very word was poison. 'What else?'

'There has been a new addition to the merry band.'

'I know. The Navigator.'

Why do I even bother? 'Yes, your Eminence, a Navigator.'

'Good luck to them. Those penny-pinching fortune-tellers are always more trouble than they're worth. Blubbering on about God and what have you. Greedy savages.'

'Absolutely. More trouble than they're worth, Arch Lector, though it would be interesting to know why they have employed one.'

'And why have they?'

Glokta paused for a moment. 'I don't know.'

'Huh,' snorted Sult. 'What else?'

'Following their night-time visitation, our friends were relocated to a suite of rooms beside the park. There was a most grisly death a few nights ago, not twenty paces from their windows.'

'Superior Goyle mentioned this. He said it was nothing to concern myself about, that there was no connection with our visitors. I left the matter in his hands.' He frowned at Glokta. 'Did I make the wrong decision?'

Oh dear me, I need not think too long over this one. 'Absolutely not, Arch Lector.' Glokta bowed his head in deep respect. 'If the Superior is satisfied, then so am I.'

'Hmm. So what you are telling me is that, all in all, we have nothing.'

Not quite nothing. 'There is this.' Glokta fished the ancient scroll from his coat pocket and held it out.

Sult had a look of mild curiosity on his face as he took it and unrolled it on the table, stared down at the meaningless symbols. 'What is it?'

Hah. So you don't know everything. 'I suppose you could say that it's a piece of history. An account of how Bayaz defeated the Master Maker.'

'A piece of history.' Sult tapped his finger thoughtfully on the table top. 'And how does it help us?' *How does it help you, you mean?*

‘According to this, it was our friend Bayaz who sealed up the House of the Maker.’ Glokta nodded towards the looming shape beyond the window. ‘Sealed it up . . . and took the key.’

‘Key? That tower has always been sealed. Always. As far as I am aware there is not even a keyhole.’

‘Those were precisely my thoughts, your Eminence.’

‘Hmm.’ Slowly, Sult began to smile. ‘Stories are all in how you tell them, eh? Our friend Bayaz knows that well enough, I dare say. He would use our own stories against us, but now we switch cups with him. I enjoy the irony.’ He picked up the scroll again. ‘Is it authentic?’

‘Does it matter?’

‘Of course not.’ Sult rose gracefully from his chair and paced slowly over to the window, tapping the rolled-up scroll against his fingers. He stood there for some time, staring out. When he turned, he had developed a look of the deepest self-satisfaction.

‘It occurs to me that there will be a feast tomorrow evening, a celebration for our new champion swordsman, Captain Luthar.’ *That cheating little worm.* ‘The great and the good will be in attendance: the Queen, both Princes, most of the Closed Council, several leading noblemen.’ *Not forgetting the King himself. It has come to something when his presence at dinner is not even worth mentioning.* ‘That would be the ideal audience for our little unmasking, don’t you think?’

Glokta cautiously bowed his head. ‘Of course, Arch Lector. The ideal audience.’ *Providing it works. It might be an embarrassing audience to fail in front of.*

But Sult was already anticipating his triumph. ‘The perfect gathering, and just enough time to make the necessary arrangements. Send a messenger to our friend the First of the Magi, and let him know that he and his companions are cordially invited to a dinner tomorrow evening. I trust that you will attend yourself?’

Me? Glokta bowed again. ‘I would not miss it for anything, your Eminence.’

‘Good. Bring your Practicals with you. Our friends might become violent when they realise the game is up. Barbarians of this sort, who can tell what they might be capable of?’ A barely perceptible motion of the Arch Lector’s

gloved hand indicated that the interview was finished. *All those stairs, just for this?*

Sult was looking down his nose at the scroll as Glokta finally reached the threshold. 'The ideal audience,' he was muttering, as the heavy doors clicked shut.

In the North, a chieftain's own Carls ate with him every night in his hall. The women brought the food in wooden bowls. You'd stab the lumps of meat out with a knife and with a knife you'd cut them up, then you'd stuff the bits in your mouth with your fingers. If you found some bone or gristle you'd toss it down on the straw for the dogs. The table, if there was one, was a few slabs of ill-fitting wood, stained and gouged and scarred from having knives stuck in it. The Carls sat on long benches, with maybe a chair or two for the Named Men. It'd be dark, especially in the long winters, and smoky from the fire-pit and the chagga pipes. There'd often be singing of songs, usually shouting of good-natured insults, sometimes screaming of bad-natured ones, and always a lot of drink. The only rule was that you waited for the chief to begin.

Logen had no idea what the rules might be here, but he guessed there were a lot.

The guests were sat round three long tables set out in a horseshoe, sixty people or more. Everyone had their own chair, and the dark wood of the table tops was polished to a high sheen, made bright enough for Logen to see the blurry outline of his face in by hundreds of candles scattered round the walls and down the tables. Every guest had at least three blunt knives, and several other things scattered about in front of them that Logen had no idea of the use for, including a big flat circle of shiny metal.

There was no shouting and certainly no singing, just a low murmur like a bee-hive as people muttered between themselves, leaning towards each other as if they were swapping secrets. The clothes were stranger than ever. Old men wore heavy robes of black, red and gold, trimmed with shining fur, even in the heat.

Young men wore tight fitting jackets in bright crimson, green, or blue, festooned with ropes and knots of gold and silver thread. Women were hung with chains and rings of glittering gold and flashing jewels, wearing strange

dresses of vivid cloth that were ridiculously loose and billowing in places, painfully tight in others, and left others still entirely, distractingly bare.

Even the servants were dressed like lords, prowling around behind the tables, leaning forward silently to fill goblets with sweet, thin wine. Logen had already drunk a deal of it, and the bright room had taken on a pleasant glow.

The problem was the lack of food. He hadn't eaten since that morning and his stomach was growling. He'd been eyeing the jars of plants sat on the tables before the guests. They had bright flowers on them, and didn't look much like food to him, but then they ate some strange things in this country.

There was nothing for it but to try. He snatched one of the things from the jar, a long piece of green plant with a yellow flower on the end. He took a nibble from the bottom of the stem. Tasteless and watery, but at least it was crunchy. He took a larger bite and munched on it without relish.

'I don't think they're meant for eating.' Logen glanced round, surprised to hear the Northern tongue spoken here, surprised that anyone was speaking to him at all. His neighbour, a tall, gaunt man with a sharp, lined face, was leaning towards him with an embarrassed smile. Logen recognised him vaguely. He'd been at the sword game – holding the blades for the lad from the gate.

'Ah,' mumbled Logen round his mouthful of plant. The taste of the stuff got worse with time. 'Sorry,' he said once he had forced it down his throat, 'I don't know much about these things.'

'Honestly, neither do I. How did it taste?'

'Like shit.' Logen held the half-eaten flower uncertainly in his fingers. The tiled floor was spotlessly clean. It hardly seemed right to toss the thing under the table. There were no dogs anyway, and even if there had been he doubted they'd have eaten the thing. A dog would have had more sense than him. He dropped it on the metal platter and wiped his fingers on his chest, hoping that no one had noticed.

'My name is West,' said the man, offering his hand, 'I come from Angland.'

Logen gave the hand a squeeze. 'Ninefingers. A Brynn, from way up north of the High Places.'

'Ninefingers?' Logen waggled his stump at him and the man nodded. 'Ah, I see.' He smiled as though remembering something funny. 'I heard a song

once, in Angland, about a nine-fingered man. What was he called now? The Bloody-Nine! That was it!' Logen felt his grin slipping. 'One of those Northern songs, you know the kind, all violence. He cut off heads by the cartload, this Bloody-Nine, and burned towns, and mixed blood with his beer and whatnot. That wasn't you, was it?'

The man was making a joke. Logen laughed nervously. 'No, no, I never heard of him,' but luckily West had already moved on.

'Tell me, you look like you've seen some battles in your time.'

'I've been in some scrapes.' It was pointless to deny it.

'Do you know of this one they call the King of the Northmen? This man Bethod?'

Logen glanced sideways. 'I know of him.'

'You fought against him in the wars?'

Logen grimaced. The sour taste of the plant seemed to be lingering in his mouth. He picked up his goblet and took a swallow. 'Worse,' he said slowly as he set it down. 'I fought for him.'

This only seemed to make the man more curious than ever. 'Then you know about his tactics, and his troops. His way of making war?' Logen nodded. 'What can you tell me about him?'

'That he's a most cunning and ruthless opponent, with no pity or scruple in him. Make no mistake, I hate the man, but there's been no war leader in his league since the days of Skarling Hoodless. He has that in him which men respect, or fear, or at least obey. He pushes his men hard, so he can make the field first and choose his own ground, but they march hard for him because he brings them victories. He's cautious when he must be, and fearless when he must be, but neglects no detail. He delights in every trick of war – in setting traps and ambushes, in mounting feints and deceptions, in sending sudden raids against the unwary. Look for him where you expect him least, and expect him to be strongest where he seems the weakest. Beware him most of all when he seems to run. Most men fear him, and those that don't are fools.'

Logen picked up the flower from the plate and started snapping it into pieces. 'His armies are grouped about the chieftains of the clans, some of them strong war leaders in their own right. Most of his fighters are Thralls, peasants pressed into service, lightly armed with spear or bow, fast moving in loose groups. In the past they were ill-trained, and taken from their farms

for only a short time, but the wars have been raging for so long that many of them have become hard fighters, and show scant mercy.'

He began to arrange the bits of plant, imagining they were groups of men and the plate a hill. 'Each chieftain keeps Carls besides, his own household warriors, well armed and armoured, skilled with axe and sword and spear, well disciplined. Some few have horses, but Bethod will keep those out of sight, waiting for the best moment to charge or pursue.' He pulled the yellow petals from the flower, and they became horsemen hidden on the flanks. 'Last there are the Known Men, the Named Men, those warriors who've earned great respect in battle. They might lead groups of Carls on the field, or act as scouts or raiders, sometimes far in the enemy's rear.'

He realised the plate was covered with a mess of broken pieces of plant, and brushed them hurriedly off onto the table. 'That's the tradition of war in the North, but Bethod's always had a fancy for new ideas. He's read books, and studied other ways of fighting, and often talked of buying flat-bows, and heavy armour, and strong war-horses from the southern traders, and of making an army to be feared throughout the world.'

Logen became aware he had been talking solidly for ages. He hadn't said half that many words together in years, but West was staring at him with a look of rapt attention. 'You speak like a man who knows his business.'

'Well, you've happened upon the one subject on which I might be reckoned an expert.'

'What advice would you give to a man who had to fight a war against Bethod?'

Logen frowned. 'Be careful. And watch your back.'

Jezal was not enjoying himself. At first, of course, it had seemed a delightful idea, just the thing he had always dreamed of: a celebration in *his* honour, attended by so many of the Union's greatest. Surely it was only the start of his wonderful new life as a champion of the Contest. The great things which everyone had predicted, no, promised for him were almost arrived, poised like over-ripe fruit to drop from the tree and into his lap. Promotions and glory were sure to follow close behind. Perhaps they would make him Major tonight, and he would go to the war in Angland as commander of a full battalion . . .

But, strangely, it appeared that most of the guests were more interested in their own affairs. They chattered to each other about government matters, about the business of merchant houses, about issues of land, and title, and politics. Fencing, and his remarkable skill at it, were scarcely mentioned. No immediate promotion had been forthcoming. He simply had to sit there, and smile, and accept the odd lukewarm congratulation from strangers in splendid clothes who barely even looked him in the eye. A wax effigy could have done the same job. He had to admit, the adulation of the commoners in the arena had been considerably more gratifying. At least they had sounded as if they meant it.

Still, he had never before been within the palace compound, a fortress within the fortress of the Agriont where few indeed were permitted to tread. Now he was seated at the top table in the King's own dining hall, though Jezal did not doubt that his Majesty took the majority of his meals propped up in bed, and most likely had them fed to him with a spoon.

There was a stage set into the wall at the far end of the room. Jezal had once heard that Ostus, the child King, had jesters perform for him at every meal. Morlic the Mad, by contrast, had staged executions there to go with his dinner. King Casamir, it was said, had likenesses of his worst enemies shout insults at him from that stage while he took his breakfast every morning, to keep his hatred for them fresh. The curtains were closed now, though. Jezal would have to look for his entertainment elsewhere, and in this regard the pickings were slim indeed.

Marshal Varuz prattled on in his ear. He, at least, was still interested in fencing. Unfortunately, he talked of nothing else. 'I never saw such a thing. The whole city is buzzing with it. Most remarkable bout that anyone's ever seen! I swear, you're better even than Sand dan Glokta used to be, and I never thought to see his like again! I never dreamed you had it in you to fight like that, Jezal, never had the slightest inkling!'

'Mmm,' said Jezal.

The Crown Prince Ladisla and his bride-to-be, Terez of Talins, made a dazzling couple at the top of the table, just beside the dozing King. They were oblivious to all that was going on around them, but hardly in the way that one might hope for from two young lovers. They were arguing viciously in scarcely hushed voices, while their neighbours studiously pretended not to suck in every word.

‘. . . well I’ll be going to war soon, in Angland, so you need not suffer me too much longer!’ whined Ladisla. ‘I might be killed! Perhaps that would make your Highness happy?’

‘Pray don’t die on my account,’ returned Terez, her Styrian accent dripping venom, ‘but if you must, you must. I suppose I will learn to bear the sorrow ...’

Somebody nearer at hand distracted Jezal by thumping on the table. ‘Damn these commoners! Damn peasantry’s up in arms in Starikland! Lazy dogs, they refuse to work a stroke!’

‘It’s these taxes,’ grumbled the man’s neighbour, ‘these war taxes have them all stirred up. Have you heard about this damn character they call the Tanner? Some bloody peasant, preaching revolution, open as you please! I heard that one of the King’s collectors was set on by a mob, not a mile outside the walls of Keln. One of the King’s collectors, I say! By a mob! Not a mile outside the city walls—’

‘We’ve damn well brought it on ourselves!’ The speaker’s face was out of sight but Jezal recognised him by the gold-embroidered cuffs on his gown. Marovia, the High Justice. ‘Treat a man like a dog and sooner or later he’ll bite you, it’s a simple fact. Our role as governors, and as noblemen, is surely to respect and protect the common man, rather than to oppress and scorn him?’

‘I wasn’t talking about scorn, Lord Marovia, or oppression, just about them paying what’s due to us as their landlords, and for that matter their natural betters ...’

Marshal Varuz, meanwhile, had not let up for an instant. ‘It was quite a thing, eh? The way you put him down, one steel against two!’ The old soldier swished his hand around in the air. ‘The whole town’s buzzing. You’re bound for great things now my boy, mark my words. Bound for great things. I’ll be damned if you don’t have my seat on the Closed Council one day!’

It really was too much. Jezal had put up with the man for all those months. He had somehow imagined that if he won that would be the end of it, but it seemed he would be disappointed in this, as in so much else. It was strange, but Jezal had never fully realised before what a boring old imbecile the Lord Marshal was. He was realising now though, and no mistake.

To further add to his dismay, there were several people seated about the tables who would most definitely not have been among his chosen guests. He supposed he could make a dispensation for Sult, the Arch Lector of the Inquisition, since he sat on the Closed Council and was without doubt a powerful figure, but Jezal could not comprehend why he might have brought that bastard Glokta with him. The cripple looked even more ill than usual, twitching eyes sunken in dark circles. For some reason he was occasionally shooting grim and suspicious glances at Jezal as though he suspected him of some crime or other. It was a damn cheek, what with it being his feast and all.

Even worse, on the other side of the room was that old, bald man, the one who had called himself Bayaz. Jezal had still not got to the bottom of his strange words of congratulation at the Contest – or his father's reaction to the man, for that matter. And he had his hideous friend, the nine-fingered barbarian, beside him.

Major West had the misfortune of being seated next to the primitive, but he was making the best of it; indeed, the two were engaged in a lively conversation. The Northman broke into sudden peals of laughter and thumped the table with his big fist, making the glasses rattle. At least they were enjoying themselves at his party, Jezal thought sourly, but he almost wished he was down there with them.

Still, he knew that he wanted to be a big, important man some day. To wear things with a lot of fur, and a heavy golden chain of office. To have people bow and scrape and fawn before him. He had made that decision long ago, and he supposed he still liked the idea. It was just that, up close, the whole thing seemed so awfully false and boring. He would much, much rather have been on his own with Ardee, even though he had seen her the night before. There was nothing boring about her . . .

'. . . the savages are closing on Ostenhorm, that's what I heard!' someone shouted over on Jezal's left. 'The Lord Governor, Meed, he's raising an army and has sworn to turn them out of Angland!'

'Hah. Meed? That swollen-headed old fool couldn't turn a pie out of a dish!'

'Enough to beat these Northern animals though, what? One good Union man's worth ten of their kind ...'

Jezal heard Terez' voice cutting suddenly shrill above the hubbub, almost loud enough to be heard at the far end of the room, '. . . of course I will marry where my father commands me, but I don't have to like it!' She appeared so vicious at that moment that he would not have been surprised to see her stab the Crown Prince in the face with her fork. Jezal felt somewhat gratified to see that he was not the only one who had trouble with women.

'. . . oh yes, a remarkable performance! Everyone's talking about it,' Varuz was still droning.

Jezal squirmed in his chair. How long was this bloody business going to take? He felt suffocated. He glanced across the faces again and caught Glokta's eye, staring at him with that grim, suspicious look on his wasted face. Jezal still couldn't meet that gaze for long, his party or no. What the hell did the cripple have against him anyhow?

The little bastard. He cheated. Somehow. I know it. Glokta's eyes tracked slowly across the table opposite until they lighted on Bayaz. The old fraud was sitting there, quite at home. *And he had some part in it. They cheated, together. Somehow.*

'My lords and ladies!' The chatter faded as the Lord Chamberlain rose to address the room. 'I would like to welcome you all, on his Majesty's behalf, to this humble gathering.' The King himself stirred briefly, gazed vacantly about him, blinked, then closed his eyes. 'We are gathered, of course, in honour of Captain Jezal dan Luthar, who has recently added his name to that most select roll of honour: those swordsman who have been victorious at the summer Contest.' A few glasses were raised and there were some half-hearted mumblings of agreement.

'I recognise several other winners among the assembly here today, many of them now the holders of high office: Lord Marshal Varuz, Commander Valdis of the Knights Herald, Major West down there, now on Marshal Burr's staff, of course. Even I was a winner in my day.' He smiled and looked down at his bulging paunch. 'Though my day was some time ago, of course.' A polite ripple of laughter passed round the room. *I notice that I don't get a mention. Not all winners are enviable, eh?*

'Victors at the Contest,' continued the Lord Chamberlain, 'have so often gone on to great things. I hope, and indeed we all hope, that it may prove so

for our young friend, Captain Luthar.' *I hope he meets a slow death in Angland, the cheating little bastard.* But Glokta raised his glass along with everyone else to toast the arrogant ass, while Luthar sat there, loving every instant of it.

And to think. I sat in that very chair, being applauded and envied and clapped on the back after I won the Contest. Different men in the big clothes, different faces sweating in the heat, but nothing very much has changed. Was my grin really any less smug? Of course not. If anything I was worse. But at least I earned it.

Such was Lord Hoff's commitment that he did not stop toasting until his goblet was entirely empty, then he shoved it back on the table and licked his lips. 'And now, before the food arrives, a small surprise has been prepared by my colleague Arch Lector Sult, in honour of another of our guests. I hope you will all find it diverting.' And the Lord Chamberlain sat heavily back down, holding his empty goblet out for more wine.

Glokta glanced across at Sult. *A surprise, from the Arch Lector? Bad news for somebody.*

The heavy red curtains of the stage rolled slowly back. They revealed an old man lying on the boards, his white garment daubed with colourful blood. A broad canvas behind depicted a forest scene beneath a starry sky. It reminded Glokta rather unpleasantly of the mural in the round room. The room beneath Severard's crumbling pile by the docks.

A second old man swept on from the wings: a tall, slender man with remarkably fine, sharp features. His head was shaved bald and he had grown a short white beard, but Glokta recognised him immediately. *Iosiv Lestek, one of the city's most respected actors.* He gave a mannered start as he noticed the bloody corpse.

'Ooooooh!' he wailed, spreading his arms wide in an actor's approximation of shock and despair. It was a truly enormous voice, loud enough to make the rafters shake. Confident that he had the undivided attention of the chamber, Lestek began to intone his lines, hands sweeping through the air, towering passions sweeping across his face.

So here, at last, my master Juvens lies,
And with his death all hope of peace now dies,
By Kanedias' treachery undone.

His passing is the setting of the sun
Upon an age.

The old actor threw back his head, and Glokta saw tears sparkling in his eyes. *A neat trick, to cry on demand like that.* A lonely drop trickled slowly down his cheek, and the audience sat spellbound. He turned once again to the body.

Here brother murders brother. All slow time
Can never have recorded such a crime.
I half expect to see the stars go out.
Why does the ground not open up and spout
Some raging flame?

He threw himself down on his knees and beat upon his ageing breast.

Oh bitter fate, I would most happily
Now join my master, but it cannot be!
For when a great man dies, we that remain
Though in a narrowed world, must brave the pain
And struggle onward.

Lestek looked slowly up towards the audience, slowly clambered to his feet, his expression shifting from deepest sorrow to grimmest determination.

For though the Maker's house is locked and barred,
All carved from rock and steel, all wondrous hard,
If I must wait until that steel is rust,
Or with my bare hands crush that rock to dust,
I'll have my vengeance!

The actor's eyes flashed fire as he flicked out his robe and strode from the stage to rapturous applause. It was a condensed version of a familiar piece, often performed. *Although rarely so well.* Glokta was surprised to find himself clapping. *Quite the performance so far. Nobility, passion, command. A great deal more convincing than another fake Bayaz I could mention.* He sat back in his chair, easing his left leg out under the table, and prepared to enjoy the show.

Logen watched with his face screwed up in confusion. He guessed that this was one of the spectacles that Bayaz had spoken of, but his grip on the language wasn't good enough to catch the details.

They swept up and down the stage with much sighing and waving of their hands, dressed in bright costumes and speaking in some kind of chant. Two of them were supposed to be dark-skinned, he thought, but were clearly pale men with black paint on their faces. In another scene, the one playing Bayaz whispered to a woman through a door, seeming to plead with her to open it, only the door was a piece of painted wood stood up on its own in the middle of the stage, and the woman was a boy in a dress. It would have been easier, Logen thought, to step around the piece of wood and speak to him or her directly.

Logen was sure of one thing, though – the real Bayaz was seriously displeased. He could feel his annoyance mounting with each scene. It reached a teeth-grinding peak when the villain of the piece, a big man with a glove and an eye-patch, pushed the boy in the dress over some wooden battlements. It was plain that he or she was meant to have fallen a great distance, even though Logen could hear him hit something soft just behind the stage.

'How fucking dare they?' the real Bayaz growled under his breath. Logen would have got all the way out of the room if he could've, but he had to be content with shuffling his chair towards West, as far from the Magus' fury as possible.

On the stage, the other Bayaz was battling the old man with the glove and the eye-patch, although they fought by walking round in circles and talking a lot. Finally the villain followed the boy off the back of the stage, but not before his adversary took an enormous golden key from him.

'There's more detail here than in the original,' muttered the real Bayaz, as his counterpart held up the key and spouted some more verse. Logen was little further on when the performance came to a close, but he caught the last two lines, just before the old actor bowed low:

> Pray your indulgence, at our story's end,
> Our humble purpose was not to offend.

'My fucking old arse it wasn't,' hissed Bayaz through gritted teeth, while fixing a grin and clapping enthusiastically.

Glokta watched Lestek take a few last bows as the curtains closed on him, the golden key still shining in his hand. Arch Lector Sult rose from his chair as the applause died.

'I am so glad you enjoyed our little diversion,' he said, smiling smoothly round at the appreciative gathering. 'I do not doubt that many of you have seen this piece before, but it has a special significance this evening. Captain Luthar is not the only celebrated figure in our midst, there is a second guest of honour here tonight. None other than the subject of our play – Bayaz himself, the First of the Magi!' Sult smiled and held out his arm towards the old fake on the other side of the room. There was a gentle rustling as every guest turned from the Arch Lector to look at him.

Bayaz smiled back. 'Good evening,' he said. A few of the worthies laughed, suspecting some further little game perhaps, but Sult did not laugh with them and their merriment was short lived. An uneasy silence descended on the hall. *A deadly silence, perhaps.*

'The First of the Magi. He has been with us in the Agriont now for several weeks. He and a few . . . companions.' Sult glanced down his nose at the scarred Northman, and then back to the self-styled Magus. 'Bayaz.' He rolled the word around his mouth, allowing it to sink into his listeners' ears. 'The first letter in the alphabet of the old tongue. First apprentice of Juvens, first letter of the alphabet, is that not so, Master Bayaz?'

'Why, Arch Lector,' asked the old man, still smirking, 'have you been checking up on me?' *Impressive. Even now, when he must sense the game will soon be over, he sticks to his role.*

Sult was unmoved however. 'It is my duty thoroughly to investigate anyone who might pose a threat to my King or country,' he intoned stiffly.

'How fearsomely patriotic of you. Your investigations no doubt revealed that I am still a member of the Closed Council, even if my chair stands empty for the time being. I believe *Lord* Bayaz would be the proper term of address.'

Sult's cold smile did not slip even a hair's breadth. 'And when exactly was your last visit, *Lord* Bayaz? It would seem that someone so deeply involved in our history would have taken more of an interest over the years. Why, if I may ask, in the centuries since the birth of the Union, since the time of Harod the Great, have you not been back to visit us?' *A good question. I wish it had occurred to me.*

‘Oh, but I have been. During the reign of King Morlic the Mad, and in the civil war which followed, I was tutor to a young man called Arnault. Later, when Morlic was murdered and Arnault was raised to the throne by the Open Council, I served as his Lord Chamberlain. I called myself Bialoveld in those days. I visited again in King Casamir’s reign. He called me Zoller, and I had your job, Arch Lector.’

Glokta could barely contain a gasp of indignation, and heard others from the chairs around him. *He has no shame, I’ll give him that. Bialoveld, and Zoller, two of the Union’s most respected servants. How dare he? And yet . . .* He pictured the painting of Zoller in the Arch Lector’s study, and the statue of Bialoveld in the Kingsway. *Both bald, both stern, both bearded . . . but what am I thinking? Major West is thinning out on top. Does that make him a legendary wizard? Most likely this charlatan merely picked the two baldest figures he could find.*

Sult, meanwhile, was trying a different tack. ‘Tell me this, then, Bayaz: it is a story well known that Harod himself doubted you when you first came to his hall, all those long years ago. As proof of your power, you broke his long table in two. It may be that there are some sceptics among us here tonight. Would you consider such a demonstration for us, now?’

The colder Sult’s tone became, the less the old fraud seemed to care. He dismissed this latest effort with a lazy wave of his hand. ‘What you speak of is not juggling, Arch Lector, or playing on the stage. There are always dangers, and costs. Besides, it would be a great shame to spoil Captain Luthar’s feast simply so I could show off, don’t you think? Not to mention the waste of a fine old piece of furniture. I, unlike so many others these days, have a healthy respect for the past.’

Some were smiling uncertainly as they watched the two old men fencing with each other, perhaps still suspecting an elaborate joke. Others knew better and were frowning hard, trying to work out what was going on, and who had the upper hand. High Justice Marovia, Glokta noticed, looked to be thoroughly enjoying himself. *Almost as if he knows something we don’t.* Glokta shifted uncomfortably in his chair, eyes fixed on the bald actor. *Things are not going as well as they should be. When will he begin to sweat? When?*

Someone placed a bowl of steaming soup in front of Logen. No doubt it was meant to be eaten, but now his appetite was gone. Logen might be no courtier, but he could spot folk working up to violence when he saw them. With each exchange between the two old men their smiles slipped further, their voices became harder, the hall seemed to grow closer and more oppressive. Everyone in the room was looking worried now – West, the proud lad who'd won that sword game because of Bayaz' cheating, the feverish cripple who'd asked all the questions . . .

Logen felt the hairs on his neck rising. There were two figures lurking in the nearest doorway. Black-clothed figures, black-masked. His eyes flicked across to the other entrances. Each held two of those masked figures, two at least, and he didn't reckon they were here to collect the plates.

They were here for him. For him and Bayaz, he could feel it. A man doesn't put on a mask unless he's got some dark work in mind. There was no way that he could deal with half that many, but he slid a knife from beside his plate and hid it behind his arm anyway. If they tried to take him, he'd fight. That didn't need thinking about.

Bayaz was starting to sound angry. 'I have supplied you with all the proofs you've asked for, Arch Lector!'

'Proofs!' The tall man they called Sult gave a cold sneer. 'You deal in words and dusty papers! More the business of a snivelling clerk than the stuff of legend! Some would say that a Magus without magic is simply a meddling old man! We are at war, and can take no chances! You mentioned Arch Lector Zoller. His diligence in the cause of truth is well documented. You, I am sure, must understand mine.' He leaned forward, planting his fists firmly on the table before him. 'Show us magic, *Bayaz*, or show us the key!'

Logen swallowed. He didn't like the way that things were going, but then he didn't understand the rules of this game. He had put his trust in Bayaz, for some reason, and there it would have to stay. It was a little late to be changing sides.

'Have you nothing left to say?' demanded Sult. He slowly lowered himself into his chair, smiling once more. His eyes slid over to the archways and Logen felt the masked figures moving forward, straining to be released. 'Have you no more words? Have you no more tricks?'

‘Only one.’ Bayaz reached into his collar. He took hold of something there, and drew it out – a long, thin chain. One of the black-masked figures stepped forward a pace, expecting a weapon, and Logen’s hand gripped tighter on the handle of the knife, but when the chain came all the way out there was only a rod of dark metal dangling on the end of it.

‘The key,’ said Bayaz, holding it up to the candlelight. It barely shone at all. ‘Less lustre than the one in your play, perhaps, but the real thing, I assure you. Kanedias never worked with gold. He did not like pretty things. He liked things that worked.’

The Arch Lector’s lip curled. ‘Do you simply expect us to take your word for it?’

‘Of course not. It is your job to be suspicious of everyone, and I must say you do it exceptionally well. It does grow rather late however, so I will wait until tomorrow morning to open the House of the Maker.’ Someone dropped a spoon on the floor, and it clattered against the tiles. ‘There will need to be some witnesses present, of course, to make sure that I don’t try any sleight of hand. How about . . .’ Bayaz’ cool green eyes swept down the table. ‘Inquisitor Glokta, and . . . your new fencing champion, Captain Luthar?’

The cripple frowned as he was named. Luthar looked utterly bewildered. The Arch Lector sat, his scorn swapped for a stony blankness. He gazed from Bayaz’ smiling face to that gently swinging rod of dark metal, then back again. His eyes moved over to one of the doorways, and he give a tiny shake of his head. The dark figures faded back into the shadows. Logen unclenched his aching teeth, then quietly slipped the knife back on to the table.

Bayaz grinned. ‘Dear me, Master Sult, you really are a hard man to please.’

‘I believe *your Eminence* is the proper term of address,’ hissed the Arch Lector.

‘So it is, so it is. I do declare, you really won’t be happy until I’ve broken some furniture. I would hate to spill everyone’s soup though, so . . .’ With a sudden bang, the Arch Lector’s chair collapsed. His hand shot out and grabbed at the table cloth as he plunged to the floor in a clattering mess of loose firewood, and sprawled in the wreckage with a groan. The King started awake, his guests blinked, and gasped, and stared. Bayaz ignored them.

‘This really is an excellent soup,’ he said, slurping noisily from his spoon.

The House of the Maker

It was a stormy day, and the House of the Maker stood stark and grim, a huge dark shape against the ragged clouds. A cold wind whipped between the buildings and through the squares of the Agriont, making the tails of Glokta's black coat flap around him as he shuffled after Captain Luthar and the would-be Magus, the scarred Northman at his side. He knew they were watched. *Watched the whole way. Behind the windows, in the doorways, on the roofs.* The Practicals were everywhere, he could feel their eyes.

Glokta had half expected, half hoped, that Bayaz and his companions would have disappeared in the night, but they had not. The bald old man seemed as relaxed as if he had undertaken to open a fruit cellar, and Glokta did not like it. *When does the bluff end? When does he throw his hands up and admit it's all a game? When we reach the University? When we cross the bridge? When we stand before the very gate of the Maker's House and his key does not fit?* But somewhere in the back of his mind the thought lurked: *What if it does not end? What if the door opens? What if he truly is as he claims to be?*

Bayaz chattered to Luthar as they strolled across the empty courtyard towards the University. *Every bit as much at ease as a grandfather with his favourite grandson, and every bit as boring.*

'. . . of course, the city is so much larger than when I last visited. That district you call the Three Farms, all teeming bustle and activity. I remember when that whole borough *was* three farms! Indeed I do! And far beyond the city walls!'

'Erm . . .' said Luthar.

'And as for the Spicers' new guildhall, I never saw such ostentation . . .'

Glokta's mind raced as he limped after the two of them, trawling for hidden meanings in the sea of blather, grasping for order in the chaos. The questions tumbled over each other. *Why pick me as a witness? Why not the Arch Lector himself? Does this Bayaz suppose that I can be easily fooled? And why Luthar? Because he won the Contest? And how did he win? Is he a part of this deception?* But if Luthar was party to some sinister plan, he was

giving no sign. Glokta had never seen the slightest hint that he was anything other than the self-obsessed young fool he appeared to be.

And then we come to this puzzle. Glokta glanced sidelong at the big Northman. There were no signs of deadly intent on his scarred face, little sign that anything was going on in there at all. *Is he very stupid, or very clever? Is he to be ignored, or feared? Is he the servant, or the master?* There were no answers to any of it. Yet.

'Well, this place is a shadow of its former self,' said Bayaz as they halted outside the door to the University, raising an eyebrow at the grimy, tilting statues. He rapped briskly on the weathered wood and the door swayed on its hinges. To Glokta's surprise, it opened almost immediately.

'You're expected,' croaked the ancient porter. They stepped around him into the gloom. 'I will show you to—' began the old man as he wrestled the creaking door shut.

'No need,' called Bayaz over his shoulder, already striding briskly off down the dusty corridor, 'I know the way!' Glokta struggled to keep up, sweating despite the cold weather, leg burning all the way. The effort of maintaining the pace scarcely gave him time to consider how the bald bastard might be so familiar with the building. *But familiar he certainly is.* He swept down the corridors as though he had spent every day of his life there, clicking his tongue in disgust at the state of the place and prattling all the while.

'. . . I've never seen such dust, eh, Captain Luthar? I wouldn't be surprised if the damn place hadn't been cleaned since I was last here! I've no idea how a man can think under such conditions! No idea at all . . .' Centuries of dead and justly forgotten Adepti stared gloomily down from their canvases, as though upset by all the noise.

The corridors of the University rolled past, an ancient, dusty, forsaken-seeming place, with nothing in it but grimy old paintings and musty old books. Jezal had precious little use for books.

He had read a few about fencing and riding, a couple about famous military campaigns, once opened the covers on a great big history of the Union he found in his father's study, and got bored after three or four pages.

Bayaz droned on. 'Here we fought with the Maker's servants. I remember it well. They cried out to Kanedias to save them, but he would not come

down. These halls ran with blood, rang with screams, rolled with smoke that day.'

Jezal had no idea why the old fool would single him out to tell his tall stories to, and still less how to reply. 'That sounds . . . violent.'

Bayaz nodded. 'It was. I am not proud of it. But good men must sometimes do violent things.'

'Uh,' said the Northman suddenly. Jezal had not been aware that he was even listening.

'Besides, that was a different age. A violent age. Only in the Old Empire were people advanced beyond the primitive. Midderland, the heart of the Union, believe it or not, was a sty. A wasteland of warring, barbaric tribes. The luckiest among them were taken into the Maker's service. The rest were painted-face savages, without writing, without science, with barely anything to separate them from the beasts.'

Jezal glanced furtively up at Ninefingers. It was not at all difficult to picture a barbaric state with that big brute beside him, but it was ridiculous to suppose that his beautiful home had once been a wasteland, that he was descended from primitives. This bald old man was a blathering liar, or a madman, but some important people seemed to take him seriously.

And Jezal thought it best always to do what the important people said.

Logen followed the others into a broken-down courtyard, bounded on three sides by the crumbling buildings of the University, on the fourth by the inner face of the sheer wall of the Agriont. All was covered in old moss, thick ivy, dry brambles. A man sat on a rickety chair among the weeds, watching them come closer.

'I've been expecting you,' he said, pushing himself up with some difficulty. 'Damn knees, I'm not what I used to be.' An unremarkable man past middle-age, in a threadbare shirt with stains down the front.

Bayaz frowned at him. 'You are the Chief Warden?'

'I am.'

'And where are the rest of your company?'

'My wife is getting the breakfast ready, but not counting her, well, I am the whole company. It's eggs,' he said happily, patting his stomach.

'What?'

'For breakfast. I like eggs.'

‘Good for you,’ muttered Bayaz, looking slightly put out. ‘In King Casamir’s reign, the bravest fifty men of the King’s Own were appointed Wardens of the House, to guard this gate. There was considered to be no higher honour.’

‘That was a long time ago,’ said the one and only Warden, plucking at his dirty shirt. ‘There were nine of us when I was a lad, but they went on to other things, or died, and were never replaced. Don’t know who’ll take over when I’m gone. There haven’t been too many applicants.’

‘You surprise me.’ Bayaz cleared his throat. ‘Oh, Chief Warden! I, Bayaz, First of the Magi, seek your leave to pass up the stair to the fifth gate, beyond the fifth gate and onto the bridge, across the bridge and to the door of the Maker’s House.’

The Chief Warden squinted back. ‘You sure?’

Bayaz was growing impatient. ‘Yes, why?’

‘I remember the last fellow who tried it, way back when I was a lad. Some big man, I reckon, some thinker. He went up those steps with ten strong workmen, chisels and hammers and picks and what-have-you, telling us how he was going to open up the House, bring out its treasures and all. Five minutes and they were back, saying nothing, looking like they saw the dead walk.’

‘What happened?’ murmured Luthar.

‘Don’t know, but they had no treasures with them, I can tell you that.’

‘Without doubt a daunting story,’ said Bayaz, ‘but we’re going.’

‘Your business, I suppose.’ And the old man turned and slouched across the miserable courtyard. Up a narrow stair they went, the steps worn down in the middle, up to a tunnel through the high wall of the Agriont, on to a narrow gate in the darkness.

Logen felt an odd sense of worry as the bolts slid back. He shrugged his shoulders, trying to get rid of it, and the Warden grinned at him. ‘You can feel it already, eh?’

‘Feel what?’

‘The Maker’s breath, they call it.’ He gave the doors the gentlest shove. They swung open together, light spilling through into the darkness. ‘The Maker’s breath.’

Glokta tottered across the bridge, teeth clenched tight on gums, painfully aware of the volume of empty air beneath his feet. It was a single, delicate arch, leaping from high up on the wall of the Agriont to the gate of the Maker's House. He had often admired it from down in the city, on the other side of the lake, wondering how it had stayed up all these years. A spectacular, remarkable, beautiful thing. *It does not seem so beautiful now.* Not much wider than a man lying down, too narrow by far for comfort, and with a terrifying drop to the water below. Worse still, it had no parapet. Not so much as a wooden handrail. *And the breeze is rather fresh today.*

Luthar and Ninefingers seemed worried enough by it. *And they have the free and painless use of both their legs.* Only Bayaz made the long trip across without apparent worry, as confident as if his feet were on a country lane.

They walked always in the vast shadow of the House of the Maker, of course. The closer they came, the more massive it seemed, its lowest parapet far higher than the wall of the Agriont. A stark black mountain, rising sheer from the lake below, blotting out the sun. A thing from a different age, built on a different scale.

Glokta glanced back towards the gate behind him. Did he catch a glimpse of something between the battlements on the wall above? *A Practical watching?* They would see the old man fail to open the door. They would be waiting to take him on their way back through. *But until then, I am helpless.* It was not a comforting thought.

And Glokta was in need of comfort. As he tottered further across the bridge, a niggling fear swelled inside him. It was more than the height, more than the strange company, more than the great tower looming above. A base fear, without reason. The animal terror of a nightmare. With every shuffling step the feeling grew. He could see the door now, a square of dark metal set back into the smooth stones of the tower. A circle of letters was etched into the centre of it. For some reason they made Glokta want to vomit, but he dragged himself closer. Two circles: large letters and small letters, a spidery script he did not recognise. His guts churned. Many circles: letters and lines, too detailed to take in. They swam before his stinging, weeping eyes. Glokta could go no further. He stood there, leaning on his cane, fighting with every ounce of will against the need to fall to his knees, turn and crawl away.

Ninefingers was faring little better, breathing hard through his nose, a look of the most profound horror and disgust on his face. Luthar was in considerably worse shape: teeth gritted, white-faced and palsied. He dropped slowly down on one knee, gasping, as Glokta edged past him.

Bayaz did not seem afraid. He stepped right up to the door and ran his fingers over the larger symbols. 'Eleven wards, and eleven wards reversed.' He traced the circle of smaller characters. 'And eleven times eleven.' His finger followed the fine line outside them. *Can it be that line is made of tiny letters too?* 'Who can say how many hundreds here? Truly, a most potent enchantment!'

The sense of awe was only slightly diminished by the sound of Luthar puking noisily over the side of the bridge. 'What does it say?' croaked Glokta, swallowing some bile of his own.

The old man grinned at him. 'Can you not feel it, Inquisitor? It says turn away. It says get you gone. It says . . . none . . . shall . . . pass. But the message is not for us.' He reached into his collar and pulled out the rod of metal. The same dark metal as the door itself.

'We shouldn't be here,' growled Ninefingers from behind. 'This place is dead. We should go.' But Bayaz did not seem to hear.

'The magic has leaked out of the world,' Glokta heard him murmuring, 'and all the achievements of Juvens lie in ruins.' He weighed the key in his hand, brought it slowly upwards. 'But the Maker's works stand strong as ever. Time has not diminished them . . . nor ever will.' There did not even seem to be a hole, but the key slid slowly into the door. Slowly, slowly, into the very centre of the circles. Glokta held his breath.

Click.

And nothing happened. The door did not open. *That is all then. The game is over.* He felt a surge of relief as he turned back towards the Agriont, raising a hand to signal to the Practicals on the wall above. *I need not go further. I need not.* Then an answering echo came from deep within.

Click.

Glokta felt his face twitch in sympathy with the sound. *Did I imagine it?* He hoped so, with all his being.

Click.

Again. *No mistake.* And now, before his disbelieving eyes, the circles in the door began to turn. Glokta took a stunned step back, his cane scraping

on the stones of the bridge.

Click, click.

There had been no sign that the metal was not all one piece, no cracks, no grooves, no mechanism, and yet the circles span, each at a different speed.

Click, click, click . . .

Faster now, and faster. Glokta felt dizzy. The innermost ring, with the largest letters, was still crawling. The outermost, the thinnest one, was flying round too fast for his eyes to follow.

. . . click, click, click, click, click . . .

Shapes formed in the markings as the symbols passed each other: lines, squares, triangles, unimaginably intricate, dancing before his eyes then vanishing as the wheels spun on . . .

Click.

And the circles were still, arranged in a new pattern. Bayaz reached up and pulled the key from the door. There was a soft hissing, barely audible, as of water far away, and a long crack appeared in the door. The two halves moved slowly, smoothly away from each other. The space between them grew steadily larger.

Click.

They slid into the walls, flush with the sides of the square archway. The door stood open.

'Now that,' said Bayaz softly, 'is craftsmanship.'

No fetid wind spilled out, no stench of rot or decay, no sign of long years passed, only a waft of cool, dry air. *And yet the feeling is of opening a coffin.*

Silence, but for the wind fumbling across the dark stones, the breath sighing in Glokta's dry throat, the distant lapping of the water far below. The unearthly terror was gone. He felt only a deep worry as he stared into the open archway. *But no worse than when I wait outside the Arch Lector's office.* Bayaz turned round, smiling.

'Long years have passed since I sealed this place, and in all that slow time no man has crossed the threshold. You three are truly honoured.' Glokta did not feel honoured. He felt ill. 'There are dangers within. Touch nothing, and go only where I lead you. Follow close behind me, for the ways are not always the same.'

'Not the same?' asked Glokta. 'How can that be?'

The old man shrugged. ‘I am only the doorman,’ he said as he slipped the key and its chain back inside his shirt, ‘not the architect.’ And he stepped into the shadows.

Jezal did not feel well, not well at all. It was not simply the vile nausea that the letters on the doors had somehow created, it was more. A lurch of sudden shock and disgust, like picking up a cup and drinking, expecting water, and finding something else inside. Piss perhaps, in this case. That same wave of ugly surprise, but stretching out over minutes, over hours. Things that he had dismissed as foolishness, or old stories, were suddenly revealed as facts before his eyes. The world was a different place than it had been the day before, a weird and unsettling place, and he had infinitely preferred it the way it was.

He could not understand why he had to be here. Jezal knew precious little about history. Kanedias, Juvens, Bayaz even, they were names from dusty books, heard as a child and holding no interest even then. It was just bad luck, bad luck was all. He had won the Contest, and here he was, wandering about in some strange old tower. That was all it was. A strange old tower.

‘Welcome,’ said Bayaz, ‘to the House of the Maker.’

Jezal looked up from the floor and his jaw sagged open. The word ‘house’ did little to describe the vastness of the dim space in which he found himself. The Lords’ Round itself could have fitted comfortably inside it, the entire building, with room to spare. The walls were made from rough stones, unfinished, unmortared, piled haphazardly, but rising endlessly upward, upward. Above the centre of the room, far above, something was suspended. A huge, fascinating something.

It put Jezal in mind of a navigator’s instruments, rendered on an enormous scale. A system of gigantic metal rings, shining in the dim light, one about the other, with further, smaller rings running between them, inside them, around them. Hundreds of them perhaps, all told, scored with markings: writing maybe, or meaningless scratches. A large black ball hung in the centre.

Bayaz was already walking out into the vast circle of the floor, covered in intricate lines, set into the dark stone in bright metal, his footfalls echoing high above. Jezal crept after him. There was something frightening, something dizzying, about moving across a space so huge.

‘This is Midderland,’ said Bayaz.

‘What?’

The old man pointed down. The squiggly lines of metal began to take on meaning. Coastlines, mountains, rivers, the land and the sea. The shape of Midderland, clear in Jezal’s mind from a hundred maps, was laid out beneath his feet.

‘The whole Circle of the World.’ Bayaz gestured across the endless floor. ‘That way is Angland, and beyond, the North. Gurkhul is over there. There is Starikland, and the Old Empire, and over here the City States of Styria, beyond them Suljuk and distant Thond. Kanedias observed that the lands of the known World form a circle, with its centre here, at his House, and its outer edge passing through the island of Shabulyan, far to the west, beyond the Old Empire.’

‘The edge of the World,’ muttered the Northman, nodding slowly to himself.

‘Some arrogance,’ snorted Glokta, ‘to think of your home as the centre of everything.’

‘Huh.’ Bayaz looked about him at the vastness of the chamber. ‘The Maker was never short on arrogance. Nor were his brothers.’

Jezal stared up gormlessly. The room was even higher than it was wide, its ceiling, if there was one, lost in shadow. An iron rail ran round the rough stone walls, a gallery perhaps twenty strides above. Beyond it, higher still, there was another, and another, and another, vague in the half light. Over all hung the strange device.

He gave a sudden start. It was moving! It was all moving! Slowly, smoothly, silently, the rings shifted, turned, revolved one about the other. He could not imagine how it was driven. Somehow, the key turning in the lock must have set it off . . . or could it have been turning all these years?

He felt dizzy. The whole mechanism now seemed to be spinning, revolving, faster and faster, the galleries too, shifting in opposite directions. Staring straight upwards was not helping with his sense of disorientation, and he fixed his aching eyes on the floor, on the map of Midderland beneath his feet. He gasped. That was even worse! Now the whole floor seemed to be turning! The entire chamber was revolving around him! The archways leading out were all identical, a dozen of them or more. He could not guess now through which one they had entered. He felt a wave of horrible panic.

Only that distant black orb in the centre of the device was still. He fixed his watering eyes desperately on that, forced himself to breathe slow.

The feeling faded. The vast hall was still again, almost. The rings were still shifting, almost imperceptibly, inching ever onwards. He swallowed a mouthful of spit, hunched his shoulders, and hurried after the others with his head down.

'Not that way!' roared Bayaz suddenly, his voice exploding in the thick silence, ripping out and bouncing back, echoing a thousand times around the cavernous space.

'Not that way!'

'Not that way!'

Jezal jumped backwards. The archway, and the dim hall beyond, looked identical to the one down which the others had been walking, but he saw now that they were off to his right. He had got turned around somehow.

'Go only where I go, I said!' hissed the old man.

'Not that way.'

'Not that way.'

'I'm sorry,' stammered Jezal, his voice sounding pitifully small in the vast space, 'I thought . . . it all looks the same!'

Bayaz placed a reassuring hand on his shoulder and drew him smoothly away. 'I did not mean to scare you, my friend, but it would be a great shame if one so promising were taken from us quite so young.' Jezal swallowed and stared into the shadowy hallway, wondering what might have awaited him down there. His mind provided any number of unpleasant possibilities.

The echoes still whispered at him as he turned away. '. . . not that way, not that way, not that way . . .'

Logen hated this place. The stones were cold and dead, the air was still and dead, even the sounds they made as they moved fell muffled and lifeless. It wasn't cold and it wasn't hot, and yet his back trickled with sweat, his neck prickled with aimless fear. He'd jerk around every few steps, stung by the sudden feeling he was being watched, but there was never anyone behind him. Only the boy Luthar and the cripple Glokta, looking every bit as worried and confused as he was.

'We chased him through these very halls,' murmured Bayaz quietly. 'Eleven of us. All the Magi, together for the last time. All but Khalul.

Zacharus, and Cawneil, they fought with the Maker here, and each was bested. They were fortunate to escape with their lives. Anselmi and Brokentooth had worse luck. Kanedias was the death of them. Two good friends, two brothers, I lost that day.'

They edged round a narrow balcony, lit by a pale curtain of light. On one side sheer stones rose smooth, on the other they dropped away and were lost in the darkness. A black pit, full of shadows, with no far side, no top, no bottom. Despite the vastness of the space there were no echoes. No air moved. There was not the tiniest breeze. The air was stale and close as a tomb.

'There should be water down there, surely,' muttered Glokta, frowning over the rail. 'There should be something, shouldn't there?' He squinted up. 'Where's the ceiling?'

'This place stinks,' whined Luthar, one hand clasped over his nose.

Logen agreed with him, for once. It was a smell he knew well, and his lips curled back with hatred at it. 'Smells like fucking Flatheads.'

'Oh yes,' said Bayaz, 'the Shanka are the Maker's work also.'

'His work?'

'Indeed. He took clay, and metal, and left-over flesh and he made them.'

Logen stared. 'He made them?'

'To fight in his war. Against us. Against the Magi. Against his brother Juvens. He bred the first Shanka here and let them loose upon the world – to grow, and breed, and destroy. That was their purpose. For many years after Kanedias' death we hunted them, but we could not catch them all. We drove them into the darkest corners of the world, and there they have grown and bred again, and now come forth to grow, and breed, and destroy, as they were always meant to do.' Logen gawped at him.

'Shanka.' Luthar chuckled and shook his head.

Flatheads were no laughing matter. Logen turned suddenly, blocking the narrow balcony with his body, looming over Luthar in the half light. 'Something funny?'

'Well, I mean, everyone knows there's no such thing.'

'I've fought them with my own hands,' growled Logen, 'all my life. They killed my wife, my children, my friends. The North is swarming with fucking Flatheads.' He leaned down. 'So don't tell me there's no such thing.'

Luthar had turned pale. He looked to Glokta for support, but the Inquisitor had sagged against the wall, rubbing at his leg, thin lips tight shut, hollow face beaded with sweat. ‘I don’t care a shit either way!’ he snapped.

‘There’s plenty of Shanka in the world,’ hissed Logen, sticking his face right up close to Luthar’s. ‘Maybe one day you’ll meet some.’ He turned and stalked off after Bayaz, already disappearing through an archway at the far end of the balcony. He had no wish to be left behind in this place.

Yet another hall. An enormous one, lined with a silent forest of columns on either side, peopled with a multitude of shadows. Light cut down in shafts from far above, etching strange patterns into the stone floor, shapes of light and dark, lines of black and white. *Almost like writing. Is there a message here? For me?* Glokta was trembling. *If I looked, just for a moment longer, perhaps I could understand . . .*

Luthar wandered past, his shadow fell across the floor, the lines were broken, the feeling was gone. Glokta shook himself. *I am losing my reason in this cursed place. I must think clearly. Just the facts, Glokta, only the facts.*

‘Where does the light come from?’ he asked.

Bayaz waved his hand. ‘Above.’

‘There are windows?’

‘Perhaps.’

Glokta’s cane tapped into the light, tapped into the dark, his left boot dragged along behind. ‘Is there nothing but hallway? What’s the point of it all?’

‘Who can know the Maker’s mind?’ intoned Bayaz pompously, ‘or fathom his great design?’ He seemed almost to take pride in never giving straight answers.

The whole place was a colossal waste of effort as far as Glokta could see. ‘How many lived here?’

‘Long years ago, in happier times, many hundreds. All manner of people who served Kanedias, and helped him in his works. But the Maker was ever distrustful, and jealous of his secrets. Bit by bit he turned his followers out, into the Agriont, the University. Towards the end, only three lived here. Kanedias himself, his assistant Jaremias,’ Bayaz paused for a moment, ‘and his daughter Tolomei.’

‘The Maker’s daughter?’

‘What of it?’ snapped the old man.

‘Nothing, nothing at all.’ *And yet the veneer slipped then, if only for an instant. It is strange that he knows the ways of this place so well.* ‘When did you live here?’

Bayaz frowned deep. ‘There is such a thing as too many questions. ’

Glokta watched him walk away. *Sult was wrong. The Arch Lector, fallible after all. He underestimated this Bayaz, and it cost him. Who is this bald, irritable fool, who can make a sprawling idiot of the most powerful man in the Union?* Standing here, deep within the bowels of this unearthly place, the answer did not seem so strange.

The First of the Magi.

‘This is it.’

‘What?’ asked Logen. The hallway stretched out in either direction, curving gently, disappearing into the darkness, walls of huge stone blocks, unbroken on either side.

Bayaz did not answer. He was running his hands gently over the stones, looking for something. ‘Yes. This is it.’ Bayaz pulled the key out from his shirt. ‘You might want to prepare yourselves. ’

‘For what?’

The Magus slid the key into an unseen hole. One of the blocks that made up the walls suddenly vanished, flying up into the ceiling with a thunderous crash. Logen reeled, shaking his head. He saw Luthar bent forward, hands clamped over his ears. The whole corridor seemed to hum with crashing echoes, on and on.

‘Wait,’ said Bayaz, though Logen could barely hear him over the ringing in his head. ‘Touch nothing. Go nowhere.’ He stepped through the opening, leaving the key lodged in the wall.

Logen peered after him. A glimmer of light shone down a narrow passageway, a rushing sound washed through like the trickling of a stream. Logen felt a strange curiosity picking at him. He glanced back at the other two. Perhaps Bayaz had meant only for them to stay? He ducked through the doorway.

And squinted up at a bright, round chamber. Light flooded in from high above, piercing light, almost painful to look at after the gloom of all the

rest. The curving walls were perfect, clean white stone, running with trickling water, flowing down all around and collecting in a round pool below. The air was cool, damp on Logen's skin. A narrow bridge sprang out from the passage, steps leading upwards, ending at a tall white pillar, rising from the water. Bayaz was standing there, on top of it, staring down at something.

Logen crept up behind the Magus, breathing shallow. A block of white stone stood there. Water dripped onto its smooth, hard centre from above. A regular tap, tap, tap, always in the same spot. Two things lay in the thin layer of wet. The first was a square box, simply made from dark metal, big enough to hold a man's head, maybe. The other was altogether stranger.

A weapon perhaps, like an axe. A long shaft, made from tiny metal tubes, all twisted about each other like the stems of old vines. At one end there was a scored grip, at the other there was a flat piece of metal, pierced with small holes, a long, thin hook curving out from it. The light played over its many dark surfaces, glittering with beads of moisture. Strange, beautiful, fascinating. On the grip one letter glinted, silver in the dark metal. Logen recognised it from his sword. The mark of Kanedias. The work of the Master Maker.

'What is this?' he asked, reaching out for it.

'Don't touch it!' screamed Bayaz, slapping Logen's hand away. 'Did I not tell you to wait?'

Logen took an uncertain step back. He had never seen the Magus look so worried, but he couldn't keep his eyes off the strange thing on the slab. 'Is it a weapon?'

Bayaz breathed a long, slow breath. 'A most terrible one, my friend. A weapon against which no steel, no stone, no magic can protect you. Do not even tread near it, I warn you. There are dangers. The Divider, Kanedias called it, and with it he killed his brother Juvens, my master. He once told me it has two edges. One here, one on the Other Side.'

'What the hell does that mean?' muttered Logen. He couldn't even see one edge you could cut with.

Bayaz shrugged. 'If I knew that I suppose that I'd be the Master Maker, instead of merely the First of the Magi.' He reached forward and lifted the box, wincing as though it was a great weight. 'Could you help me with this?'

Logen hooked his hands under it, and gasped. It could hardly have weighed more if it was a block of solid iron. ‘Heavy,’ he grunted.

‘Kanedias forged it to be strong. As strong as all his great skill could make it. Not to keep its contents safe from the World.’ He leaned close and spoke softly. ‘To keep the World safe from its contents.’

Logen frowned down. ‘What’s in it?’

‘Nothing,’ muttered Bayaz. ‘Yet.’

Jezal was trying to think of three men in the world he hated more. Brint? He was simply a swollen-headed idiot. Gorst? He had merely done his meagre best to beat Jezal in a fencing match. Varuz? He was just a pompous old ass.

No. These three were at the top of his list. The arrogant old man with his idiotic prattle and his self-important air of mystery. The hulking savage with his ugly scars and his menacing frown. The patronising cripple with his smug little comments and his pretensions of knowing all about life. The three of them, combined with the stagnant air and perpetual gloom of this horrible place, were almost enough to make Jezal puke again. The only thing he could imagine worse than his present company was no company at all. He looked into the shadows all around, and shuddered at the thought.

Still, his spirits rose as they turned a corner. There was a small square of daylight up ahead. He hurried towards it, overtaking Glokta as he shambled along on his cane, mouth watering with anticipation at the thought of being back out under the sky.

Jezal closed his eyes with pleasure as he stepped into the open air. The cold wind stroked his face and he gasped in great lungfulls of it. The relief was terrific, as though he had been trapped down there in the darkness for weeks, as though fingers clamped around his throat had just now been released. He walked forward across a wide, open space, paved with stark, flat stones. Ninefingers and Bayaz stood side by side up ahead, behind a parapet, waist high, and beyond them . . .

The Agriont came into view below. A patchwork of white walls, grey roofs, glinting windows, green gardens. They were nowhere near the summit of the Maker’s House, only on one of the lowest roofs, above the gate, but still terrifyingly high. Jezal recognised the crumbling University, the shining dome of the Lords Round, the squat mass of the House of Questions. He could see the Square of Marshals, a bowl of wooden seating

in amongst the buildings, perhaps even the tiny yellow flash of the fencing circle in its centre. Beyond the citadel, surrounded by its white wall and twinkling moat, the city was a sprawling grey mass under the dirty grey sky, stretching all the way to the sea.

Jezal laughed with disbelief and delight. The Tower of Chains was a step ladder compared to this. He was so high above the world that all seemed somehow still, frozen in time. He felt like a king. No man had seen this, not for hundreds of years. He was huge, grand, far more important than the tiny people that must live and work in the little buildings down there. He turned to look at Glokta, but the cripple was not smiling. He was even paler than ever, frowning at the toy city, his left eye twitching with worry.

'Scared of heights?' laughed Jezal.

Glokta turned his ashen face toward him. 'There were no steps. We climbed no steps to get here!' Jezal's grin began to fade. 'No steps, do you understand? How could it be? How? Tell me that!'

Jezal swallowed as he thought over the way they had come. The cripple was right. No steps, no ramps, they had gone neither up nor down. Yet here they were, far above the tallest tower of the Agriont. He felt sick, again. The view now seemed dizzying, disgusting, obscene. He backed unsteadily away from the parapet. He wanted to go home.

'I followed him through the darkness, alone, and here I faced him. Kanedias. The Master Maker. Here we fought. Fire, and steel, and flesh. Here we stood. He threw Tolomei from the roof before my eyes. I saw it happen, but I could not stop him. His own daughter. Can you imagine? No one could have deserved that less than she. There never was a more innocent spirit.' Logen frowned. He hardly knew what to say to this.

'Here we struggled,' muttered Bayaz, his meaty fists clenched tight on the bare parapet. 'I tore at him, with fire and steel, and flesh, and he at me. I cast him down. He fell burning, and broke upon the bridge below. And so the last of the sons of Euz passed from the world, so many of their secrets lost forever. They destroyed each other, all four of them. What a waste.'

Bayaz turned to look at Logen. 'But that was a long time ago, eh, my friend? Long ago.' He puffed out his cheeks and hunched his shoulders. 'Let us leave this place. It feels like a tomb. It is a tomb. Let us seal it up once more, and the memories with it. That is all in the past.'

‘Huh,’ said Logen. ‘My father used to say the seeds of the past bear fruit in the present.’

‘So they do.’ Bayaz reached out slowly, and his fingers brushed against the cold, dark metal of the box in Logen’s hands. ‘So they do. Your father was a wise man.’

Glokta’s leg was burning, his twisted spine was a river of fire from his arse to his skull. His mouth was dry as sawdust, his face sweaty and twitching, the breath hissing in his nose, but he pressed on through the darkness, away from the vast hall with its black orb and its strange contraption, on towards the open door. *And into the light.*

He stood there with his head tipped back, on the narrow bridge before the narrow gateway, his hand trembling on the handle of his cane, blinking and rubbing his eyes, gasping in the free air and feeling the cool breeze on his face. *Who would have thought that wind could feel so fine? Maybe it’s just as well there weren’t any steps. I might never have made it out.*

Luthar was already halfway back across the bridge, hurrying as though he had a devil a stride behind. Ninefingers was not far away, breathing hard and muttering something in Northern over and over. ‘Still alive,’ Glokta thought it might be. His big hands were clenched tight around that square metal box, tendons standing out as though it weighed as much as an anvil. *There was more to this trip than just proving a point. What is it that they brought out from there? What weighs so heavily?* He glanced back into the darkness, and shivered. He was not sure he even wanted to know.

Bayaz strolled out of the tunnel and into the open air, looking smug as ever. ‘So, Inquisitor,’ he said breezily. ‘How did you find your trip into the House of the Maker?’

A twisted, strange and horrible nightmare. I might even have preferred to return to the Emperor’s prisons for a few hours. ‘Something to do of a morning,’ he snapped.

‘I’m so glad you found it diverting,’ chuckled Bayaz, as he pulled the rod of dark metal out from his shirt. ‘And tell me, do you still believe that I’m a liar? Or have your suspicions finally been laid to rest?’

Glokta frowned at the key. He frowned at the old man. He frowned into the crushing darkness of the Maker’s House. *My suspicions grow with every*

passing moment. They are never laid to rest. They only change shape.
'Honestly? I don't know what to believe.'

'Good. Knowing your own ignorance is the first step to enlightenment. Between you and me, though, I'd think of something else to tell the Arch Lector.' Glokta felt his eyelid flickering. 'You'd better start across, eh, Inquisitor? While I lock up?'

The plunge to the cold water below no longer seemed to hold much fear. *If I were to fall, at least I would die in the light.* Glokta looked back only once, as he heard the doors of the Maker's House shut with a soft click, the circles slide back into place. *All as it was before we arrived.* He turned his prickling back, sucked his gums against the familiar waves of nausea, and cursed and struggled his limping way across the bridge.

Luthar was hammering desperately on the old gates at the far end. 'Let us in!' he was nearly sobbing as Glokta hobbled up, an edge of cracked panic to his voice. 'Let us in!' The door finally wobbled open to reveal a shocked-looking Warden. *Such a shame. I was sure that Captain Luthar was about to burst into tears. The proud winner of the Contest, the Union's bravest young son, the very flower of manhood, blubbing on his knees. That sight could almost have made the trip worthwhile.* Luthar darted through the open gate and Ninefingers followed grimly after, cradling the metal box in his arms. The Warden squinted at Glokta as he limped up to the gate. 'Back so soon?'

You old dolt. 'What the hell are you talking about, so soon?'

'I'm only halfway through my eggs. You've been gone less than half an hour.'

Glokta barked a joyless laugh. 'Half a day, perhaps.' But he frowned as he peered past into the courtyard. The shadows were almost exactly where they had been when they left. *Early morning still, but how?*

'The Maker once told me that time is all in the mind.' Glokta winced as he turned his head. Bayaz had come up behind him, and was tapping the side of his bald skull with a thick finger. 'It could be worse, believe me. It's when you come out before you went in that you really start to worry.' He smiled, eyes glinting in the light through the doorway. *Playing the fool? Or trying to make a fool of me? Either way, these games grow tiresome.*

'Enough riddles,' sneered Glokta. 'Why not just tell me what you're after?'

The First of the Magi, if such he was, grinned still wider. ‘I like you, Inquisitor, I really do. I wouldn’t be surprised if you were the only honest man left in this whole damn country. We should have a talk at some point, you and I. A talk about what I want, and about what you want.’ His smile vanished. ‘But not today.’

And he stepped through the open door, leaving Glokta behind in the shadows.

Nobody's Dog

'Why me?' West murmured to himself through gritted teeth, staring across the bridge towards the South Gate. That nonsense at the docks had taken him longer than expected, much longer, but then didn't everything these days? It sometimes felt as if he was the only man in the Union seriously preparing for a war, and had to organise the entire business on his own, right down to counting the nails that would hold the horses' shoes on. He was already late for his daily meeting with Marshal Burr, and knew there would be a hundred impossible things for him to get done today. There always were. To become involved in some pointless hold-up here at the very gate of the Agriont was all he needed.

'Why the hell must it be me?' His head was starting to hurt again. That all too familiar pulsing behind the eyes. Each day it seemed to come on earlier, and end up worse.

Because of the heat over the last few days, the guards had been permitted to come to duty without full armour. West reckoned that at least two of them were now regretting it. One was folded up on the ground near the gate, hands clasped between his legs, whimpering noisily. His sergeant stood stooped over next to him, blood running from his nose and pattering dark red drops on the stones of the bridge. The two other soldiers in the detail had their spears lowered, blades pointing towards a scrawny dark-skinned youth. Another southerner stood nearby, an old man with long grey hair, leaning against the handrail and watching the scene with an expression of profound resignation.

The youth glanced quickly over his shoulder and West felt a sting of surprise. A woman: black hair hacked off short and sticking off her head in a mess of greasy spikes. One sleeve was torn off round her shoulder and a long, sinewy brown arm stuck out, ending in a fist bunched tight around the grip of a curved knife. The blade shone, mirror bright and evilly sharp, the one and only thing about her that looked clean. There was a thin, grey scar all the way down the right side of her face, through her black eyebrow and across her scowling lips. It was her eyes, though, which truly caught West off guard: slightly slanted, narrowed with the deepest hostility and

suspicion, and yellow. He had seen all kinds of Kantics in his time, while he was fighting in Gurkhul, in the war, but he never saw eyes like that before. Deep, rich, golden yellow, like . . .

Piss. That was the smell, as he came closer. Piss, and dirt, and a lot of old, sour sweat. He remembered that from the war alright, the stink of men who had not washed in a very long time. West fought the compulsion to wrinkle up his nose and breathe through his mouth as he approached, and the urge to circle out wide and keep his distance from that glittering blade. You have to show no fear if you're to calm a dangerous situation, however much you might be feeling. In his experience, if you could seem to be in control, you were more than halfway to being there.

'What the hell is going on here?' he growled at the bloody-faced sergeant. He had no need at all to feign annoyance, he was getting later and angrier by the second.

'These stinking beggars wanted to come into the Agriont, sir! I tried to turn them away, of course, but they have letters!'

'Letters?'

The strange old man tapped West on the shoulder, handed over a folded sheet of paper, slightly grubby round the edges. He read it, his frown growing steadily deeper. 'This is a letter of transit signed by Lord Hoff himself. They must be admitted.'

'But not armed, sir! I said they couldn't go in armed!' The sergeant held up an odd looking bow of dark wood in one hand, and a curved sword of the Gurkish design in the other. 'It was enough of a struggle getting her to give these up, but when I tried to search her . . . this Gurkish bitch . . .' The woman hissed and took a quick step forward, and the sergeant and his two guards shuffled nervously back in a tight group.

'Peace, Ferro,' sighed the old man in the Kantic tongue. 'For God's sake, peace.' The woman spat on the stones of the bridge and hissed some curse that West could not understand, weaving the blade back and forth in a way that suggested she knew how to use it, and was more than willing.

'Why me?' West mumbled under his breath. It was plain he was going nowhere until this difficulty was resolved. As if he didn't have enough to worry about. He took a deep breath and did his best to put himself in the position of the stinking woman: a stranger, surrounded by strange-looking people speaking words she didn't understand, brandishing spears and trying

to search her. Probably she was even now thinking about how horrible West smelled. Disorientated and afraid, most likely, rather than dangerous. She did look very dangerous though, and not in the least afraid.

The old man certainly seemed the more reasonable of the two, so West turned to him first. ‘Are you two from Gurkhul?’ he asked him in broken Kantic.

The old man turned his tired eyes on West. ‘No. There is more to the South than the Gurkish.’

‘Kadir then? Taurish?’

‘You know the South?’

‘A little. I fought there, in the war.’

The old man jerked his head at the woman, watching them suspiciously with her slanted yellow eyes. ‘She is from a place called Muntaz.’

‘I never heard of it.’

‘Why would you have?’ The old man shrugged his bony shoulders. ‘A small country, by the sea, far to the east of Shaffa, beyond the mountains. The Gurkish conquered it years ago, and its people were scattered or made slaves. Apparently she has been in a foul mood ever since.’ The woman scowled over at them, keeping one eye on the soldiers.

‘And you?’

‘Oh, I come from much further south, beyond Kanta, beyond the desert, even beyond the Circle of the World. The land of my birth will not be on your maps, friend. Yulwei is my name.’ He held out a long, black hand.

‘Collem West.’ The woman watched them warily as they shook hands.

‘This one is called West, Ferro! He fought against the Gurkish! Will that make you trust him?’ Yulwei didn’t sound very hopeful, and indeed the woman’s shoulders were still as hunched and bristling as ever, her grip on the knife no less tight. One of the soldiers chose that unfortunate moment to take a step forward, jabbing at the air with his spear, and the woman snarled and spat again, shouting more unintelligible curses.

‘That’s enough!’ West heard himself roaring at the guard. ‘Put your fucking spears up!’ They blinked at him, shocked, and he fought to bring his voice back under control. ‘I don’t think this is a full-scale invasion, do you? Put them up!’

Reluctantly the spearpoints drifted away from the woman. West stepped firmly towards her, keeping his eyes fixed on hers with all the authority he

could muster. Show no fear, he thought to himself, but his heart was thumping. He held out his open palm, almost close enough to touch her.

'The knife,' said West sharply in his bad Kantic. 'Please. You will not be harmed, you have my word.'

The woman stared at him with those slanted, beady yellow eyes, then at the guards with the spears, then back to him. She took plenty of time over it. West stood there, mouth dry, head still thumping, getting later and later, sweating under his uniform in the hot sun, trying to ignore the woman's smell. Time passed.

'God's teeth, Ferro!' snapped the old man suddenly. 'I am old! Take pity on me! I may only have a few years left! Give the man the knife, before I die!'

'Ssssss,' she hissed, curling her lip. For a dizzy, stretched-out moment the knife went up, then the hilt slapped down into West's palm. He allowed himself a dry swallow of relief. Right up until the last moment he had been almost sure she would give him the sharp end.

'Thank you,' he said, a deal more calmly than he felt. He handed the knife to the sergeant. 'Stow the weapons away and escort our guests into the Agriont, and if any harm comes to anyone, especially her, I'll be holding you responsible, understand?' He glowered at the sergeant for a moment then stepped through the gate into the tunnel before anything else could go wrong, leaving the old man and the stinking woman behind him. His head was thumping harder even than before. Damn it he was late.

'Why the hell me?' he grumbled to himself.

'I am afraid the armouries are closed for the day,' sneered Major Vallimir, staring down his nose at West as though at a beggar whining for small change. 'Our quotas are fulfilled, ahead of schedule, and we will not be lighting the forges again this week.

Perhaps if you had arrived on time . . .' The pounding in West's head was growing worse than ever. He forced himself to breathe slowly, and keep his voice calm and even. There was nothing to be gained by losing his temper. There was never anything to be gained by that.

'I understand, Major,' said West patiently, 'but there is a war on. Many of the levies we have received are scarcely armed, and Lord Marshal Burr has asked that the forges be lit, in order to provide equipment for them.'

This was not entirely true, but since joining the Marshal's staff West had more or less given up on telling the whole truth to anyone. That was no way to get anything done. He now employed a mixture of wheedling, bluster, and outright lies, humble entreaties and veiled threats, and had become quite expert at judging which tactic would be most effective on what man.

Unfortunately, he had yet to strike the right chord with Major Vallimir, the Master of the King's Armouries. Somehow, their being equal in rank made matters all the more difficult: he could not quite get away with bullying the man, but could not quite bring himself to beg.

Furthermore, in terms of social standing they were anything but equals. Vallimir was old nobility, from a powerful family, and arrogant beyond belief. He made Jezal dan Luthar seem a humble, selfless type, and his total lack of experience in the field only made matters worse: he behaved doubly like an ass in order to compensate. Instructions from West, though they might come from Marshal Burr himself, were as welcome as they would have been from a reeking swineherd.

Today was no exception. 'This month's quotas are fulfilled, *Major West*,' Vallimir managed to put a sneering emphasis into the name, 'and so the forges are closed. That is all.'

'And this is what you would have me tell the Lord Marshal?'

'The arming of levies is the responsibility of those lords that provide them,' he recited primly. '*I* cannot be blamed if *they* fall short on *their* obligations. It is simply not our problem, *Major West*, and you may tell *that* to the Lord Marshal.'

This was always the way of it. Back and forth: from Burr's offices to the various commissary departments, to the commanders of companies, of battalions, of regiments, to the stores scattered around the Agriont and the city, to the armouries, the barracks, the stables, to the docks where the soldiers and their equipment would begin to embark in just a few short days, to other departments and back to where he began, with miles walked and nothing done. Each night he would drop into bed like a stone, only to start up a few hours later with it all to do again.

As commander of a battalion his trade had been to fight the enemy with steel. As a staff officer, it seemed, his role was to fight his own side with paper, more secretary than soldier. He felt like a man trying to push a huge stone up a hill. Straining and straining, getting nowhere, but unable to stop

pushing in case the rock should fall and crush him. Meanwhile, arrogant bastards who were in just the same danger lazed on the slopes beside him saying, ‘Well, it’s not my rock.’

He understood now why, during the war in Gurkhul, there had sometimes not been enough food for the men to eat, or clothes for them to wear, or wagons to draw the supplies with, or horses to draw the wagons, or all manner of other things that were deeply necessary and easily anticipated.

West would be damned before that happened because of some oversight of his. And he would certainly be damned if he would see men die for want of a weapon to fight with. He tried yet again to calm himself, but each time his head hurt more, and his voice was cracking with the effort. ‘And what if we find ourselves mired in Angland with a crowd of half-clothed, unarmed peasants to provide for, what then, Major Vallimir? Whose problem will it be? Not yours, I dare say! You’ll still be here, with your cold forges for company!’

West knew as soon as he said it that he had gone too far: the man positively bristled. ‘How dare you, sir! Are you questioning my personal honour? My family goes back nine generations in the King’s Own!’

West rubbed his eyes, not knowing whether he wanted to laugh or cry. ‘I have no doubts as to your courage, I assure you, that was not my meaning at all.’ He tried to put himself in Vallimir’s position. He did not really know the pressures the man was under: probably he would rather be in command of soldiers than smiths, probably . . . it was no use. The man was a shit, and West hated him. ‘This is not a question of your honour, Major, or that of your family. This is a question of our being fit for war!’

Vallimir’s eyes had turned deadly cold. ‘Just who do you think you’re talking to, you dirty commoner? All the influence you have you owe to Burr, and who is he but an oaf from the provinces, risen to his rank by fortune alone?’ West blinked. He guessed what they said about him behind his back of course, but it was another thing to hear it to his face. ‘And when Burr is gone, what will become of you? Eh? Where will you be without him to hide behind? You’ve no blood, no family!’ Vallimir’s lips twisted in a cold sneer. ‘Apart from that *sister* of yours of course, and from what I hear —’

West found himself moving forward, fast. ‘What?’ he snarled. ‘What was that?’ His expression must have been dire indeed: he saw the colour

draining from Vallimir's face.

'I . . . I—'

'You think I need Burr to fight my battles, you fucking gutless worm?' Before he knew it he had moved again, and Vallimir stumbled back towards the wall, flinching sideways and raising one arm as if to ward off an expected blow. It was the most West could do to stop his hands from grabbing hold of the little bastard and shaking him until his head came off. His own skull was throbbing, pounding. He felt as though the pressure would pop his eyes right out of his head. He dragged in long, slow breaths through his nose, clenched his fists until they hurt. The anger slowly subsided, back below the point where it threatened to take sudden control of his body. It only pulsed now, squeezing at his chest.

'If you have something to say on the subject of my sister,' he whispered softly, 'then you can say it. Say it now.' He let his left hand drop slowly to sit on the hilt of his sword. 'And we can settle this outside the city walls.'

Major Vallimir shrank back still further. 'I heard nothing,' he whispered, 'nothing at all.'

'Nothing at all.' West looked down into his white face for a moment longer, then stepped away. 'Now if you would be so good as to reopen the forges for me? We have a great deal of work to get through.'

Vallimir blinked for a moment. 'Of course. I will have them lit at once.'

West turned on his heel and stalked off, knowing the man was glowering daggers at his back, knowing that he had made yet another bad situation worse. One more high-born enemy among the many. The really galling thing was that the man was right. Without Burr, he was as good as finished. He had no family apart from that *sister* of his. Damn it, his head hurt.

'Why me?' he hissed to himself. 'Why?'

There was still a lot to do today, enough for a whole day's work on its own, but West could take no more. His head hurt so badly that he could hardly see. He had to lie down in the dark, with a wet cloth over his face, if only for an hour, if only for a minute. He fumbled in his pocket for his key, his other hand clamped over his aching eyes, his teeth locked together. Then he heard a sound on the other side of the door. A faint clink of glass. Ardee.

'No,' he hissed to himself. Not now! Why the hell had he ever given her a key? Cursing softly, he raised his fist to knock. Knocking on his own door,

that was where he was now. His fist never made it to the wood. A most unpleasant image began to form in the back of his mind. Ardee and Luthar, naked and sweaty, writhing around on his carpet. He turned his key swiftly in the lock and shoved the door open.

She was standing by the window, alone and, he was relieved to see, fully dressed. He was less pleased to see her filling a glass right to the brim from the decanter though. She raised an eyebrow at him as he burst through the door.

'Oh, it's you.'

'Who the hell else would it be?' snapped West. 'These are my rooms, aren't they?'

'Somebody's not in the best of moods this morning.' A bit of wine slopped over the rim of her glass and onto the table. She wiped it up with her hand and sucked her fingers, then took a long swig from the glass for good measure. Her every movement niggled at him.

West grimaced and shoved the door shut. 'Do you have to drink so much?'

'I understand that a young lady should have a beneficial pastime.' Her words were careless, as usual, but even through his headache West could tell there was something strange going on. She kept glancing towards the desk, then she was moving towards it. He got there first, snatched up a piece of paper from the top, one line written on it.

'What's this?'

'Nothing! Give it me!'

He held her away with one arm and read it:

The usual place, tomorrow night—
A.

West's skin prickled with horror. 'Nothing? Nothing?' He shook the letter under his sister's nose. Ardee turned away from him, flicking her head as you might at a fly, saying nothing, but slurping noisily from her glass. West ground his teeth.

'It's Luthar, isn't it?'

'I didn't say so.'

'You didn't have to.' The paper crumpled up into a tiny ball in his white-knuckled hand. He half turned towards the door, every muscle tensed and

trembling. It was the most he could do to stop himself dashing out and throttling the little bastard right now, but he was just able to make himself think for a moment.

Jezal had let him down, and badly, that ungrateful shit. But it was hardly that shocking – the man was an ass. You keep your wine in a paper bag you shouldn't be too upset when it leaks. Besides, Jezal wasn't the one writing the letters. What good would stepping on his neck do? There would always be more empty-headed young men in the world.

'Just where are you going with this, Ardee?'

She sat down on the settle and glared at him frostily over the rim of her glass. 'With what, brother?'

'You know with what!'

'Aren't we family? Can't we be candid with each other? If you have something to say you can out and say it! Where do you think I'm going?'

'I think you're going straight to shit, since you ask!' He squeezed his voice back down with the greatest of difficulty. 'This business with Luthar has gone way too far. Letters? Letters? I warned him, but it seems he wasn't the problem! What are you thinking? Are you thinking at all? It has to stop, before people start to talk!' He felt a suffocating tightness in his chest, took a deep breath, but his voice burst out anyway. 'They're damn well talking already! It stops now! Do you hear me?'

'I hear you,' she said carelessly, 'but who cares what they think?'

'I care!' He nearly screamed it. 'Do you know how hard I have to work? Do you think I'm a fool? You know what you're about, Ardee!' Her face was turning sullen, but he forged on. 'It's not as though this is the first time! Must I remind you, your luck with men has not exactly been the best!'

'Not with the men in my family, at least!' She was sitting bolt upright now, face tight and pale with anger. 'And what would you know about my luck? We've hardly talked in ten years!'

'We're talking now!' shouted West, flinging the crumpled bit of paper across the room. 'Have you thought how this might turn out? What if you were to get him? Have you considered that? Would his family be charmed by the blushing bride, do you think? At best they'd never speak to you. At worst they'd cut you both off!' He pointed a shaking finger at the door. 'Haven't you noticed he's a vain, arrogant swine! They all are! How would he manage, do you think, without his allowance? Without his friends in high

places? He wouldn't know where to begin! How could you be happy with each other?' His head was ready to split in half, but he ranted on. 'And what happens if, as is far more likely, you can't get him? What then? You'd be finished, have you thought on that? You've come close enough before! And you're supposed to be the clever one! You're making a laughing-stock of yourself!' He almost choked on his rage. 'Of both of us!'

Ardee gave a gasp. 'Now we see it!' she nearly screamed at him. 'No one cares a shit for me, but if *your* reputation is in danger—'

'You fucking stupid bitch!' The decanter flew spinning across the room. It crashed against the wall not far from Ardee's head, sending fragments of glass flying and wine running down the plaster. It made him more furious. 'Why don't you fucking listen? '

He was across the room in an instant. Ardee looked surprised, just for a moment, then there was a sharp click – his fist catching her in the face as she got up. She didn't fall far. His hands caught her before she hit the ground, yanked her up then flung her back against the wall.

'You'll be the end of us!' Her head smacked against the plaster – once, twice, three times. One hand grabbed hold of her neck.

Teeth bared. Body crushed her against the wall. A little snort in her throat as the fingers began to squeeze.

'You selfish, useless . . . fucking . . . whore!'

Hair was tangled across her face. He could only see a narrow slice of skin, the corner of a mouth, one dark eye.

The eye stared back at him. Painless. Fearless. Empty, flat, like a corpse.

Squeeze. Snort. Squeeze.

Squeeze . . .

West came to his senses with a sickening jolt. The fingers snapped open, he jerked the hand away. His sister stayed upright against the wall. He could hear her breathing. Short gasps. Or was that him? His head was splitting. The eye was still staring at him.

He must have imagined it. Must have. Any second now he would wake up, the nightmare would be over. A dream. Then she pushed the hair out of her face.

Her skin was candle wax, pasty white. The trickle of blood from her nose looked almost black against it. The pink marks stood out vivid on her neck.

The marks the fingers made. His fingers. Real, then.

West's stomach churned. His mouth opened but no sound came out. He looked at the blood on her lip, and he wanted to be sick. 'Ardee . . .' He was so disgusted he half vomited as he said the word. He could taste the bile at the back of his mouth, but his voice wouldn't stop gurgling away. 'I'm sorry . . . I'm so sorry . . . Are you alright?'

'I've had worse.' She reached up slowly and touched her lip with a finger-tip. The blood smeared out across her mouth.

'Ardee . . .' One hand reached out to her, then he jerked it back, afraid of what it might do. 'I'm sorry ...'

'He was always sorry. Don't you remember? He'd hold us and cry afterwards. Always sorry. But it never stopped him the next time. Have you forgotten?'

West gagged, choked back vomit again. If she'd wept, and ranted, and beat him with her fists, it would have been easier to bear. Anything but this. He tried never to think about it, but he hadn't forgotten. 'No,' he whispered, 'I remember.'

'Did you think he stopped when you left? He got worse. Only then I'd hide on my own. I used to dream that you'd come back, come back and save me. But when you did come back it wasn't for long, and things weren't the same between us, and you did nothing.'

'Ardee . . . I didn't know—'

'You knew, but you got away. It was easier to do nothing. To pretend. I understand, and do you know, I don't even blame you. It was some kind of comfort, back then, to know you got away. The day he died was the happiest of my life.'

'He was our father—'

'Oh yes. My bad luck. Bad luck with men. I cried at the grave like a dutiful daughter. Cried and cried until the mourners feared for my reason. Then I lay in bed awake, until everyone was sleeping. I crept out of the house, I went back to the grave, I stood a while looking down . . . then I fucking pissed on it! I pulled up my shift, and I squatted down, and I pissed on him! And all the while I was thinking – I'll be nobody's dog any more!'

She wiped the blood from her nose on the back of her hand. 'You should have seen how happy I was when you sent for me! I read the letter over and over. The pathetic little dreams all came alive again. Hope, eh? What a

fucking curse! Off to live with my brother. My protector. He'll look out for me, he'll help me. Now maybe *I* can have a life! But I find you different than I remembered. All grown up. First you ignore me, then you lecture me, then you hit me, and now you're sorry. Truly your father's son!'

He groaned. It was as if she was sticking a needle in him, right in his skull. Less than he deserved. She was right. He had failed her. Long before today. While he had been playing with swords and kissing the arses of people who despised him, she had been suffering. A little effort was all it would have taken, but he could never face it. Every minute he had spent with her he felt the guilt, like a rock in his gut, weighing him down, unbearable.

She stepped away from the wall. 'Perhaps I'll go and pay a call on Jezal. He may be the shallowest idiot in the whole city, but I don't think he'd ever raise a hand to me, do you?' She pushed him out of the way and made for the door.

'Ardee!' he caught hold of her arm. 'Please . . . Ardee . . . I'm sorry ...'

She stuck her tongue out, curled it into a tube, and blew bloody spit through it. It splattered softly down the front of his uniform. 'That's for your sorry, bastard.'

The door banged shut in his face.

Each Man Worships Himself

Ferro stared at the big pink through narrowed eyes, and he stared back. It had been going on for a good while now, not all the time, but most of it. Staring. They were all ugly, these soft white things, but this one was something special.

Hideous.

She knew that she was scarred, and weathered by sun and wind, worn down by years in the wilderness, but the pale skin on this one's face looked like a shield hard used in battle – chopped, gouged, torn, dented. It was surprising to see the eyes still alive in a face so battered, but they were, and they were watching her.

She had decided he was dangerous.

Not just big, but strong. Brutal strong. Twice her weight maybe, and his thick neck was all sinew. She could feel the strength coming off him. She wouldn't have been surprised if he could lift her with one hand, but that didn't worry her too much. He'd have to get a hold on her first. Big and strong can make a man slow.

Slow and dangerous don't mix.

Scars didn't worry her either. They just meant he'd been in a lot of fights, they didn't say whether he'd won. It was other things. The way he sat – still but not quite relaxed. Ready. Patient. The way his eyes moved – cunning, careful, from her to the rest of the room, then back to her. Dark eyes, watching, thoughtful. Weighing her up. Thick veins on the backs of his hands, but long fingers, clever fingers, lines of dirt under the nails. One finger missing. A white stump. She didn't like any of it. Smelled like danger.

She wouldn't want to fight this one unarmed.

But she'd given her knife over to that pink on the bridge. She'd been on the very point of stabbing him, but at the last moment she'd changed her mind. Something in his eyes had reminded her of Aruf, before the Gurkish stuck his head on a spear. Sad and level, as if he understood her. As if she was a person, and not a thing. At the last moment, despite herself, she'd given the blade away. Allowed herself to be led in here.

Stupid!

She regretted it now, bitterly, but she'd fight any way she could, if she had to. Most people never realise how full the world is of weapons. Things to throw, or throw enemies on to. Things to break, or use as clubs. Wound-up cloths to strangle with. Dirt to fling in faces. Failing that, she'd bite his throat out. She curled her lips back and showed him her teeth to prove it, but he seemed not to notice. Just sat there, watching. Silent, still, ugly, and dangerous.

'Fucking pinks,' she hissed to herself.

The thin one, by contrast, hardly seemed dangerous at all. Ill-looking, with long hair like a woman's. Awkward and twitchy, licking his lips. He would sneak the odd glance at her, but look away as soon as she scowled over at him, swallowing, the knobbly lump in his neck squirming up and down. He seemed scared, no threat, but Ferro kept him in the corner of her eye while she watched the big one. Best not to dismiss him entirely.

Life had taught her to expect surprises.

That just left the old man. She didn't trust a one of these pinks, but she trusted this bald one least of all. Many deep lines on his face, round his eyes, round his nose. Cruel lines. Hard, heavy bones in his cheeks. Big thick hands, white hairs on the backs of them. If she had to kill these three, for all the danger that the big one seemed to offer, she decided she would kill this bald one first. He had the look of a slaver in his eye, staring at her up and down, all over. A cold look, judging what she might be worth.

Bastard.

Bayaz, Yulwei called him, and the two old men seemed to know each other well. 'So, brother,' the bald pink was saying in the Kantic tongue, though it was plain enough they weren't related, 'how is it in the great Empire of Gurkhul?'

Yulwei sighed. 'Only a year since he seized the crown, and Uthman has broken the last of the rebels, and brought the governors firmly to heel. Already, the young Emperor is more feared than ever his father was. Uthman-ul-Dosht, his soldiers call him, and proudly. Almost all of Kanta is in his grip. He reigns supreme all round the Southern Sea.'

'Aside from Dagoska.'

'True, but his eyes are bent on it. His armies swarm toward the peninsula, and his agents are ever busy behind Dagoska's great walls. Now that there

is war in the North, it cannot be long before he feels the time is ripe to lay siege to the city, and when he does, I do not think it can stand long against him.'

'Are you sure? The Union still controls the seas.'

Yulwei frowned. 'We saw ships, brother. Many great ships. The Gurkish have built a fleet. A powerful one, in secret. They must have begun years ago, during the last war. I fear the Union will control the seas but little longer.'

'A fleet? I had hoped to have a few more years in which to prepare.' The bald pink sounded grim. 'My plans only become the more urgent.'

She was bored with their talk. She was used to being always on the move, keeping always one stride ahead, and she hated to stand still. Stay too long in one place, and the Gurkish would find you. She wasn't interested in being an exhibit for these curious pinks to stare at. She sauntered off around the room while the two old men made endless words, scowling and sucking her teeth. She swung her arms around. She kicked at the worn boards of the floor. She poked at the cloths on the walls, and peered behind them, ran her fingers along the edges of the furniture, clicked her tongue and snapped her teeth together.

Making everyone nervous.

She passed by the big ugly pink in the chair, almost close enough for her swinging hand to touch his pitted skin. Just to show him that she didn't care a shit for his size, or his scars, or anything else. Then she strutted over to the nervous one. The skinny pink with the long hair. He swallowed as she came close.

'Sssss,' she hissed at him. He muttered something and shuffled away, and she stepped up to the open window in his place. Looking out, turning her back on the room.

Just to show the pinks she didn't care a shit for any of them.

There were gardens outside the window. Trees, plants, wide sweeps of lawn neatly arranged. Groups of fat, pale men and women lazed around in the sun on the carefully cut grass, stuffing their sweaty faces with food. Swilling down drink. She scowled down at them. Fat, ugly, lazy pinks, with no God but eating and idleness.

'Gardens,' she sneered.

There had been gardens in Uthman's palace. She used to look at them from the tiny window of her room. Her cell. Long before he became Uthman-ul-Dosht. When he had only been the Emperor's youngest son. When she had been one among his many slaves. His prisoner. Ferro leaned forward and spat out of the window.

She hated gardens.

She hated cities altogether. Places of slavery, fear, degradation. Their walls were the walls of a prison. The sooner she was gone from this accursed place the happier she would be. Or the less unhappy, at least. She turned away from the window, and scowled again. They were all staring at her.

The one called Bayaz was the first to speak. 'It certainly is quite a striking thing you've discovered, brother. You wouldn't miss her in a crowd, eh? Are you sure she's what I'm looking for?'

Yulwei looked at her for a minute. 'As sure as I can be.'

'I'm standing right here,' she growled at them, but the bald pink went on talking as though she couldn't hear.

'Does she feel pain?'

'But little. She fought an Eater on the road.'

'Really?' Bayaz chuckled softly to himself. 'How badly did it hurt her?'

'Badly, but in two days she was walking, in a week she was healed. She shows not a scratch from it. That is not normal.'

'We have both seen many things that are not normal in our times. We must be sure.' The bald man reached into a pocket. Ferro watched suspiciously as he pulled out his fist, placed it on the table. When he took it away two smooth, polished stones lay on the wood.

The bald man leaned forward. 'Tell me, Ferro, which is the blue stone?'

She stared at him, hard, then down at the stones. There was no difference between them. They were all watching her, closer than ever now, and she ground her teeth.

'That one.' She pointed to the one on the left.

Bayaz smiled. 'Exactly the answer I was hoping for.' Ferro shrugged her shoulders. Lucky, she thought, to guess the right one. Then she noticed the look on the big pink's face. He was frowning at the two stones, as though he didn't understand.

'They both are red,' said Bayaz. 'You see no colours at all, eh, Ferro?'

So the bald pink had played a trick on her. She wasn't sure how he could have known, but she was sure she didn't like it. No one plays tricks on Ferro Maljinn. She started to laugh. A rough, ugly, unpractised gurgling.

Then she sprang across the table.

The look of surprise was just forming on the old pink's face as her fist crunched into his nose. He gave a grunt, chair tipping backwards, sprawling out onto the floor. She scrambled across the table to get at him, but Yulwei grabbed hold of her leg and dragged her back. Her clawing hands missed the bald bastard's neck and hauled the table over on its side instead, the two stones skittering away across the boards.

She shook her leg free and went for the old pink as he staggered up from the floor, but Yulwei caught her arm and pulled her back again, all the while yelling, 'Peace!' He got her elbow in his face for his trouble, and sagged back against the wall with her on top of him. She was first up, ready to go at the bald bastard again.

By now the big one was on his feet though, and moving forward, still watching her. Ferro smiled at him, fists clenched at her sides. Now she would see how dangerous he really was.

He took another step.

Then Bayaz put an arm out to stop him. He had his other hand clasped to his nose, trying to staunch the flow of blood. He started to chuckle.

'Very good!' He coughed. 'Very fierce, and damn quick too. Without a doubt, you're what we're after! I hope you will accept my apologies, Ferro.'

'What?'

'For my awful manners.' He wiped blood from his upper lip. 'I deserved no less, but I had to be sure. I am sorry. Am I forgiven?' He looked somehow different now, though nothing had changed. Friendly, considerate, honest. Sorry. But it took more than that to win her trust. A lot more.

'We'll see,' she hissed.

'That's all I ask. That, and that you give Yulwei and I a moment to discuss some . . . matters. Matters best discussed in private.'

'It's alright, Ferro,' said Yulwei, 'they are friends.' She was damn sure they weren't her friends, but she allowed him to shepherd her out of the door behind the two pinks. 'Just try not to kill any of them.'

This room was much like the other. They had to be rich, these pinks, for all they didn't look it. Great big fireplace, made of dark veined stone.

Cushions, and soft cloth round the window, covered in flowers and birds in tiny stitches. There was a painting of a stern man with a crown on his head, frowning down at Ferro from the wall. She frowned back at him. Luxury.

Ferro hated luxury even more than she hated gardens.

Luxury meant captivity more surely than the bars of a cage. Soft furniture spelled danger more surely than weapons. Hard ground and cold water was all she needed. Soft things make you soft, and she wanted no part of that.

There was another man waiting in there, walking round and round with his hands behind his back, as though he didn't like to stand still too long. Not quite a pink, his leathery skin was somewhere between hers and theirs in tone. Head shaved, like a priest. Ferro didn't like that.

She hated priests most of all.

His eyes lit up when he saw her though, for all her sneering at him, and he hurried over. A strange little man in travel-worn clothes, the top of his head came up no higher than Ferro's mouth. 'I am Brother Longfoot,' flapping his hands around all over the place, 'of the great order of Navigators.'

'Lucky for you.' Ferro turned her shoulder towards him, straining her ears to hear what the two old men were saying beyond the door, but Longfoot was not deterred.

'It is lucky! Yes, yes, it most certainly is! God has truly blessed me! I declare that never, in all of history, has a man been so well suited to his profession, or a profession to a man, as I, Brother Longfoot, am suited to the noble science of Navigation! From the snow-covered mountains of the far North, to the sun-drenched sands of the utmost South, the whole world is my home, truly!'

He smiled at her with a look of sickening self-satisfaction. Ferro ignored him. The two pinks, the big one and the scrawny one, were talking to each other on the far side of the room. They spoke in some language she didn't understand. Sounded like pigs grunting. Talking about her maybe, but she didn't care. They went out another door, leaving her alone with the priest, still flapping his lips.

'There are few nations within the Circle of the World to which I, Brother Longfoot, am a stranger, and yet I am at a loss as to your origins.' He waited expectantly, but Ferro said nothing. 'You would like me to guess, then? Indeed, it is a riddle. Let me see . . . your eyes have the shape of the

people of distant Suljuk, where the black mountains rise sheer from the sparkling sea, indeed they do, and yet your skin is—'

'Stop your mouth, cunt.'

The man paused in mid-sentence, coughed and moved away, leaving Ferro to attend to the voices on the other side of the door. She smiled to herself. The wood was thick and the sounds were muffled, but the two old men had not reckoned on the sharpness of her ears. They were still speaking in Kantic. Now that idiot of a Navigator was quiet she could make out every word that Yulwei was saying.

'. . . Khalul breaks the Second Law, so you must break the First? I like it not, Bayaz! Juvens would never have allowed this!' Ferro frowned. Yulwei had a strange note in his voice. Fear. The Second Law. He had spoken of it to the Eaters, Ferro remembered. It is forbidden to eat the flesh of men.

She heard the bald pink next. 'The First Law is a paradox. All magic comes from the Other Side, even ours. Whenever you change a thing you touch the world below, whenever you make a thing you borrow from the Other Side, and there is always a cost.'

'But the cost of this might be too high! It is a cursed thing, this Seed, a damned thing. Nothing but chaos grows from it! The sons of Euz, so great in wisdom and power, this Seed was the end of them, of all of them, in different ways. Are you wiser than Juvens, Bayaz? Are you more cunning than Kanedias? Are you stronger than Glustrod?'

'None of those, brother, but tell me . . . how many Eaters has Khalul made?'

A long pause. 'I cannot be sure.'

'How many?'

Another pause. 'Perhaps two hundred. Perhaps more. The priesthood scour the South for those with any promise. Faster and faster now he makes them, but most are young, and weak.'

'Two hundred or more, and growing all the time. Many are weak, but among them are some that might be a match for you or I. Those that were Khalul's apprentices in the Old Time – the one they called the East Wind, and those cursed bloody twins.'

'Damn those bitches!' Yulwei groaned.

'Not to mention Mamun, whose lies began this chaos.'

‘The trouble was well rooted before he was even born, you know it, Bayaz. Still Mamun was in the Badlands. I felt him near. He is grown terrible strong.’

‘You know that I am right. Meanwhile, our numbers hardly grow.’

‘I thought this one, Quai, showed promise?’

‘We need only a hundred more like him and twenty years in which to train them. Then we might stand on equal terms. No, brother, no. We must use fire against fire.’

‘Even if the fire burns you and all creation to ashes? Let me go to Sarkant. Khalul might yet hear reason—’

Laughter. ‘He has enslaved half the world! When will you wake, Yulwei? When he has enslaved the rest of it? I cannot afford to lose you, brother!’

‘Remember, Bayaz, there are worse things than Khalul. Far worse.’ His voice dropped to a whisper and Ferro strained to hear. ‘The Tellers of Secrets are always listening ...’

‘Enough, Yulwei! It is better not even to think of it!’ Ferro frowned. What was this nonsense? Tellers of Secrets? What secrets?

‘Remember what Juvens told you, Bayaz. Beware of pride. You have been using the Art. I know it. I see a shadow on you.’

‘Damn your shadows! I do what I must! Remember what Juvens told *you*, Yulwei. One cannot watch forever. Time is short, and I will watch no longer. I am first. It is my decision to make.’

‘Have I not always followed where you have led? Always, even when my conscience told me otherwise?’

‘And have I ever led you wrong?’

‘That remains to be seen. You are first, Bayaz, but you are not Juvens. It is my part to question, and that of Zacharus too. He will like this still less than I. Far less.’

‘It must be done.’

‘But others will pay the price, as they always have. This Northman, Ninefingers, he can speak to the spirits?’

‘Yes.’ Ferro frowned. Spirits? The nine-fingered pink had scarcely looked as if he could speak to other humans.

‘And if you find the Seed,’ came Yulwei’s voice from behind the door, ‘you mean for Ferro to carry it?’

‘She has the blood, and someone must.’

‘Be careful then, Bayaz. I know you, remember. Few better. Give me your word that you will keep her safe, even after she has served your purpose.’

‘I will guard her more closely than I would my own child.’

‘Guard her closer than you did the Maker’s child, and I will be satisfied.’

A long silence. Ferro worked her jaw as she thought on what she had heard. Juvens, Kanedias, Zacharus – the strange names meant nothing to her. And what kind of seed could burn all creation to ashes? She wanted no part of any such thing, she was sure of that. Her place was in the south, fighting the Gurkish with weapons that she understood.

The door opened, and the two old men stepped through. They could hardly have looked more different. One dark-skinned, tall and bony with long hair, the other white-skinned, heavy-built and bald. She looked at them suspiciously. It was the white one who spoke first.

‘Ferro, I have an offer to—’

‘I am not going with you, old pink fool.’

The slightest shadow of annoyance flitted across the bald man’s face, but was quickly mastered. ‘Why? What other business have you which is so very pressing?’

That needed no thinking about. ‘Vengeance.’ Her favourite word.

‘Ah. I see. You hate the Gurkish?’

‘Yes.’

‘They owe you a debt, for what they have done to you?’

‘Yes.’

‘For taking your family, your people, your country?’

‘Yes.’

‘For making you a slave,’ he whispered. She glowered back at him, wondering how he knew so much about her, wondering whether to go for him again. ‘They have robbed you, Ferro, robbed you of everything. They have stolen your life from you. If I were you . . . if I had suffered as you have suffered . . . there would not be enough blood in all the South to satisfy me. I would see every Gurkish soldier made a corpse before I was satisfied. I would see every Gurkish city burn before I was satisfied. I would see their Emperor rotting in a cage before his own palace before I was satisfied!’

‘Yes!’ she hissed, a fierce smile across her face. He was talking her language now. Yulwei had never talked so – perhaps this old pink wasn’t so

bad after all. ‘You understand! That is why I must go south!’

‘No, Ferro.’ It was the bald man grinning now. ‘You do not realise the chance that I am offering you. The Emperor does not truly rule in Kanta. Mighty though he seems, he dances to the tune of another, a hand well hidden. Khalul, they call him.’

‘The Prophet.’

Bayaz nodded. ‘If you are cut, do you hate the knife, or the one who wields it? The Emperor, the Gurkish, they are but Khalul’s tools, Ferro. Emperors come and go, but the Prophet is always there, behind them. Whispering. Suggesting. Ordering. He is the one that owes you.’

‘Khalul . . . yes.’ The Eaters had used that name. Khalul. The Prophet. The Emperor’s palace was filled with priests, everyone knew it. The palaces of the governors too. Priests, they were everywhere, swarming, like insects. In the cities, in the villages, in amongst the soldiers, always spreading their lies. Whispering. Suggesting. Ordering. Yulwei was frowning, unhappy, but Ferro knew that the old pink was right. ‘Yes, I see it!’

‘Help me, and I will give you vengeance, Ferro. Real vengeance. Not one dead soldier, or ten, but thousands. Tens of thousands! Perhaps the Emperor himself, who knows?’ He shrugged, and half turned away from her. ‘Still, I cannot force you. Go back to the Badlands, if you wish – hide, and run, and grub in the dust like a rat. If that satisfies you. If that is the full measure of your vengeance. The Eaters want you now. Khalul’s children. Without us they will have you, and sooner rather than later. Still, the choice is yours.’

Ferro frowned. All those years in the wilderness, fighting tooth and nail, always running, had got her nothing. No vengeance worthy of the word. If it had not been for Yulwei, she would be finished now. White bones in the desert. Meat in the bellies of the Eaters. In the cage before the Emperor’s palace.

Rotting.

She could not say no, and she knew it, but she did not like it. This old man had known exactly what to offer her. She hated to have no choice.

‘I will think about it,’ she said.

Again, the slightest shadow of anger on the bald pink’s face, quickly covered. ‘Think about it then, but not for long. The Emperor’s soldiers are massing, and time is short.’ He followed the others out of the room, leaving her alone with Yulwei.

‘I do not like these pinks,’ she said, loud enough for the old one to hear her in the corridor, and then more softly. ‘Do we have to go with them?’

‘You do. I must return to the South.’

‘What?’

‘Someone must keep watch on the Gurkish.’

‘No!’

Yulwei began to laugh. ‘Twice you have tried to kill me. Once you have tried to run away from me, but now that I am leaving you want me to stay? There’s no understanding you, Ferro.’

She frowned. ‘This bald one says he can give me vengeance. Does he lie?’

‘No.’

‘Then I must go with him.’

‘I know. That is why I brought you here.’

She could think of nothing to say. She looked down at the floor, but Yulwei surprised her by stepping forward suddenly. She raised her hand, to ward off a blow, but instead he put his arms round her and squeezed her tightly. A strange feeling. Being so close to someone else. Warm. Then Yulwei stepped away, one hand on her shoulder. ‘Walk in God’s footsteps, Ferro Maljinn.’

‘Huh. They have no God here.’

‘Say rather that they have many.’

‘Many?’

‘Had you not noticed? Here, each man worships himself.’ She nodded. That seemed close to the truth. ‘Be careful, Ferro. And listen to Bayaz. He is the first of my order, and few indeed are wise as he.’

‘I do not trust him.’

Yulwei leaned closer. ‘I did not tell you to trust him.’ Then he smiled, and turned his back. She watched him walk slowly to the door, then out into the corridor. She heard his bare feet flapping away on the tiles, the bangles on his arms jingling softly.

Leaving her alone with the luxury, and the gardens, and the pinks.

Old Friends

There was a thumping knock at the door, and Glokta jerked his head up, left eye suddenly twitching. *Who the hell comes knocking at this hour? Frost? Severard? Or someone else? Superior Goyle, maybe, come to pay me a visit with his circus freaks? Might the Arch Lector have grown tired of his toy cripple already? One could hardly say the feast went according to plan, and his Eminence is hardly the forgiving type. Body found floating by the docks . . .*

The knocking came again. Loud, confident knocking. *The kind that demands the door be opened, before it's broken down.* 'I'm coming!' he shouted, voice cracking slightly as he prised himself out from behind his table, legs wobbly. 'I'm just coming!' He snatched up his cane and limped to the front door, took a deep breath and fumbled with the latch.

It was not Frost, or Severard. Nor was it Goyle, or one of his freakish Practicals. It was someone much more unexpected. Glokta raised an eyebrow, then leaned against the door frame. 'Major West, what a surprise.'

Sometimes, when old friends meet, things are instantly as they were all those years before. The friendship resumes, untouched, as though there had been no interruption. *Sometimes, but not now.* 'Inquisitor Glokta,' mumbled West – hesitant, awkward, embarrassed. 'I'm sorry to bother you so late.'

'Don't mention it,' said Glokta with icy formality.

The Major nearly winced. 'May I come in?'

'Of course.' Glokta shut the front door behind him, then limped after West into his dining room. The Major squeezed himself into one of the chairs and Glokta took another. They sat there facing each other for a moment, without speaking. *What the hell does he want, at this hour or any other?* Glokta scrutinised his old friend's face in the glow from the fire and the one, flickering candle. Now that he could see him more clearly, he realised West had changed. *He looks old*. His hair was thinning at the temples, going grey round his ears. His face was pale, pinched, slightly hollow. *He looks worried. Ground down. Close to the edge.* West looked round at the mean room, the mean fire, the mean furniture, cautiously up at Glokta, then

quickly down at the floor. Nervous, as if he had something picking at his mind. *He looks ill at ease. As well he might.*

He did not seem ready to break the silence, so Glokta did it for him. 'So, how long has it been, eh? Apart from that night in town, and we can hardly count that, can we?'

The memory of that unfortunate meeting hung between them for a moment like a fart, then West cleared his throat. 'Nine years.'

'Nine years. Imagine that. Since we stood on the ridge, old friends together, looking down towards the river. Down towards the bridge and all those Gurkish on the other side. Seems a lifetime ago, doesn't it? Nine years. I can remember you pleading with me not to go down there, but I was having none of it. What a fool I was, eh? Thought I was our only hope. Thought I was invincible.'

'You saved us all that day, saved the whole army.'

'Did I? How wonderful. I daresay if I'd died on that bridge there'd be statues of me all over the place. Shame I didn't, really. Shame for everyone.'

West winced and shifted in his chair, looking ever more uncomfortable. 'I looked for you, afterwards . . .' he mumbled.

You looked for me? How hugely fucking noble. What a true friend. Precious little good it did me, dragged off in agony with my leg hacked to mincemeat. And that was just the beginning. 'You did not come to discuss old times, West.'

'No . . . no, I didn't. I came about my sister.'

Glokta paused. He had certainly not expected that answer. 'Ardee?'

'Ardee, yes. I'm leaving for Angland soon and . . . I was hoping that, perhaps, you could keep an eye on her for me, while I'm away.' West's eyes flickered up nervously. 'You always had a way with women . . . Sand.' Glokta grimaced at the sound of his first name. No one called him that anymore. *No one besides my mother.* 'You always knew just what to say. Do you remember those three sisters? What were their names? You had them all eating out of your hand.' West smiled, but Glokta couldn't.

He remembered, but the memories were weak now, colourless, faded. *The memories of another man. A dead man. My life began in Gurkhul, in the Emperor's prisons. The memories since then are much more real. Stretched out in bed like a corpse after I came back, in the darkness, waiting for*

friends who never came. He looked at West, and he knew that his glance was terribly cold. *Do you think to win me with your honest face and your talk of old times? Like a long-lost dog, at last come faithfully home? I know better. You stink, West. You smell like betrayal. That memory at least is mine.*

Glokta leaned back slowly in his chair. 'Sand dan Glokta,' he murmured, as though recalling a name he once knew. 'Whatever became of him, eh, West? You know, that friend of yours, that dashing young man, handsome, proud, fearless? Magic touch with the women? Loved and respected by all, destined for great things? Wherever did he go?'

West looked back, puzzled and unsure of himself, and said nothing.

Glokta lurched towards him, hands spread out on the table, lips curling back to show his ruined mouth. 'Dead! He died on the bridge! And what remains? A fucking ruin with his name! A limping, skulking shadow! A crippled ghost, clinging to life the way the smell of piss clings to a beggar. He has no friends, this loathsome fucking remnant, and he wants none! Get you gone, West! Go back to Varuz, and to Luthar, and the rest of those empty bastards! There's no one here you know!' Glokta's lips trembled and spat with revulsion. He wasn't sure who disgusted him more – West, or himself.

The Major blinked, his jaw muscles working silently. He got shakily to his feet. 'I'm sorry,' he said, over his shoulder.

'Tell me!' shouted Glokta, bringing him up short of the door. 'The rest of them, they stuck to me so long as I was useful, so long as I was going up. I always knew it. I wasn't so very surprised they wanted nothing to do with me when I came back. But you, West, I always thought you were a better friend than that, a better man. I always thought that you at least – you alone – would come to visit me.' He shrugged. 'I suppose I was wrong.' Glokta turned away, frowning towards the fire, waiting for the sound of the front door closing.

'She didn't tell you?'

Glokta looked back. 'Who?'

'Your mother.'

He snorted. 'My mother? Tell me what?'

'I did come. Twice. As soon as I learned that you were back, I came. Your mother turned me away at the gates of your estate. She said that you were

too ill to take visitors, and that in any case you wanted nothing more to do with the army, and nothing more to do with me in particular. I came back again, a few months later. I thought I owed you that much. That time a servant came to see me off. Later I heard that you had joined the Inquisition, and left for Angland. I put you out of my mind . . . until we met . . . that night in the city . . .' West trailed off.

It took a while for his words to sink in, and by the time they had, Glokta realised that his mouth was hanging open. *So simple. No conspiracy. No web of betrayal.* He almost wanted to laugh at the stupidity of it. *My mother turned him away at the gate, and I never thought to doubt that no one came. She always hated West. A most unsuitable friend, far beneath her precious son. No doubt she blamed him for what happened to me. I should have guessed, but I was too busy wallowing in pain and bitterness. Too busy being tragic.* He swallowed. 'You came?'

West shrugged. 'For what it's worth.'

Well. What can we do, except try to do better? Glokta blinked, and took a deep breath. 'I'm, er . . . I'm sorry. Forget what I said, if you can. Please. Sit down. You were saying something about your sister.'

'Yes. Yes. My sister.' West fumbled his way back to his seat, looking down at the floor, his face taking on that worried, guilty look again. 'We're leaving for Angland soon, and I don't know when I'll be back . . . or if, I suppose . . . she'll be without any friends in the city and, well . . . I think you met her once, when you came to our house.'

'Of course, and a good deal more recently than that, in fact.'

'You did?'

'Yes. With our mutual friend, Captain Luthar.'

West turned even paler. *There is something more to this than he is telling me.* But Glokta did not feel like putting his club foot through his one friendship quite yet, not so soon after it had been reborn. He stayed quiet, and after a moment the Major went on.

'Life has been . . . difficult for her. I could have done something. I should have done something.' He stared miserably down at the table and an ugly spasm ran across his face. *I know that one. One of my own favourites. Self-loathing.* 'But I chose to let other things get in the way, and I did my best to forget all about it, and I pretended that everything was fine. She has suffered and I am to blame.' He coughed, then swallowed awkwardly. His

lip began to tremble and he covered his face with his hands. ‘My fault . . . if something were to happen to her . . .’ His shoulders shook silently, and Glokta raised his eyebrows. He was used to men crying in his presence of course. *But I usually have at least to show them the instruments first.*

‘Come on, Collem, this isn’t like you.’ He reached slowly across the table, half pulled his hand back, and then patted his sobbing friend awkwardly on the shoulder. ‘You’ve made some mistakes, but haven’t we all? They’re in the past, and can’t be changed. There’s nothing to be done now except to do better, eh?’ *What? Can it really be me talking? Inquisitor Glokta, comforter of the needy?* But West seemed reassured. He lifted his head, wiped his runny nose, stared up hopefully at Glokta with wet eyes.

‘You’re right, you’re right, of course. I have to make amends. Have to! Will you help me, Sand? Will you look after her, while I’m gone?’

‘I’ll do whatever I can for her, Collem, you can depend on me. I was once proud to call you my friend and . . . I would be again.’ Strange, but Glokta could almost feel a tear in his own eye. *Me? Can it be? Inquisitor Glokta, trustworthy friend? Inquisitor Glokta, protector of vulnerable young women?* He almost laughed out loud at the idea, and yet here he was. He never would have thought that he needed one, but it felt good to have a friend again.

‘Hollit,’ said Glokta.

‘What?’

‘Those three sisters, their name was Hollit.’ He chuckled to himself, the memory filtering through a little clearer than before. ‘They had a thing about fencing. Loved it. Something about the sweat, maybe.’

‘I think that was when I decided to take it up.’ West laughed, then screwed up his face as if he was trying to remember something. ‘What was our quartermaster’s name? He had a thing for the youngest one, was out of his mind with jealousy. What the hell was that man’s name? Fat man.’

The name was not so very difficult for Glokta to recall. ‘Rews. Salem Rews.’

‘Rews, that’s the one! I’d forgotten all about him. Rews! He could tell a story like no one else, that man. We’d sit up all night listening to him, all of us rolling with laughter! Whatever became of him?’

Glokta paused for a moment. ‘I think he left the army . . . to become a merchant of some sort.’ He waved his hand dismissively. ‘I heard he moved

north.’

Back to the Mud

Carleon weren't at all how the Dogman remembered it, but then he tended to remember it burning. A memory like that stays with you. Roofs falling in, windows cracking, crowds of fighters everywhere, all drunk on pain and winning and, well, drink – looting, killing, setting fires, all the unpleasant rest of it. Women screaming, men shouting, stinking with smoke and fear. In short, a sack, with him and Logen at the heart of it.

Bethod had put the fires out and made it his. Moved in, then started building. He hadn't got far when he kicked Logen and the Dogman and the rest of them into exile, but they must have been building every day since. It was twice as big now as it used to be, even before it got burned, covering the whole hill and all the slope down to the river. Bigger than Uffrith. Bigger than any city the Dogman had seen. From where he was, up in the trees on the other side of the valley, you couldn't see the people, but there had to be an awful lot of them in there. Three new roads leading out from the gates. Two big new bridges. New buildings everywhere, and big ones where the small ones used to be. Lots of them. Built from stone, mostly, slate roofs, glass in some of the windows even.

'They been busy,' said Threetrees.

'New walls,' said Grim.

'Lots of 'em,' muttered the Dogman. There were walls all over. There was a big one round the outside, with proper towers and everything, and a big ditch beyond it. There was an even bigger one round the top of the hill where Skarling's Hall used to stand. Huge great thing. Dogman could hardly work out where they got all the stone for the building of it. 'Biggest damn wall I ever saw,' he said.

Threetrees shook his head. 'I don't like it. If Forley gets took, we won't never get him out.'

'If Forley gets took there'll be five of us, chief, and we'll be looked for. He's no threat to no one, but we are. Getting him out'll be the least of our worries. He'll muddle through, like always. Most likely he'll outlive the lot of us.'

‘Wouldn’t surprise me,’ muttered Threetrees. ‘We’re in a dangerous line of work.’

They slithered back through the brush, back to the camp. Black Dow was there, looking even worse-tempered than usual. Tul Duru too, working at a hole in his coat with a needle, face all screwed up as his great thick fingers fumbled with the little splinter of metal. Forley was sat near him, looking up at the sky through the leaves.

‘How you feeling Forley?’ asked the Dogman.

‘Bad, but you got to have fear to have courage.’

Dogman grinned at him. ‘So I heard. Reckon we’re both heroes then, eh?’

‘Must be,’ he said, grinning back.

Threetrees was all business. ‘You sure about this, Forley? Sure you want to go in there? Once you get in, there might be no getting out, no matter how good a talker y’are.’

‘I’m sure. I may be shittin’ myself, but I’m going. I can do more good there than I can out here. Someone’s got to warn ’em about the Shanka. You know it, chief. Who else is there?’

The old boy nodded to himself, slow as the sun rising. Taking his moment, as always. ‘Aye. Alright. Tell ’em I’m waiting here, by the old bridge. Tell ’em I’m alone. Just in case Bethod decides you’re not welcome, you understand?’

‘I get it. You’re on your own, Threetrees. It was just the two of us made it back over the mountains.’

They’d all gathered now, and Forley smiled round at ’em. ‘Well then, lads, it’s been something ain’t it?’

‘Shut up, Weakest,’ scowled Dow. ‘Bethod ain’t got nothing against you. You’re coming back.’

‘In case I don’t, though. It’s been something.’ The Dogman nodded to him, awkward. It was the same dirty, scarred-up faces as usual, but grimmer than ever. None of ’em liked letting one of their own put himself in danger, but Forley was right, someone had to do it, and he was the best suited. Sometimes weakness is a better shield than strength, the Dogman reckoned. Bethod was an evil bastard, but he was a clever one. The Shanka were coming, and he needed the warning. Hopefully, he’d be grateful for it.

They walked together, down to the edge of the trees, looking out towards the path. It crossed over the old bridge and wound down into the valley.

From there to the gates of Carleon. Into Bethod's fortress.

Forley took a deep breath, and the Dogman clapped him on his shoulder. 'Luck, Forley. Good luck.'

'And to you.' He squeezed Dogman's hand in his for a minute. 'To all of you lads, eh?' and he turned and marched off towards the bridge, with his head up high.

'Luck, Forley!' shouted Black Dow, startling them all.

He turned round for a minute, the Weakest, stood on top of the bridge, and he grinned. Then he was gone.

Threetrees took a deep breath. 'Weapons,' he said, 'just in case Bethod don't want to hear sense. And wait for the signal, eh?'

It seemed a long time waiting, up in the leaves, staying quiet and still, looking down at all them new walls. The Dogman lay on his belly, bow near at hand, watching, waiting, wondering how Forley was doing in there. A long, tense time. Then he saw them. Horsemen coming out the nearest gate, riding over one of the new bridges, crossing the river. They'd got a cart at the back. Dogman wasn't sure why they'd have a cart, but he didn't like it any. No sign of Forley, and he wasn't sure whether that was a good thing or a bad.

They came quick, spurring up the side of the valley, up the steep path towards the trees and the stream and the old stone bridge across it. Right at the Dogman. He could hear the hooves thumping on the dirt. Close enough to count now, and take a good look at. Spears, shields and good armour. Helmets and mail. Ten of 'em, and two others sitting on the cart, either side of the driver, carrying some sorts of things that looked like little bows on blocks of wood. He didn't know what they were about, and he didn't like not knowing. He was the one wanted to be giving them the surprises.

He wriggled back through the brush on his stomach, sloshed through the stream and hurried to the edge of the trees, where he could get a good view of the old bridge. Threetrees, Tul and Dow were standing round the near side of it, and he waved over to them. Couldn't see Grim, he must've been off in the woods away beyond. He made the sign for horsemen, held up his fist to say ten, hand flat on his chest to say armour.

Dow took up his sword and axe, ran up into a bunch of broken rocks, high up beside the bridge, keeping low and quiet. Tul slid down the bank into the

stream, luckily no more than knee-deep right then, plastered his big self against the far side of the arch with his great long sword held up above the water. Made the Dogman a bit nervous, he could see Tul so clear from where he was sitting. Still, the riders wouldn't see him at all if they came straight up the path. They'd only be expecting one man alone, and Dogman hoped they wouldn't come too careful. He hoped, 'cause if they took the time to check it'd be a fucking disaster.

He watched Threetrees strap his shield on his arm, draw his sword, stretch his neck out, then he just stood, waiting, big and solid, blocking the path on the near side of the bridge, seeming all alone in the world.

The Dogman could hear the hoof-beats loud now, and the clattering of the cart's wheels out beyond the trees. He pulled out a few arrows and planted them in the earth, point down, where he could get to 'em quick. Doing his best to swallow his fear. His fingers were shaking all the while, but that didn't matter. They'd work alright when they needed to.

'Wait for the signal,' he whispered to himself. 'Wait for the signal.'

He nocked a shaft to his bow and half-drew the string, taking aim down towards the bridge. Damn it but he needed to piss bad.

The first spear-point showed itself over the crest of the hill, then others. Bobbing helmets, mailed chests, horses' faces, bit by bit the riders came up towards the bridge. The cart rolled behind, with its driver and its two funny passengers, pulled by a big shaggy carthorse.

The rider up front saw Threetrees now, waiting for him, over the hump of the bridge, and he spurred on forward. The Dogman breathed a little easier as the others trotted after him in a clump, all eagerness. Forley must've said as he was told – they were expecting only one. Dogman could see Tul peering up from underneath the mossy arch as the horses clopped above him. By the dead, his hands were shaking. He was worried he'd let the arrow fly half-drawn and ruin the whole thing.

The cart stopped on the far bank, the two men on it stood up and pointed their strange bows at Threetrees. The Dogman got himself a nice aim on one of 'em, and drew the string back all the way. Most of the riders were on the bridge by now, horses shying and stirring about, unhappy at being packed in so tight. The one at the front reined up in front of Threetrees, spear pointing at him. The old boy didn't back away a step, though. Not

him. He just frowned up, not giving the riders any room to get around him, keeping 'em choked up on the bridge.

'Well, well,' the Dogman heard their leader saying. 'Rudd Threetrees. We thought you was long dead, old man.' He knew the voice. One of Bethod's Carls, from way back. Bad-Enough they called him.

'Reckon I've got a fight or two left in me,' said Threetrees, still giving no ground.

Bad-Enough took a look about him, squinting into the trees, sense enough to see he was in a poor position, but not too careful. 'Where's the rest of you? Where's that fucker Dow, eh?'

Threetrees shrugged. 'There's just me.'

'Back to the mud, eh?' The Dogman could just see Bad-Enough grinning under his helmet. 'Shame. Hoped I'd be the one to kill that dirty bastard.'

Dogman winced, half expecting Dow to come flying out of those rocks right then, but there was no sign of him. Not yet. Waiting for the signal, for once.

'Where's Bethod?' asked Threetrees.

'The King don't come out for the likes of you! Anyhow, he's off in Angland, kicking the Union's arses. Prince Calder's taking care of things while he's gone.'

Threetrees snorted. 'Prince is it, now? I remember him sucking on his mother's tit. He could scarcely do that right.'

'A lot's changed, old man. All kind of things.'

By the dead, Dogman was wishing they'd get on with it, one way or another. He could hardly keep the piss in. 'Wait for the signal,' he was mouthing to himself, just to try and keep his hands steady.

'The Flatheads are everywhere,' Threetrees was saying. 'They'll be coming south by next summer, sooner maybe. Something needs doing.'

'Well, why don't you come with us, eh? You can warn Calder yourself. We brought a cart, for you to ride in. Man of your age shouldn't have to walk.' A couple of the other riders laughed at that, but Threetrees didn't join 'em.

'Where's Forley?' he growled. 'Where's the Weakest?'

There was more sniggering from the horsemen. 'Oh, he's nearby,' said Bad-Enough, 'he's real close. Why don't you get in the cart, and we'll take

you right to him. Then we can all sit round and talk about Flatheads, nice and peaceful.'

The Dogman didn't like this. Not at all. He'd got a nasty feeling. 'You must take me for some new kind o' fool,' said Threetrees. 'I'm going nowhere 'til I've seen Forley.'

Bad-Enough frowned at that. 'You're in no state to be telling us what you'll do. You might have been the big man once, but you're come to less than nothing, and that's a fact. Now give up your blade and get in the fucking cart like I told you, before I lose my temper.'

He tried to nudge his horse forward again but Threetrees wasn't budging. 'Where's Forley?' he growled. 'And I'll have a straight answer or I'll have your guts.'

Bad-Enough grinned over his shoulder at his mates, and they grinned back. 'Alright, old man, since you're asking. Calder wanted us to wait for this, but I've got to see the look on your face. The Weakest's in the cart. Leastways, most of him is.' He smiled and let something drop from his saddle. A canvas sack, with something in it. Dogman could guess already what it was. It hit the ground near Threetrees' feet. The something rolled out, and the Dogman could see on the old boy's face that he'd guessed right. Forley's head.

Well that was it, o' course. Fuck the signal. Dogman's first arrow stuck one of the men on the cart right through his chest, and he screamed and tumbled over into the back, dragging the driver with him. It was a good shot, but there was no time to think on that, he was far too busy fumbling for another arrow, and shouting. Didn't even know what he was shouting, just that he was. Grim must've been shooting as well, one of the Carls on the bridge gave a yell, fell off his horse and splashed into the stream.

Threetrees was down in a crouch, hiding behind his shield, backing off while Bad-Enough prodded at him with his spear, kicking his horse off the bridge and onto the path on our side.

The rider behind pushed around the side of him, keen to get off the bridge, coming close beside the rocks.

'Fucking bastards!' Dow flew out of the stones above him, barrelled into the rider. They tumbled down together, a mess of limbs and weapons, but

the Dogman could see that Dow was on top. His axe went up and down a couple of times, quick. One less to worry on.

Dogman's second arrow went well wide of the mark, he was so busy shouting his head off, but it stuck one of the horses in the rump, and that turned out better than anything. It started rearing and thrashing about, and soon all the horses were milling and crying while their riders cursed and bumbled around, spears going every which way, noise and mess on all sides.

The horseman at the back split in half, all of a sudden, blood spraying everywhere. The Thunderhead had come up from the stream, got round behind them. There's no armour that could stop a blow like that. The giant roared and swung the great length of bloody metal over his head again. The next in line got his shield up in time, but he might as well not have bothered. The blade hacked a big chunk out of it, tore his head open and hammered him out of the saddle. The blow was that strong it clubbed the horse down too.

One of them had got his mount turned now, bringing up his spear to stab at Tul from the side. Before he could he grunted and jerked, arching his back. Dogman could see the feathers sticking from his side. Grim must've shot him, and he tumbled down. His foot caught in the stirrup and he hung there, swinging. He was groaning and moaning and trying to right himself, but his horse was plunging now along with the others, making him dance, wrong way up, smacking his head against the side of the bridge. He dropped his spear in the stream, tried to pull himself up, then his horse half landed a kick on his shoulder and knocked him free. He went down under the milling hooves and the Dogman paid him no more mind.

The second archer was still sitting up on the cart. He was getting over his shock now, and lining up his funny bow on Threetrees, still squatting down behind his shield. Dogman shot at him but he was hurrying, and yelling, and his shaft missed and hit the driver beside him in his shoulder, just got up from the back of the cart, knocked him back down again.

The weird bow twanged and Threetrees jerked back from his shield. The Dogman was worried for a minute, then he saw that the arrow split the heavy wood and punched on through, but stopped just short of catching Threetrees in the face. It was lodged there through his shield, feathers

sticking out one side, point out the other. That's an evil little bow, Dogman thought.

He heard Tul roar and saw another rider fly off into the stream. Another dropped with one of Grim's arrows in his back. Dow turned and chopped the back legs out from under Bad-Enough's horse with his sword, and it stumbled and slid, pitching him off onto the ground. The last couple were trapped. Dow and Threetrees at one end of the bridge, Tul at the other, too tight with frightened, riderless horses for them to turn around or nothing, at the mercy of Grim out in the woods. He wasn't in a merciful mood, it seemed, and it didn't take him long to pick 'em off.

The one with the bow tried to make a break for it, chucking his bit of wood away and jumping down from the cart. Dogman thought nice and careful about his aiming this time, and his shaft got the archer right between the shoulders and knocked him on his face before he could get more than a few paces. He had a go at crawling, but he wasn't crawling far. The driver of the cart showed his face again, groaning and grabbing at the arrow in his shoulder. The Dogman didn't usually kill men that were down, but he reckoned today was an exception. His arrow got the driver through the mouth, and that was him dealt with.

Dogman could see one of the riders limping away, one of Grim's arrows in his leg, and lined him up with his last shaft. Threetrees got there first though, and stuck him through the back with his sword. There was another one still moving, struggling up to his knees, and the Dogman took an aim on him. Before he could loose, Dow stepped up and hacked his head off. Blood everywhere. Horses still milling, screaming, slipping on the slick stones of the bridge.

Dogman could see Bad-Enough now, the last one going. He must've lost his helmet when he fell off his horse. He was struggling in the stream on his hands and knees, slowed up by all that weight of mail. He'd dropped his shield, and his spear, to make better time running for it, but he hadn't realised he was coming right at the Dogman.

'Get him alive!' shouted Threetrees. Tul set off down one bank, but he was making slow progress, slipping and sliding in the mud the cart churned up. 'Get him alive!' Dow was after him too, splashing and cursing in the water. Bad-Enough was close now. The Dogman could hear his scared gasping as he struggled down the stream.

‘Aah!’ he howled as Dogman’s arrow thudded into his leg, just below the bottom of his mail coat. He toppled sideways onto the bank, blood leaking into the muddy water. He started dragging himself up the wet turf beside the stream.

‘That’s it, Dogman,’ shouted Threetrees. ‘Alive!’

The Dogman slid out the trees and down the bank, through the water. He pulled his knife out. Tul and Dow were still a little ways off, hurrying towards him. Bad-Enough rolled over in the mud, his face screwed up with the pain of the arrow in his leg. He held his hands up. ‘Alright, alright, I’ll gurrr—’

‘You’ll what?’ asked the Dogman, looking down at him.

‘Gurrr—’ he said again, looking mightily surprised, hand gripped to his neck. There was blood pouring out between his fingers, down the front of his wet mail.

Dow splashed up beside them and stood there, looking down. ‘Well that’s the end of that,’ he said.

‘What you do that for?’ shouted Threetrees, hurrying over.

‘Eh?’ asked the Dogman. Then he looked down at his knife. It was all bloody. ‘Ah.’ That’s when he saw it was him as had cut Bad-Enough’s throat.

‘We could have asked him questions!’ said Threetrees. ‘He could have took a message back to Calder, told him who did this, and why!’

‘Wake up, chief,’ muttered Tul Duru, already wiping his sword down. ‘No one cares a shit for the old ways no more. Besides, they’ll be after us soon enough. No point letting ’em know more than we have to.’

Dow clapped the Dogman on the shoulder. ‘You were right to do it. This bastard’s head’ll do for a message.’ Dogman wasn’t sure Dow’s approval was something he was after, but it was a bit late now. It took Dow a couple of chops to get Bad-Enough’s head off. He carried it, swinging by its hair, with as little care or worry as he’d carry a bag of turnips. He grabbed a spear out of the stream on his way, found a spot he liked.

‘Things ain’t the way they used to be,’ Threetrees was muttering as he strode off down the bank towards the bridge, where Grim was already picking over the bodies.

The Dogman followed him, watching Dow stick Bad-Enough’s head on the spear, shoving the blunt end into the ground, stepping back, hands on

hips, to admire his work. He shifted it a bit to the right, then back to the left, until he'd got it nice and straight. He grinned over at the Dogman.

'Perfect,' he said.

'What now, chief?' Tul was asking. 'What now?'

Threetrees was stooping down on the bank, washing his bloody hands in the river.

'What do we do?' asked Dow.

The old boy stood up slowly, wiped his hands on his coat, taking his time thinking on it. 'South. We bury Forley on the way. We take these horses here, since they'll be coming after us now, and we head south. Tul, you better unhitch that carthorse, he's the only one as'll carry you.'

'South?' asked the Thunderhead, looking confused, 'south to where?'

'Angland.'

'Angland?' asked the Dogman, and he could tell they were all thinking it. 'For what? Ain't they fighting down there?'

'Course they are, that's why I've a mind to go.'

Dow frowned. 'Us? What have we got against the Union?'

'No, fool,' said Threetrees, 'I've a mind to fight along with 'em.'

'With the Union?' asked Tul, his lip curling up, 'with those bloody women? That ain't our fight, chief!'

'Any fight against Bethod is my fight now. I mean to see the end of him.' Once he'd thought on it, the Dogman had never yet seen Threetrees change his mind. Never once. 'Who's with me?' he asked.

They all were. Course.

It was raining. Thin rain, making the whole world damp. Soft as a maiden's kiss, as they say, though the Dogman could hardly remember what one of those felt like. Rain. Seemed right somehow, for the occasion. Dow was done with piling the dirt, and he sniffed and dug the spade down into the earth beside the grave.

It was a long way from the road. A good long way. They didn't want no one finding it and digging Forley up. They all gathered round, just five now, looking down. It was a long time since they'd had anyone to bury among them. The Shanka got Logen o' course, not too long ago, but they never had found the body. There might have been just one less in the band, but it seemed to the Dogman like there was a lot missing.

Threetrees frowned, taking a moment, thinking out what to say. It was just as well he was the chief, and had to find the words, 'cause Dogman didn't reckon he could have found a thing. After a minute Threetrees started speaking, slow as the light fading at sunset.

'This was a weak man, here. The Weakest, that's a fact. That was his name, and ain't that a joke? To call a man the Weakest. The worst fighter they could find, to surrender to Ninefingers. Weak fighter, no doubt, but strong heart, say I.'

'Aye,' said Grim.

'Strong heart,' said Tul Duru.

'The strongest,' mumbled the Dogman. He had a bit of a lump in the throat, being honest.

Threetrees nodded to himself. 'It takes some bones to meet your death as well as he did. To walk to it, with no complaint. To ask for it. And not for his own sake, but for others, that he didn't even know.' Threetrees clenched his teeth and took his moment, looking down at the earth. They all did. 'That's all I've got to say. Back to the mud with you, Forley. We're the poorer, and the ground's the richer for it.'

Dow knelt down, and set his hand on the fresh-turned soil. 'Back to the mud,' he said. The Dogman thought for a minute there might be a tear dripping off his nose, but it had to be only the rain. This was Black Dow, after all. He got up and walked away with his head down and the others followed him, one by one, off toward the horses.

'Fare you well, Forley,' said the Dogman. 'No more fear.'

He reckoned now that he was the coward of the band.

Misery

Jezal frowned. Ardee was taking her time. She never took her time. She was always there when he arrived, at whatever spot had been arranged. He didn't like having to wait for her one bit. He always had to wait for her letters, and that rankled as it was. Standing here like an idiot, it made him feel even more of a slave than he did already.

He frowned up at the grey skies. There were a few spots of rain falling, just to match his mood. He felt one from time to time, a tiny pin-prick on his face. He could see the drops making circles in the grey surface of the lake, making pale streaks against the green of the trees, the grey of the buildings. The dark shape of the House of the Maker was rendered hazy by them. He frowned at that building with particular displeasure.

He hardly knew what to make of it now. The whole thing had been like some feverish nightmare and, like a nightmare, he had decided simply to ignore it, and pretend it never happened. He might have succeeded too, except that the bloody thing was always looming on the edge of his vision, whenever he stepped out of the door, reminding him the world was full of mysteries he did not understand, seething just below the surface.

'Damn it,' he muttered, 'and damn that lunatic, Bayaz, as well.'

He frowned across the damp lawns. The rain was keeping people away from the park, and it was emptier than he had seen it in a long time. A couple of sad-looking men sat listlessly on benches, nursing their own personal tragedies, and there were passers-by on the paths, hurrying from somewhere to wherever. One was coming towards him now, wrapped up in a long cloak.

Jezal's frown vanished. It was her, he could tell. She had her hood pulled right down over her face. He knew it was a cold day, but this seemed a touch dramatic. He had never thought she was the type to be put off by a few spots of rain. Still, he was glad to see her. Ridiculously glad. He smiled and hastened forward. Then, when they were a couple of paces apart, she pushed the hood back.

Jezal gasped with horror. There was a great purple bruise across her cheek, around her eye, the corner of her mouth! He stood there frozen for a

moment, wishing, stupidly, that he was hurt instead of her. The pain would have been less. He realised he'd clamped one hand over his mouth, eyes bulging like a nervous little girl at a spider in the bath, but he couldn't stop himself.

Ardee only scowled. 'What? Did you never see a bruise before? '

'Well, yes, but . . . are you alright?'

'Of course I am.' She stepped around him and started walking off down the path. He had to hurry to catch her up. 'It's nothing. I fell is all. I'm a clumsy fool. Always have been. All my life.' She said it with some bitterness, it seemed to him.

'Is there anything I can do?'

'What could you do? Kiss it better?' If they'd been alone he wouldn't have minded trying, but her frown showed him what she thought of that idea. It was strange: the bruises should have repelled him, but they didn't. Not at all. Rather, he had an almost overpowering urge to take her in his arms, to stroke her hair, to murmur soothing words. Pathetic. Probably she would slap him if he tried. Probably he would deserve it. She didn't need his help. Besides, he couldn't touch her. There were people around, damn them, eyes everywhere. You never knew who might be watching. The thought made him more than a little nervous.

'Ardee . . . aren't we taking a risk? I mean, what if your brother were to —'

She snorted. 'Forget about him. He won't do anything. I've told him to keep his nose out of my business.' Jezal had to smile. He imagined that must have been quite an amusing scene. 'Besides, I hear that you're all leaving for Angland on the next tide, and I could hardly let you go without saying goodbye, now could I?'

'I wouldn't have done that!' he said, horrified again. It hurt just hearing her say the word goodbye. 'I mean, well, I'd have let them sail without me before I would've done that!'

'Huh.'

They walked along in silence for a moment, skirting the lake, both with their eyes on the gravel. It was hardly the bitter-sweet farewell that he had pictured so far. Just bitter. They passed among the trunks of some willow trees, their branches trailing in the water below. It was a secluded spot, screened from prying eyes. Jezal reckoned he was unlikely to find one

better for what he had to say. He glanced sideways at her, and took a deep breath.

'Ardee, er, I don't know how long we'll be away. I mean, I suppose it could be months . . .' He chewed at his top lip. It was not coming out at all as he had hoped. He had practised this speech twenty times at least, staring in his mirror until he got just the right expression: serious, confident, slightly wheedling. Now, though, the words came out in a foolish rush. 'I hope that, I mean, perhaps, I hope that you'll wait for me?'

'I daresay I'll still be here. I've nothing else to do. But don't worry, you'll have a lot to think about in Angland – war, honour, glory and all that. You'll soon forget about me.'

'No!' he shouted, catching hold of her arm. 'No I won't!' He pulled his hand away quickly, worried someone might see. At least she was looking at him now, somewhat surprised, maybe, at how fierce his denial had been – though not half as surprised as he was.

Jezal blinked down at her. A pretty girl certainly, but too dark, too tanned, too clever by half, simply dressed with no jewels, and with a great ugly bruise across her face. She would hardly have excited much comment in the officer's mess. How was it that she seemed to him the most beautiful woman in the world? The Princess Terez was an unwashed dog beside her. The clever words leaked out of his mind and he spoke without thinking, looking her straight in the eye. Maybe this was what honesty felt like.

'Look, Ardee, I know you think I'm an ass and, well, I daresay I am, but I don't plan always to be one. I don't know why you even look at me, and I don't know much about this sort of thing but, well . . . I think about you all the time. I hardly think about anything else any more.' He took another deep breath. 'I think . . .' He glanced around again, just to check that no one was watching. 'I think I love you!'

She spluttered with laughter. 'You really are an ass,' she said. Despair. He was utterly crushed. He couldn't breathe for disappointment. His face screwed up, his head drooped and he stared down at the ground. There were tears in his eyes. Actual tears.

Pitiful. 'But I'll wait.' Joy. It swelled in his chest and burst out in a little girlish sob. He was helpless. It was ridiculous the power she had over him.

The difference between misery and happiness was the right word from her. She laughed again. ‘Look at you, you fool.’

She reached up and touched his face, rubbed a tear from his cheek with her thumb. ‘I’ll wait,’ she said, and she smiled at him. That crooked smile.

The people had faded, the park, the city, the world. Jezal stared down at Ardee, for how long he could not have said, trying to stamp every detail of her face into his mind. He had a feeling, for some reason, that the memory of that smile might have to get him through a lot.

The docks were heaving with activity, even for the docks. The wharves boiled with people, the air shook and rattled with their din. Soldiers and supplies poured endlessly up the slippery gangways and onto the ships. Crates were hauled, barrels were rolled, hundreds of horses were dragged and pushed and kicked aboard, eyes bulging, mouths frothing. Men grunted and groaned, heaved at wet ropes, strained at wet beams, sweating and shouting in the spitting rain, slipping around on the slick decks, running here and there in epic confusion.

Everywhere people embraced, kissed, waved to each other. Wives saying goodbye to husbands, mothers to sons, children to fathers, all equally bedraggled. Some put a brave face on it, some wept and wailed. Others did not care: spectators come simply to witness the madness.

It all meant nothing to Jezal, leaning on the weathered rail of the ship that would carry him to Angland. He was sunk in a terrible gloom, nose running, hair plastered to his scalp with wet. Ardee was not there, and yet she was everywhere. He would hear her voice above the din, calling his name. He would glimpse her out of the corner of his eye, looking at him, and his breath would catch in his throat. He would smile, half-raise his hand to wave, then he would see it was not her. Some other dark-haired woman, smiling at some other soldier. His shoulders would slump again. Each time the disappointment was sharper.

He realised now that he had made a terrible mistake. Why the hell had he asked her to wait for him? Wait for what? He could not marry her, that was a fact. Impossible. But the thought of her even looking at another man made him feel sick. He was wretched.

Love. He hated to admit it, but it had to be. He had always regarded the whole notion with contempt. A stupid word. A word for bad poets to harp

on, and foolish women to chatter about. A thing found in childish stories and with no relevance to the real world, where relationships between men and women were simple matters of fucking and money. Yet here he was, mired in a horrible bog of fear and guilt, lust and confusion, loss and pain. Love. What a curse.

'I'd like to see Ardee,' murmured Kaspa, wistfully.

Jezal turned to stare at him. 'What? What did you say?'

'It's quite a sight to see,' said the Lieutenant, holding his hands up, 'that's all.' Everyone was a little careful around him since that card game, as if he might blow up at any moment.

Jezal turned sullenly back to the crowds. There was some kind of a commotion down below them. A single horseman was forcing his way through the chaos, spurring a well-lathered horse with frequent shouts of 'Move!' Even in the rain, the wings on the rider's helmet glittered. A Knight Herald.

'Bad news for someone,' murmured Kaspa.

Jezal nodded. 'Looks like us.' He was indeed making directly for their ship, leaving a trail of bemused and angry soldiers and workmen behind him. He swung out of the saddle and strode purposefully up the gangplank towards them, face grim, bright-polished armour covered with moisture and jingling with every step.

'Captain Luthar?' he asked.

'Yes,' said Jezal, 'I'll fetch the Colonel.'

'No need. My message is for you.'

'It is?'

'High Justice Marovia requires your presence at his offices. Immediately. It would be best if you took my mount.'

Jezal frowned. He did not like the taste of this at all. There was no reason that he could see for a Knight Herald to be bringing messages to him, except that he had been inside the House of the Maker. He wanted nothing more to do with that. He wanted it in the past, forgotten, along with Bayaz, and his Northman, and that disgusting cripple.

'The High Justice is waiting, Captain.'

'Yes, of course.' It seemed there was nothing to be done.

‘Ah, Captain Luthar! An honour to see you again!’ Jezal was hardly surprised to run into the madman Sulfur, even here outside the offices of the High Justice. He no longer even seemed a madman, just another part of a world gone entirely mad. ‘An absolute honour!’ he frothed.

‘Likewise,’ said Jezal numbly.

‘I’m so lucky I caught you, what with both of us leaving so soon! My master has all manner of errands for me.’ He gave a deep sigh. ‘Never the slightest peace, eh?’

‘No, I know what you mean.’

‘Still, an honour indeed to see you, and victorious at the Contest! I saw the whole thing, you know, it was a privilege to bear witness.’ He smiled broadly, different coloured eyes glittering. ‘And to think, you were set on giving it up. Hah! But you stuck at it, just as I said you would! Yes you did, and now you reap the rewards! The edge of the World,’ he whispered softly, as though to say the words out loud was to invite disaster. ‘The edge of the World. Can you imagine? I envy you, indeed I do!’

Jezal blinked. ‘What?’

‘What! Hah! “What”, he says! You are dauntless, sir! Dauntless!’ And Sulfur strode off across the wet Square of Marshals, chuckling to himself. Jezal was so bemused that he had not even the presence of mind to call him a damn idiot once he was out of earshot.

One of Marovia’s many clerks ushered him through an empty, echoing hallway towards a pair of enormous doors. He stopped before them, knocked. At an answering cry he turned the handle and pulled one of the doors back, standing aside politely for Jezal to pass through.

‘You may go in,’ he said quietly, after they had been stood there for a while.

‘Yes, yes, of course.’

The cavernous chamber beyond was eerily silent. Furniture was strangely sparse in that huge, panelled space, and what there was seemed oversized, as though for the use of people much bigger than Jezal. It gave him the distinct feeling that he was arriving at his own trial.

High Justice Marovia sat behind an enormous table, its surface polished to mirror brightness, smiling at Jezal with a kindly, if slightly pitying expression. Marshal Varuz was seated to his left, staring down guiltily at his own blurry reflection. Jezal had not thought he could feel more depressed,

but on seeing the third member of the group he realised he had been wrong. Bayaz, wearing a self-satisfied smirk. He felt a mild surge of panic as the door shut behind him: the clicking of the latch felt like the clank of the heavy bolt on a prison cell.

Bayaz started up from his chair and came round the table. ‘Captain Luthar, I am so glad you could join us.’ The old man took Jezal’s damp hand in both of his and squeezed it firmly, leading him forward into the room. ‘Thank you for coming. Thank you indeed.’

‘Er, of course.’ As if he had been given a choice.

‘Well now, you’re probably wondering what this is all about. Allow me to explain.’ He stepped back and perched on the edge of the table, like a kindly uncle holding forth to a child. ‘I and a few brave companions – chosen people, you understand, people of quality – are engaging on a great journey! An epic voyage! A grand adventure! I have little doubt that, should we be successful, there will be stories told of this for years to come. Very many years.’ Bayaz’ forehead crinkled as he raised his white eyebrows. ‘Well? What do you think?’

‘Er . . .’ Jezal glanced nervously over at Marovia and Varuz, but they were giving no clues as to what was going on. ‘If I may?’

‘Of course, Jezal – I may call you Jezal, may I?’

‘Yes, er, well, yes, I suppose. Er, the thing is . . . I was wondering what all this has to do with me?’

Bayaz smiled. ‘We are short a man.’

There was a long, heavy silence. A drop of water trickled down Jezal’s scalp, dripped from his hair, ran down his nose and pattered against the tiles beneath his feet. Horror crept slowly through his body, from his gut to the very tips of his fingers. ‘Me?’ he croaked.

‘The road will be a long and difficult one, most likely beset with dangers. We have enemies out there, you and I. More enemies than you would believe. Who could be more useful than a proven swordsman, such as yourself? The winner of the Contest, no less!’

Jezal swallowed. ‘I appreciate the offer, really I do, but I am afraid I must decline. My place is with the army, you understand.’ He took a hesitant step back towards the door. ‘I must go north. My ship will soon be sailing and —’

‘I am afraid it has sailed already, Captain,’ said Marovia, his warm voice stopping Jezal dead in his tracks. ‘You need not concern yourself with that any longer. You will not be going to Angland.’

‘But, your Worship, my company—’

‘Will find another commander,’ smiled the High Justice: understanding, sympathetic, but horribly firm. ‘I appreciate your feelings, indeed I do, but we consider this more urgent. It is important that the Union be represented in this matter.’

‘Terribly important,’ murmured Varuz, half-heartedly. Jezal blinked at the three old men. There was no escape. So this was his reward for winning the Contest? Some crackpot voyage to who-knew-where in the company of a demented old man and a pack of savages? How he wished now that he had never started fencing! That he had never even seen a steel in his life! But wishing was useless. There was no way back.

‘I need to serve my country—’ mumbled Jezal.

Bayaz laughed. ‘There are other ways to serve your country, my boy, than being one corpse in a pile, up there in the frozen North. We leave tomorrow.’

‘Tomorrow? But my things are—’

‘Don’t worry, Captain,’ and the old man slipped off the table and clapped him enthusiastically on the shoulder, ‘everything is arranged. Your boxes were brought off the ship before it left. You have this evening to pick out some things for our journey, but we must travel light. Weapons, of course, and stout clothes for travelling. Make sure you pack a good pair of boots, eh? No uniforms, I’m afraid, they might attract the wrong kind of attention where we’re going.’

‘No, of course,’ said Jezal miserably. ‘Might I ask . . . where are we going?’

‘The edge of the World, my boy, the edge of the World!’ Bayaz’ eyes twinkled. ‘And back, of course . . . I hope.’

The Bloody-Nine

Say one thing for Logen Ninefingers, say that he's happy. They were leaving, at last. Beyond some vague talk about the Old Empire, and the edge of the World, he had no idea where they were going and he didn't care. Anywhere but this cursed place would do for him, and the sooner the better.

The latest member of the group didn't seem to share his good spirits. Luthar, the proud young man from the gate. The one who'd won the sword-game, thanks to Bayaz' cheating. He'd barely said two words together since he arrived. Just stood there, face rigid and chalky pale, staring out of the window, bolt upright like he had a spear all the way up his arse.

Logen ambled over to him. If you're going to travel with a man, and maybe fight alongside him, it's best to talk, and laugh if you can. That way you can get an understanding, and then a trust. Trust is what binds a band together, and out there in the wilds that can make the difference between living or dying. Building that kind of trust takes time, and effort. Logen reckoned it was best to get started early, and today he had good humour to spare, so he stood next to Luthar and looked out at the park, trying to dream up some common ground in which to plant the seeds of an unlikely friendship.

'Beautiful, your home.' He didn't think it was, but he was short on ideas.

Luthar turned from the window, looked Logen haughtily up and down. 'What would you know about it?'

'I reckon one man's thoughts are worth about as much as another's.'

'Huh,' sneered the young man coldly. 'Then I suppose that's where we differ.' He turned back to the view.

Logen took a deep breath. The trust might be a while coming. He abandoned Luthar and tried Quai instead, but the apprentice was scarcely more promising: slumped in a chair, frowning at nothing.

Logen sat down next to him. 'Aren't you looking forward to going home?'

'Home,' mumbled the apprentice listlessly.

'That's right, the Old Empire . . . or wherever.'

'You don't know what it's like there.'

‘You could tell me,’ said Logen, hoping to hear something about the peaceful valleys, cities, rivers and whatnot.

‘Bloody. It’s bloody there, and lawless, and life is cheap as dirt.’

Bloody and lawless. That all had an unpleasantly familiar smack to it. ‘Isn’t there an Emperor, or something?’

‘There are many, always making war on one another, forging alliances that last a week, or a day, or an hour, before they scramble to be first to stab each other in the back. When one Emperor falls another rises, and another, and another, and meanwhile the hopeless and the dispossessed scavenge and loot and kill on the fringes. The cities dwindle, the great works of the past fall into ruin, the crops go unharvested and the people go hungry. Bloodshed and betrayal, hundreds of years of it. The feuds have become so deep, so complicated, that few can tell any longer who hates who, and no one can say why. There’s no need for reasons any more.’

Logen made one last effort. ‘You never know. Things might have got better.’

‘Why?’ muttered the apprentice. ‘Why?’

Logen was fumbling for a reply when one of the doors swung briskly open. Bayaz frowned around the room. ‘Where’s Maljinn?’

Quai swallowed. ‘She left.’

‘I can see she left! I thought I told you to keep her here!’

‘You didn’t tell me how,’ muttered the apprentice.

His master ignored him. ‘What the hell has become of that bloody woman? We must be away by noon! Three days I’ve known her, and she already has me at the end of my rope!’ He clenched his teeth and took a deep breath. ‘Find her, will you Logen? Find her and bring her back.’

‘What if she doesn’t want to come back?’

‘I don’t know, pick her up and carry her! You can kick her all the way back here as far as I’m concerned!’

Easy to say, but Logen didn’t fancy trying it. Still, if it had to be done before they could leave, it was best done now. He sighed, got up from his chair and made for the door.

Logen pressed himself into the shadows by the wall, watching.

‘Shit,’ he whispered to himself. It would have to be now, just as they were about to leave. Ferro was twenty strides away, standing up tall with a deeper

than usual scowl on her dark face. There were three men gathered round her. Masked men, all in black. Their sticks were down by their legs, behind their backs, kept half out of sight, but Logen had no doubt about what they had in mind. He could hear one of them talking, hissing through his mask, something about coming quietly. He winced. Coming quietly didn't sound like Ferro's style.

He wondered whether he should slip away and tell the others. He couldn't really say he liked the woman much, not near enough to get his head broken for her. But if he left them to it, three against one, the chances were they'd have knocked her to pieces by the time he got back, however tough she was, and dragged her off to who knew where. He might never get out of this damn city then.

He started judging the distance, thinking about how best to go at them, weighing his chances, but he'd been too long doing nothing, and his mind moved slowly. He was still working on it when Ferro suddenly jumped on one of them, yelling at the top of her voice, knocking him on his back. She gave him a couple of vicious-looking punches in the face before the others caught hold of her and dragged her up.

'Shit,' hissed Logen. The three of them wrestled, lurching around in the lane, knocking against the walls, grunting and swearing, kicking and punching, a tangle of flailing limbs. It seemed that time had run out for a clever approach. Logen gritted his teeth and charged towards them.

The one on the floor had rolled to his feet, shaking the fuzz out of his head while the other two struggled to get a good grip on Ferro. Now he lifted his stick high, arching back, ready to smash her on the skull. Logen let go a roar. The masked face snapped round, surprised-looking.

'Huh?' Then Logen's shoulder crunched into his ribs, lifting him off his feet and sending him sprawling. Out of the corner of his eye he saw someone swing a stick at him, but he'd got them offguard and there was no real force behind it. He caught it across his arm then pressed in under it and smashed the man right in the mask with his fists, a full-blooded punch with each hand. He reeled back, arms flopping, already falling. Logen grabbed him by two fistfuls of his black coat, hauled him into the air and flung him upsidedown into the wall.

He bounced off with a gurgle and crumpled on the cobbles. Logen spun round, fists clenched, but the last one was lying on his face with Ferro on

top of him, one knee jammed into his back, pulling his head up by the hair and smashing his face into the road, shouting meaningless curses all the while.

'What did you fucking do?' he shouted, grabbing her under the elbow and dragging her off.

She tore free of his grip and stood there panting, fists bunched up by her sides, blood leaking out of her nose. 'Nothing,' she snarled.

Logen took a cautious step back. 'Nothing? What's this then?'

She bit off each word in her ugly accent and spat them at him. 'I . . . don't . . . know.' She wiped her bloody mouth with one hand, then froze. Logen glanced over his shoulder. Three more masked men, running at them down the narrow lane.

'Shit.'

'Move, pink!' Ferro turned and started running and Logen followed her. What else could he do? He ran. The horrible, breathless running of the hunted, shoulders prickling for a blow in the back, sucking in air in gasps, the slapping footfalls of the men behind echoing around him.

High white buildings flashed past on either side, windows, doors, statues, gardens. People too, shouting as they dived out of the way or flattening themselves against the walls. He had no idea where they were, no idea where they were going. A man stepped out of a doorway right in front of him, a big sheaf of papers in his arms. They crashed together, tumbled to the ground, rolling over and over in the gutter with papers flapping down all around them.

He tried to get up but his legs were burning. He couldn't see! There was a piece of paper across his face. He tore it away, felt someone grab him under the arm and haul him along. 'Up, pink!

Move!' Ferro. She wasn't even out of breath. Logen's lungs were bursting as he struggled to keep up with her but she pulled steadily away, head down, feet flying.

She charged through an archway just ahead and Logen laboured after her, boots skidding as he turned the corner. A great shadowy space, timbers reaching up high above, like a strange forest of square beams. Where the hell were they? There was bright light just ahead, open air. He plunged out

into it, blinking. Ferro was just beyond him, turning round slowly, breathing hard. They were in the middle of a circle of grass, a little circle.

He knew where they were now. The arena where he'd sat among the crowds, watching the sword-game. The empty benches stretched away all round. There were carpenters crawling amongst them, sawing and hammering. They'd already taken some of the benches to pieces near the back and the supports stuck up high into the air alone like giant rib bones. He put his hands on his wobbly knees and bent over, gasping for air, blowing spit out onto the ground.

'What . . . now?'

'This way.' Logen straightened up with an effort and wobbled after her, but she was already on her way back. 'Not that way!'

Logen saw them. Black masked figures, again. The one at the front was a woman, tall with a shock of red hair sprouting off her head. She padded towards the circle silently on the balls of her feet, waved her arm behind her, pointing the other two out to the sides, trying to get on the flanks, surround him. Logen cast about, looking for a weapon, but there was nothing – just the empty benches and the high white walls beyond. Ferro was backing towards him, not ten feet away, and beyond her there were two more masks, creeping out around the enclosures with sticks in their hands. Five. Five altogether.

'Shit,' he said.

'What the hell is keeping them?' growled Bayaz, pacing the floor. Jezal had never seen the old man annoyed before, and for some reason it made him nervous. Whenever he came close, Jezal wanted to back away. 'I'm having a bath, damn it. Could be months before my next one. Months!' Bayaz stalked out of the room and slammed the bathroom door behind him, leaving Jezal alone with the apprentice.

They were probably close enough in age, but they had nothing else in common, so far as Jezal could see, and he stared with unconcealed contempt. A sickly, weaselly, puny, bookish sort. Sulking like that, moping around, it was pathetic. Rude, too. Damn rude. Jezal fumed silently. Just who did he think he was, the arrogant pup? What the hell did he have to be so upset about? It wasn't him who'd had his life stolen out from under him.

Still, if he had to be left alone with one of them, he supposed it could have been worse. It might have been the moron Northman with his fumbling, thick-tongued small-talk. Or that Gurkish witch, staring and staring with her devil-yellow eyes. He shuddered to think of it. People of quality, Bayaz had said. He would have laughed had he not been on the verge of tears.

Jezal cast himself down on the cushions in a high-backed chair, but he found scant comfort there. His friends were on their way to Angland now, and he missed them already. West, Kaspa, Jalenhorm. Even that bastard Brint. On their way to honour, on their way to fame. The campaign would be long finished by the time he returned from whatever pit the old madman was leading him to, if he returned at all. Who knew when the next war would be, the next chance at glory?

How he wished he was going to fight the Northmen. How he wished he was with Ardee. It seemed like an age since he was happy. His life was awful. Awful. He lay back listlessly in his chair, wondering if things could possibly be any worse.

'Gurgh,' growled Logen as a stick cracked into his arm, then another into his shoulder, one in his side. He stumbled back, half on his knees, fending them away as best as he could. He could hear Ferro screaming somewhere behind him, fury or pain he couldn't say, he was too busy taking a battering.

Something smacked across his skull, hard enough to send him reeling away towards the seats. He fell on his face and the front bench hit him in the chest, driving the air from his lungs. There was blood running down his scalp, on his hands, in his mouth. His eyes were watering from a blow to the nose, his knuckles were all skinned and bloody, near as ripped as his clothes were. He lay there, for a moment, gathering whatever strength was left. There was a thick length of timber lying on the ground behind the bench. He grabbed hold of the end of it. It was loose. He dragged it towards him. It felt good in his hand. Heavy.

He sucked in air, summoning one more effort. He moved his arms and legs a little, testing them. Nothing broken – except his nose maybe, but it was hardly the first time. He heard footsteps coming up behind. Slow footsteps, taking their time.

He pushed himself up, slowly, trying to look as though he was in a daze. Then he let go a roar and spun round, swinging the timber over his head. It

broke in half across the masked man's shoulder with a mighty crack, half of it flying up off the turf and clattering away. The man gave a muffled wail and sank down, eyes screwed shut, one hand clutching at his neck, the other hanging useless, stick dropping from his fingers. Logen hefted the short piece of wood left in his hands and clubbed him across the face with it. It snapped his head back and drove him into the turf, mask half torn off, blood bubbling out from underneath.

Logen's head exploded with light and he tottered and sagged down on to his knees. Someone had hit him in the back of the head. Hit him hard. He swayed there for a moment trying to stop himself falling on his face, then things came suddenly back into focus. The red-haired woman was standing over him, raising her stick high.

Logen shoved himself up, flailed into her, fumbled with her arm, half pulling at her, half leaning on her, ears ringing, the world swinging madly. They staggered around, tugging on the stick like two drunkards wrestling over a bottle, back and forth in the circle of grass. He felt her punching him in the side with her other hand. Hard punches, right in the ribs.

'Aargh,' he growled, but his head was clearing now, and she was half his weight. He twisted the arm with the stick around behind her back. She punched him again, a knock on the side of his face that brought the stars back for an instant, but then he got hold of her other wrist and pinned that arm as well. He bent her backwards over his knee.

She kicked and twisted, eyes screwed up to furious slits, but Logen had her fast. He freed his right hand from the tangle of limbs, brought his fist up high and mashed it into her stomach. She gave a breathy wheeze and went limp, eyes bulging. He flung her away and she crawled a foot or two, pulled her mask down and started coughing puke onto the grass.

Logen stumbled and swayed, shook his head, spitting blood and dirt out onto the grass. Aside from the retching woman, there were four black, crumpled shapes stretched out in the circle. One of them was grunting softly as Ferro kicked him over and over. She had blood all over her face, but she was smiling.

'I am still alive,' Logen muttered to himself, 'I am still ...' There were more of them coming through the archway. He swung around, almost falling over. More, four more, from the other side. They were trapped.

‘Move, pink!’ Ferro dashed past him and sprang up onto the first bench, then the second, then the third, springing between them with great strides. Madness. Where was she going to go from there? Red Hair had stopped puking, she was crawling towards her fallen stick. The others were closing in fast, more of them than ever. Ferro was already a quarter of the way back and showing no signs of slowing, bounding from one bench to the next, making the planks rattle.

‘Shit.’ Logen set off after her. After a dozen benches his legs were burning again. He gave up trying to spring between them and started scrambling however he could. As he flopped over the backs of the benches he could see the masked men behind – following, watching, pointing and calling, spreading out through the seats.

He was slowing now. Each bench was a mountain. The nearest mask was only a few rows behind. He scrambled on, higher and higher, bloody hands clutching at the wood, bloody knees scraping across the benches, skull echoing with his own breath, skin prickling with sweat and fear. Air loomed suddenly empty before him. He stopped, gasping, arms waving, teetering on the edge of a dizzying drop.

He was close to the high roofs of the buildings behind, but most of the seating near the back had already been taken down, leaving the supports exposed – single looming pillars, narrow beams between them, and a lot of high, empty space. He watched Ferro spring from one soaring upright to another, then run across a wobbling plank, heedless of the plunging space below. She jumped off onto a flat roof at the far end, high above him. It seemed a very long way away.

‘Shit.’ Logen teetered out across the nearest beam, arms stretched out wide for balance, feet moving in an old man’s shuffle. His heart was banging like a smith’s hammer on an anvil, his knees were weak and wobbling from the climb. He tried to ignore the scrambling and shouting of the men behind him and look only at the knotted surface of the beam, but he couldn’t look down without seeing the spider’s web of timbers below him, and the tiny flagstones of the square below them. Far below.

He lurched onto a stretch of walkway still intact, clattered up it to the far end. He hauled himself up onto a timber above his head, locked his legs around it and dragged himself along on his arse whispering ‘I am still

alive,' to himself, over and over. The nearest mask had made it to the walkway, was running along it towards him.

The beam ended at the top of one of the upright struts. A square of wood a foot or two across. Then there was nothing. Two strides of empty air. Then another square at the top of another dizzying mast, then the plank to the flat roof. Ferro stared at him from the parapet.

'Jump!' she screamed. 'Jump, you pink bastard!'

He jumped. He felt the wind around him. His left foot landed on the square of wood, but there was no stopping. His right foot hit the plank. His ankle twisted, his knee buckled. The dizzy world pitched. His left foot came down, half on the wood, half off. The plank rattled. He was in the empty air, limbs flailing. It seemed like a long time.

'Ooof!' The parapet crashed into his chest. His arms clawed with it but there was no breath left in him. He began to slide back, ever so slowly, inch by terrible inch. First he could see the roof, then he could see his hands, then he could see nothing but the stones in front of his face. 'Help,' he whispered, but no help came.

It was a long way down, he knew that. A long, long way, and there was no water to fall into this time. Only hard, flat, fatal stone. He heard a rattling. The mask coming across the plank behind him. He heard someone shouting, but none of it mattered much now. He slipped backwards a little further, hands scrabbling at the crumbling mortar. 'Help,' he croaked, but there was no one to help him. Only the masks and Ferro, and none of them seemed like the helping kind.

He heard a clunk and a despairing shriek. Ferro kicking the plank, and the mask falling. The scream fell away, it felt like for a long time, then it was cut off in a distant thud. The mask's body smashing to pulp against the ground, far below, and Logen knew he was about to join him. You have to be realistic about these things. There would be no washing up on a river bank this time. His fingertips were slipping, slowly, the mortar was starting to come apart. The fighting, the running, the climb, they had all sucked the strength out of him, and now there was nothing left. He wondered what sound he would make as he plunged through the air. 'Help,' he mouthed.

And strong fingers closed around his wrist. Dark, dirty fingers. He heard growling, felt his arm being pulled, hard. He groaned. The edge of the parapet came back into view. He saw Ferro now, teeth gritted, eyes

squeezed almost shut with effort, veins standing out from her neck, scar livid against her dark face. He clutched at the parapet with his other hand, his chest came up beyond it, he managed to force his knee over.

She hauled him the rest of the way, and he rolled and flopped on his back on the other side, gasping like a landed fish, staring up at the white sky. 'I am still alive,' he muttered to himself after a moment, hardly able to believe it. It wouldn't have been too much of a surprise if Ferro had trodden on his hands and helped him fall.

Her face appeared above him, yellow eyes staring down, teeth bared in a snarl. 'You stupid, heavy pink bastard!'

She turned away, shaking her head, stalked to a wall and started climbing, hauling herself up fast towards a low-pitched roof above. Logen winced as he watched her. Did she never get tired? His arms were battered, bruised, scratched all over. His legs ached, his nose had started bleeding again. Everything hurt. He turned and looked down. One mask was staring at him from the edge of the benches, twenty strides away. A few more were scurrying around below, looking for some way up. Far below, in the yellow circle of grass, he could see a thin black figure with red hair, pointing around, then up at him, giving orders.

Sooner or later they would find a way up. Ferro was perched on the peak of the roof above him, a ragged dark shape against the bright sky. 'Stay there if you want,' she barked, then turned and disappeared. Logen groaned as he stood up, groaned as he shuffled to the wall, sighed as he began to search for a handhold.

*

'Where is everyone?' demanded Brother Longfoot. 'Where is my illustrious employer? Where is Master Ninefingers? Where is the charming lady, Maljinn?'

Jezal looked around. The sickly apprentice was sunk too deep in self-centred gloom to answer. 'I don't know about the other two, but Bayaz is in the bath.'

'I swear, I never came upon a man more attached to bathing than he. I hope the others will not be long. All is prepared, you know! The ship is

ready. The stores are loaded. It is not my way to delay. Indeed it is not! We must catch the tide, or be stuck here until—' The little man paused, staring up at Jezal with a sudden concern. 'You seem upset, my young friend. Troubled, indeed. Can I, Brother Longfoot, be of any assistance?'

Jezal had half a mind to tell him to mind his own business, but he settled for an irritated, 'No, no.'

'I'd wager that there is a woman involved. Would I be right?' Jezal looked up sharply, wondering how the man could have guessed. 'Your wife, perhaps?'

'No! I'm not married! It's nothing like that. It's er, well,' he fumbled for the words to describe it, and failed. 'It's nothing like that is all!'

'Ah,' said the Navigator, with a knowing grin. 'Ah, a forbidden love then, a secret love is it?' Much to his annoyance, Jezal found that he was blushing. 'I am right, I see it! There is no fruit so sweet as the one you cannot taste, eh, my young friend? Eh? Eh?' He waggled his eyebrows in what Jezal felt was a most unsavoury fashion.

'I wonder what's keeping those two?' Jezal didn't care in the least, but anything to change the subject.

'Maljinn, and Ninefingers? Hah,' laughed Longfoot, leaning towards him. 'Perhaps they've become involved, eh, in a secret love like yours? Perhaps they've crept off somewhere, to do what comes naturally!' He nudged Jezal in the ribs. 'Can you imagine, those two? That'd be something wouldn't it? Hah!'

Jezal grimaced. The hideous Northman he already knew for an animal, and from what little he'd seen of that evil woman she might well be worse. All he could imagine coming naturally to them was violence. The idea was perfectly revolting. He felt soiled just thinking about it.

*

The roofs seemed to go on forever. Up one, down another. Creeping along the peaks, one slippery foot on either side, edging across ledges, stepping over crumbling bits of wall. Sometimes Logen would look up for a moment, get a dizzying view across the tumbling mass of damp slates, pitted tiles, ancient lead, to the distant wall of the Agriont, sometimes even the city far

beyond. It might almost have been peaceful if it wasn't for Ferro, fast-moving, sure-footed, cursing at him and pulling him on, giving him no time to think about the view, or the nerve-wracking drops they skirted, or the black figures, surely still seeking for them below.

One of her sleeves had been torn half off some time in the fighting, flapping around her wrist, getting in the way as they climbed. She snarled and ripped it away at the shoulder. Logen smiled to himself as he recalled the efforts Bayaz had gone to in getting her to change her old stinking rags for new clothes. Now she was filthier than ever, shirt sweated through, spotted with blood and caked with grime from the roof-tops. She looked over her shoulder and saw him watching her. 'Move, pink,' she hissed at him.

'You see no colours, right?' She clambered on, ignoring him, swinging around a smoking chimney and slithering across the dirty slates on her belly, sliding down onto a narrow ledge between two roofs. Logen scrambled down behind her. 'No colours at all.'

'So?' she threw over her shoulder.

'So why do you call me pink?'

She looked round. 'Are you pink?'

Logen peered at his forearms. Aside from the mottled bruises, red scratches, blue veins, they were sort of pink, it had to be said. He frowned.

'Thought so.' She scurried away between the roofs, right to the end of the building, and peered down. Logen followed her, leaned out gingerly over the edge. A couple of people were moving around in the lane below. Far below, and there was no way down. They'd have to go back the way they came. Ferro had already moved away behind him.

Wind flicked at the side of Logen's face. Ferro's foot slapped against the edge of the roof, and then she was in the air. His jaw hung open as he watched her fly away, back arched, arms and legs flailing. She landed on a flat roof, grey lead streaked with green moss, rolled once then came up smoothly to her feet.

Logen licked his lips, pointed at his chest. She nodded. The flat roof was ten feet below, but there might have been twenty feet of empty air between him and it, and it was a long way down. He backed away slowly, giving himself a good run-up. He sucked in a couple of deep breaths, closed his eyes for a moment.

It would be perfect, in a way, if he fell. No songs, no stories. Just a bloody smear on a road somewhere. He started running. His feet thumped on the stone. The air whistled in his mouth, plucked at his torn clothes. The flat roof came flying up towards him. He landed with a shuddering impact, rolled once just as Ferro had done, stood up beside her. He was still alive.

'Hah!' he shouted. 'What d'you think of that?'

There was a creaking sound, then a cracking, then the roof gave way under Logen's feet. He grabbed despairingly at Ferro as he fell and she slid through after him, helpless. He tumbled in the air for a sickening moment, wailing, hands clutching at nothing. He crashed down on his back.

Logen coughed on choking dust, shook his head, shifted painfully. He was in a room, inky dark after the brightness outside. Dust was filtering down through the light from the ragged hole in the roof above. There was something soft under him. A bed. It had half collapsed, leaning at an angle, blankets covered in broken plaster. There was something across his legs. Ferro. He snorted a gurgling laugh to himself. In bed with a woman again, at last. Unfortunately it wasn't quite what he'd been hoping for.

'Stupid fucking pink!' she snarled, scrabbling off him and over to the door, bits of wood and plaster sliding off her dusty back. She hauled on the doorknob. 'Locked! It's—' Logen crashed past her, ripping the door off its hinges and sprawling out into the corridor beyond.

Ferro sprang over him. 'Up, pink, up!' A handy-looking length of wood had split from the edge of the door, a couple of nails sticking out of the end. Logen snatched it up in his hand. He struggled to his feet, stumbled down the corridor a few paces, came to a junction. A shadowy hallway stretched away to either side. Small windows cast sharp pools of light on the dark matting.

No way to tell which way Ferro had gone. He turned right, towards a flight of stairs.

There was a figure moving carefully down the dim corridor towards him. Long and thin like a black spider in the darkness, balanced on the balls of its feet. A chink of light shone on bright red hair.

'You again,' said Logen, weighing the length of wood in his hand.

‘That’s right. Me.’ There was a jingling sound, a flash of metal in the dark. Logen felt the piece of wood ripped out of his fingers and he saw it fly over the woman’s shoulder and clatter away down the corridor. Unarmed again, but she didn’t give him long to worry about it. There was something in her hand, something like a knife, and she threw it at him. He ducked out of the way and it hissed past his ear, then she jerked her other arm and something slashed him across the face, just under his eye. He lurched back against the wall, trying to understand what kind of magic he was facing.

It was like a metal cross, the thing in her hand, three curved blades, one with a hook on the end. A chain looped from a ring on the handle and disappeared up her sleeve.

The knife-thing darted out, missed Logen’s face by an inch as he bobbed away, struck a shower of sparks as it ripped back along the wall and slapped smoothly back into her hand. She let it drop, swinging gently from its chain, rattling against the floor, jumping and dancing towards him as she edged forward. She jerked her wrist and the thing shot out at Logen again, slashed across his chest as he tried to get away, spattering drops of blood against the wall.

He dived at her but his outspread arms caught nothing. There was a rattle and he felt his foot dragged from under him, his ankle snapped round painfully, caught by the chain as she ducked by. He sprawled out on his face, started to push himself up. The chain snaked under his neck. He just got his hand behind it before it snapped taut. The woman was on top of him, he could feel her knee pressing into his back, could hear her breath hissing through her mask as she pulled, the chain growing tighter and tighter, cutting into the palm of his hand.

Logen grunted, scrabbling to his knees, lumbering unsteadily to his feet. The woman was still on his back, all her weight bearing down on him, pulling at the chain as hard as she could. Logen flailed around with his free hand but he couldn’t get at her, couldn’t throw her off – she was like a barnacle stuck fast to him. He could hardly breathe now. He tottered forward a few steps, then dropped over backwards.

‘Uurgh,’ whispered the woman in his ear as his weight crushed her into the floor. The chain went slack enough for Logen to drag it clear and slither out from under it. Free. He rolled over and grabbed the woman’s neck with his left hand, started squeezing. She kneed at him, dug at him with her fists,

but his weight was across her and the blows were weak. They snarled and gasped and croaked at each other, animal sounds, faces only inches apart. A couple of spots of blood dripped from the cut on his cheek and pattered on her mask. Her hand came up and started fumbling with his face, pushing his head back. Her finger forced its way up his nose.

'Aargh!' he screamed. Pain stabbed up into his head. He let go of her and staggered up, one hand clasped to his face. She scrambled away, coughing, landed a kick in his ribs that bent him over, but he still had a grip on the chain and he yanked on it with all his weight. Her arm snapped out and she yelped and flew straight into him, his knee sinking into her side, crushing the breath out of her. Logen grabbed hold of the back of her shirt, half lifted her off the floor and flung her down the stairs.

She rolled and flopped and bounced her way down, slid to a stop on her side near the bottom. Logen was half-tempted to follow her down and finish the job, but he had no time. There'd be more where she came from. He turned and hobbled back the other way, cursing his twisted ankle.

Sounds crept up on him from all around, echoing down the corridor from who knew where. Distant rattling and banging, shouts and cries. He stared into darkness, limping, running with sweat, one hand on the wall to steady himself. He leaned round a corner, trying to see if it was clear. He felt something cold across his neck. A knife.

'Still alive?' whispered a voice in his ear. 'You don't die easy, eh, pink?' Ferro. He slowly pushed her arm away.

'Where d'you get the knife?' He wished he had one.

'He gave it me.' There was a crumpled shape in the shadows by the wall, the matting all round soaked with dark blood. 'This way.'

Ferro crept off down the corridor, keeping low in the darkness. He could still hear the sounds, beneath them, beside them, all around them. They crept down a flight of stairs, out into a dim hallway panelled with dark wood. Ferro ducked from shadow to shadow, moving fast. Logen could do no more than limp after her, dragging his leg, trying not to squeal with pain whenever he put his weight on it.

'There! It's them!' Figures in the dim corridor behind. He turned to run, but Ferro held her arm out. There were more, coming the other way. There was a big door on his left, standing open a crack.

‘In here!’ Logen shoved his way through and Ferro darted in after him. There was a heavy piece of furniture beside it, a big cupboard thing with shelves on top, covered in plates. Logen grabbed hold of one end and dragged it across in front of the doors, a couple of the plates dropping off and smashing on the floor. He pressed his back against it. That should hold them for a moment, at least.

A big room with a high vaulted ceiling. Two huge windows took up most of one wood-panelled wall, a big stone fireplace facing them. A long table stood between, ten chairs on either side, set for eating with cutlery and candlesticks. A big dining room, and there was only one way in. Or out.

Logen heard muffled shouting beyond the door. The big cupboard wobbled against his back. Another plate clattered from its shelf, bounced off his shoulder and smashed on the stone flags, scattering fragments across the floor.

‘Nice fucking plan,’ snarled Ferro. Logen’s feet slid as he strained to hold the teetering cupboard up. She dashed over to the nearest window, fumbled at the metal frames round the little panes, prising with her fingernails, but there was no way out.

Logen’s eye caught on something. An old greatsword, mounted over the fireplace as an ornament. A weapon. He gave the cupboard one last shove then hurried over to it, seized hold of the long hilt in both hands and ripped it from its bracket. It was blunt as a plough, the heavy blade spotted with rust, but still solid. A blow from it might not cut a man in half, but it would knock him down alright. He turned just in time to see the cupboard tipping over, dropping shattering crockery all over the stone floor.

Black figures spilled into the room, masked figures. The one at the front had an evil-looking axe, the next a short-bladed sword. The one behind him was dark-skinned, with gold rings through his ears. He had a long, curved dagger in either hand.

Those weapons were not for knocking a man on the head with, not unless they meant to knock his brains right out. Seemed that they’d given up on taking prisoners. Killing weapons, meant to kill. Well, so much the better, Logen told himself. If you say one thing for Logen Ninefingers, and one thing only, say he’s a killer. He eyed those black-masked men, clambering over the fallen cupboard, spreading out cautiously around the far wall. He glanced over at Ferro, lips curled back, knife in her hand, yellow eyes

sparkling. He fingered the grip of his stolen sword – heavy and brutal. Just the tool for the job, for once.

He plunged at the nearest mask, yelling at the top of his voice, swinging the sword over his head. The man tried to duck away but the tip of the blade caught him on the shoulder and knocked him reeling. Another one jumped in behind him, chopping with his axe, sending Logen stumbling away, gasping as his weight went onto his bad ankle.

He flailed around with the big sword, but there were too many. One scrambled over the table, got between him and Ferro. Something hit him in the back and he stumbled, spun, slipped, lashed out with the sword and hit something soft. Somebody screamed, but by then the one with the axe was coming for him again. Everything was a mess of masks and iron, clashing, scraping weapons, curses and cries, ragged breathing.

Logen swung the sword but he was so tired, so hurt, so aching. The sword was heavy, and getting heavier all the time. The mask weaved out of the way and the rusty blade clanged into the wall, knocking a great chunk out of the wooden panelling and biting into the plaster behind, the shock nearly jarring it out of his hands.

'Ooof,' he breathed as the man kneed him in the stomach. Something hit him in the leg and he nearly fell. He could hear somebody yelling behind, but it seemed far away. His chest was hurting, his mouth was sour. There was blood on him. All over him. He could hardly breathe. The mask stepped forward, and again, smiling, smelling victory. Logen lurched back towards the fireplace, his foot slipping, falling down on one knee.

All things come to an end.

He couldn't lift the old sword any more. There was no strength left. Nothing. The room was growing blurry.

All things come to an end, but some only lie still, forgotten . . .

There was a cold feeling in Logen's stomach, a feeling he hadn't felt for a long time. 'No,' he whispered. 'I'm free of you.' But it was too late. Too late . . .

. . . there was blood on him, but that was good. There was always blood. But he was kneeling, and that was wrong. The Bloody-Nine kneels to no man. His fingers sought out the cracks between the stones of the fireplace, prising between them like old tree roots, pulling him up. His leg hurt and he

smiled. Pain was the fuel that made the fires burn. Something moved in front of him. Masked men. Enemies.

Corpses, then.

'You're hurt, Northman!' The eyes of the closest one sparkled above his mask, the shining blade of his axe danced in the air. 'Want to give up yet?'

'Hurt?' The Bloody-Nine threw back his head and laughed. 'I'll fucking show you hurt!' He tumbled forward, flowed beneath the axe, slippery as fishes in the river, swinging the heavy blade in a great low circle. It crunched into the man's knee and cracked it back the wrong way, scythed on into his other leg and ripped it out from under him. He gave a muffled scream as he spun onto the stones, turning round and round in the air, shattered legs flopping.

Something dug into the Bloody-Nine's back, but there was no pain. It was a sign. A message in a secret tongue, that only he could understand. It told him where the next dead man was standing. He reeled around and the sword followed him in a furious, beautiful, irresistible arc. It crunched into someone's guts, folded him in half, snatched him off his feet and flung him through the air. He bounced from the wall beside the fireplace and crumpled on the floor in a shower of broken plaster.

A knife whirled, hissing, stuck deep into the Bloody-Nine's shoulder with a damp thud. The black one, with the rings through his ears. He had thrown it. He was on the other side of the table, smiling, pleased with his throw. A terrible mistake. The Bloody-Nine came for him. Another knife flashed past, clattered against the wall. He sprang over the table and the sword followed behind.

The dark man dodged the first great swing, and the second. Fast and tricky clever, but not clever enough. The third blow bit him in the side. A glancing bite. Just a nibble. It only smashed his ribs and knocked him screaming to his knees. The last one was better, a circle of flesh and iron that carved into his mouth and ripped his head half off, showering blood across the walls. The Bloody-Nine plucked the knife from his shoulder and tossed it to the floor. Blood ran from the wound, soaked through his shirt and made a great, lovely, warm red stain.

He dropped and faded away, leaves falling from the tree, rolling across the ground. A man lunged past, slashing at the air where he had stood with a short-bladed sword. Before he could turn, the Bloody-Nine was on him, left

hand snaking round his fists. He struggled and strained, but it was useless. The Bloody-Nine's grip was strong as the roots of mountains, relentless as the tide. 'They send such as you to fight me?' He flung the man back against the wall and squeezed, crushing his hands around the grip of his weapon, turning the short blade until it was pointing at his chest. 'A fucking insult!' he roared, spitting him on his own sword.

The man screamed, and screamed behind his mask, and the Bloody-Nine laughed, and twisted the blade. Logen might have pitied him, but Logen was far away and the Bloody-Nine had no more pity in him than the winter. Less even. He stabbed, and cut, and cut, and smiled, and the screams bubbled and died, and he let the corpse drop to the cold stones. His fingers were slick with blood and he wiped it on his clothes, on his arms, on his face – just as it should be.

The one by the fireplace was sitting, hanging limp, head back, eyes like wet stones, staring at the ceiling. Part of the earth now. The Bloody-Nine smashed his face open with the sword just to make sure. Best to leave no doubts. The one who'd had the axe was crawling for the door, legs twisted out and dragging over the stones behind him, gasping and whimpering all the way.

'Quiet now.' The heavy blade crunched into the back of the man's skull and sprayed his blood across the stones.

'More,' he whispered, and the room turned around him as he sought out the next kill. 'More!' he bellowed, and he laughed, and the walls laughed, and the corpses laughed with him. 'Where's the rest of you?'

He saw a dark-skinned woman, with a bleeding cut on her face and a knife in her hand. She didn't look like the others, but she would do just as well. He smiled, crept forward, raising the sword in both hands. She stepped away, watching him, keeping the table between them, hard yellow eyes like the wolf. A tiny voice seemed to tell him that she was on his side. Shame.

'Northerner, eh?' asked a massive shape in the doorway.

'Aye, who's asking?'

'The Stone-Splitter.'

He was big this one, very big, and tough, and savage. You could see it on him as he shoved the cupboard away with his huge boot and crunched forward through the broken plates. It meant less than nothing to the Bloody-Nine though – he was made to break such men. Tul Duru Thunderhead had

been bigger. Rudd Threetrees had been tougher. Black Dow had been twice as savage. The Bloody-Nine had broken them, and plenty more besides. The bigger, the tougher, the more savage he was, so much the worse would be his breaking.

'Stone-Shitter?' laughed the Bloody-Nine. 'So fuckin' what? Next to die is what y'are, and nothing more!' He held his left hand up, spattered with red blood, three fingers spread out wide, grinning through the gap where the middle one used to be, a long time ago. 'They call me the Bloody-Nine.'

'Dah!' The Stone-Splitter ripped off his mask and threw it on the floor. 'Liar! There's plenty o' men in the north have lost a finger. They ain't all Ninefingers!'

'No. Only me.'

That great face twisted up with rage. 'You fucking liar! You think to scare the Stone-Splitter with a name that's not your own? I'll carve a new arse in you, maggot! I'll put the bloody cross on you! I'll put you back in the mud you coward fucking liar!'

'Kill me?' The Bloody-Nine laughed louder than ever. 'I do the killing, fool!'

The talk was done. Stone-Splitter came at him with axe in one hand and mace in the other, great heavy weapons, though he used them quick enough. The mace swung across, smashed a great hole through the glass in one of the windows. The axe came down, split one timber of the table in half, made the plates jump in the air, the candlesticks topple. The Bloody-Nine twitched away, frog hopping, waiting for his time.

The mace missed his shoulder by an inch as he rolled across the table, cracked one of the big flat stones on the floor, split it down the middle, chips flying through the air. Stone-Splitter roared, swinging his weapons, smashing a chair in half, knocking a chunk of stone out of the fireplace, chopping a great gash in the wall. His axe stuck fast in the wood for a moment and the Bloody-Nine's sword flashed over, broke the haft into splintered halves, leaving the Stone-Splitter with a broken stick in his paw. He flung it away and hefted the mace, came on even harder, swinging it round with furious bellows.

It sailed over and the Bloody-Nine's sword caught it just below the head, ripped it out of the big hand. It twisted through the air and clattered into the corner, but the Stone-Splitter pressed forward, spreading his great hands out

wide. Too close to use the big sword now. Stone-Splitter smiled as his huge arms closed around the Bloody-Nine, folding him tight, holding him fast. ‘Got yer!’ he shouted, squeezing him in a great hug.

An awful mistake. Better to embrace the burning fire.

Crack!

The Bloody-Nine’s forehead smashed into his mouth. He felt the Stone-Splitter’s grip slacken a little and he wriggled his shoulders, making room, wriggling, wriggling, mole in his burrow. He swung his head back as far as it would go. Billy-goat charges. The second head-butt smashed the Stone-Splitter’s flat nose open. He grunted and the big arms released a little more. The third cracked his cheekbone. The arms fell away. The fourth broke his heavy jaw. Now it was the Bloody-Nine holding him up, smiling as he mashed his forehead into the shattered face. Woodpecker pecking, tap, tap, tap. Five. Six. Seven. Eight. There was a satisfying rhythm to the crunching of the face bones. Nine, and he let the Stone-Splitter fall. He sagged sideways and crumpled onto the floor, blood spilling from his ruined face.

‘How’s that for yer?’ laughed the Bloody-Nine, wiping blood out of his eyes and giving the Stone-Splitter’s lifeless body a couple of kicks. The room spun around him, swam around him, laughing, laughing. ‘How’s that . . . fuck . . .’ He stumbled, blinked, sleepy, campfire guttering. ‘No . . . not yet . . .’ He dropped to his knees. Not yet. There was more to do, always more.

‘Not yet,’ he snarled, but his time was up . . .

. . . Logen screamed. He fell down. Pain, everywhere. His legs, his shoulder, his head. He wailed until the blood caught in his throat, then he coughed and gasped and rolled around, scrabbling at the floor. The world was a blurry smear. He gurgled up blood and drooled it out, long enough to start wailing again.

A hand clamped over his mouth. ‘Stop your damn crying, pink! Now, you hear me?’ A voice, whispering urgent in his ear. Strange, hard voice. ‘Stop your crying or I leave you, understand? One chance!’ The hand came away. Air came out between his gritted teeth in a high pitched, keening moan, but not too loud.

A hand clamped round his wrist, dragged his arm up. He gasped as his shoulder stretched out, was dragged over something hard. Torture. ‘Up,

bastard, I can't carry you! Up, now! One chance, understand?'

He was lifted slowly, he tried to push with his legs. The breath whistled and clicked in his throat, but he could do it. Left foot, right foot. Easy. His knee buckled, pain stabbed up his leg. He screamed again and fell, grovelled on the floor. Best to lie still. His eyes closed.

Something slapped him hard in the face, and again. He grunted. Something slid under his armpit, started to pull him up.

'Up, pink! Up, or I leave you. One chance, you hear?'

Breath in, breath out. Left foot, right foot.

Longfoot fussed and worried, first tapping his fingers on the arm of his chair, then counting on them, shaking his head and moaning about tides. Jezal stayed silent, hoping against hope that the two savages might have drowned in the moat, and that the whole venture might therefore come to nothing. There would still be plenty of time to make it to Angland. Perhaps all was not lost . . .

He heard the door open behind him, and his dreams were punctured. Misery swaddled him once again, but it was soon replaced by horrified surprise as he turned around.

Two ragged shapes stood in the doorway, covered in blood and filth. Devils, surely, stepped out from some gate to hell. The Gurkish woman was cursing as she lurched into the room. Ninefingers had one arm across her shoulders, the other swinging loose, blood dripping from his fingertips, head drooping.

They wobbled together for a step or two, then the Northman's stumbling foot caught on a chair leg and they tumbled onto the floor. The woman snarled and shrugged off his limp arm, shoved him away and scrambled up to her feet. Ninefingers rolled over slowly, groaning, and a deep gash in his shoulder yawned open, oozing blood across the carpet. It was red in there, like fresh meat in a butcher's shop. Jezal swallowed, horrified and fascinated at once.

'God's breath!'

'They came for us.'

'What?'

'Who came?'

A woman sidled cautiously around the door frame, red-haired, all in black, wearing a mask. A Practical, Jezal's numb brain was saying, but he could not understand why she was so bruised, or walking with such a limp. Another edged through behind her, a man, armed with a heavy sword.

'You're coming with us,' said the woman.

'Make me!' Maljinn spat at her. Jezal was shocked to see she had produced a knife from somewhere, and a bloody one at that. She should not be armed! Not here!

He realised, stupidly, that he was wearing a sword. Of course he was. He fumbled with the hilt and drew it, with the vague intention of knocking the Gurkish devil on the back of the head with the flat before she could do any more damage. If the Inquisition wanted her they could damn well have her, and the rest of them too. Unfortunately, the Practicals got the wrong idea.

'Drop it,' hissed the red-haired woman, glaring at him through narrow eyes.

'I will not!' said Jezal, tremendously offended that she might think he was on the side of these villains.

'Erm . . .' said Quai.

'Aaargh,' groaned Ninefingers, clutching up a bloody handful of carpet and dragging it towards him, making the table lurch across the floor.

A third Practical crept through the door, around the red-haired woman, a heavy mace in his gloved fist. An unpleasant-looking weapon. Jezal could not help picturing the effect it might have on his skull, if swung in anger. He fingered the hilt of his sword uncertainly, feeling in terrible need of someone to tell him what to do.

'Coming with us,' said the woman again, as her two friends advanced slowly into the room.

'Oh dear,' murmured Longfoot, taking cover behind the table.

Then the door to the bathroom banged against the wall. Bayaz stood there, entirely naked, dripping with soapy water. His slow gaze took in first Ferro, scowling with her knife out, then Longfoot hiding behind the table, Jezal with sword drawn, Quai standing with his mouth open, Ninefingers sprawled out in a bloody ruin, and finally the three black masked figures, weapons at the ready.

There was a pregnant pause.

‘What the fuck is this?’ he roared, striding into the centre of the room, water dripping from his beard, down through the grizzled white hairs on his chest, off his slapping fruits. It was a strange sight to see. A naked old man confronting three armed Practicals of the Inquisition. Ridiculous, and yet no one was laughing. There was something strangely terrifying about him, even without his clothes and running with wet. It was the Practicals who shifted backwards, confused, scared even.

‘You’re coming with us,’ the woman repeated, though a certain doubt seemed to have entered her voice. One of her companions stepped warily toward Bayaz.

Jezal felt a strange sensation in his stomach. A tugging, a sucking, an empty, sick feeling. It was like being back on the bridge, in the shadow of the Maker’s House. Only worse. The wizard’s face had turned terribly hard. ‘My patience is at an end.’

Like a bottle dropped from a great height, the nearest Practical burst apart. There was no thunderclap, only a gentle squelching. One moment he was moving toward the old man, sword raised, entirely whole. The next he was a thousand fragments. Some unknown part of him thudded wetly against the plaster next to Jezal’s head. His sword dropped and rattled on the boards.

‘You were saying?’ growled the First of the Magi.

Jezal’s knees trembled. His mouth gaped. He felt faint, and queasy, and awfully hollow inside. There were spots of blood across his face, but he dared not move to wipe them off. He stared at the naked old man, unable to believe his eyes. It seemed that he had watched a well-meaning old buffoon change in an instant into a brutal murderer, and without the slightest grain of hesitation.

The red-haired woman stood there a moment, spattered with blood and flecks of meat and bone, eyes wide as two dinner plates, then started to shuffle slowly backwards towards the door. The other one followed her, almost tripping over Ninefingers’ foot in his haste to get away. Everyone else stayed motionless as statues. Jezal heard quick footsteps in the corridor outside as the two Practicals ran for their lives. He almost envied them. They, it seemed, would escape. He was trapped in this nightmare.

‘We must leave, now!’ barked Bayaz, wincing as if he was in pain, ‘just as soon as I have my trousers on. Help him, Longfoot!’ he shouted over his shoulder. For once, the Navigator was lost for words. He blinked, then got

up from behind the table and bent down over the unconscious Northman, ripped off a strip of his tattered shirt to use as a bandage. He paused, frowning, as though unsure where to begin.

Jezal swallowed. His sword was still in his hand, but he seemed to lack the strength to put it away. Bits of the unfortunate Practical were scattered around the room, stuck to the walls, the ceiling, the people. Jezal had never seen a man die before, let alone in so hideous and unnatural a fashion. He supposed he should have been horrified, but instead he felt only an overpowering sense of relief. His worries seemed now rather petty things.

He, at least, was still alive.

The Tools we Have

Glokta stood in the narrow hallway, leaning on his cane and waiting. On the other side of the door, he could hear raised voices.

'I said, no visitors!'

He sighed to himself. He had many better things to do than to stand around here on his aching leg, but he had given his word and he meant to keep it. A pokey, unremarkable hallway in a pokey, unremarkable house among many hundreds of others the same. The whole district was recently built, terraces of houses in the new fashion: half-timbered, three stories, good perhaps for a family and a couple of servants. Hundreds of houses, one very much like another. Houses for the gentlefolk. The new rich. Jumped-up commoners, Sult would probably have called them. Bankers, merchants, artisans, shop keepers, clerks. *Perhaps the odd town-house of some successful gentleman farmer, like this one here.*

The voices had stopped now. Glokta heard movement, some clinking of glass, then the door opened a crack and the maid peered out. An ill-favoured girl with big, watery eyes. She looked scared and guilty. *Still, I am used to that. Everyone seems scared and guilty around the Inquisition.*

'She'll see you now,' the girl mumbled. Glokta nodded and shuffled past her into the room beyond.

He had some hazy memories of staying with West's family for a week or two one summer, up in Angland, a dozen years ago perhaps, although it seemed more like a hundred. He remembered fencing with West in the courtyard of their house, of being watched every day by a dark-haired girl with a serious face. He remembered meeting a young woman in the park not long ago, who had asked him how he was. He had been in a lot of pain at the time, scarcely seeing straight, and her face was a blur in his memory. So it was that Glokta was not sure what to expect, but he certainly had not expected the bruises. He was a touch shocked, for a moment. *Though I hide it well.*

Dark, purple and brown and yellow, under her left eye, the lower lid well swollen. Round the corner of her mouth too, the lip split and scabbed over. Glokta knew a lot about bruises, few men more. *And I hardly think she got*

these by accident. She was punched in the face, by someone who meant it. He looked at those ugly marks, and he thought about his old friend Collem West, crying in his dining room and begging for help, and he put the two together.

Interesting.

She sat there, all the while, looking back at him with her chin high, the side of her face with the worst bruises turned towards him, as though challenging him to say something. *She is not much like to her brother. Not much like at all. I don't think she'll be bursting into tears in my dining room, or anywhere else.*

'What can I do for you, Inquisitor?' she asked him coldly. He detected the very slightest slurring of the word Inquisitor. *She has been drinking . . . though she hides it well. Not enough to make her stupid.* Glokta pursed his lips. For some reason he had the feeling that he needed to watch his step.

'I'm not here in a professional capacity. Your brother asked me to—'

She cut him off rudely. 'Did he? Really? Here to make sure I don't fuck the wrong man, are you?' Glokta waited for a moment, allowing that to sink in, then he began to chuckle softly to himself. *Oh, that's grand! I begin to quite like her!* 'Something funny?' she snapped.

'Pardon me,' said Glokta, wiping his running eye with a finger, 'but I spent two years in the Emperor's prisons. I daresay, if I had known I'd be there half that long at the start, I would have made a more concerted effort to kill myself. Seven hundred days, give or take, in the darkness. As close to hell, I would have thought, as a living man can go. My point is this – if you mean to upset me you'll need more than harsh language.'

Glokta treated her to his most revolting, toothless, crazy smile. There were few people indeed who could stomach that for long, but she did not look away for an instant. Soon, in fact, she was smiling back at him. A lop-sided grin of her own, and one which he found oddly disarming. *A different tack, perhaps.*

'The fact is, your brother asked me to look after your welfare while he is away. As far as I'm concerned you can fuck whomever you please, though my general observation has been that, as far as the reputations of young women are concerned, the less fucking the better. The reverse is true for young men of course. Hardly fair, but then life is unfair in so many ways, this one hardly seems worth commenting on.'

‘Huh. You’re right there.’

‘Good,’ said Glokta, ‘so we understand each other then. I see that you hurt your face.’

She shrugged. ‘I fell. I’m a clumsy fool.’

‘I know how you feel. I’m such a fool I knocked half my teeth out and hacked my leg to useless pulp. Look at me now, a cripple. It’s amazing where a little foolishness can take you, if it goes unchecked. We clumsy types should stick together, don’t you think?’

She looked at him thoughtfully for a moment, stroking the bruises on her jaw. ‘Yes,’ she said, ‘I suppose we should.’

Goyle’s Practical, Vitari, was sprawled on a chair opposite Glokta, just outside the huge dark doors to the Arch Lector’s office. She was slumped into it, poured onto it, draped over it like a wet cloth, long limbs dangling, head resting on the back. Her eyes twitched lazily around the room from time to time under heavy lids, sometimes coming to rest on Glokta himself for insultingly long periods. She never turned her head though, or indeed moved a muscle, as though the effort might be too painful.

Which, indeed, it probably would be.

Plainly, she had been involved in a most violent melee, hand to hand. Above her black collar, her neck was a mass of mottled bruises. There were more around her black mask, a lot more, and a long cut across her forehead. One of her drooping hands was heavily bandaged, the knuckles of the other were scratched and scabbed over. *She’s taken more than a couple of knocks. Fighting hard, against someone who meant business.*

The tiny bell jumped and tinkled. ‘Inquisitor Glokta,’ said the secretary, as he hurried out from behind his desk to open the door, ‘his Eminence will see you now.’

Glokta sighed, grunted and heaved on his cane as he got to his feet. ‘Good luck,’ said the woman as he limped past.

‘What?’

She gave a barely perceptible nod towards the Arch Lector’s office. ‘He’s in a hell of a mood today.’

As the door opened, Sult’s voice washed out into the ante-room, changing from a muffled murmuring into an all-out scream. The secretary jerked back from the gap as if slapped in the face.

‘Twenty Practicals!’ shrieked the Arch Lector, from beyond the archway. ‘Twenty! We should have been questioning that bitch now, instead of sitting here, licking our wounds! How many Practicals?’

‘Twenty, Arch Lec—’

‘Twenty! Damn it!’ Glokta took a deep breath and insinuated himself through the door. ‘And how many dead?’ The Arch Lector was striding briskly up and down the tiled floor of his huge circular office, waving his long arms in the air. He was dressed all in white, as spotless as ever. *Though I fancy a hair is out of place, maybe even two. He must truly be in a fury.* ‘How many?’

‘Seven,’ mumbled Superior Goyle, hunched into his chair.

‘A third of them! A third! How many injured?’

‘Eight.’

‘Most of the rest! Against how many?’

‘In all, there were six—’

‘Really?’ The Arch Lector thumped his fists on the table, leaning down over the shrinking Superior. ‘I heard two. Two!’ he screamed, pacing once more round and round the table, ‘and both of them savages! Two I heard! A white one and a black one, and the black one a woman! A woman!’ He kicked savagely at the chair next to Goyle and it wobbled back and forth on its feet. ‘And what’s worse, there were countless witnesses to this disgrace! Did I not say discreet? What part of the word discreet is beyond your comprehension, Goyle?’

‘But Arch Lector, circumstances cannot—’

‘Cannot?’ Sult’s screech rose an entire octave higher. ‘Cannot? How dare you give me *cannot*, Goyle? Discreet I asked for, and you gave me bloody slaughter across half the Agriont, and failed into the bargain! We look like fools! Far worse, we look like weak fools! My enemies on the Closed Council will waste no time in turning this farce to their advantage. Marovia’s already stirring trouble, the old windbag, whining about liberty and tighter reins and all the rest of it! Damn lawyers! They had their way, we’d get nothing done! And you’re making it happen, Goyle! I’m stalling, and I’m saying sorry, and I’m trying to put things in the best light, but a turd’s a turd, whatever light it’s in! Do you have any notion of the damage you’ve inflicted? Of the months of hard work you’ve undone?’

‘But, Arch Lector, have they not now left the—’

‘They’ll be back, you cretin! He did not go to all this trouble simply to leave, dolt! Yes they’ve gone, idiot, and they’ve taken the answers with them! Who they are, what they want, who is behind them! Left? Left? Damn you, Goyle!’

‘I am wretched, your Eminence.’

‘You are less than wretched!’

‘I cannot but apologise.’

‘You’re lucky you’re not apologising over a slow fire!’ Sult sneered his disgust. ‘Now get out of my sight!’

Goyle flashed a look of the most profound hatred at Glokta as he cringed his way out of the room. *Goodbye, Superior Goyle, goodbye. The Arch Lector’s fury could not fall upon a more deserving candidate.* Glokta could not suppress the tiniest of smiles as he watched him go.

‘Something amusing you?’ Sult’s voice was ice as he held out his white gloved hand, purple stone flashing on his finger.

Glokta bent to kiss it. ‘Of course not, your Eminence.’

‘Good, because you’ve nothing to be amused about, I can tell you! Keys?’ he sneered. ‘Stories? Scrolls? What could have possessed me to listen to your drivel?’

‘I know, Arch Lector, I apologise.’ Glokta edged humbly into the chair that Goyle had so recently vacated.

‘You apologise, do you? Everyone apologises! Some good that does me! Fewer apologies and more successes is what I need! And to think, I had such high hopes for you! Still, I suppose we must work with the tools we have.’

Meaning? But Glokta said nothing.

‘We have problems. Very serious problems, in the South.’

‘The South, Arch Lector?’

‘Dagoska. The situation there is grave. Gurkish troops are flocking to the peninsula. They already outnumber our garrison by ten to one, and all our strength is committed in the North. Three regiments of the King’s Own remain in Adua, but with the peasants getting out of hand across half of Midderland, they cannot be spared. Superior Davoust was keeping me informed in weekly letters. He was my eyes, Glokta, do you understand? He suspected that there was a conspiracy afoot within the city. A conspiracy intending to deliver Dagoska into the hands of the Gurkish. Three weeks

ago the letters stopped, and yesterday I learned that Davoust has disappeared. Disappeared! A Superior of the Inquisition! Vanished into thin air! I am blind, Glokta. I am fumbling in the dark at a most crucial time! I need someone there that I can trust, do you understand?'

Glokta's heart was thumping. 'Me?'

'Oh you're learning,' sneered Sult. 'You are the new Superior of Dagoska.'

'Me?'

'Many congratulations, but forgive me if we leave the feast until a quieter moment! You, Glokta, you!' The Arch Lector leaned down over him. 'Go to Dagoska and dig. Find out what happened to Davoust. Weed the garden down there. Root out everything disloyal. Everything and anyone. Light a fire under them! I need to know what's going on, if you have to toast the Lord Governor until he drips gravy!'

Glokta swallowed. 'Toast the Lord Governor?'

'Is there an echo in here?' snarled Sult, looming even lower. 'Sniff out the rot, and cut it away! Hack it off! Burn it out! All of it, wherever it is! Take charge of the city's defences yourself if you must. You were a soldier!' He reached out and slid a single sheet of parchment across the table top. 'This is the King's writ, signed by all twelve chairs on the Closed Council. All twelve. I sweated blood to get it. Within the city of Dagoska, you will have full powers.'

Glokta stared down at the document. A simple sheet of cream-coloured paper, black writing, a huge red seal at the bottom. *We, the undersigned, confer upon His Majesty's faithful servant, Superior Sand dan Glokta, our full powers and authority* . . . Several blocks of neat writing, and below, two columns of names. Crabby blotches, flowing swirls, near illegible scrawls. *Hoff, Sult, Marovia, Varuz, Halleck, Burr, Torlichorm, and all the rest. Powerful names.* Glokta felt faint as he picked up the document in his two trembling hands. It seemed heavy.

'Don't let it go to your head! You still have to tread carefully. We can stand no more embarrassments, but the Gurkish must be kept out at all costs, at least until this business in Angland is settled. At all costs, do you understand?'

I understand. A posting to a city surrounded by enemies and riddled with traitors, where one Superior has already mysteriously disappeared. Closer

to a knife in the back than a promotion, but we must work with the tools we have. ‘I understand, Arch Lector.’

‘Good. Keep me well informed. I want to be swamped by your letters.’

‘Of course.’

‘You have two Practicals, correct?’

‘Yes, your Eminence, Frost and Severard, both very—’

‘Not nearly enough! You won’t be able to trust anyone down there, not even the Inquisition.’ Sult seemed to think about that for a moment. ‘Especially the Inquisition. I have picked out a half dozen others whose skills are proven, including Practical Vitari.’

That woman, watching over my shoulder? ‘But, Arch Lector—’

‘Don’t “but” me, Glokta!’ hissed Sult. ‘Don’t you dare “but” me, not today! You’re not half as crippled as you could be! Not half as crippled, you understand?’

Glokta bowed his head. ‘I apologise.’

‘You’re thinking, aren’t you? I can see the cogs turning. Thinking you don’t want one of Goyle’s people getting in the way? Well, before she worked for him she worked for me. A Styrian, from Sipano. Cold as the snow, those people, and she’s the coldest of them, I can tell you. So you needn’t worry. Not about Goyle, anyway.’ *No. Only about you, which is far worse.*

‘I will be honoured to have her along.’ *I will be damned careful.*

‘Be as honoured as you damn well please, just don’t let me down! Make a mess of this and you’ll need more than that piece of paper to save you. A ship is waiting at the docks. Leave. Now.’

‘Of course, your Eminence.’

Sult turned away and strode over to the window. Glokta quietly got up, quietly slid his chair under the table, quietly shuffled across the room. The Arch Lector was still standing, hands clasped behind him, as Glokta ever so carefully pulled the doors to. It was not until they clicked shut that he realised he had been holding his breath.

‘How’d it go?’

Glokta turned round sharply, his neck giving a painful click.

Strange, how I never learn not to do that. Practical Vitari was still flopped in her chair, looking up at him with tired eyes. She did not seem to have moved the whole time he was inside. *How did it go?* He ran his tongue

around his mouth, over his empty gums, thinking about it. *That remains to be seen.* 'Interesting,' he said in the end. 'I am going to Dagoska.'

'So I hear.' The woman did indeed have an accent, now he thought about it. *A slight whiff of the Free Cities.*

'I understand you're coming with me.'

'I understand I am.' But she did not move.

'We are in something of a hurry.'

'I know.' She held out her hand. 'Could you help me up?'

Glokta raised his eyebrows. *I wonder when I was last asked that question?* He had half a mind to say no, but in the end he held his hand out, if only for the novelty. Her fingers closed round it, started to pull. Her eyes were narrowed, he could hear her breath hissing as she unfolded herself slowly from the chair. It hurt, having her pull on him like that, in his arm, in his back. *But it hurts her more.* Behind her mask, he was pretty sure, her teeth were gritted with pain. She moved her limbs one at a time, cautiously, not sure what would hurt and how much. Glokta had to smile. *A routine I go through myself every morning. Strangely invigorating, to see someone else doing it.*

Eventually she was standing, her bandaged hand clutched against her ribs. 'You able to walk?' asked Glokta.

'I'll loosen up.'

'What happened? Dogs?'

She gave a bark of laughter. 'No. A big Northman knocked the shit out of me.'

Glokta snorted. *Well, forthright at least.* 'Shall we go?'

She looked down at his cane. 'Don't suppose you've got one of those spare, have you?'

'I'm afraid not. I only have the one, and I can't walk without it.'

'I know how you feel.'

Not quite. Glokta turned and began to limp away from the Arch Lector's office. *Not quite.* He could hear the woman hobbling along behind. *Strangely invigorating, to have someone trying to keep up with me.* He upped the pace, and it hurt him. *But it hurts her more.*

Back to the South, then. He licked at his empty gums. *Hardly a place of happy memories. To fight the Gurkish, after what it cost me last time. To root out disloyalty in a city where no one can be trusted, especially those*

sent to help me. To struggle in the heat and the dust, at a thankless task almost certain to end in failure. And failure, more than likely, will mean death.

He felt his cheek twitch, his eyelid flicker. *At the hands of the Gurkish? At the hands of plotters against the crown? At the hands of his Eminence, or his agents? Or simply to vanish, as my predecessor did? Has one man ever had such a range of deaths to choose from?* The corner of his mouth twitched up. *I can hardly wait to get started.*

That same question came into his head, over and over, and he still had no answer.

Why do I do this?

Why?

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sore from reading it
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before he got to the end

THE FIRST LAW: BOOK TWO

JOE
ABERCROMBIE

BEFORE THEY ARE HANGED

For the Four Readers
You know who you are

Table of Contents

Dedication
Title Page

PART I

The Great Leveller
Best Laid Plans
Questions
The Wounds of the Past
The Condition of the Defences
The Thing About Trust
Allies
Campfire Politics
Small Crimes
Rain
Bloody Company
Long Shadows
And Next . . . My Gold
Fear
One Hundred Words
The Blind Lead the Blind
Prince Ladisla's Stratagem
Until Sunset
Long Odds
The Road to Victory
Necessary Evils
Among the Stones
The Fruits of Boldness
One for Dinner
One of Them

PART II

Heading North
Scant Mercy
So This is Pain
One Step at a Time
The Rest is Wasted Breath
A Matter of Time
Scars
Furious
To the Last Man
Jewel of Cities
Luck
Beneath the Ruins
No Good for Each Other
The Hero’s Welcome
Cold Comfort
The High Places
Coming Over
Cheap at the Price
To the Edge of the World
Before the Storm
Questions
Holding the Line
A Fitting Punishment
The Abode of Stones
Back to the Mud

Acknowledgements

PART I

‘We should forgive our enemies, but not before they are hanged.’

Heinrich Heine

The Great Leveller

Damn mist. It gets in your eyes, so you can't see no more than a few strides ahead. It gets in your ears, so you can't hear nothing, and when you do you can't tell where it's coming from. It gets up your nose, so you can't smell naught but wet and damp. Damn mist. It's a curse on a scout.

They'd crossed the Whiteflow a few days before, out of the North and into Angland, and the Dogman had been nervy all the way. Scouting out strange land, in the midst of a war that weren't really their business. All the lads were jumpy. Aside from Threetrees, none of 'em had ever been out of the North. Except for Grim maybe. He weren't saying where he'd been.

They'd passed a few farms burned out, a village all empty of people. Union buildings, big and square. They'd seen the tracks of horses and men. Lots of tracks, but never the men themselves. Dogman knew Bethod weren't far away, though, his army spread out across the land, looking for towns to burn, food to steal, people to kill. All manner o' mischief. He'd have scouts everywhere. If he caught Dogman or any of the rest, they'd be back to the mud, and not quickly. Bloody cross and heads on spikes and all the rest of it, Dogman didn't wonder.

If the Union caught 'em they'd be dead too, most likely. It was a war, after all, and folk don't think too clearly in a war. Dogman could hardly expect 'em to waste time telling a friendly Northman from an unfriendly one. Life was fraught with dangers, alright. It was enough to make anyone nervy, and he was a nervy sort at the best of times.

So it was easy to see how the mist might have been salt in the cut, so to speak.

All this creeping around in the murk had got him thirsty, so he picked his way through the greasy brush, over to where he could hear the river chattering. He knelt down at the water's edge. Slimy down there, with rot and dead leaves, but Dogman didn't reckon a little slime would make the difference, he was about as dirty as a man could be already. He scooped up water in his hands and drank. There was a breath of wind down there, out beyond the trees, pushing the mist in close one minute, dragging it out the next. That's when the Dogman saw him.

He was lying on his front, legs in the river, top half up on the bank. They stared at each other a while, both fully shocked and amazed. He'd got a long stick coming out of his back. A broken spear. That's when the Dogman realised he was dead.

He spat the water out and crept over, checking careful all around to make sure no one was waiting to give him a blade in the back. The corpse was a man of about two dozen years. Yellow hair, brown blood on his grey lips. He'd got a padded jacket on, bloated up with wet, the kind a man might wear under a coat of mail. A fighting man, then. A straggler maybe, lost his crew and been picked off. A Union man, no doubt, but he didn't look so different to Dogman or to anyone else, now he was dead. One corpse looks much like another.

'The Great Leveller,' Dogman whispered to himself, since he was in a thoughtful frame of mind. That's what the hillmen call him. Death, that is. He levels all differences. Named Men and nobodies, south or north. He catches everyone in the end, and he treats each man the same.

Seemed like this one had been dead no more 'n a couple of days. That meant whoever killed him might still be close, and that got the Dogman worried. The mist seemed full of sounds now. Might've been a hundred Carls, waiting just out of sight. Might've been no more than the river slapping at its banks. Dogman left the corpse lying and slunk off into the trees, ducking from one trunk to another as they loomed up out of the grey.

He nearly stumbled on another body, half buried in a heap of leaves, lying on his back with his arms spread out. He passed one on his knees, a couple of arrows in his side, face in the dirt, arse in the air. There's no dignity in death, and that's a fact. The Dogman was starting to hurry along, too keen to get back to the others, tell them what he'd seen. Too keen to get away from them corpses.

He'd seen plenty, of course, more than his share, but he'd never quite got comfortable around 'em. It's an easy thing to make a man a carcass. He knew a thousand ways to do it. But once you've done it, there's no going back. One minute he's a man, all full up with hopes, and thoughts, and dreams. A man with friends, and family, and a place where he's from. Next minute he's mud. Made the Dogman think on all the scrapes he'd been in, all the battles and the fights he'd been a part of. Made him think he was

lucky still to be breathing. Stupid lucky. Made him think his luck might not last.

He was halfway running now. Careless. Blundering about in the mist like an untried boy. Not taking his time, not sniffing the air, not listening out. A Named Man like him, a scout who'd been all over the North, should've known better, but you can't stay sharp all the time. He never saw it coming.

Something knocked him in the side, hard, ditched him right on his face. He scrambled up but someone kicked him down. Dogman fought, but whoever this bastard was he was fearsome strong. Before he knew it he was down on his back in the dirt, and he'd only himself to blame. Himself, and the corpses, and the mist. A hand grabbed him round his neck, started squeezing his windpipe shut.

'Gurgh,' he croaked, fiddling at the hand, thinking his last moment was on him. Thinking all his hopes were turned to mud. The Great Leveller, come for him at last . . .

Then the fingers stopped squeezing.

'Dogman?' said someone in his ear, 'that you?'

'Gurgh.'

The hand let go his throat and he sucked in a breath. Felt himself pulled up by his coat. 'Shit on it, Dogman! I could ha' killed you!' He knew the voice now, well enough. Black Dow, the bastard. Dogman was half annoyed at being throttled near to dying, half stupid-happy at still being alive. He could hear Dow laughing at him. Hard laughter, like a crow calling. 'You alright?'

'I've had warmer greetings,' croaked Dogman, still doing his best to get the air in.

'Count yourself lucky, I could've given you a colder one. Much colder. I took you for one of Bethod's scouts. Thought you was out over yonder, up the valley.'

'As you can see,' he whispered, 'no. Where's the others at?'

'Up on a hill, above this fucking mist. Taking a look around.'

Dogman nodded back the way he'd come. 'There's corpses over there. Loads of 'em.'

'Loads of 'em is it?' asked Dow, as though he didn't think Dogman knew what a load of corpses looked like. 'Hah!'

‘Aye, a good few anyway. Union dead, I reckon. Looks like there was a fight here.’

Black Dow laughed again. ‘A fight? You reckon?’ Dogman wasn’t sure what he meant by that.

‘Shit,’ he said.

They were standing up on the hill, the five of them. The mist had cleared up, but the Dogman almost wished it hadn’t. He saw what Dow had been saying now, well enough. The whole valley was full of dead. They were dotted high up on the slopes, wedged between the rocks, stretched out in the gorse. They were scattered out across the grass in the valley bottom like nails spilled from a sack, twisted and broken on the brown dirt road. They were heaped up beside the river, heaped on the banks in a pile. Arms and legs and broken gear sticking up from the last shreds of mist. They were everywhere. Stuck with arrows, stabbed with swords, hacked with axes. Crows called as they hopped from one meal to the next. It was a good day for the crows. It had been a while since Dogman saw a proper battlefield, and it brought back some sour memories. Horrible sour.

‘Shit,’ he said again. Couldn’t think of aught else to say.

‘Reckon the Union were marching up this road.’ Threetrees was frowning hard. ‘Reckon they were hurrying. Trying to catch Bethod unawares.’

‘Seems they weren’t scouting too careful,’ rumbled Tul Duru. ‘Seems like it was Bethod caught them out.’

‘Maybe it was misty,’ said Dogman, ‘like today.’

Threetrees shrugged. ‘Maybe. It’s the time of year for it. Either way they were on the road, in column, tired from a long day’s tramp. Bethod came on ’em from here, and from up there, on the ridge. Arrows first, to break ’em up, then the Carls, coming down from the tall ground, screaming and ready to go. The Union broke quick, I reckon.’

‘Real quick,’ said Dow.

‘And then it was a slaughter. Spread out on the road. Trapped against the water. Nowhere much to run to. Men trying to pull their armour off, men trying to swim the river with their armour on. Packing in and climbing one on top o’ the other, with arrows falling down all round. Some of ’em might’ve got as far as those woods down there, but knowing Bethod he’d have had a few horsemen tucked away, ready to lick the plate.’

‘Shit,’ said Dogman, feeling more than a bit sick. He’d been on the wrong end of a rout himself, and the memory weren’t at all a happy one.

‘Neat as good stitching,’ said Threetrees. ‘You got to give Bethod his due, the bastard. He knows his work, none better.’

‘This the end of it then, chief?’ asked Dogman. ‘Bethod won already?’

Threetrees shook his head, nice and slow. ‘There’s a lot of Southerners out there. An awful lot. Most of ’em live across the sea. They say there’s more of ’em down there than you can count. More men than there are trees in the North. Might take ’em a while to get here, but they’ll be coming. This is just the beginning.’

The Dogman looked out at the wet valley, at all them dead men, huddled and sprawled and twisted across the ground, no more ’n food for crows. ‘Not much of a beginning for them.’

Dow curled his tongue and spat, as noisy as he could. ‘Penned up and slaughtered like a bunch o’ sheep! You want to die like that, Threetrees? Eh? You want to side with the likes of these? Fucking Union! They don’t know anything about war!’

Threetrees nodded. ‘Then I reckon we’ll have to teach ’em.’

There was a great press round the gate. There were women, gaunt and hungry-looking. There were children, ragged and dirty. There were men, old and young, stooped under heavy packs or clutching gear. Some had mules, or carts they were pushing, loaded up with all kinds of useless looking stuff. Wooden chairs, tin pots, tools for farming. A lot had nothing at all, besides misery. The Dogman reckoned there was plenty of that to go round.

They were choking up the road with their bodies and their rubbish. They were choking up the air with their pleading and their threatening. Dogman could smell the fear, thick as soup in his nose. All running from Bethod.

They were shouldering each other pretty good, some pushing in, some pushed out, here and there one falling in the mud, all desperate for that gate like it was their mother’s tit. But as a crowd, they were going nowhere. Dogman could see spear tips glinting over the heads of the press, could hear hard voices shouting. There were soldiers up ahead, keeping everyone out of the city.

Dogman leaned over to Threetrees. ‘Looks like they don’t want their own kind,’ he whispered. ‘You reckon they’ll want us, chief?’

‘They need us, and that’s a fact. We’ll talk to ’em, and then we’ll see, or you got some better notion?’

‘Going home and staying out of it?’ muttered Dogman under his breath, but he followed Threetrees into the crowd anyway.

The Southerners all gawped as they stepped on through. There was a little girl among ’em, looked at Dogman as he passed with great staring eyes, clutching some old rag to her. Dogman tried a smile but it had been a long time since he’d dealt with aught but hard men and hard metal, and it can’t have come out too pleasing. The girl screamed and ran off, and she wasn’t the only one scared. The crowd split open, wary and silent when they saw Dogman and Threetrees coming, even though they’d left their weapons back with the others.

They made it through to the gate alright, only having to give the odd shove to one man or another, just to start him moving. Dogman saw the soldiers now, a dozen of ’em, stood in a line across the gate, each one just the same as the one next door. He’d rarely seen such heavy armour as they had on, great plates from head to toe, polished to a blinding shine, helmets over their faces, stock-still like metal pillars. He wondered how you’d fight one, if you had to. He couldn’t imagine an arrow doing much, or a sword even, less it got lucky and found a joint.

‘You’d need a pickaxe for that, or something.’

‘What?’ hissed Threetrees.

‘Nothing.’ It was plain they had some strange ideas about fighting down in the Union. If wars were won by the shinier side, they’d have had Bethod well licked, the Dogman reckoned. Shame they weren’t.

Their chief was sat in the midst of them, behind a little table with some scraps of paper on it, and he was the strangest of the lot. He’d got some jacket on, bright red. An odd sort of cloth for a leader to wear, Dogman thought. You’d have picked him out with an arrow easy enough. He was mighty young for the job an’ all. Scarcely had a beard on him yet, though he looked proud enough of himself all the same.

There was a big man in a dirty coat arguing with him. Dogman strained to listen, trying to make sense of their Union words. ‘I’ve five children out here,’ the farmer was saying, ‘and nothing to feed them with. What do you suggest I do?’

An old man got in first. ‘I’m a personal friend of the Lord Governor, I demand you admit me to the—’

The lad didn’t let either one finish. ‘I don’t give a damn who your friends are, and I don’t care if you have a hundred children! The city of Ostenhorm is full. Lord Marshal Burr has decreed that only two hundred refugees be admitted each day, and we have already reached our limit for this morning. I suggest you come back tomorrow. Early.’

The two men stood there staring. ‘Your limit?’ growled the farmer.

‘But the Lord Governor—’

‘Damn you!’ screamed the lad, thumping at the table in a fit. ‘Only push me further! I’ll let you in alright! I’ll have you dragged in, and hung as traitors!’

That was enough for those two, they backed off quick. Dogman was starting to think he should do the same, but Threetrees was already making for the table. The boy scowled up at ’em as though they stank worse than a pair of fresh turds. Dogman wouldn’t have been so bothered, except he’d washed specially for the occasion. Hadn’t been this clean in months. ‘What the hell do you want? We’ve no need of spies or beggars!’

‘Good,’ said Threetrees, clear and patient. ‘We’re neither. My name is Rudd Threetrees. This here is the Dogman. We’re come to speak to whoever’s in charge. We’re come to offer our services to your King.’

‘Offer your services?’ The lad started to smile. Not a friendly smile at all. ‘Dogman, you say? What an interesting name. I can’t imagine how he came by it.’ He had himself a little snigger at that piece of cleverness, and Dogman could hear chuckles from the others. A right set of arseholes, he reckoned, stitched up tight in their fancy clothes and their shiny armour. A right set of arseholes, but there was nothing to be gained by telling ’em so. It was a good thing they’d left Dow behind. He’d most likely have gutted this fool already, and got them all killed.

The lad leaned forward and spoke real slow, as if to children. ‘No Northmen are allowed within the city, not without special permission.’

Seemed that Bethod crossing their borders, slaughtering their armies, making war across their lands weren’t special enough. Threetrees ploughed on, but the Dogman reckoned he was ploughing in stony ground, alright. ‘We’re not asking much. Only food and a place to sleep. There’s five of us, each one a Named Man, veterans all.’

‘His Majesty is more than well supplied with soldiers. We are a little short of mules however. Perhaps you’d care to carry some supplies for us?’

Threetrees was known for his patience, but there was a limit to it, and Dogman reckoned they were awful close. This prick of a boy had no idea what he was stepping on. He weren’t a man to be toyed with, Rudd Threetrees. It was a famous name where they came from. A name to put fear in men, or courage, depending where they stood. There was a limit to his patience alright, but they weren’t quite at it yet. Luckily for all concerned.

‘Mules, eh?’ growled Threetrees. ‘Mules can kick. Best make sure one don’t kick your head off, boy.’ And he turned around and stalked off, down the road the way they came, the scared folks shuffling out the way then crowding back in behind, all shouting at once, pleading with the soldiers why they should be the ones to get let in while the others were left out in the cold.

‘That weren’t quite the welcome we was hoping for,’ Dogman muttered. Threetrees said nothing, just marched away in front, head down. ‘What now, chief?’

The old boy shot a grim look over his shoulder. ‘You know me. You think I’m taking that fucking answer?’ Somehow, the Dogman reckoned not.

Best Laid Plans

It was cold in the hall of the Lord Governor of Angland. The high walls were of plain, cold render, the wide floor was of cold stone flags, the gaping fireplace held nothing but cold ashes. The only decoration was a great tapestry hanging at one end, the golden sun of the Union stitched into it, the crossed hammers of Angland in its centre.

Lord Governor Meed was slumped in a hard chair before a huge, bare table, staring at nothing, his right hand slack around the stem of a wine cup. His face was pale and hollow, his robes of state were crumpled and stained, his thin white hair was in disarray. Major West, born and raised in Angland, had often heard Meed spoken of as a strong leader, a great presence, a tireless champion of the province and its people. He looked a shell of a man now, crushed under the weight of his great chain of office, as empty and cold as his yawning fireplace.

The temperature might have been icy, but the mood was cooler still. Lord Marshal Burr stood in the middle of the floor, feet placed wide apart, big hands clasped white-knuckle tight behind his back. Major West stood at his shoulder, stiff as a log, head lowered, wishing that he had not given up his coat. It was colder in here than outside, if anything, and the weather was bitter, even for autumn.

'Will you take wine, Lord Marshal?' murmured Meed, not even looking up. His voice seemed weak and reedy thin in the great space. West fancied he could almost see the old man's breath smoking.

'No, your Grace. I will not.' Burr was frowning. He had been frowning constantly, as far as West could tell, for the last month or two. The man seemed to have no other expressions. He had a frown for hope, a frown for satisfaction, a frown for surprise. This was a frown of the most intense anger. West shifted nervously from one numb foot to the other, trying to get the blood flowing, wishing he was anywhere but here.

'What about you, Major West?' whispered the Lord Governor. 'Will you take wine?' West opened his mouth to decline, but Burr got in first.

'What happened?' he growled, the hard words grating off the cold walls, echoing in the chilly rafters.

‘What happened?’ The Lord Governor shook himself, turned his sunken eyes slowly towards Burr, as though seeing him for the first time. ‘I lost my sons.’ He snatched up his cup with a trembling hand and drained it to the dregs.

West saw Marshal Burr’s hands clench tighter still behind his back. ‘I am sorry for your loss, your Grace, but I was referring to the broader situation. I am talking of Black Well.’

Meed seemed to flinch at the mere mention of the place. ‘There was a battle.’

‘There was a massacre!’ barked Burr. ‘What is your explanation? Did you not receive the King’s orders? To raise every soldier you could, to man your defences, to await reinforcements? Under no circumstances to risk battle with Bethod!’

‘The King’s orders?’ The Lord Governor’s lip curled. ‘The Closed Council’s orders, do you mean? I received them. I read them. I considered them.’

‘And then?’

‘I tore them up.’

West could hear the Lord Marshal breathing hard through his nose. ‘You tore . . . them up?’

‘For a hundred years, I and my family have governed Angland. When we came here there was nothing.’ Meed raised his chin proudly as he spoke, puffing out his chest. ‘We tamed the wilderness. We cleared the forests, and laid the roads, and built the farms, and the mines, and the towns that have enriched the whole Union!’

The old man’s eyes had brightened considerably. He seemed taller, bolder, stronger. ‘The people of this land look first to me for protection, before they look across the sea! Was I to allow these Northmen, these barbarians, these animals to raid across my lands with impunity? To undo the great work of my forefathers? To rob, and burn, and rape, and kill as they pleased? To sit behind my walls while they put Angland to the sword? No, Marshal Burr! Not I! I gathered every man, and I armed them, and I sent them to meet the savages in battle, and my three sons went at their head. What else should I have done?’

‘Followed your fucking orders!’ screamed Burr at the very top of his voice. West started with shock, the thunderous echoes still ringing in his

ears.

Meed twitched, then gaped, then his lip began to quiver. Tears welled up in the old man's eyes and his body sagged again. 'I lost my sons,' he whispered, staring down at the cold floor. 'I lost my sons.'

'I pity your sons, and all those others whose lives were wasted, but I do not pity you. You alone brought this upon yourself.' Burr winced, then swallowed and rubbed at his stomach. He walked slowly to the window and looked out over the cold, grey city. 'You have wasted all your strength, and now I must dilute my own to garrison your towns, your fortresses. Such survivors as there are from Black Well, and such others as are armed and can fight you will transfer to my command. We will need every man.'

'And me?' murmured Meed, 'I daresay those dogs on the Closed Council are howling for my blood?'

'Let them howl. I need you here. Refugees are coming southwards, fleeing from Bethod, or from the fear of him. Have you looked out of your window lately? Ostenhorm is full of them. They crowd around the walls in their thousands, and this is only the beginning. You will see to their well-being, and their evacuation to Midderland. For thirty years your people have looked to you for protection. They have need of you still.'

Burr turned back into the room. 'You will provide Major West with a list of those units still fit for action. As for the refugees, they are in need of food, and clothing, and shelter. Preparations for their evacuation should begin at once.'

'At once,' whispered Meed. 'At once, of course.'

Burr flashed West a quick glance from under his thick eyebrows, took a deep breath then strode for the door. West looked back as he left. The Lord Governor of Angland still sat hunched in his chair in his empty, freezing hall, head in his hands.

'This is Angland,' said West, gesturing at the great map. He turned to look at the assembly. Few of the officers were showing the slightest interest in what he had to say. Hardly a surprise, but it still rankled.

General Kroy was sitting on the right-hand side of the long table, stiff upright and motionless in his chair. He was tall, gaunt, hard, grey hair cropped close to his angular skull, black uniform simple and spotless. His enormous staff were similarly clipped, shaved, polished, as dour as a bevy

of mourners. Opposite, on the left, lounged General Poulder, round-faced, ruddy-skinned, possessed of a tremendous set of moustaches. His great collar, stiff with gold thread, came almost to his large, pink ears. His retinue sat their chairs like saddles, crimson uniforms dripping with braid, top buttons carelessly undone, spatters of mud from the road worn like medals.

On Kroy's side of the room, war was all about cleanliness, self-denial, and strict obedience to the rules. On Poulder's it was a matter of flamboyance and carefully organised hair. Each group glared across the table at the other with haughty contempt, as though only they held the secrets of good soldiering, and the other crowd, try as they might, would never be more than a hindrance.

Either were hindrance enough to West's mind, but neither one was half the obstacle that the third lot presented, clustered around the far end of the table. Their leader was none other than the heir to the throne, Crown Prince Ladisla himself. It was not so much a uniform that he was wearing, as a kind of purple dressing gown with epaulettes. Bedwear with a military motif. The lace on his cuffs alone could have made a good-sized tablecloth, and his staff were little less remarkable in their finery. Some of the richest, most handsome, most elegant, most useless young men in the whole Union were sprawled in their chairs around the Prince. If the measure of a man was the size of his hat, these were great men indeed.

West turned back to the map, his throat uncomfortably dry. He knew what he had to say, he needed only to say it, as clearly as possible, and sit down. Never mind that some of the most senior men in the army were behind him. Not to mention the heir to the throne. Men who West knew despised him. Hated him for his high position and his low birth. For the fact that he had earned his place.

'This is Angland,' said West again, in what he hoped was a voice of calm authority. 'The river Cumnur,' and the end of his stick traced the twisting blue line of the river, 'splits the province into two parts. The southern part is much the smaller, but contains the great majority of the population and almost all the significant towns, including the capital, Ostenhorm. The roads here are reasonably good, the country relatively open. As far as we know, the Northmen have yet to set foot across the river.'

West heard a loud yawning behind him, clearly audible even from the far end of the table. He felt a sudden pang of fury and spun round. Prince

Ladisla himself appeared, at least, to be listening attentively. The culprit was one of his staff, the young Lord Smund, a man of impeccable lineage and immense fortune, a little over twenty but with all the talents of a precocious ten-year-old. He was slouched in his chair, staring into space, mouth extravagantly gaping.

It was the most West could do to stop himself leaping over and thrashing the man with his stick. 'Am I boring you?' he hissed.

Smund actually seemed surprised to be picked on. He stared left and right, as though West might have been talking to one of his neighbours. 'What, me? No, no, Major West, not in the least. Boring? No! The River Cumnur splits the province in two, and so forth. Thrilling stuff! Thrilling! I do apologise, really. Late night, last night, you see?'

West did not doubt it. A late night spent drinking and showing off with the rest of the Prince's hangers-on, all so that he could waste everyone's time this morning. Kroy's men might be pedantic, and Poulder's arrogant, but at least they were soldiers. The Prince's staff had no skills whatever, as far as West could see, beyond annoying him, of course. At that, they were all expert. He was almost grinding his teeth with frustration as he turned back to the map.

'The northern part of the province is a different matter,' he growled. 'An unwelcoming expanse of dense forests, trackless bogs, and broken hills, sparsely populated. There are mines, logging camps, villages, as well as several penal colonies operated by the Inquisition, but they are widely scattered. There are only two roads even faintly suitable for large bodies of men or supplies, especially given that winter will soon be upon us.' His stick traced the two dotted lines, running north to south through the woods. 'The western road goes close to the mountains, linking the mining communities. The eastern one follows the coast, more or less. They meet at the fortress of Dunbrec on the Whiteflow, the northern border of Angland. That fortress, as we all know, is already in the hands of the enemy.'

West turned away from the map and sat down, trying to breathe slow and steady, squash down his anger and see off the headache which was already starting to pulse behind his eyes.

'Thank you, Major West,' said Burr as he got to his feet to address the assembly. The room rustled and stirred, only now coming awake. The Lord Marshal strode up and down before the map for a moment, collecting his

thoughts. Then he tapped at it with his own stick, a spot well to the north of the Cumnur.

'The village of Black Well. An unremarkable settlement, ten miles or so from the coast road. Little more than a huddle of houses, now entirely deserted. It isn't even marked on the map. A place unworthy of anyone's attention. Except, of course, that it is the site of a recent massacre of our troops by the Northmen.'

'Damn fool Anglanders,' someone muttered.

'They should have waited for us,' said Poulder, with a self-satisfied smirk.

'Indeed they should have,' snapped Burr. 'But they were confident, and why not? Several thousand men, well equipped, with cavalry. Many of them were professional soldiers. Not in the same class as the King's Own perhaps, but trained and determined nonetheless. More than a match for these savages, one would have thought.'

'They put up a good fight though,' interrupted Prince Ladisla, 'eh, Marshal Burr?'

Burr glared down the table. 'A good fight is one you win, your Highness. They were slaughtered. Only those with good horses and very good luck escaped. In addition to the regrettable waste of manpower, there is the loss of equipment and supplies. Considerable quantities of each, with which our enemy is now enriched. Most seriously, perhaps, the defeat has caused panic among the population. The roads our army will depend on are clogged with refugees, convinced that Bethod will come upon their farms, their villages, their homes at any moment. An utter disaster, of course. Perhaps the worst suffered by the Union in recent memory. But disasters are not without their lessons.'

The Lord Marshal planted his big hands firmly on the table and leaned forwards. 'This Bethod is careful, clever, and ruthless. He is well supplied with horse, foot, and archers, and has sufficient organisation to use them together. He has excellent scouts and his forces are highly mobile, probably more so than ours, especially in difficult country, such as that we will face in the northern part of the province. He set a trap for the Anglanders and they fell into it. We must not do the same.'

General Kroy gave a snort of joyless laughter. 'So we should fear these barbarians, Lord Marshal? Would that be your advice?'

‘What was it that Stolicus wrote, General Kroy? “Never fear your enemy, but always respect him.” I suppose that would be my advice, if I gave any.’ Burr frowned across the table. ‘But I don’t give advice. I give orders.’

Kroy twitched with displeasure at the reprimand, but at least he shut up. For the time being. West knew that he wouldn’t stay quiet for long. He never did.

‘We must be cautious,’ continued Burr, now addressing the room at large, ‘but we still have the advantage. We have twelve regiments of the King’s Own, at least as many men in levies from the noblemen, and a few Anglanders who avoided the carnage at Black Well. Judging from such reports as we have, we outnumber our enemy by five to one, or more. We have the advantage in equipment, in tactics, in organisation. The Northmen, it seems, are not ignorant of this. Despite their successes, they are remaining north of the Cumnur, content to forage and mount the odd raid. They do not seem keen to come across the river and risk an open battle with us.’

‘One can hardly blame ’em, the dirty cowards,’ chuckled Poulder, to mutterings of agreement from his own staff. ‘Probably regretting they ever crossed the border now!’

‘Perhaps,’ murmured Burr. ‘In any case, they are not coming to us, so we must cross the river and hunt them down. The main body of our army will therefore be split into two parts, the left wing under General Kroy, the right under General Poulder.’ The two men eyed each other across the table with the deepest hostility. ‘We will push up the eastern road from our camps here at Ostenhorm, spread out beyond the river Cumnur, hoping to locate Bethod’s army and bring him to a decisive battle.’

‘With the greatest respect,’ interrupted General Kroy, in a tone that implied he had none, ‘would it not be better to send one half of the army up the western road?’

‘The west has little to offer aside from iron, the one thing with which the Northmen are already well supplied. The coast road offers richer pickings, and is closer to their own lines of supply and retreat. Besides, I do not wish our forces to be too thinly spread. We are still guessing at Bethod’s strength. If we can bring him to battle, I want to be able to concentrate our forces quickly, and overwhelm him.’

‘But, Lord Marshal!’ Kroy had the air of a man addressing a senile parent who still, alas, retains the management of their own affairs. ‘Surely the western road should not be left unguarded?’

‘I was coming to that,’ growled Burr, turning back to the map. ‘A third detachment, under the command of Crown Prince Ladisla, will dig in behind the Cumnur and stand guard on the western road. It will be their job to make sure the Northmen do not slip around us and gain our rear. They will hold there, south of the river, while our main body splits in two and flushes out the enemy.’

‘Of course, my Lord Marshal.’ Kroy sat back in his chair with a thunderous sigh, as though he had expected no better but had to try anyway, for everyone’s sake, while the officers of his staff tutted and clucked their disapproval for the scheme.

‘Well, I find it an excellent plan,’ announced Poulder warmly. He smirked across the table at Kroy. ‘I am entirely in favour, Lord Marshal. I am at your disposal in any way you should think fit. I shall have my men ready to march within ten days.’ His staff nodded and hummed their assent.

‘Five would be better,’ said Burr.

Poulder’s plump face twitched his annoyance, but he quickly mastered himself. ‘Five it is, Lord Marshal.’ But now it was Kroy’s turn to look smug.

Crown Prince Ladisla, meanwhile, was squinting at the map, an expression of puzzlement slowly forming on his well-powdered face. ‘Lord Marshal Burr,’ he began slowly, ‘my detachment is to proceed down the western road to the river, correct?’

‘Indeed, your Highness.’

‘But we are not to pass beyond the river?’

‘Indeed not, your Highness.’

‘Our role is to be, then,’ and he squinted up at Burr with a hurt expression, ‘a purely defensive one?’

‘Indeed. Purely defensive.’

Ladisla frowned. ‘That sounds a meagre task.’ His absurd staff shifted in their seats, grumbled their discontent at an assignment so far beneath their talents.

‘A meagre task? Pardon me, your Highness, but not so! Angland is a wide and tangled country. The Northmen may elude us, and if they do it is on you

that all our hopes will hang. It will be your task to prevent the enemy from crossing the river and threatening our lines of supply, or, worse yet, marching on Ostenhorm itself.' Burr leaned forward, fixing the Prince with his eye, and shook his fist with great authority. 'You will be our rock, your Highness, our pillar, our foundation! You will be the hinge on which the gate will hang, a gate which will swing shut on these invaders, and drive them out of Angland!'

West was impressed. The Prince's assignment was indeed a meagre one, but the Lord Marshal could have made mucking out the latrines sound like noble work. 'Excellent!' exclaimed Ladisla, the feather on his hat thrashing back and forth. 'The hinge, of course! Capital!'

'Unless there are any further questions then, gentlemen, we have a great deal of work to do.' Burr looked round the half-circle of sulky faces. No one spoke. 'Dismissed.'

Kroy's staff and Poulder's exchanged frosty glances as they hurried to be first out of the room. The two great generals themselves jostled each other in the doorway, which was more than wide enough for both of them, neither wanting to turn his back on the other, or to follow behind him. They turned, bristling, once they had pushed their way out into the corridor.

'General Kroy,' sneered Poulder, with a haughty toss of his head.

'General Poulder,' hissed Kroy, tugging his impeccable uniform smooth.

Then they stalked off in opposite directions.

As the last of Prince Ladisla's staff ambled out, holding forth to each other noisily about who had the most expensive armour, West got up to leave himself. He had a hundred tasks to be getting on with, and there was nothing to be gained by waiting. Before he got to the door, though, Lord Marshal Burr began to speak.

'So there's our army, eh, West? I swear, I sometimes feel like a father with a set of squabbling sons, and no wife to help me. Poulder, Kroy, and Ladisla.' He shook his head. 'My three commanders! Every man of them seems to think the purpose of this whole business is his personal aggrandisement. There aren't three bigger heads in the whole Union. It's a wonder we can fit them all in one room.' He gave a sudden burp. 'Damn this indigestion!'

West racked his brains for something positive. 'General Poulder seems obedient, at least, sir.'

Burr snorted. ‘Seems, yes, but I trust him even less than Kroy, if that’s possible. Kroy, at least, is predictable. He can be depended on to frustrate and oppose me at every turn. Poulder can’t be depended on at all. He’ll smirk, and flatter, and obey to the tiniest detail, until he sees some advantage to himself, and then he’ll turn on me with double the ferocity, you’ll see. To keep ’em both happy is impossible.’ He squinted and swallowed, rubbing at his gut. ‘But as long as we can keep them equally unhappy, we’ve a chance. The one thing to be thankful for is that they hate each other even more than they do me.’

Burr’s frown grew deeper. ‘They were both ahead of me in the queue for my job. General Poulder is an old friend of the Arch Lector, you know. Kroy is Chief Justice Marovia’s cousin. When the post of Lord Marshal became available, the Closed Council couldn’t decide between them. In the end they fixed on me as an unhappy compromise. An oaf from the provinces, eh, West? That’s what I am to them. An effective oaf to be sure, but an oaf still. I daresay that if Poulder or Kroy died tomorrow, I’d be replaced the next day by the other. It’s hard to imagine a more ludicrous situation for a Lord Marshal, until you add in the Crown Prince, that is.’

West almost winced. How to turn that nightmare into an advantage? ‘Prince Ladisla is . . . enthusiastic?’ he ventured.

‘Where would I be without your optimism?’ Burr gave a mirthless chuckle. ‘Enthusiastic? He’s living in a dream! Pandered to, and coddled, and utterly spoiled his whole life! That boy and the real world are entire strangers to one another!’

‘Must he have a separate command, sir?’

The Lord Marshal rubbed at his eyes with his thick fingers. ‘Unfortunately, he must. The Closed Council have been most specific on that point. They are concerned that the King is in poor health, and that his heir is seen as an utter fool and wastrel by the public. They hope we might win some great victory here, so they can heap the credit on the Prince. Then they’ll ship him back to Adua, glowing with the glamour of the battlefield, ready to become the kind of King the peasants love.’

Burr paused for a moment, and looked down at the floor. ‘I’ve done all I can to keep Ladisla out of trouble. I’ve put him where I think the Northmen aren’t, and with any luck won’t ever be. But war is anything but a predictable business. Ladisla might actually be called upon to fight. That’s

why I need someone to look over his shoulder. Someone with experience in the field. Someone as tenacious and hard-working as his joke of a staff are soft and lazy. Someone who might stop the Prince blundering into trouble.' He looked up from under his heavy brows.

West felt a horrible sinking sensation in his guts. 'Me?'

'I'm afraid so. There's no one I'd rather keep, but the Prince has asked for you personally.'

'For me, sir? But I'm no courtier! I'm not even a nobleman!'

Burr snorted. 'Aside from me, Ladisla is probably the one man in this army who doesn't care whose son you are. He's the heir to the throne! Nobleman or beggar, we're all equally far below him.'

'But why me?'

'Because you're a fighter. First through the breach at Ulrioch and all that. You've seen action, and plenty of it. You've a fighter's reputation, West, and the Prince wants one himself. That's why.' Burr fished a letter from his jacket and handed it across. 'Maybe this will help to sweeten the medicine.'

West broke the seal, unfolded the thick paper, scanned the few lines of neat writing. When he had finished, he read it again, just to be sure. He looked up. 'It's a promotion.'

'I know what it is. I arranged it. Maybe they'll take you a little more seriously with an extra star on your jacket, maybe they won't. Either way, you deserve it.'

'Thank you, sir,' said West numbly.

'What, for the worst job in the army?' Burr laughed, and gave him a fatherly clap on the shoulder. 'You'll be missed, and that's a fact. I'm riding out to inspect the first regiment. A commander should show his face, I've always thought. Care to join me, Colonel?'

Snow was falling by the time they rode out through the city gates. White specks blowing on the wind, melting as soon as they touched the road, the trees, the coat of West's horse, the armour of the guards that followed them.

'Snow,' Burr grumbled over his shoulder. 'Snow already. Isn't that a little early in the year?'

'Very early, sir, but it's cold enough.' West took one hand from his reins to pull his coat tighter round his neck. 'Colder than usual, for the end of autumn.'

‘It’ll be a damn sight colder up north of the Cumnur, I’ll be bound.’

‘Yes, sir, and it won’t be getting any warmer now.’

‘Could be a harsh winter, eh, Colonel?’

‘Very likely, sir.’ Colonel? Colonel West? The words still seemed strange together, even in his own mind. No one could ever have dreamed a commoner’s son would go so far. Himself least of all.

‘A long, harsh winter,’ Burr was musing. ‘We need to catch Bethod quickly. Catch him and put a quick end to him, before we all freeze.’ He frowned at the trees as they slipped by, frowned up at the flecks of snow eddying around them, frowned over at West. ‘Bad roads, bad ground, bad weather. Not the best situation, eh, Colonel?’

‘No, sir,’ said West glumly, but it was his own situation that was worrying him.

‘Come now, it could be worse. You’ll be dug in south of the river, nice and warm. Probably won’t see a hair of a Northman all winter. And I hear the Prince and his staff eat pretty well. A damn stretch better than blundering around in the snow with Poulder and Kroy for company.’

‘Of course, sir.’ But West was less than sure.

Burr glanced over his shoulder at the guards, trotting along at a respectful distance. ‘You know, when I was a young man, before I was given the dubious honour of commanding the King’s army, I used to love to ride. I’d ride for miles, at the gallop. Made me feel . . . alive. Seems like there’s no time for it these days. Briefings, and documents, and sitting at tables, that’s all I do. Sometimes, you just want to ride, eh, West?’

‘Of course, sir, but now would—’

‘Yah!’ The Lord Marshal dug his spurs in with a will and his horse bolted down the track, mud flicking up from its hooves. West gaped after him for a moment.

‘Damn it,’ he whispered. The stubborn old fool would most likely get thrown and break his thick neck. Then where would they be? Prince Ladisla would have to take command. West shivered at the prospect, and kicked his own horse into a gallop. What choice did he have?

The trees flashed past on either side, the road flowed by underneath him. His ears filled with the clattering of hooves, the rattling of harness. The wind rushed in his mouth, stung his eyes. The snow flakes came at him,

straight on. West snatched a look over his shoulder. The guards were tangled up with each other, horses jostling, lagging far back down the road.

It was the best he could do to keep up and stay in his saddle at the same time. The last time he'd ridden so hard had been years ago, pounding across a dry plain with a wedge of Gurkish cavalry just behind him. He'd hardly been any more scared then. His hands were gripping the reins painfully tight, his heart was hammering with fear and excitement. He realised that he was smiling. Burr had been right. It did make him feel alive.

The Lord Marshal had slowed, and West reined his own horse in as he drew level. He was laughing now, and he could hear Burr chuckling beside him. He hadn't laughed like that in months. Years maybe, he couldn't remember the last time. Then he noticed something out of the corner of his eye.

He felt a sickening jolt, a crushing pain in his chest. His head snapped forward, the reins were ripped from his hands, everything turned upside down. His horse was gone. He was rolling on the ground, over and over.

He tried to get up and the world lurched. Trees and white sky, a horse's kicking legs, dirt flying. He stumbled and pitched into the road, took a mouthful of mud. Someone helped him up, pulling roughly at his coat, dragging him into the woods.

'No,' he gasped, hardly able to breathe for the pain in his chest. There was no reason to go that way.

A black line between the trees. He staggered forward, bent double, tripping over the tails of his coat, crashing through the undergrowth. A rope across the road, pulled tight as they passed. Someone was half dragging him, half carrying him. His head was spinning, all sense of direction lost. A trap. West fumbled for his sword. It took him a moment to realise that his scabbard was empty.

The Northmen. West felt a stab of terror in his gut. The Northmen had him, and Burr too. Assassins, sent by Bethod to kill them. There was a rushing sound somewhere, out beyond the trees. West struggled to make sense of it. The guards, following down the road. If he could only give them a signal somehow . . .

'Over here . . .' he croaked, pitifully hoarse, before a dirty hand clamped itself over his mouth, dragged him down into the wet undergrowth. He struggled as best he could, but there was no strength in him. He could see

the guards flashing by through the trees, no more than a dozen strides away, but he was powerless.

He bit the hand, as hard as he could, but it only gripped tighter, squeezing his jaw, crushing his lips. He could taste blood. His own blood maybe, or blood from the hand. The sound of the guards faded into the woods and was gone, and fear pressed in behind it. The hand let go, gave him a parting shove and he tumbled onto his back.

A face swam into view above him. A hard, gaunt, brutish face, black hair hacked short, teeth bared in an animal scowl, cold, flat eyes, brimful of fury. The face turned and spat on the ground. There was no ear on the other side of it. Just a flap of pink scar, and a hole.

Never in his life had West seen such an evil-looking man. The whole set of him was violence itself. He looked strong enough to tear West in half, and more than willing to do it. There was blood running from a wound in his hand. The wound that West's teeth had made. It dripped from his fingertips onto the forest floor. In his other fist he held a length of smooth wood. West's eyes followed it, horrified. There was a heavy, curved blade at the end, polished bright. An axe.

So this was a Northman. Not the kind who rolled drunk in the gutters of Adua. Not the kind who had come to his father's farm to beg for work. The other kind. The kind his mother had scared him with stories of when he was a child. A man whose work, and whose pastime, and whose purpose, was to kill. West looked from that hard blade to those hard eyes and back, numb with horror. He was finished. He would die here in the cold forest, down in the dirt like a dog.

West dragged himself up by one hand, seized by a sudden impulse to run. He looked over his shoulder, but there was no escape that way. A man was moving through the trees towards them. A big man with a thick beard and a sword over his shoulder, carrying a child in his arms. West blinked, trying to get some sense of scale. It was the biggest man he had ever seen, and the child was Lord Marshal Burr. The giant tossed his burden down on the ground like a bundle of sticks. Burr stared up at him, and burped.

West ground his teeth. Riding off like that, the old fool, what had he been thinking? He'd killed them both with his fucking 'sometimes you just want to ride'. Makes you feel alive? Neither one of them would live out the hour.

He had to fight. Now might be his last chance. Even if he had nothing to fight with. Better to die that way than on his knees in the mud. He tried to dig the anger out. There was no end to it, when he didn't want it. Now there was nothing. Just a desperate helplessness that weighed down every limb.

Some hero. Some fighter. It was the most he could do to keep from pissing himself. He could hit a woman alright. He could throttle his sister half to death. The memory of it still made him choke with shame and revulsion, even with his own death staring him in the face. He had thought he would make it right later. Only now there was no later. This was all there was. He felt tears in his eyes.

'Sorry,' he muttered to himself. 'I'm sorry.' He closed his eyes and waited for the end.

'No need for sorry, friend, I reckon he's been bitten harder.'

Another Northman had melted out of the woods, crouching down beside West on his haunches. Lank, matted brown hair hung around his lean face. Quick, dark eyes. Clever eyes. He cracked a wicked grin, anything but reassuring. Two rows of hard, yellow, pointed teeth. 'Sit,' he said, accent so thick that West could scarcely understand him. 'Sit and be still is best.'

A fourth man was standing over him and Burr. A great, broadchested man, his wrists as thick as West's ankles. There were grey hairs in his beard, in his tangled hair. The leader, it seemed, from the way the others made room for him. He looked down at West, slow and thoughtful, as a man might look at an ant, deciding whether or not to squash it under his boot.

'Which of 'em's Burr, do you think?' he rumbled in Northern.

'I'm Burr,' said West. Had to protect the Lord Marshal. Had to. He clambered up without thinking, but he was still dizzy from the fall, and he had to grab hold of a branch to stop himself falling. 'I'm Burr.'

The old warrior looked him up and down, slow and steady. 'You?' He burst into a peal of laughter, deep and menacing as a storm in the distance. 'I like that! That's nice!' He turned to the evil-looking one. 'See? I thought you said they got no guts, these Southerners?'

'It was brains I said they was short on.' The one-eared man glowered down at West the way a hungry cat looks at a bird. 'And I've yet to see otherwise.'

'I think it's this one.' The leader was looking down at Burr. 'You Burr?' he asked in the common tongue.

The Lord Marshal looked at West, then up at the towering Northmen, then he got slowly to his feet. He straightened and brushed down his uniform, like a man preparing to die with dignity. ‘I’m Burr, and I’ll not entertain you. If you mean to kill us, you should do it now.’ West stayed where he was. Dignity hardly seemed worth the effort now. He could almost feel the axe biting into his head already.

But the Northman with the grey in his beard only smiled. ‘I can see how you’d make that mistake, and we’re sorry if we’ve frayed your nerves at all, but we’re not here to kill you. We’re here to help you.’ West struggled to make sense of what he was hearing.

Burr was doing the same. ‘To help us?’

‘There’s plenty in the North who hate Bethod. There’s plenty who don’t kneel willing, and some who don’t kneel at all. That’s us. We’ve a feud with that bastard has been a long time brewing, and we mean to settle it, or die in the trying. We can’t fight him alone, but we hear you’re fighting him, so we reckoned we’d join you.’

‘Join us?’

‘We came a long way to do it, and from what we seen on the way you could use the help. But when we got here, your people weren’t keen to take us.’

‘They was somewhat rude,’ said the lean one, squatting next to West.

‘They was indeed, Dogman, they was indeed. But we ain’t men to back off at a little rudeness. That’s when I hit on the notion of talking to you, chief to chief, you might say.’

Burr stared over at West. ‘They want to fight with us,’ he said. West blinked back, still trying to come to terms with the notion that he might live out the day. The one called Dogman was holding out a sword towards him, hilt first, and grinning. It took West a moment to realise it was his own.

‘Thanks,’ muttered West as he fumbled with the grip.

‘No bother.’

‘There’s five of us,’ the leader was saying, ‘all Named Men and veterans. We’ve fought against Bethod, and we’ve fought with him, all across the North. We know his style, few better. We can scout, we can fight, we can lay surprises, as you see. We’ll not shirk any task worth the doing, and any task that hurts Bethod is worth it to us. What do you say?’

‘Well . . . er,’ murmured Burr, rubbing his chin with his thumb. ‘You plainly are a most . . .’ and he looked from one hard, dirty, scarred face to the next ‘. . . useful set of men. How could I resist an offer so graciously made?’

‘Then I better make the introductions. This here is the Dogman.’

‘That’s me,’ growled the lean one with the pointy teeth, flashing his worrying grin again. ‘Good to meet.’ He grabbed hold of West’s hand and squeezed it until his knuckles clicked.

Threetrees jerked his thumb sideways at the evil one with the axe and the missing ear. ‘This friendly fellow’s Black Dow. I’d say he gets better with time, but he don’t.’ Dow turned and spat on the ground again. ‘The big lad is Tul Duru. They call him the Thunderhead. Then there’s Harding Grim. He’s off out there in the trees, keeping your horses off the road. Not to worry though, he’d have nothing to say.’

‘And you?’

‘Rudd Threetrees. Leader of this little crew, on account of our previous leader having gone back to the mud.’

‘Back to the mud, I see.’ Burr took a deep breath. ‘Well then. You can report to Colonel West. I’m sure that he can find food and quarters for you, not to mention work.’

‘Me?’ asked West, sword still dangling from his hand.

‘Absolutely.’ The Lord Marshal had the tiniest smile at the corner of his mouth. ‘Our new allies should fit right in with Prince Ladisla’s retinue.’ West couldn’t decide whether to laugh or cry. Just when he had thought his situation could not be any more difficult, he had five primitives to handle.

Threetrees seemed happy enough with the outcome. ‘Good,’ he said, slowly nodding his approval. ‘That’s settled then.’

‘Settled,’ said the Dogman, his evil smile growing wider still.

The one called Black Dow gave West a long, cold stare.

‘Fucking Union,’ he growled.

Questions

To Sand dan Glokta,
Superior of Dagoska, and for his eyes alone.
You will take ship immediately, and assume command of the Inquisition in the city of Dagoska. You will establish what became of your predecessor, Superior Davoust. You will investigate his suspicion that a conspiracy is afoot, perhaps in the city's ruling council itself. You will examine the members of that council, and uproot any and all disloyalty. Punish treason with scant mercy, but ensure that your evidence is sound. We can afford no further blunders.
Gurkish soldiers already crowd to the peninsula, ready to exploit any weakness. The King's regiments are fully committed in Angland, so you can expect little help should the Gurkish attack. You will therefore ensure that the defences of the city are strong, and that provisions are sufficient to withstand any siege. You will keep me informed of your progress in regular letters. Above all, you will ensure that Dagoska does not, under any circumstances, fall into the hands of the Gurkish.
Do not fail me.
Sult
Arch Lector of his Majesty's Inquisition.
Glokta folded the letter carefully and slipped it back into his pocket, checking once again that the King's writ was safe beside it. *Damn thing*. The big document had been weighing heavily in his coat ever since the Arch Lector passed it to him. He pulled it out and turned it over in his hands, the gold leaf on the big red seal glittering in the harsh sunlight. *A single sheet of paper, yet worth more than gold. Priceless. With this, I speak with the King's own voice. I am the most powerful man in Dagoska, greater even than the Lord Governor himself. All must hear me and obey. As long as I can stay alive, that is.*

The voyage had not been a pleasant one. The ship was small and the Circle Sea had been rough on the way over. Glokta's own cabin was tiny, hot and close as an oven. *An oven swaying wildly all day and all night*. If he had not been trying to eat gruel with the bowl slopping crazily around, he

had been vomiting back up those small amounts he had actually managed to swallow. But at least below decks there was no chance of his useless leg giving way and dumping him over the side into the sea. *Yes, the voyage has hardly been pleasant.*

But now the voyage was over. The ship was already slipping up to its mooring in amongst the crowded wharves. The sailors were already struggling with the anchor, throwing ropes on to the dock. Now the gangplank was sliding across from ship to dusty shore.

'Right,' said Practical Severard. 'I'm going to get me a drink.'

'Make it a strong one, but see you catch up with me later. We'll have work to do tomorrow. Lots of work.'

Severard nodded, lanky hair swaying around his thin face. 'Oh, I live to serve.' *I'm not sure what you live for, but I doubt it's that.* He sauntered off, whistling tunelessly, clattered across the plank, down the wharf and off between the dusty brown buildings beyond.

Glokta eyed the narrow length of wood with not a little worry, worked his hand around the handle of his cane, tongued at his empty gums, building himself up to stepping on to it. *An act of selfless heroism indeed*. He wondered for a moment whether he would be wiser to crawl across on his stomach. *It would reduce the chance of a watery death, but it would hardly be appropriate, would it? The city's awe-inspiring Superior of the Inquisition, slithering into his new domain on his belly?*

'Need a hand?' Practical Vitari was looking at him sideways, leaning back on the ship's handrail, red hair sticking up off her head like the spines on a thistle. She seemed to have spent the entire journey basking in the open air like a lizard, quite unmoved by the reeling of the ship, enjoying the crushing heat every bit as much as Glokta despised it. It was hard to judge her expression beneath her black Practical's mask. *But it's a good bet she's smiling. No doubt she's already preparing her first report to the Arch Lector: 'The cripple spent most of the voyage below decks, puking. When we arrived at Dagoska he had to be hoisted ashore with the cargo. Already he has become a laughing stock . . .'*

'Of course not!' snapped Glokta, hobbling up onto the plank as though he took his life in his hands every morning. It wobbled alarmingly as he planted his right foot on it, and he became painfully aware of the grey-green

water slapping at the slimy stones of the quay a long drop below him. *Body found floating by the docks . . .*

But in the end he was able to shuffle across without incident, dragging his withered leg behind him. He felt an absurd pang of pride when he made it to the dusty stones of the docks and finally stood on dry land again. *Ridiculous. Anyone would think I'd beaten the Gurkish and saved the city already, rather than hobbled three strides.* To add insult to injury, now that he had become used to the constant lurching of the ship, the stillness of land was making his head spin and his stomach roll, and the rotten salt stink of the baking docks was very far from helping. He forced himself to swallow a mouthful of bitter spit, closed his eyes and turned his face towards the cloudless sky.

Hell, but it's hot. Glokta had forgotten how hot the South could be. Late in the year, and still the sun was blazing down, still he was running with sweat under his long black coat. *The garments of the Inquisition may be excellent for instilling terror in a suspect, but I fear they are poorly suited to a hot climate.*

Practical Frost was even worse off. The hulking albino had covered every exposed inch of his milky skin, even down to black gloves and a wide hat. He peered up at the brilliant sky, pink eyes narrowed with suspicion and misery, broad white face beaded with sweat around his black mask.

Vitari peered sidelong at the pair of them. 'You two really should get out more,' she muttered.

A man in Inquisitor's black was waiting at the end of the wharf, sticking close to the shade of a crumbling wall but still sweating generously. A tall, bony man with bulging eyes, his hooked nose red and peeling from sunburn. *The welcoming committee? Judging by its scale, I am scarcely welcome at all.*

'I am Harker, senior Inquisitor in the city.'

'Until I arrived,' snapped Glokta. 'How many others have you?'

The Inquisitor frowned. 'Four Inquisitors and some twenty Practicals.'

'A small complement, to keep a city of this size free of treason.'

Harker's frown grew more surly yet. 'We've always managed.' *Oh, indeed. Apart from mislaying your Superior, of course.* 'This is your first visit to Dagoska?'

‘I have spent some time in the South.’ *The best days of my life, and the worst.* ‘I was in Gurkhul during the war. I saw Ulrioch.’ *In ruins after we burned the city.* ‘And I was in Shaffa for two years.’ *If you count the Emperor’s Prisons. Two years in the boiling heat and the crushing darkness. Two years in hell.* ‘But I have never been to Dagoska.’

‘Huh,’ snorted Harker, unimpressed. ‘Your quarters are in the Citadel.’ He nodded towards the great rock that loomed up over the city. *Of course they are. In the very highest part of the highest building, no doubt.* ‘I’ll show you the way. Lord Governor Vurms and his council will be keen to meet their new Superior.’ He turned with a look of some bitterness. *Feel you should have got the job yourself, eh? I’m delighted to disappoint you.*

Harker set off into the city at a brisk pace, Practical Frost trudging along beside him, heavy shoulders hunched around his thick neck, sticking to every trace of shade as though the sun were shooting tiny darts at him. Vitari zig-zagged across the dusty street as if it was a dance-floor, peering through windows and down narrow side-streets. Glokta shuffled along doggedly behind, his left leg already starting to burn with the effort.

‘The cripple shuffled only three strides into the city before he fell on his face, and had to be carried the rest of the way by stretcher, squealing like a half-slaughtered pig and begging for water, while the very citizens he was sent to terrify watched, dumbstruck . . .’

He curled his lips back and dug his remaining teeth into his empty gums, forced himself to keep pace with the others, the handle of his cane cutting into his palm, his spine giving an agonising click with every step.

‘This is the Lower City,’ grumbled Harker over his shoulder, ‘where the native population are housed.’

A giant, boiling, dusty, stinking slum. The buildings were mean and badly maintained: rickety shacks of one storey, leaning piles of half-baked mud bricks. The people were all dark-skinned, poorly dressed, hungry-looking. A bony woman peered out at them from a doorway. An old man with one leg hobbled past on bent crutches. Down a narrow alley ragged children darted between piles of refuse. The air was heavy with the stink of rot and bad sewers. *Or no sewers at all.* Flies buzzed everywhere. Fat, angry flies. *The only creatures prospering here.*

‘If I’d known it was such a charming place,’ observed Glokta, ‘I’d have come sooner. Seems the Dagoskans have done well from joining the Union,

eh?'

Harker did not recognise the irony. 'They have indeed. During the short time the Gurkish controlled the city, they took many of the leading citizens as slaves. Now, under the Union, they are truly free to work and live as they please.'

'Truly free, eh?' *So this is what freedom looks like.* Glokta watched a group of sullen natives crowding round a stall poorly stocked with half-rotten fruit and flyblown offal.

'Well, mostly.' Harker frowned. 'The Inquisition had to weed out a few troublemakers when we first arrived. Then, three years ago, the ungrateful swine mounted a rebellion.' *After we gave them the freedom to live like animals in their own city? Shocking.* 'We got the better of them, of course, but they caused no end of damage. After that they were barred from keeping weapons, or entering the Upper City, where most of the whites live. Since then, things have been quiet. It only goes to show that a firm hand is most effective when it comes to dealing with these primitives.'

'They built some impressive defences, for primitives.'

A high wall cut through the city before them, casting a long shadow over the squalid buildings of the slum. There was a wide pit in front, freshly dug and lined with sharpened stakes. A narrow bridge led across to a tall gate, set between looming towers. The heavy doors were open, but a dozen men stood before them: sweating Union soldiers in steel caps and studded leather coats, harsh sun glinting on their swords and spears.

'A well-guarded gate,' mused Vitari. 'Considering that it's inside the city.'

Harker frowned. 'Since the rebellion, natives have only been allowed within the Upper City if they have a permit.'

'And who holds a permit?' asked Glokta.

'Some skilled craftsmen and so forth, still employed by the Guild of Spicers, but mostly servants who work in the Upper City and the Citadel. Many of the Union citizens who live here have native servants, some have several.'

'Surely the natives are citizens of the Union also?'

Harker curled his lip. 'If you say so, Superior, but they can't be trusted, and that's a fact. They don't think like us.'

'Really?' *If they think at all it will be an improvement on this savage.*

‘They’re all scum, these browns. Gurkish, Dagoskan, all the same. Killers and thieves, the lot of them. Best thing to do is to push them down and keep them down.’ Harker scowled out at the baking slum. ‘If a thing smells like shit, and is the colour of shit, the chances are it is shit.’ He turned and stalked off across the bridge.

‘What a charming and enlightened man,’ murmured Vitari. *You read my mind.*

It was a different world beyond the gates. Stately domes, elegant towers, mosaics of coloured glass and pillars of white marble shone in the blazing sun. The streets were wide and clean, the residences well maintained. There were even a few thirsty-looking palms in the neat squares. The people here were sleek, well dressed, and white-skinned. *Aside from a great deal of sunburn.* A few dark faces moved among them, keeping well out of the way, eyes on the ground. *Those lucky enough to be allowed to serve? They must be glad that we in the Union would not tolerate such a thing as slavery.*

Over everything Glokta could hear a rattling din, like a battle in the distance. It grew louder as he dragged his aching leg through the Upper City, and reached a furious pitch as they emerged into a wide square, packed from one edge to the other with a bewildering throng. There were people of Midderland, and Gurkhul, and Styria, narrow-eyed natives of Suljuk, yellow-haired citizens of the Old Empire, bearded Northmen even, far from home.

‘Merchants,’ grunted Harker. *All the merchants in the world, it looks like.* They crowded round stalls laden with produce, great scales for the weighing of materials, blackboards with chalked-in goods and prices. They bellowed, borrowed and bartered in a multitude of different languages, threw up their hands in strange gestures, shoved and tugged and pointed at one another. They sniffed at boxes of spice and sticks of incense, fingered at bolts of cloth and planks of rare wood, squeezed at fruits, bit at coins, peered through eye-glasses at flashing gemstones. Here and there a native porter stumbled through the crowds, stooped double under a massive load.

‘The Spicers take a cut of everything,’ muttered Harker, shoving impatiently through the chattering press.

‘That must be a great deal,’ said Vitari under her breath. *A very great deal, I should imagine. Enough to defy the Gurkish. Enough to keep a whole city prisoner. People will kill for much, much less.*

Glokta grimaced and snarled his way across the square, jolted and barged and painfully shoved at every limping step. It was only when they finally emerged from the crowds at the far side that he realised they were standing in the very shadow of a vast and graceful building, rising arch upon arch, dome upon dome, high over the crowds. Delicate spires at each corner soared into the air, slender and frail.

'Magnificent,' muttered Glokta, stretching out his aching back and squinting up, the pure white stone almost painful to look at in the afternoon glare. 'Seeing this, one could almost believe in God.' *If one didn't know better.*

'Huh,' sneered Harker. 'The natives used to pray here in their thousands, poisoning the air with their damn chanting and superstition, until the rebellion was put down, of course.'

'And now?'

'Superior Davoust declared it off limits to them. Like everything else in the Upper City. Now the Spicers use it as an extension to the marketplace, buying and selling and so on.'

'Huh.' *How very appropriate. A temple to the making of money. Our own little religion.*

'I believe some bank uses part of it for their offices, as well.'

'A bank? Which one?'

'The Spicers run that side of things,' snapped Harker impatiently. 'Valint and something, is it?'

'Balk. Valint and Balk.' *So some old acquaintances are here before me, eh? I should have known. Those bastards are everywhere. Everywhere there's money.* He peered round at the swarming marketplace. *And there's a lot of money here.*

The way grew steeper as they began to climb the great rock, the streets built onto shelves cut out from the dry hillside. Glokta laboured on through the heat, stooped over his cane, biting his lip against the pain in his leg, thirsty as a dog and with sweat leaking out through every pore. Harker made no effort to slow as Glokta toiled along behind him. *And I'll be damned if I'm going to ask him to.*

'Above us is the Citadel.' The Inquisitor waved his hand at the mass of sheer-walled buildings, domes and towers clinging to the very top of the brown rock, high above the city. 'It was once the seat of the native King,

but now it serves as Dagoska's administrative centre, and accommodates some of the most important citizens. The Spicers' guildhall is inside, and the city's House of Questions.'

'Quite a view,' murmured Vitari.

Glokta turned and shaded his eyes with his hand. Dagoska was spread out before them, almost an island. The Upper City sloped away, neat grids of neat houses with long, straight roads in between, speckled with yellow palms and wide squares. On the far side of its long, curving wall lay the dusty brown jumble of the slums. Looming over them in the distance, shimmering in the haze, Glokta could see the mighty land walls, blocking the one narrow neck of rock that joined the city to the mainland, the blue sea on one side and the blue harbour on the other. *The strongest defences in the world, so they say. I wonder if we shall be putting that proud boast to the test before too long?*

'Superior Glokta?' Harker cleared his throat. 'The Lord Governor and his council will be waiting.'

'They can wait a little longer, then. I am curious to know what progress you have made in investigating the disappearance of Superior Davoust.' *It would be most unfortunate if the new Superior were to suffer the same fate, after all.*

Harker frowned. 'Well . . . some progress. I have no doubt the natives are responsible. They never stop plotting. Despite the measures Davoust took after the rebellion, many of them still refuse to learn their place.'

'I stand amazed.'

'It is all too true, believe me. Three Dagoskan servants were present in the Superior's chambers on the night he disappeared. I have been questioning them.'

'And what have you discovered?'

'Nothing yet, unfortunately. They have proved exceedingly stubborn.'

'Then let us question them together.'

'Together?' Harker licked his lips. 'I wasn't aware that you would want to question them yourself, Superior.'

'Now you are.'

One would have thought it would be cooler, deep within the rock. But it was every bit as hot as outside in the baking streets, without the mercy of the

slightest breeze. The corridor was silent, dead, and stuffy as a tomb. Vitari's torch cast flickering shadows into the corners, and the darkness closed in fast behind them.

Harker paused beside an iron-bound door, mopped fat beads of sweat from his face. 'I must warn you, Superior, it was necessary to be quite . . . firm with them. A firm hand is the best thing, you know.'

'Oh, I can be quite firm myself, when the situation demands it. I am not easily shocked.'

'Good, good.' The key turned in the lock, the door swung open, and a foul smell washed out into the corridor. *A blocked latrine and a rotten rubbish heap rolled into one.* The cell beyond was tiny, windowless, the ceiling almost too low to stand. The heat was crushing, the stench was appalling. It reminded Glokta of another cell. Further south, in Shaffa. Deep beneath the Emperor's palace. *A cell in which I gasped away two years, squealing in the blackness, scratching at the walls, crawling in my own filth.* His eye had begun to twitch, and he wiped it carefully with his finger.

One prisoner lay stretched out, his face to the wall, skin black with bruises, both legs broken. Another hung from the ceiling by his wrists, knees brushing the floor, head hanging limp, back whipped raw. Vitari stooped and prodded at one of them with her finger. 'Dead,' she said simply. She crossed to the other. 'And this one. Dead a good while.'

The flickering light fell across a third prisoner. This one was alive. *Just.* She was chained by hands and feet, face hollow with hunger, lips cracked with thirst, clutching filthy, bloodstained rags to her. Her heels scraped at the floor as she tried to push herself further back into the corner, gibbering faintly in Kantic, one hand across her face to ward off the light. *I remember. The only thing worse than the darkness is when the light comes. The questions always come with it.*

Glokta frowned, his twitching eyes moving from the two broken corpses to the cowering girl, his head spinning from the effort, and the heat, and the stink. 'Well this is very cosy. What have they told you?'

Harker had his hand over his nose and mouth as he stepped reluctantly into the cell, Frost looming just over his shoulder. 'Nothing yet, but I—'

'You'll get nothing from these two, now, that's sure. I hope they signed confessions.'

‘Well . . . not exactly. Superior Davoust was never that interested in confessions from the browns, we just, you know . . .’

‘You couldn’t even keep them alive long enough to confess?’

Harker looked sullen. *Like a child unfairly punished by his schoolmaster.* ‘There’s still the girl,’ he snapped.

Glokta looked down at her, licking at the space where his front teeth used to be. *There is no method here. No purpose. Brutality, for it’s own sake. I might almost be sickened, had I eaten anything today.* ‘How old is she?’

‘Fourteen, perhaps, Superior, but I fail to see the relevance.’

‘The relevance, Inquisitor Harker, is that conspiracies are rarely led by fourteen-year-old girls.’

‘I thought it best to be thorough.’

‘Thorough? Did you even ask them any questions?’

‘Well, I—’

Glokta’s cane cracked Harker cleanly across the face. The sudden movement caused a stab of agony in Glokta’s side, and he stumbled on his weak leg and had to grab at Frost’s arm for support. The Inquisitor gave a squeal of pain and shock, tumbled against the wall and slid into the filth on the cell floor.

‘You’re not an Inquisitor!’ hissed Glokta, ‘you’re a fucking butcher! Look at the state of this place! And you’ve killed two of our witnesses! What use are they now, fool?’ Glokta leaned forward. ‘Unless that was your intention, eh? Perhaps Davoust was killed by a jealous underling? An underling who wanted to silence the witnesses, eh, Harker? Perhaps I should start my investigations with the Inquisition itself!’

Practical Frost loomed over Harker as he struggled to get up, and he shrank back down against the wall, blood starting to dribble from his nose. ‘No! No, please! It was an accident! I didn’t mean to kill them! I just wanted to know what happened!’

‘An accident? You’re a traitor or an utter incompetent, and I’ve no use for either one!’ He leaned down even lower, ignoring the pain shooting up his back, his lips curling away to show his toothless smile. ‘I understand a firm hand is most effective when dealing with primitives, Inquisitor. You will find there are no firmer hands than mine. Not anywhere. Get this worm out of my sight!’

Frost seized hold of Harker by his coat and hauled him bodily through the filth towards the door. ‘Wait!’ he wailed, clutching at the door frame, ‘please! You can’t do this!’ His cries faded down the corridor.

Vitari had a faint smile around her eyes, as though she had rather enjoyed the scene. ‘What about this mess?’

‘Get it cleaned up.’ Glokta leaned against the wall, his side still pulsing with pain, wiped sweat from his face with a trembling hand. ‘Wash it down. Bury these bodies.’

Vitari nodded towards the one survivor. ‘What about her?’

‘Give her a bath. Clothes. Food. Let her go.’

‘Hardly worth giving her a bath if she’s going back to the Lower City.’

She has a point there. ‘Alright! She was Davoust’s servant, she can be mine. Put her back to work!’ he shouted over his shoulder, already hobbling for the door. He had to get out. He could hardly breathe in there.

‘I am sorry to disappoint you all, but the walls are far from impregnable, not in their present poor condition . . .’ The speaker trailed off as Glokta shuffled through the door into the meeting chamber of Dagoska’s ruling council.

It was as unlike the cell below as it was possible for a room to be. *It is, in fact, the most beautiful room I ever saw.* Every inch of wall and ceiling was carved in the most minute detail: geometric patterns of frightening intricacy wound round scenes from Kantic legends in life-size, all painted in glittering gold and silver, vivid red and blue. The floor was a mosaic of wondrous complexity, the long table was inlaid with swirls of dark wood and chips of bright ivory, polished to a high sheen. The tall windows offered a spectacular view over the dusty brown expanse of the city, and the sparkling bay beyond.

The woman who rose to greet Glokta as he entered did not seem out of place in the magnificent surroundings. *Not in the slightest.*

‘I am Carlot dan Eider,’ she said, smiling easily and holding her hands out to him as though to an old friend, ‘Magister of the Guild of Spicers.’

Glokta was impressed, he had to admit. *If only by her stomach. Not even the slightest sign of horror. She greets me as though I were not a disfigured, twitching, twisted ruin. She greets me as though I looked as fine as she does.* She wore a long gown in the style of the South: blue silk, trimmed

with silver, it shimmered around her in the cool breeze through the high windows. Jewels of daunting value flashed on her fingers, on her wrists, round her throat. Glokta detected a strange scent as she came closer. *Sweet. Like the spice that has made her so very rich, perhaps.* The effect was far from wasted on him. *I am still a man, after all. Just less so than I used to be.*

'I must apologise for my attire, but Kantic garments are so much more comfortable in the heat. I have become quite accustomed to them during my years here.'

Her apologising for her appearance is like a genius apologising for his stupidity. 'Don't mention it.' Glokta bowed as low as he could, given the uselessness of his leg and the sharp pain in his back. 'Superior Glokta, at your service.'

'We are most glad to have you with us. We have all been greatly concerned since the disappearance of your predecessor, Superior Davoust.' *Some of you, I expect, have been less concerned than others.*

'I hope to shed some light on the matter.'

'We all hope that you will.' She took Glokta's elbow with an effortless confidence. 'Please allow me to make the introductions. '

Glokta refused to be moved. 'Thank you, Magister, but I believe I can make my own.' He shuffled across to the table under his own power, such as it was. 'You must be General Vissbruck, charged with the city's defence.' The General was in his middle forties, running slightly to baldness, sweating abundantly in an elaborate uniform, buttoned all the way to the neck in spite of the heat. *I remember you. You were in Gurkhul, in the war. A Major in the King's Own, and well known for being an ass. It seems you have done well, at least, as asses generally do.*

'A pleasure,' said Vissbruck, scarcely even glancing up from his documents.

'It always is, to renew an old acquaintance.'

'We've met?'

'We fought together in Gurkhul.'

'We did?' A spasm of shock ran over Vissbruck's sweaty face. 'You're . . . *that* Glokta?'

'I am indeed, as you say, *that* Glokta.'

The General blinked. 'Er, well, er . . . how have you been?'

‘In very great pain, thank you for asking, but I see that you have prospered, and that is a tremendous consolation.’ Vissbruck blinked, but Glokta did not give him time to reply. ‘And this must be Lord Governor Vurms. A positive honour, your Grace.’

The old man was a caricature of decrepitude, shrunken into his great robes of state like a withered plum in its furry skin. His hands seemed to shiver even in the heat, his head was shiny bald aside from a few white wisps. He squinted up at Glokta through weak and rheumy eyes.

‘What did he say?’ The Lord Governor stared about him in confusion. ‘Who is this man?’

General Vissbruck leaned across, so close his lips almost brushed the old man’s ear. ‘Superior Glokta, your Grace! The replacement for Davoust!’

‘Glokta? Glokta? Where the hell is Davoust anyway?’ No one bothered to reply.

‘I am Korsten dan Vurms.’ The Lord Governor’s son spoke his own name as though it was a magic spell, offered his hand to Glokta as though it was a priceless gift. He was blond-haired and handsome, spread out carelessly in his chair, a well-tanned glow of health about him, as lithe and athletic as his father was ancient and wizened. *I despise him already.*

‘I understand that you were once quite the swordsman.’ Vurms looked Glokta up and down with a mocking smile. ‘I fence myself, and there’s really no one here to challenge me. Perhaps we might have a bout?’ *I’d love to, you little bastard. If I still had my leg I’d give you a bout of the shits before I was done.*

‘I did fence but, alas, I had to give it up. Ill health.’ Glokta leered back a toothless smile of his own. ‘I daresay I could still give you a few pointers, though, if you’re keen to improve.’ Vurms frowned at that, but Glokta had already moved on. ‘You must be Haddish Kahdia.’

The Haddish was a tall, slender man with a long neck and tired eyes. He wore a simple white robe, a plain white turban wound about his head. *He looks no more prosperous than any of the other natives down in the Lower City, and yet there is a certain dignity about him.*

‘I am Kahdia, and I have been chosen by the people of Dagoska to speak for them. But I no longer call myself Haddish. A priest without a temple is no priest at all.’

‘Must we still hear about the temple?’ whined Vurms.

‘I am afraid you must, while I sit on this council.’ He looked back at Glokta. ‘So there is a new Inquisitor in the city? A new devil. A new bringer of death. Your comings and goings are of no interest to me, torturer.’

Glokta smiled. *Confessing his hatred for the Inquisition without even seeing my instruments. But then his people can hardly be expected to have much love for the Union, they’re little better than slaves in their own city. Could he be our traitor?*

Or him? General Vissbruck seemed every inch a loyal military man, a man whose sense of duty was too strong, and whose imagination was too weak, for intrigue. *But few men become Generals without looking to their own profit, without oiling the wheels, without keeping some secrets.*

Or him? Korsten dan Vurms was sneering at Glokta as though at a badly-cleaned latrine he had to use. *I’ve seen his like a thousand times, the arrogant whelp. The Lord Governor’s own son, perhaps, but it’s plain enough he has no loyalty to anyone beyond himself.*

Or her? Magister Eider was all comely smiles and politeness, but her eyes were hard as diamonds. *Judging me like a merchant judges an ignorant customer. There’s more to her than fine manners and a weakness for foreign tailoring. Far more.*

Or him? Even the old Lord Governor seemed suspect now. *Are his eyes and ears as bad as he claims? Or is there a hint of play-acting in his squinting, his demands to know what’s going on? Does he already know more than anyone?*

Glokta turned and limped towards the window, leaned against the beautifully carved pillar beside it and peered out at the astonishing view, the evening sun still warm on his face. He could already feel the council members shifting restlessly, keen to be rid of him. *I wonder how long before they order the cripple out of their beautiful room? I do not trust a one of them. Not a one. He smirked to himself. Precisely as it should be.*

It was Korsten dan Vurms who lost patience first. ‘Superior Glokta,’ he snapped. ‘We appreciate your thoroughness in presenting yourself here, but I am sure you have urgent business to attend to. We certainly do.’

‘Of course.’ Glokta hobbled back to the table with exaggerated slowness as if he were leaving the room. Then he slid out a chair and lowered himself into it, wincing at the pain in his leg. ‘I will try to keep my comments to a minimum, at least to begin with.’

‘What?’ said Vissbruck.

‘Who is this fellow?’ demanded the Lord Governor, craning forwards and squinting with his weak eyes. ‘What is going on here?’

His son was more direct. ‘What the hell do you think you’re doing?’ he demanded. ‘Are you mad?’ Haddish Kahdia began to chuckle softly to himself. At Glokta, or at the rage of the others, it was impossible to say.

‘Please, gentlemen, please.’ Magister Eider spoke softly, patiently. ‘The Superior has only just arrived, and is perhaps ignorant of how we conduct business in Dagoska. You must understand that your predecessor did not attend these meetings. We have been governing this city successfully for several years, and—’

‘The Closed Council disagrees.’ Glokta held up the King’s writ between two fingers. He let everyone look at it for a moment, making sure they could see the heavy seal of red and gold, then he flicked it across the table.

The others stared over suspiciously as Carlot dan Eider picked up the document, unfolded it and started to read. She frowned, then raised one well-plucked eyebrow. ‘It seems that we are the ignorant ones.’

‘Let me see that!’ Korsten dan Vurms snatched the paper out of her hands and started to read it. ‘It can’t be,’ he muttered. ‘It can’t be!’

‘I’m afraid that it is.’ Glokta treated the assembly to his toothless leer. ‘Arch Lector Sult is most concerned. He has asked me to look into the disappearance of Superior Davoust, and also to examine the city’s defences. To examine them carefully, and to ensure that the Gurkish stay on the other side of them. He has instructed me to use whatever measures I deem necessary.’ He gave a significant pause. ‘Whatever . . . measures.’

‘What is that?’ grumbled the Lord Governor. ‘I demand to know what is going on!’

Vissbruck had the paper now. ‘The King’s writ,’ he breathed, mopping his sweaty forehead on the back of his sleeve, ‘signed by all twelve chairs on the Closed Council. It grants full powers!’ He laid it down gently on the inlaid table-top, as though worried it might suddenly burst into flames. ‘This is—’

‘We all know what it is.’ Magister Eider was watching Glokta thoughtfully, one fingertip stroking her smooth cheek. *Like a merchant who suddenly becomes aware that her supposedly ignorant customer has fleeced*

her, and not the other way around. ‘It seems Superior Glokta will be taking charge.’

‘I would hardly say taking charge, but I will be attending all further meetings of this council. You should consider that the first of a very great number of changes.’ Glokta gave a comfortable sigh as he settled into his beautiful chair, stretching out his aching leg, resting his aching back. Almost comfortable. He glanced across the frowning faces of the city’s ruling council. *Except, of course, that one of these charming people is most likely a dangerous traitor. A traitor who has already arranged the disappearance of one Superior, and may very well now be considering the removal of a second . . .*

Glokta cleared his throat. ‘Now then, General Vissbruck, what were you saying as I arrived? Something about the walls?’

The Wounds of the Past

‘The mistakes of old,’ intoned Bayaz with the highest pomposity, ‘should be made only once. Any worthwhile education, therefore, must be founded on a sound understanding of history.’

Jezal gave vent to a ragged sigh. Why on earth the old man had undertaken to enlighten him was past his understanding. The towering self-interest, perhaps, of the mildly senile was to blame. In any case, Jezal was unshakable in his determination not to learn a thing.

‘. . . yes, history,’ the Magus was musing, ‘there is a lot of history in Calcis . . .’

Jezal glanced around him, unimpressed in the extreme. If history was nothing more than age, then Calcis, ancient city-port of the Old Empire, was plainly rich with it. If history went further – to grandeur, to glory, to something which stirred the blood – then it was conspicuously absent.

Doubtless the city had been carefully laid out, with wide, straight streets positioned to give the traveller magnificent views. But what might once have been proud civic vistas, the long centuries had reduced to panoramas of decay. Everywhere there were abandoned houses, empty windows and doorways gazing sadly out into the rutted squares. They passed side-streets choked with weeds, with rubble, with rotting timbers. Half the bridges across the sluggish river had collapsed and never been repaired; half the trees in the broad avenues were dead and withered, throttled by ivy.

There was none of the sheer life that crammed Adua, from the docks, to the slums, to the Agriont itself. Jezal’s home might have sometimes seemed swarming, squabbling, bursting at the seams with humanity, but, as he watched the few threadbare citizens of Calcis traipsing through their rotting relic of a city, he was in no doubt which atmosphere he preferred.

‘. . . you will have many opportunities to improve yourself on this journey of ours, my young friend, and I suggest you take advantage of them. Master Ninefingers in particular, is well worthy of study. I feel you could learn a great deal from him . . .’

Jezal almost gasped with disbelief. ‘From that ape?’

‘That ape, as you say, is famous throughout the North. The Bloody-Nine, they call him there. A name to fill strong men with fear or courage, depending on which side they stand. A fighter and tactician of deep cunning and matchless experience. Above all, he has learned the trick of saying a great deal less than he knows.’ Bayaz glanced across at him. ‘The precise opposite of some people I could name.’

Jezal frowned and hunched his shoulders. He could see nothing to be learned from Ninefingers apart, perhaps, from how to eat with one’s hands and go days without washing.

‘The great forum,’ muttered Bayaz, as they passed into a wide, open space. ‘The throbbing heart of the city.’ Even he sounded disappointed. ‘Here the citizens of Calcis would come to buy and sell, to watch spectacles and hear cases at law, to argue philosophy and politics. In the Old Time it would have been crammed shoulder to shoulder here, until late in the evening.’

There was ample space now. The vast paved area could easily have accommodated fifty times the sorry crowd that was gathered there. The grand statues round the edge were stained and broken, their dirty pedestals leaning at all angles. A few desultory stalls were laid out in the centre, crowded together like sheep in cold weather.

‘A shadow of its former glory. Still,’ and Bayaz pointed out the dishevelled sculptures, ‘these are the only occupants that need interest us today.’

‘Really, and they are?’

‘Emperors of the distant past, my boy, each with a tale to tell.’

Jezal groaned inwardly. He had nothing more than a passing interest in the history of his own country, let alone that of some decaying backwater in the far-flung west of the World. ‘There’s a lot of them,’ he muttered.

‘And these are by no means all. The history of the Old Empire stretches back for many centuries.’

‘Must be why they call it old.’

‘Don’t try to be clever with me, Captain Luthar, you have not the equipment. While your forebears in the Union were running around naked, communicating by gestures and worshipping mud, here my master Juvens was guiding the birth of a mighty nation, a nation that in scale and wealth, in knowledge and grandeur, has never been equalled. Adua, Talins, Shaffa,

they are but shadows of the wondrous cities that once thrived in the valley of the great river Aos. This is the cradle of civilisation, my young friend.'

Jezal glanced round him at the sorry statues, the rotting trees, the grimy, the forlorn, the faded streets. 'What went wrong?'

'The failure of something great is never a simple matter, but, where there is success and glory, there must also be failure and shame. Where there are both, jealousies must simmer. Envy and pride led by slow degrees to squabbles, then to feuds, then to wars. Two great wars that ended in terrible disasters.' He stepped smartly towards the nearest of the statues. 'But disasters are not without their lessons, my boy.'

Jezal grimaced. He needed more lessons like he needed a dose of the cock-rot, and he in no sense felt himself to be anyone's boy, but the old man was not in the least put off by his reluctance.

'A great ruler must be ruthless,' intoned Bayaz. 'When he perceives a threat against his person or authority, he must move swiftly, and with no space left for regret. For an example, we need look no further than the Emperor Shilla.' He gazed up at the marble above them, its features all but entirely worn away by the weather. 'When he suspected his chamberlain of harbouring pretensions to the throne, he ordered him put to death on the instant, his wife and all his children strangled, his great mansion in Aulcus levelled to the ground.' Bayaz shrugged. 'All without the slightest shred of proof. An excessive and a brutal act, but better to act with too much force than too little. Better to be held in fear, than in contempt. Shilla knew this. There is no place for sentiment in politics, do you see?'

'I see that wherever I turn in life there's always some fucking old dunce trying to give me a lecture.' That was what Jezal thought, but he was not about to say it. The memory of a Practical of the Inquisition bursting apart before his very eyes was still horribly fresh in his mind. The squelching sound of the flesh. The feeling of spots of hot blood pattering across his face. He swallowed and looked down at his shoes.

'I see,' he muttered.

Bayaz' voice droned on. 'Not that a great King need be a tyrant, of course! To gain the love of the common man should always be a ruler's first aim, for it can be won with small gestures, and yet can last a lifetime.'

Jezal was not about to let that pass, however dangerous the old man might be. It was clear that Bayaz had no practical experience in the arena of

politics. ‘What use is the love of commoners? The nobles have the money, the soldiers, the power.’

Bayaz rolled his eyes at the clouds. ‘The words of a child, easily tricked by flim-flam and quick hands. Where does the nobles’ money come from, but from taxes on the peasants in the fields? Who are their soldiers, but the sons and husbands of common folk? What gives the lords their power? Only the compliance of their vassals, nothing more. When the peasantry become truly dissatisfied, that power can vanish with terrifying speed. Take the case of the Emperor Dantus.’ He gestured up at one of the many statues, one arm broken off at the shoulder, the other holding out a handful of scum in which a rich bloom of moss had taken hold. The loss of his nose, leaving a grimy crater, had left the Emperor Dantus with an expression of eternal embarrassed bewilderment, like a man surprised whilst on the latrine.

‘No ruler has ever been more loved by his people,’ said Bayaz. ‘He greeted every man as his equal, always gave half his revenues to the poor. But the nobles conspired against him, fixed on one of their number to replace him, and threw the Emperor into prison while they seized the throne.’

‘Did they really?’ grunted Jezal, staring off across the half-empty square.

‘But the people would not abandon their beloved monarch. They rose from their homes and rioted, and would not be subdued. Some of the conspirators were dragged from their palaces and hung in the streets, the others were cowed, and returned Dantus to his throne. So you see, my lad, that the love of the people is a ruler’s surest shield against danger.’

Jezal sighed. ‘Give me the support of the lords every time.’

‘Hah. Their love is costly, and fickle as the changing wind. Have you not stood in the Lords’ Round, Captain Luthar, while the Open Council is in session?’ Jezal frowned. Perhaps there was some grain of truth in the old man’s babble. ‘Hah. Such is the love of nobles. The best that one can do is to divide them and work on their jealousies, make them compete for small favours, claim the credit for their successes, and most of all ensure that no one of them should grow too powerful, and rise to challenge one’s own majesty.’

‘Who is this?’ One statue stood noticeably higher than the others. An impressive-seeming man in late middle-age with a thick beard and curling

hair. His face was handsome but there was a grim set to his mouth, a proud and wrathful wrinkling of his brow. A man not to be fooled with.

'That is my master, Juvens. Not an Emperor, but the first and last adviser to many. He built the Empire, yet he was also the principal in its destruction. A great man, in so many ways, but great men have great faults.' Bayaz turned his worn staff thoughtfully round in his hand. 'One should learn the lessons of history. The mistakes of the past need only be made once.' He paused for a moment. 'Unless there are no other choices.'

Jezal rubbed his eyes and stared across the forum. The Crown Prince Ladisla, perhaps, might have benefited from such a lecture, but Jezal rather doubted it. Was this why he had been torn away from his friends, from his hard-earned chance at glory and advancement? To listen to the dusty musings of some strange, bald wanderer?

He frowned. There were a group of three soldiers moving towards them across the square. At first he watched them, uninterested. Then he realised they were looking right at him and Bayaz, and moving directly towards them. Now he saw another group of three, and another, coming from different directions.

Jezal's throat felt tight. Their armour and weapons, though of an antique design, looked worryingly effective and well-used. Fencing was one thing. Actual fighting, with its possibilities for serious wounding and death, was quite another. It was not cowardice, surely, to feel worried, not with nine armed men very clearly approaching them, and no possible route of escape.

Bayaz had noticed them too. 'A welcome appears to have been prepared.'

The nine closed in, faces hard, weapons firmly gripped. Jezal squared his shoulders and did his best to look fearsome while meeting nobody's eye, and keeping his hands well away from the hilts of his steels. He had no wish whatsoever for someone to get nervous, and stab him on a whim.

'You are Bayaz,' said their leader, a heavy-set man with a grubby red plume on his helmet.

'Is that a question?'

'No. Our master, the Imperial Legate, Salamo Narba, governor of Calcis, invites you to an audience.'

'Does he indeed?' Bayaz glanced around at the party of soldiers, then raised an eyebrow at Jezal. 'I suppose it would be rude of us to refuse, when

the Legate has gone to all the trouble of organising an honour guard. Lead the way.'

Say one thing for Logen Ninefingers, say he's in pain. He dragged himself over the broken cobblestones, wincing every time his weight went onto his bad ankle – limping, gasping, waving his arms to keep his balance.

Brother Longfoot grinned over his shoulder at this sorry display. 'How are your injuries progressing, my friend?

'Painfully,' grunted Logen, through gritted teeth.

'And yet, I suspect, you have endured worse.'

'Huh.' The wounds of the past were many. He'd spent most of his life in some amount of pain, healing too slowly from one beating or another. He remembered the first real wound he'd ever taken, a cut down his face that the Shanka had given him. Fifteen years old, lean and smooth-skinned and the girls in the village had still liked to look at him. He touched his thumb to his face and felt the old scar. He remembered his father pressing the bandage to his cheek in the smoky hall, the stinging of it, wanting to shout but biting his lip. A man stays silent.

When he can. Logen remembered lying on his face in a stinking tent with the cold rain drumming on the canvas, biting on a piece of leather to keep from screaming, coughing it out and screaming anyway while they dug in his back for an arrow-head that hadn't come out with the shaft. It had taken them a day of looking to find the bastard thing. Logen winced and wriggled his tingling shoulder blades at that memory. He hadn't been able to talk for a week from all that screaming.

Hadn't been able to talk for more than a week after the duel with Threetrees. Or walk, or eat, or see hardly. Broken jaw, broken cheek, ribs broken past counting. Bones smashed until he was no more than aching, crying, self-pitying goo, mewling like an infant at every movement of his stretcher, fed by an old woman with a spoon and grateful to get it.

There were plenty more memories, all crowding in and cutting at him. The stump of his finger after the battle at Carleon, burning and burning and making him crazy. Waking up sudden after a day out cold, when he got knocked on the head up in the hills. Pissing red after Harding Grim's spear had pricked him through the guts. Logen felt them now on his tattered skin, all of his scars, and he hugged his arms around his aching body.

The wounds of the past were many, alright, but it didn't make the ones he had now hurt any less. The cut in his shoulder nagged at him, sore as a burning coal. He'd seen a man lose an arm from nothing more than a graze he'd got in battle. First they had to take off his hand, then his arm to the elbow, then all the way to the shoulder. Next he got tired, then he started talking stupid, then he stopped breathing. Logen didn't want to go back to the mud that way.

He hopped up to a crumbling stump of wall and leaned against it, painfully shrugged his coat off, fumbled at the buttons of his shirt with one clumsy hand, pulled the pin out of the bandage and peeled the dressing carefully away.

'How does it look?' he asked.

'Like the parent of all scabs,' muttered Longfoot, peering at his shoulder.

'Does it smell alright?'

'You want me to smell you?'

'Just tell me if it stinks.'

The Navigator leaned forwards and sniffed daintily at Logen's shoulder. 'A marked odour of sweat, but that might be your armpit. I fear that my remarkable talents do not encompass medicine. One wound smells much like another to me.' And he pushed the pin back through the bandage.

Logen worked his shirt on. 'You'd know if it was rotten, believe me. Reeks like old graves, and once the rot gets in you there's no getting rid of it but with a blade. Bad way to go.' And he shuddered and pressed his palm gently against his throbbing shoulder.

'Yes, well,' said Longfoot, already striding off down the near-deserted street. 'Lucky for you that we have the woman Maljinn with us. Her talent for conversation is most extremely limited, but when it comes to wounds, well, I saw the whole business and don't object to telling you, she can stitch skin as calm and even as a master cobbler stitches leather. She can indeed! She pulls a needle as nimble and neat as a queen's dressmaker. A useful talent to have in these parts. I would not be the least surprised if we need that talent again before we're done.'

'It's a dangerous journey?' asked Logen, still trying to struggle back into his coat.

'Huh. The North has always been wild and lawless, heavy with bloody feuds and merciless brigands. Every man goes armed to the teeth, and ready

to kill at a moment's notice. In Gurkhul foreign travellers stay free only on the whim of the local governor, at risk of being taken as a slave at any moment. Styrian cities sport thugs and cutpurses on every corner, if you can even get through their gates without being robbed by the authorities. The waters of the Thousand Isles are thick with pirates, one for each merchant, it sometimes seems, while in distant Suljuk they fear and despise outsiders, and likely as not will hang you by your feet and cut your throat as soon as give you directions. The Circle of the World is full of dangers, my nine-fingered friend, but if all that is not enough for you, and you yearn for more severe peril, I suggest that you visit the Old Empire.'

Logen got the feeling that Brother Longfoot was enjoying himself. 'That bad?'

'Worse, oh yes, indeed! Especially if, rather than simply visiting, one undertakes to cross the breadth of the country from one side to the other.'

Logen winced. 'And that's the plan?'

'That is, as you put it, the plan. For time out of mind, the Old Empire has been riven by civil strife. Once a single nation with a single Emperor, his laws enforced by a mighty army and a loyal administration, it has dissolved down the years into a boiling soup of petty princedoms, crackpot republics, city states and tiny lordships, until few acknowledge any leader who does not even now hold a sword over their heads. The lines between tax and brigandage, between just war and bloody murder, between rightful claim and fantasy have blurred and vanished. Hardly a year goes by without another power-hungry bandit declaring himself king of the world. I understand there was a time, perhaps fifty years ago, when there were no fewer than sixteen Emperors at one moment.'

'Huh. Fifteen more than you need.'

'Sixteen more, some might say, and not a one of them friendly to travellers. When it comes to getting murdered, the Old Empire presents a victim with quite the dazzling choice. But one need not be killed by men.'

'No?'

'Oh, dear me, no! Nature has also placed many fearsome obstacles in our path, especially given that winter is now coming fast upon us. Westward of Calcis stretches a wide and level plain, open grassland for many hundreds of miles. In the Old Time, perhaps, much of it was settled, cultivated, crossed by straight roads of good stone in every direction. Now the towns

mostly lie in silent ruins, the land is storm-drenched wilderness, the roads are trails of broken stones luring the unwary into sucking bogs.'

'Bogs,' muttered Logen, slowly shaking his head.

'And worse beside. The river Aos, greatest of all rivers within the Circle of the World, carves a deep and snaking valley through the midst of this wasteland. We will have to cross it, but there are only two surviving bridges, one at Darmium, which is our best chance, another at Aostum, a hundred miles or more further west. There are fords, but the Aos is mighty, and fast-flowing, and the valley deep and dangerous.' Longfoot clicked his tongue. 'That is before we reach the Broken Mountains.'

'High, are they?'

'Oh, extremely. Very high, and very perilous. Called Broken for their steep cliffs, their jagged ravines, their sudden plunging drops. There are rumoured to be passes, but all the maps, if indeed there ever were any, were lost long ago. Having negotiated the mountains we will take ship—'

'You plan to carry a ship over the mountains?'

'Our employer assures me he can get one on the other side, though how I do not know, for that land is almost utterly unknown. We will sail due west to the island of Shabulyan, which they say rises from the ocean at the very edge of the World.'

'They say?'

'Rumour is all that anyone knows of it. Even amongst the illustrious order of Navigators, I have heard of no man who lays claim to have set foot upon the place, and the brothers of my order are well known for . . . far-fetched claims, shall we say?'

Logen scratched slowly at his face, wishing that he'd asked Bayaz his plans before. 'It all sounds a long way.'

'One could scarcely conceive, in fact, of a destination more remote.'

'What's there?'

Longfoot shrugged. 'You will have to ask our employer. I find routes, not reasons. Follow me please, Master Ninefingers, and I pray you not to dally. We have a great deal to do if we are to pose as merchants.'

'Merchants?'

'That is Bayaz' plan. Merchants often risk the journey west from Calcis to Darmium, even beyond to Aostum. They are large cities still, and largely cut off from the outside world. The profits one can make carrying foreign

luxuries to them – spices from Gurkhul, silks from Suljuk, chagga from the North – are astronomical. Why, you can triple your investment in a month, if you survive! Such caravans are a common sight, well armed and well defended, of course.'

'What about these looters and robbers wandering the plain? Aren't merchants just what they're after?'

'Of course,' said Longfoot. 'It must be some other threat that this disguise is intended to defend against. One directed specifically at us.'

'At us? Another threat? We need more?' But Longfoot was already striding out of earshot.

In one part of Calcis at least, the majesty of the past was not entirely faded. The hall into which they were ushered by their guards, or their kidnappers, was glorious indeed.

Two lines of columns, tall as forest trees, marched down either side of the echoing space, carved from polished green stone fretted with glittering veins of silver. High above, the ceiling was painted a rich blue-black, marked with a galaxy of shining stars, constellations picked out by golden lines. A deep pool of dark water filled the space before the door, perfectly still, reflecting everything. Another shadowy hall below. Another shadowy night sky beyond it.

The Imperial Legate lay sprawled out across a couch on a high dais at the far end of the room, a table before him loaded with delicacies. He was a huge man, round-faced and fleshy. Fingers heavy with golden rings snatched up choice morsels and tossed them into his waiting mouth, eyes never leaving his two guests, or his two prisoners, for a moment.

'I am Salamo Narba, Imperial Legate and governor of the city of Calcis.' He worked his mouth, then spat out an olive stone which pinged into a dish. 'You are the one they call the First of the Magi?'

The Magus inclined his bald head. Narba lifted up a goblet, holding the stem between his heavy forefinger and his heavy thumb, took a swig of wine, sloshed it slowly round in his mouth while he watched them, and swallowed. 'Bayaz.'

'The same.'

'Hmm. I mean no offence.' Here the Legate snatched up a tiny fork and speared an oyster from its shell, 'but your presence in this city concerns me.

The political situation in the Empire is . . . volatile.' He picked up his goblet. 'Even more so than usual.' Swig, slosh, swallow. 'The last thing that I need is someone . . . upsetting the balance.'

'More volatile than usual?' asked Bayaz. 'I understood that Sabarbus had finally calmed things.'

'Calmed them under his boot, for a while.' The Legate tore a handful of dark grapes from a bunch and leaned back on his cushions, popping them one by one into his gaping mouth. 'But Sabarbus . . . is dead. Poison, they say. His sons, Scario . . . and Goltus . . . squabbled over his legacy . . . then made war on each other. An exceptionally bloody war, even for this exhausted land.' And he spat the pips out onto the table top.

'Goltus held the city of Darmium, in the midst of the great plain. Scario employed his father's greatest general, Cabrian, to take it under siege. Not long ago, after five months of encirclement, starved of provisions, hopeless of relief . . . the city surrendered.' Narba bit into a ripe plum, juice running down his chin.

'So Scario is close to victory, then.'

'Huh.' The Legate wiped his face with the tip of his little finger and tossed the unfinished fruit carelessly onto the table. 'No sooner had Cabrian finally taken the city, pillaged its treasures and given it over to a brutal sack by his soldiers, than he installed himself in the ancient palace and proclaimed himself Emperor.'

'Ah. You seem unmoved.'

'I weep on the inside, but I have seen all this before. Scario, Goltus, and now Cabrian. Three self-appointed Emperors, locked in a deadly struggle, their soldiers ravaging the land, while the few cities who have maintained their independence look on, horrified, and do their best to escape the nightmare unscathed.'

Bayaz frowned. 'I mean to travel westward. I must cross the Aos, and Darmium is the closest bridge.'

The Legate shook his head. 'It is said that Cabrian, always eccentric, has lost his reason entirely. That he has murdered his wife and married his own three daughters. That he has declared himself a living god. The city gates are sealed while he scours the city for witches, devils, and traitors. Every day there are new bodies hanging at the public gibbets he has raised on each

corner. No one is permitted either to enter or to leave. Such is the news from Darmium.'

Jezal was more than a little relieved to hear Bayaz say, 'it must be Aostum, then.'

'Nobody will be crossing the river at Aostum any longer. Scario, running from his brother's vengeful armies, fled across the bridge and had his engineers bring it down behind him.'

'He destroyed it?'

'He did. A wonder of the Old Time which stood for two thousand years. Nothing remains. To add to your woes, there have been heavy rains and the great river runs swift and high. The fords are impassable. You will not cross the Aos this year, I fear.'

'I must.'

'But you will not. If you wish for my advice, I would leave the Empire to its misery and return from whence you came. Here in Calcis we have always tried to plough a middle furrow, to remain neutral, and firmly aloof from the disasters that have befallen the rest of the land, one hard upon another. Here we still cling to the ways of our forefathers.' He gestured at himself. 'The city is yet governed by an Imperial Legate, as it was in the Old Time, not ruled by some brigand, some petty chieftain, some false Emperor.' He waved a limp hand at the rich hall around them. 'Here, against the odds, we have managed to retain some vestige of the glory of old, and I will not risk that. Your friend Zacharus was here, not but a month ago.'

'Here?'

'He told me that Goltus was the rightful Emperor and demanded that I throw my support behind him. I sent him scurrying away with the same answer I will give to you. We in Calcis are happy as we are. We want no part of your self-serving schemes. Take your meddling and get you gone, Magus. I give you three days to leave the city.'

There was a long, quiet pause as the last echoes of Narba's speech faded. A long, breathless moment, and all the while Bayaz' frown grew harder. A long, expectant silence, but not quite empty. It was full of growing fear.

'Have you confused me with some other man?' growled Bayaz, and Jezal felt an urgent need to shuffle away from him and hide behind one of the beautiful pillars. 'I am the First of the Magi! The first apprentice of great

Juvens himself!' His anger was like a great stone pressing on Jezal's chest, squeezing the air from his lungs, crushing the strength from his body. He held up his meaty fist. 'This is the hand that cast down Kanedias! The hand that crowned Harod! You dare to give me threats? Is this what you call the glory of old? A city shrunken in its crumbling walls like some withered old warrior cowering in the outsize armour of his youth?' Narba shrank behind his silverware and Jezal winced, terrified that the Legate might explode at any moment and shower the room with gore.

'You think I care a damn for your broken piss-pot of a town?' thundered Bayaz. 'You give me three days? I'll be gone in one!' And he turned on his heel and stalked across the polished floor towards the entrance, the ringing echoes of his voice still grating from the shining walls, the glittering ceiling.

Jezal dithered a moment, weak and trembling, then shuffled guiltily away, following the First of the Magi past the Legate's horrified, dumbstruck guards and out into the daylight.

The Condition of the Defences

To Arch Lector Sult,
head of his Majesty's Inquisition.
Your Eminence,
I have acquainted the members of Dagoska's ruling council with my mission. You will not be surprised to learn that they are less than delighted at the sudden reduction in their powers. My investigation into the disappearance of Superior Davoust is already underway, and I feel confident that results will not be long in coming. I will be appraising the city's defences as soon as possible, and will take any and all steps necessary to ensure that Dagoska is impregnable.
You will hear from me soon. Until then, I serve and obey.
Sand dan Glokta,
Superior of Dagoska.

The sun pressed down on the crumbling battlements like a great weight. It pressed through Glokta's hat and onto his stooped head. It pressed through Glokta's black coat and onto his twisted shoulders. It threatened to squeeze the water right out of him, squash the life right out of him, crush him to his knees. A cool autumn morning in charming Dagoska.

While the sun attacked him from above, the salt wind came at him head on. It swept in off the empty sea and over the bare peninsula, hot and full of choking dust, blasting the land walls of the city and scouring everything with salty grit. It stung at Glokta's sweaty skin, whipped the moisture from his mouth, tickled at his eyes and made them weep stinging tears. Even the weather wants to be rid of me, it would seem.

Practical Vitari teetered along the parapet beside him, arms outstretched like a circus performer on the high rope. Glokta frowned up at her, a gangly black shape against the brilliant sky. *She could just as easily walk down here, and stop making a spectacle of herself. But at least this way there is always the chance of her falling off.* The land walls were twenty strides high at the least. Glokta allowed himself the very slightest smile at the thought of the Arch Lector's favourite Practical slipping, sliding, tumbling from the

wall, hands clutching at nothing. *Perhaps a despairing scream as she fell to her death?*

But she didn't fall. *Bitch. Considering her next report to the Arch Lector, no doubt. 'The cripple continues to flounder like a landed fish. He has yet to uncover the slightest trace of Davoust, or any traitor, despite questioning half the city. The one man he has arrested is a member of his own Inquisition . . .'*

Glokta shaded his eyes with his hand and squinted into the blinding sun. The neck of rock that connected Dagoska with the mainland stretched away from him, no more than a few hundred strides across at its narrowest point, the sparkling sea on both sides. The road from the city gates was a brown stripe through the yellow scrub, cutting southwards towards the dry hills on the mainland. A few sorry-looking seabirds squawked and circled over the causeway, but there were no other signs of life.

'Might I borrow your eye-glass, General?'

Vissbruck flicked the eye-glass open and slapped it sulkily into Glokta's outstretched hand. *Plainly he feels he has better things to do than give me a tour of the defences.* The General was breathing heavily, standing stiffly to attention in his impeccable uniform, plump face shining with sweat. *Doing his best to maintain his professional bearing. His bearing is the only professional thing about this imbecile, but, as the Arch Lector says, we must work with the tools we have.* Glokta raised the brass tube to his eye.

The Gurkish had built a palisade. A tall fence of wooden stakes that fringed the hills, cutting Dagoska off from the mainland. There were tents scattered about the other side, thin plumes of smoke rising from a cooking fire here or there. Glokta could just about make out tiny figures moving, sun glinting on polished metal. *Weapons and armour, and plenty of both.*

'There used to be caravans from the mainland,' Vissbruck murmured. 'Last year there were a hundred of them every day. Then the Emperor's soldiers started to arrive, and there were fewer traders. They finished the fence a couple of months ago. There hasn't been so much as a donkey since. Everything has to come in by ship, now.'

Glokta scanned across the fence, and the camps behind, from the sea on one side to the sea on the other. *Are they simply flexing their muscles, putting on a show of force? Or are they in deadly earnest? The Gurkish love a good show, but they don't mind a good fight either – that's how they've*

conquered the whole of the South, more or less. He lowered the eye-glass. 'How many Gurkish, do you think?'

Vissbruck shrugged. 'Impossible to say. At least five thousand, I would guess, but there could be many more, behind those hills. We have no way of knowing.'

Five thousand. At the least. If it's a show, it's a good one. 'How many men have we?'

Vissbruck paused. 'I have around six hundred Union soldiers under my command.'

Around six hundred? Around? You lackwit dunce! When I was a soldier I knew the name of every man in my regiment, and who was best suited to what tasks. 'Six hundred? Is that all?'

'There are mercenaries in the city also, but they cannot be trusted, and frequently cause trouble of their own. In my opinion they are worse than worthless.'

I asked for numbers, not opinions. 'How many mercenaries?'

'Perhaps a thousand, now, perhaps more.'

'Who leads them?'

'Some Styrian. Cosca, he calls himself.'

'Nicomo Cosca?' Vitari was staring down from the parapet, one orange eyebrow raised.

'You know him?'

'You could say that. I thought he was dead, but it seems there's no justice in the world.'

She's right there. Glokta turned to Vissbruck. 'Does this Cosca answer to you?'

'Not exactly. The Spicers pay him, so he answers to Magister Eider. In theory, he's supposed to follow my orders—'

'But he only follows his own?' Glokta could see in the General's face that he was right. *Mercenaries. A double-edged sword, if ever there was one. Keen, as long as you can keep paying, and provided that trustworthiness is not a priority. 'And Cosca's men outnumber yours two to one.' It would appear that, as far as the defences of the city are concerned, I am speaking to the wrong man. Perhaps there is one issue, though, on which he can enlighten me.* 'Do you know what became of my predecessor, Superior Davoust?'

General Vissbruck twitched his annoyance. ‘I have no idea. That man’s movements were of no interest to me.’

‘Hmm,’ mused Glokta, jamming his hat down tighter onto his head as another gritty gust of wind blew in across the walls. ‘The disappearance of the city’s Superior of the Inquisition? Of no interest whatsoever?’

‘None,’ snapped the General. ‘We rarely had cause to speak to one another. Davoust was well-known as an abrasive character. As far as I am concerned, the Inquisition has its responsibilities, and I have mine.’ *Touchy, touchy. But then everyone is, since I arrived in town. You’d almost think they didn’t want me here.*

‘You have your responsibilities, eh?’ Glokta shuffled to the parapet, lifted his cane and prodded at a corner of crumbling masonry, not far from Vitari’s heel. A chunk of stone cracked away and tumbled from the wall into space. A few moments later he heard it clatter into the ditch, far below. He rounded on Vissbruck. ‘As commander of the city’s defences, would you count the maintenance of the walls as being among your responsibilities? ’

Vissbruck bristled. ‘I have done everything possible!’

Glokta counted the points off with the fingers of his free hand. ‘The land walls are crumbling and poorly manned. The ditch beyond is so choked with dirt it barely exists. The gates have not been replaced in years, and are falling to pieces on their own. If the Gurkish were to attack tomorrow, I do believe we’d be in quite a sorry position.’

‘Not for any oversight on my part, I can assure you! With the heat, and the wind, and the salt from the sea, wood and metal rot in no time, and stone fares little better! Do you realise the task?’ The General gestured at the great sweep of the towering land walls, curving away to the sea on either side. Even here at the top, the parapet was wide enough to drive a cart down, and they were a lot thicker at the base. ‘I have few skilled masons, and precious little materials! What the Closed Council gives me barely pays for the upkeep of the Citadel! Then the money from the Spicers scarcely keeps the walls of the Upper City in good repair—’

Fool! One could almost believe he did not seriously mean to defend the city at all. ‘The Citadel cannot be supplied by sea if the rest of Dagoska is in Gurkish hands, am I right?’

Vissbruck blinked. ‘Well, no, but—’

‘The walls of the Upper City might keep the natives where they are, but they are too long, too low, and too thin to withstand a concerted attack for long, would you agree?’

‘Yes, I suppose so, but—’

‘So any plan that treats the Citadel, or the Upper City, as our main line of defence is one that only plays for time. Time for help to arrive. Help that, with our army committed hundreds of leagues away in Angland, might take a while appearing.’ *Will never appear at all.* ‘If the land walls fall the city is doomed.’ Glokta tapped the dusty flags underfoot with his cane. ‘Here is where we must fight the Gurkish, and here is where we must keep them out. Everything else is an irrelevance.’

‘An irrelevance,’ Vitari piped to herself as she hopped from one part of the parapet to another.

The General was frowning. ‘I can only do as the Lord Governor and his council instruct me. The Lower City has always been regarded as dispensable. I am not responsible for overall policy—’

‘I am.’ Glokta held Vissbruck’s eye for a very long moment. ‘From now on all resources will be directed into the repair and strengthening of the land walls. New parapets, new gates, every broken stone must be replaced. I don’t want to see a crack an ant could crawl through, let alone a Gurkish army.’

‘But who will do the work?’

‘The natives built the damn things in the first place, didn’t they? There must be skilled men among them. Seek them out and hire them. As for the ditch, I want it down below sea level. If the Gurkish come we can flood it, and make the city into an island.’

‘But that could take months!’

‘You have two weeks. Perhaps not even that long. Press every idle man into service. Women and children too, if they can hold a spade.’

Vissbruck frowned up at Vitari. ‘And what about your people in the Inquisition?’

‘Oh, they’re too busy asking questions, trying to find out what happened to your last Superior. Or they’re watching me, and my quarters, and the gates of the citadel all day and night, trying to make sure that the same thing doesn’t happen to your new one. Be a shame, eh, Vissbruck, if I disappeared before the defences were ready?’

‘Of course, Superior,’ muttered the General. *But without tremendous enthusiasm, I rather think.*

‘Everyone else must work, though, including your own soldiers.’

‘But you can’t expect my men to—’

‘I expect every man to do his part. Anyone who doesn’t like it can go back to Adua. He can go back and explain his reluctance to the Arch Lector.’ Glokta leered his toothless smile at the General. ‘There’s no one that can’t be replaced, General, no one at all.’

There was a great deal of sweat on Vissbruck’s pink face, great drops of it. The stiff collar of his uniform was dark with moisture. ‘Of course, every man must do his part! Work on the ditch will begin immediately!’ He made a weak attempt at a smile. ‘I’ll find every man, but I’ll need money, Superior. If people work they must be paid, even the natives. Then we will need materials, everything has to be brought in by sea—’

‘Borrow what you need to get started. Work on credit. Promise everything and give nothing, for now. His Eminence will provide.’ *He’d better.* ‘I want reports on your progress every morning.’

‘Every morning, yes.’

‘You have a great deal to do, General. I’d get started.’

Vissbruck paused for a moment, as though unsure whether to salute or not. In the end he simply turned on his heel and stalked off. *The pique of a professional soldier dictated to by a civilian, or something more? Am I upsetting his carefully laid plans? Plans to sell the city to the Gurkish, perhaps?*

Vitari hopped down from the parapet onto the walkway. ‘His Eminence will provide? You’d be lucky.’

Glokta frowned at her back as she sauntered away, then he frowned towards the hills on the mainland, then he frowned up at the citadel. *Dangers on every side. Trapped between the Arch Lector and the Gurkish, and with nobody but an unknown traitor for company. It’ll be a wonder if I last a day.*

A committed optimist might have called the place a dive. *But it scarcely deserves the name.* A piss-smelling shack with some oddments of furniture, everything stained with ancient sweat and recent spillages. *A kind of cesspit with half the cess removed.* Customers and staff were indistinguishable:

drunken, fly-blown natives stretched out in the heat. Nicomo Cosca, famed soldier of fortune, sprawled in amongst this scene of debauchery, soundly asleep.

He had his driftwood chair rocked back on its rear legs against the grimy wall, one boot up on the table in front of him. It had probably been as fine and flamboyant a boot as one could hope for, once, black Styrian leather with a golden spur and buckles. *No longer*. The upper was sagging and scuffed grey with hard use. The spur was snapped off short, the gilt on the buckles was flaking away and the iron underneath was spotted with brown rust. A circle of pink, blistered skin peered at Glokta through a hole in the sole.

And a boot could scarcely be better fitted to its owner. Cosca's long moustaches, no doubt meant to be waxed out sideways in the fashion of a Styrian dandy, flopped limp and lifeless round his half-open mouth. His neck and jaw were covered in a week's growth, somewhere between beard and stubble, and there was a scabrous, flaking rash peering out above his collar. His greasy hair stuck from his head at all angles, excepting a large bald spot on his crown, angry red with sunburn. Sweat beaded his slack skin, a lazy fly crawled across his puffy face. One bottle lay empty on its side on the table. Another, half-full, was cradled in his lap.

Vitari stared down at this picture of drunken self-neglect, expression of contempt plainly visible despite her mask. 'So it's true then, you are still alive.' *Just barely.*

Cosca prised open one red-rimmed eye, blinked, squinted up, and then slowly began to smile. 'Shylo Vitari, I swear. The world can still surprise me.' He worked his mouth, grimacing, glanced down and saw the bottle in his lap, lifted it and took a long, thirsty pull. Deep swallows, just as if it were water in the bottle. *A practised drunkard, as though there was any doubt. Hardly the man one would choose to entrust the defence of the city to, at first glance.* 'I never expected to see you again. Why don't you take off the mask? It's robbing me of your beauty.'

'Save it for your whores, Cosca. I don't need to catch what you've got.'

The mercenary gave a bubbling sound, half laugh, half cough. 'You still have the manners of a princess,' he wheezed.

'Then this shithouse must be a palace.'

Cosca shrugged. 'It all looks the same if you're drunk enough.'

‘You think you’ll ever be drunk enough?’

‘No. But it’s worth trying.’ As if to prove the point he sucked another mouthful from the bottle.

Vitari perched herself on the edge of the table. ‘So what brings you here? I thought you were busy spreading the cock-rot across Styria.’

‘My popularity at home had somewhat dwindled.’

‘Found yourself on both sides of a fight once too often, eh?’

‘Something like that.’

‘But the Dagoskans welcomed you with open arms?’

‘I’d rather you welcomed me with open legs, but a man can’t get everything he wants. Who’s your friend?’

Glokta slid out a rickety chair with one aching foot and eased himself into it, hoping it would bear his weight. *Crashing to the floor in a bundle of broken sticks would hardly send the right message, now, would it?* ‘My name is Glokta.’ He stretched his sweaty neck out to one side, and then the other. ‘Superior Glokta.’

Cosca looked at him for a long time. His eyes were bloodshot, sunken, heavy-lidded. *And yet there is a certain calculation there. Not half as drunk as he pretends, perhaps.* ‘The same one who fought in Gurkhul? The Colonel of Horse?’

Glokta felt his eyelid flicker. *You could hardly say the same man, but surprisingly well remembered, nonetheless.* ‘I gave up soldiery some years ago. I’m surprised you’ve heard of me.’

‘A fighting man should know his enemies, and a hired man never knows who his next enemy might be. It’s worth taking notice of who’s who, in military circles. I heard your name mentioned, some time ago, as a man worth taking notice of. Bold and clever, I heard, but reckless. That was the last I heard. And now here you are, in a different line of work. Asking questions.’

‘Recklessness didn’t work out for me in the end.’ Glokta shrugged. ‘And a man needs something to do with his time.’

‘Of course. Never doubt another’s choices, I say. You can’t know his reasons. You come here for a drink, Superior? They’ve nothing but this piss, I’m afraid.’ He waved the bottle. ‘Or have you questions for me?’

That I have, and plenty of them. ‘Do you have any experience with sieges?’

‘Experience?’ spluttered Cosca, ‘Experience, you ask? Hah! Experience is one thing I am not short of—’

‘No,’ murmured Vitari over her shoulder, ‘just discipline and loyalty.’

‘Yes, well,’ Cosca frowned up at her back, ‘that all depends on who you ask. But I was at Etrina, and at Muris. Serious pair of sieges, those. And I besieged Visserine myself for a few months and nearly had it, except that she-devil Mercatto caught me unawares. Came on us with cavalry before dawn, sun behind and all, damned unfriendly trick, the bitch—’

‘I heard you were passed out drunk at the time,’ muttered Vitari.

‘Yes, well . . . Then I held Borletta against Grand Duke Orso for six months—’

Vitari snorted. ‘Until he paid you to open the gates.’

Cosca gave a sheepish grin. ‘It was an awful lot of money. But he never fought his way in! You’d have to give me that, eh, Shylo?’

‘No one needs to fight you, providing they bring their purse.’

The mercenary grinned. ‘I am what I am, and never claimed to be anything else.’

‘So you’ve been known to betray an employer?’ asked Glokta.

The Styrian paused, the bottle halfway to his mouth. ‘I am thoroughly offended, Superior. Nicomo Cosca may be a mercenary, but there are still rules. I could only turn my back on an employer under one condition.’

‘Which is?’

Cosca grinned. ‘If someone else were to offer me more.’

Ah, the mercenary’s code. Some men will do anything for money. Most men will do anything for enough. Perhaps even make a Superior of the Inquisition disappear? ‘Do you know what became of my predecessor, Superior Davoust?’

‘Ah, the riddle of the invisible torturer!’ Cosca scratched thoughtfully at his sweaty beard, picked a little at the rash on his neck and examined the results, wedged under his fingernail. ‘Who knows or cares to know? The man was a swine. I hardly knew him and what I knew I didn’t like. He had plenty of enemies, and, in case you hadn’t noticed, it’s a real snake pit down here. If you’re asking which one bit him, well . . . isn’t that your job? I was busy here. Drinking.’

Not too difficult to believe. ‘What would your opinion be of our mutual friend, General Vissbruck?’

Cosca hunched his shoulders and sank a little lower into his chair. ‘The man’s a child. Playing soldiers. Tinkering with his little castle and his little fence, when the big walls are all that count. Lose those and the game is done, I say.’

‘I’ve been thinking the very same thing.’ *Perhaps the defence of the city could be in worse hands, after all.* ‘Work has already begun on the land walls, and on the ditch beyond. I hope to flood it.’

Cosca raised an eyebrow. ‘Good. Flood it. The Gurkish don’t like the water much. Poor sailors. Flood it. Very good.’ He tipped his head back and sucked the last drops from the bottle, then he tossed it on the dirty floor, wiped his mouth with his dirty hand, then wiped his hand on the front of his sweat-stained shirt. ‘At least someone knows what they’re doing. Perhaps when the Gurkish attack, we’ll last longer than a few days, eh?’ *Providing we aren’t betrayed beforehand.*

‘You never know, perhaps the Gurkish won’t attack.’

‘Oh, I hope they do.’ Cosca reached under his chair and produced another bottle. There was a glint in his eye as he pulled the cork out with his teeth and spat it across the room. ‘I get paid double once the fighting starts.’

It was evening, and a merciful breeze was washing through the audience chamber. Glokta leaned against the wall by the window, watching the shadows stretch out over the city below.

The Lord Governor was keeping him waiting. *Trying to let me know he’s still in charge, whatever the Closed Council might say.* But Glokta didn’t mind being still for a while. The day had been a tiring one. Slogging round the city in the baking heat, examining the walls, the gates, the troops. Asking questions. *Questions to which no one has satisfactory answers.* His leg was throbbing, his back was aching, his hand was raw from gripping his cane. *But no worse than usual. I am still standing. A good day, all in all.*

The glowing sun was shrouded in lines of orange cloud. Beneath it a long wedge of sea glittered silver in the last light of the day. The land walls had already plunged half the ramshackle buildings of the Lower City into deep gloom, and the shadows of the tall spires of the great temple stretched out across the roofs of the Upper City, creeping up the slopes of the rock towards the citadel. The hills on the mainland were nothing more than a distant suggestion, full of shadows. *And crawling with Gurkish soldiers.*

Watching us, as we watch them, no doubt. Seeing us dig our ditches, patch our walls, shore up our gates. How long will they be content to watch, I wonder? How long before the sun goes down for us?

The door opened and Glokta turned his head, wincing as his neck clicked. It was the Lord Governor's son, Korsten dan Vurms. He shut the door behind him and strode purposefully into the room, metal heel tips clicking on the mosaic floor. *Ah, the flower of the Union's young nobility. The sense of honour is almost palpable. Or did someone fart?*

'Superior Glokta! I hope I have not kept you waiting.'

'You have,' said Glokta as he shuffled to the table. 'That is what happens when one comes late to a meeting.'

Vurms frowned slightly. 'Then I apologise,' he said, in the most unapologetic tone imaginable. 'How are you finding our city?'

'Hot and full of steps.' Glokta dumped himself into one of the exquisite chairs. 'Where is the Lord Governor?'

The frown turned down further. 'I am afraid that my father is unwell, and cannot attend. You understand that he is an old man, and needs his rest. I can speak for him however.'

'Can you indeed? And what do the two of you have to say?'

'My father is most concerned about the work that you are undertaking on the defences. I am told that the King's soldiers have been set to digging holes on the peninsula, rather than defending the walls of the Upper City. You realise that you are leaving us at the mercy of the natives!'

Glokta snorted. 'The natives are citizens of the Union, no matter how reluctant. Believe me, they are more inclined to mercy than the Gurkish.' *Of their mercy I have first-hand experience.*

'They are primitives!' sneered Vurms, 'and dangerous to boot! You have not been here long enough to understand the threat they pose to us! You should talk to Harker. He's got the right ideas as far as the natives are concerned.'

'I talked to Harker, and I didn't like his ideas. I suspect he may have been forced to rethink them, in fact, downstairs, in the dark.' *I suspect he is rethinking even now, and as quickly as his pea of a brain will allow.* 'As for your father's worries, he need no longer concern himself with the defence of the city. Since he is an old man, and in need of rest, I have no doubt he will be happy to pass the responsibility to me.'

A spasm of anger passed across Vurms' handsome features. He opened his mouth to hiss some curse, but evidently thought better of it. *As well he should.* He sat back in his chair, rubbing one thumb and one finger thoughtfully together. When he spoke, it was with a friendly smile and a charming softness. *Now comes the wheedling.* 'Superior Glokta, I feel we have got off on the wrong foot—'

'I only have one that works.'

Vurms' smile slipped somewhat, but he forged on. 'It is plain that you hold the cards, for the time being, but my father has many friends back in Midderland. I can be a significant hindrance to you, if I have the mind. A significant hindrance or a great help—'

'I am so glad that you have chosen to cooperate. You can begin by telling me what became of Superior Davoust.'

The smile slipped off entirely. 'How should I know?'

'Everyone knows something.' *And someone knows more than the rest. Is it you, Vurms?*

The Lord Governor's son thought about it for a moment. *Dense, or guilty? Is he trying to think of ways to help me, or ways to cover his tracks?* 'I know the natives hated him. They were forever plotting against us, and Davoust was tireless in his pursuit of the disloyal. I have no doubt he fell victim to one of their schemes. I'd be asking questions down in the Lower City, if I was you.'

'Oh, I am quite confident the answers lie here in the Citadel.'

'Not with me,' snapped Vurms, looking Glokta up and down. 'Believe me when I say, I would be much happier if Davoust was still with us.'

Perhaps, or perhaps not, but we will get no answers today. 'Very well. Tell me about the city's stores.'

'The stores?'

'Food, Korsten, food. I understand that, since the Gurkish closed the land routes, everything must be brought in by sea. Feeding the people is surely one of a governor's most pressing concerns.'

'My father is mindful of his people's needs in any eventuality!' snapped Vurms. 'We have provisions for six months!'

'Six months? For all the inhabitants?'

'Of course.' *Better than I expected. One less thing to worry about, at least, from this vast tangle of worries.* 'Unless you count the natives,' added

Vurms, as though it was of no importance.

Glokta paused. ‘And what will they eat, if the Gurkish lay siege to the city?’

Vurms shrugged. ‘I really hadn’t thought about it.’

‘Indeed? What will happen, do you suppose, when they begin to starve?’

‘Well . . .’

‘Chaos is what will happen! We cannot hold the city with four fifths of the population against us!’ Glokta sucked at his empty gums in disgust. ‘You will go to the merchants, you will secure provisions for six months! For everyone! I want six months’ supplies for the rats in the sewers!’

‘What am I?’ sneered Vurms. ‘Your grocery boy?’

‘I suppose you’re whatever I tell you to be.’

All trace of friendliness had vanished from Vurms’ face now. ‘I am the son of a Lord Governor! I refuse to be addressed in this manner!’ The legs of his chair squealed furiously as he sprang up and made for the door.

‘Fine,’ murmured Glokta. ‘There’s a boat that goes to Adua every day. A fast boat, and it takes its cargo straight to the House of Questions. They’ll address you differently there, believe me. I could easily arrange a berth for you.’

Vurms stopped in his tracks. ‘You wouldn’t dare!’

Glokta smiled. His most revolting, leering, gap-toothed smile. ‘You’d have to be a bold man to bet your life on what I’d dare. How bold are you?’ The young man licked his lips, but he did not meet Glokta’s gaze for long. *I thought not. He reminds me of my friend Captain Luthar. All flash and arrogance, but with no kind of character to hang it on. Prick him with a pin, and he sags like a punctured wineskin.*

‘Six months’ food. Six months for everyone. And see that it’s done promptly.’ *Grocery boy.*

‘Of course,’ growled Vurms, still staring grimly at the floor.

‘Then we can get started on the water. The wells, the cisterns, the pumps. People will need something to wash all your hard work down with, eh? You will report to me every morning.’

Vurms’ fists clenched and unclenched by his sides, his jaw muscles worked with fury. ‘Of course,’ he managed to splutter.

‘Of course. You may go.’

Glokta watched him stalk away. *And I have talked to two out of four. Two of four, and I have made two enemies. I will need allies if I am to succeed here. Without allies, I will not last, regardless of what documents I hold. Without allies I will not keep the Gurkish out, if they decide to try and come in. Worse yet, I still know nothing of Davoust. A Superior of the Inquisition, disappeared into thin air. Let us hope the Arch Lector will be patient.*

Hope. Arch Lector. Patience. Glokta frowned. Never have three ideas belonged together less.

The Thing About Trust

The wheel on the cart turned slowly round, and squeaked.
It turned round again, and squeaked. Ferro scowled at it. Damn wheel. Damn cart. She shifted her scorn from the cart to its driver.

Damn apprentice. She didn't trust him a finger's breadth. His eyes flickered over to her, lingered an insulting moment, then darted off. As if he knew something about Ferro that she did not know herself. That made her angry. She looked away from him to the first of the horses, and its rider.

Damn Union boy with his stiff back, sitting in his saddle like a King sits on his throne, as though being born with a good-shaped face was an achievement to be endlessly proud of. He was pretty, and neat, and dainty as a princess. Ferro smiled grimly to herself. The princess of the Union, that's what he was. She hated fine-looking people even more than ugly ones. Beauty was never to be trusted.

You would have had to look far and wide to find anyone less beautiful than the big nine-fingered bastard. He sat in his saddle slumped over like some great sack of rice. Slow-moving, scratching, sniffing, chewing like a big cow. Trying to look like he had no killing in him, no mad fury, no devil. She knew better. He nodded to her and she scowled back. He was a devil wearing a cow's skin, and she was not fooled.

Better than that damn Navigator, though. Always talking, always smiling, always laughing. Ferro hated talk, and smiles, and laughter, each one more than the last. Stupid little man with his stupid tales. Underneath all his lies he was plotting, watching, she could feel it.

That left the First of the Magi, and she trusted him least of all. She saw his eyes sliding to the cart. Looking at the sack he'd put the box in. Square, grey, dull, heavy box. He thought no one had seen, but she had. Full of secrets is what he was. Bald bastard, with his thick neck and his wooden pole, acting as if he had done nothing but good in his life, as if he would not know where to begin at making a man explode.

'Damn fucking pinks,' she whispered to herself. She leaned over and spat onto the track, glowered at their five backs as they rode ahead of her. Why had she let Yulwei talk her into this madness? A voyage way off into the

cold west where she had no business. She should have been back in the South, fighting the Gurkish.

Making them pay what they owed her.

Cursing the name of Yulwei silently to herself, she followed the others up to the bridge. It looked ancient – pitted stones splattered with stains of lichen, the surface of it rutted deep where a cart's wheels would roll. Thousands of years of carts, rolling back and forward. The stream gurgled under its single arch, bitter cold water, flowing fast. A low hut stood beside the bridge, settled and slumped into the landscape over long years. Some wisps of smoke were snatched from its chimney and out across the land in the cutting wind.

One soldier stood outside, alone. Drew the short straw, maybe. He'd pressed himself against the wall, swathed in a heavy cloak, horse-hair on his helmet whipping back and forth in the gusts, his spear ignored beside him. Bayaz reined his horse in before the bridge and nodded across.

'We're going up onto the plain. Out towards Darmium.'

'Can't advise it. Dangerous up there.'

Bayaz smiled. 'Dangers mean profits.'

'Profits won't stop an arrow, friend.' The soldier looked them up and down, one by one, and sniffed. 'Varied crowd, aren't you?'

'I take good fighters wherever I can find them.'

'Course.' He looked over at Ferro and she scowled back. 'Very tough, I'm sure, but the fact is the plains are deadly, and more than ever now. Some traders are still going up there, but they're not coming back. That madman Cabrian has raiders out there, I reckon, keen for plunder. Scario and Goltus too, they're little better. We keep some shred of law on this side of the stream, but once you're up there, you're on your own. There'll be no help for you if you're caught out on the plain.' He sniffed again. 'No help at all.'

Bayaz nodded grimly. 'We ask for none.' He spurred his horse and it began to trot over the bridge, onto the track on the other side. The others followed behind, Longfoot first, then Luthar, then Ninefingers. Quai shook the reins and the cart clattered across. Ferro brought up the rear.

'No help at all!' the soldier called after her, before he wedged himself back against the rough wall of his hut.

The great plain.

It should have been good land for riding, reassuring land. Ferro could have seen an enemy coming from miles away, but she saw no one. Only the vast carpet of tall grass, waving and thrashing in the wind, stretching away in every direction, to the far, far, horizon. Only the track broke the monotony, a line of shorter, drier grass, pocked with patches of bare black earth, cutting across the plain straight as an arrow flies.

Ferro did not like it, this vast sameness. She frowned as they rode, peering left and right. In the Badlands of Kanta, the barren earth was full of features – broken boulders, withered valleys, dried-up trees casting their clawing shadows, distant creases in the earth full of shade, bright ridges doused in light. In the Badlands of Kanta, the sky above would be empty, still, a bright bowl holding nothing but the blinding sun in the day, the bright stars at night.

Here all was strangely reversed.

The earth was featureless, but the sky was full of movement, full of chaos. Towering clouds loomed over the plain, dark and light swirling together into colossal spirals, sweeping over the grassland with the raking wind, shifting, turning, ripping apart and flooding back together, casting monstrous, flowing shadows onto the cowering earth, threatening to crush the six tiny riders and their tiny cart with a deluge to sink the world. All hanging over Ferro's hunched up shoulders, the wrath of God made real.

This was a strange land, one in which she had no place. She needed reasons to be here, and good ones. 'You, Bayaz!' she shouted, drawing up level with him. 'Where are we going?'

'Huh,' he grunted, frowning out across the waving grass, from nothing, to nothing. 'We are going westwards, across the plain, over the great river Aos, as far as the Broken Mountains.'

'Then?'

She saw the faint lines around his eyes, across the bridge of his nose, grow deeper, watched his lips press together. Annoyance. He did not like her questions. 'Then we go further.'

'How long will it take?'

'All of winter and into spring,' he snapped. 'And then we must come back.' He dug his heels into his horse's flanks and trotted away from her, up the track towards the front of the group.

Ferro was not so easily put off. Not by this shifty old pink. She dug in her own heels and drew up level with him. ‘What is the First Law?’

Bayaz looked sharply over at her. ‘What do you know about it?’

‘Not enough. I heard you and Yulwei talking, through the door.’

‘Eavesdropping, eh?’

‘You have loud voices and I have good ears.’ Ferro shrugged. ‘I am not sticking a bucket on my head just to keep your secrets. What is the First Law?’

The lines round Bayaz’ forehead grew deeper, the corners of his mouth turned down. Anger. ‘A stricture that Euz placed on his sons, the first rule made after the chaos of ancient days. It is forbidden to touch the Other Side direct. Forbidden to communicate with the world below, forbidden to summon demons, forbidden to open gates to hell. Such is the First Law, the guiding principle of all magic.’

‘Uh,’ snorted Ferro. It meant nothing to her. ‘Who is Khalul?’

Bayaz’ thick brows drew in together, his frown deepened, his eyes narrowed. ‘Is there no end to your questions, woman?’ Her questions galled him. That was good. That meant they were the right questions.

‘You’ll know if I stop asking them. Who is Khalul?’

‘Khalul was one of the order of Magi,’ growled Bayaz. ‘One of my order. The second of Juvens’ twelve apprentices. He was always jealous of my place, always thirsty for power. He broke the Second Law to get it. He ate the flesh of men, and persuaded others to do the same. He made of himself a false prophet, tricked the Gurkish into serving him. That is Khalul. Your enemy, and mine.’

‘What is the Seed?’

The Magus’ face gave a sudden twitch. Fury, and perhaps the slightest trace of fear. Then his face softened. ‘What is it?’ He smiled at her, and his smile worried her more than all his anger could have. He leaned towards her, close enough that no one else could hear. ‘It is the instrument of your vengeance. Of our vengeance. But it is dangerous. Even to speak of it is dangerous. There are those who are always listening. It would be wise for you to shut the door on your questions, before the answers to them burn us all.’ He spurred his horse once again, trotting out ahead of the party on his own.

Ferro stayed behind. She had learned enough for now. Learned enough to trust this First of the Magi less than ever.

A hollow in the ground, no more than four strides across. A sink in the soil, ringed by a low wall of damp, dark earth, full of tangled grass roots. That was the best place they had found to camp for the night, and they had been lucky to find it.

It was as big a feature in the landscape as Ferro had seen all day.

The fire that Longfoot had made was burning well now, flames licking bright and hungry at the wood, rustling and flickering out sideways as a gust of wind swept down into the hollow. The five pinks sat clustered around it, hunched and huddled for warmth, light from it bright on their pinched-up faces.

Longfoot was the only one speaking. His talk was all of his own great achievements. How he had been to this place or that. How he knew this thing or that. How he had a remarkable talent for this, or for that. Ferro was sick of it already, and had told him so twice. The first time she thought she had been clear. The second time she had made sure of it. He would not be talking to her of his idiot travels again, but the others still suffered in silence.

There was space for her, down by the fire, but she did not want it. She preferred to sit above them, cross-legged in the grass on the lip of the hollow. It was cold up here in the wind, and she pulled the blanket tighter round her shivering shoulders. A strange and frightening thing, cold. She hated it.

But she preferred cold to company.

And so she sat apart, sullen and silent, and watched the light drain out of the brooding sky, watched the darkness creep into the land. There was just the faintest glow of the sun now, on the distant horizon. A last feeble brightness round the edges of the looming clouds.

The big pink stood up, and looked at her. ‘Getting dark,’ he said.

‘Uh.’

‘Guess that’s what happens when the sun goes down, eh?’

‘Uh.’

He scratched at the side of his thick neck. ‘We need to set watches. Could be dangerous out here at night. We’ll take it in shifts. I’ll go first, then

Luthar—’

‘I’ll watch,’ she grunted.

‘Don’t worry. You can sleep. I’ll wake you later.’

‘I do not sleep.’

He stared at her. ‘What, never?’

‘Not often.’

‘Maybe that explains her mood,’ murmured Longfoot.

Meant to be under his breath, no doubt, but Ferro heard him. ‘My mood is my business, fool.’

The Navigator said nothing as he wrapped himself in his blanket and stretched out beside the fire.

‘You want to go first?’ said Ninefingers, ‘then do it, but wake me a couple of hours in. We each should take our turn.’

Slowly, quietly, wincing with the need not to make noise, Ferro stole from the cart. Dry meat. Dry bread. Water flask. Enough to keep her going for days. She shoved it into a canvas bag.

One of the horses snorted and shied as she slipped past and she scowled at it. She could ride. She could ride well, but she wanted nothing to do with horses. Damn fool, big beasts. Smelled bad. They might move quick, but they needed too much food and water. You could see and hear them from miles away. They left great big tracks to follow. Riding a horse made you weak. Rely on a horse and when you need to run, you find you can’t any more.

Ferro had learned never to rely on anything except herself.

She slipped the bag over one shoulder, her quiver and her bow over the other. She took one last look at the sleeping shapes of the others, dark mounds clustered round the fire. Luthar had the blanket drawn up under his chin, smooth-skinned, full-lipped face turned towards the glowing embers. Bayaz had his back to her, but she could see the dim light shining off his bald pate, the back of one dark ear, hear the slow rhythm of his breathing. Longfoot had his blanket pulled up over his head, but his bare feet stuck from the other end, thin and bony, tendons standing out like tree roots from the mud. Quai’s eyes were open the tiniest chink, firelight shining wet on a slit of eyeball. Made it look like he was watching her, but his chest was

moving slowly up and down, mouth hanging slack, sound asleep and dreaming, no doubt.

Ferro frowned. Just four? Where was the big pink? She saw his blanket lying empty on the far side of the fire, dark folds and light folds, but no man inside. Then she heard his voice.

'Going already?'

Behind her. That was a surprise, that he could have crept around her like that, while she was stealing food. He seemed too big, too slow, too noisy to creep up on anyone. She cursed under her breath. She should have known better than to go by the way things seemed.

She turned slowly round to face him and took one step towards the horses. He followed, keeping the distance between them the same. Ferro could see the glowing fire reflected in one corner of each of his eyes, a curve of cratered, stubbly cheek, the vague outline of his bent nose, a few strands of greasy hair floating over his head in the breeze, slightly blacker than the black land behind.

'I don't want to fight you, pink. I've seen you fight.' She had seen him kill five men in a few moments, and even she had been surprised. The memory of the laughter echoing from the walls, his twisted hungry face, half snarl, half smile, covered in blood, and spit, and madness, the ruined corpses strewn on the stones like rags, all this was sharp in her mind. Not that she was frightened, of course, for Ferro Maljinn felt no fear.

But she knew when to be careful.

'I've no wish to fight you either,' he said, 'but if Bayaz finds you gone in the morning, he'll have me chasing you. I've seen you run, and I'd rather fight you than chase you. At least I'd have some chance.'

He was stronger than her, and she knew it. Almost healed now, moving freely. She regretted helping him with that. Helping people was always a mistake. A fight was an awful risk. She might be tougher than others, but she'd no wish to have her face broken into slop like that big man, the Stone Splitter. No wish to be stuck through with a sword, to have her knees smashed, her head ripped half off.

None of that held any appeal.

But he was too close to shoot, and if she ran he'd rouse the others, and they had horses. Fighting would probably wake them anyway, but if she could land a good blow quickly she might get away in the confusion.

Hardly perfect, but what choice did she have? She slowly swung the bag off her shoulder and lowered it to the ground, then her bow and her quiver. She put one hand onto the hilt of her sword, fingers brushing the grip in the darkness, and he did the same.

'Alright then, pink. Let's get to it.'

'Might be there's another way.'

She watched him, suspicious, ready for tricks. 'What way?'

'Stay with us. Give it a few days. If you don't change your mind, well, I'll help you pack. You can trust me.' Trust was a word for fools. It was a word people used when they meant to betray you. If he moved forward a finger's width she would sweep the sword out and take his head off. She was ready.

But he did not move forward and he did not move back. He stood there, a big, silent outline in the darkness. She frowned, fingertips still tickling the grip of the curved sword. 'Why should I trust you?'

The big pink shrugged his heavy shoulders. 'Why not? Back in the city, I helped you and you helped me. Without each other, might be we'd both be dead.' It was true, she supposed, he had helped her. Not as much as she had helped him, but still. 'Time comes you got to stick at something, don't you? That's the thing about trust, sooner or later you just got to do it, without good reasons.'

'Why?'

'Otherwise you end up like us, and who wants that?'

'Huh.'

'I'll do you a deal. You watch my back, I'll watch yours.' He tapped his chest slowly with his thumb. 'I'll stick.' He pointed at her. 'You'll stick. What d'you say?'

Ferro thought about it. Running had given her freedom, but little else. It had taken her through years of misery to the very edge of the desert, hemmed in by enemies. She had run from Yulwei and the Eaters had nearly taken her. Where would she run to now, anyway? Would she run across the sea to Kanta? Perhaps the big pink was right. Perhaps the time had come to stop running.

At least until she could get away unnoticed.

She took her hand away from her sword, slowly folded her arms across her chest, and he did the same. They stood there for a long moment, watching one another in the darkness, in the silence. 'Alright, pink,' she

growled. ‘I will stick, as you say, and we will see. But I make no fucking promises, you understand? ’

‘I didn’t ask for promises. My turn at the watch. You get some rest.’

‘I need no rest, I told you that.’

‘Suit yourself, but I’m sitting down.’

‘Fine.’

The big pink began to lower himself cautiously towards the earth, and she followed him. They sat cross-legged where they had stood, facing each other, the embers of the campfire glowing beside them, casting a faint brightness over the four sleepers, across one side of the pink’s lumpy face, casting a faint warmth across hers.

They watched each other.

Allies

To Arch Lector Sult,
head of his Majesty's Inquisition.
Your Eminence,
Work is underway on the defences of the city. The famous land walls, though powerful, are in a shameful condition, and I have taken vigorous steps to strengthen them. I have also ordered extra supplies, food, armour, and weapons, essential if the city is to stand a siege of any duration.
Unfortunately, the defences are extensive, and the scale of the task vast. I have begun the work on credit, but credit will only stretch so far. I most humbly entreat that your Eminence will send me funds with which to work. Without money our efforts must cease, and the city will be lost.
The Union forces here are few, and morale is not high. There are mercenaries within the city, and I have ordered that more be recruited, but their loyalty is questionable, particularly if they cannot be paid. I therefore request that more of the King's soldiers might be sent. Even a single company could make a difference.
You will hear from me soon. Until then, I serve and obey.
Sand dan Glokta,
Superior of Dagoska.

'This is the place,' said Glokta. 'Uh,' said Frost. It was a rough building of one storey, carelessly built from mud bricks, no bigger than a good-sized wood shed. Chinks of light spilled out into the night from around the ill-fitting door and the ill-fitting shutters in the single window. It was much the same as the other huts in the street, if you could call it a street. It hardly looked like the residence of a member of Dagoska's ruling council. *But then Kahdia is the odd man out in many ways. The leader of the natives. The priest without a temple. The one with least to lose, perhaps?*

The door opened before Glokta even had the chance to knock. Kahdia stood in the doorway, tall and slender in his white robe. 'Why don't you come in?' The Haddish turned, stepped over to the only chair and sat down in it.

'Wait here,' said Glokta.

‘Uh.’

The inside of the shed was no more auspicious than the outside. *Clean, and orderly, and poor as hell.* The ceiling was so low that Glokta could only just stand upright, the floor was hard-packed dirt. A straw mattress lay on empty crates at one end of the single room, a small chair beside it. A squat cupboard stood under the window, a few books stacked on top, a guttering candle burning beside them. Apart from a dented bucket for natural functions, that appeared to be the full extent of Kahdia’s worldly possessions. *No sign of any hidden corpses of Superiors of the Inquisition, but you never know. A body can be packed away quite neatly, if one cuts it into small enough pieces . . .*

‘You should move out of the slums.’ Glokta shut the door behind him on creaking hinges, limped to the bed and sat down heavily on the mattress.

‘Natives are not permitted within the Upper City, or had you not heard?’

‘I’m sure that an exception could be made in your case. You could have chambers in the Citadel. Then I wouldn’t have to limp all the way down here to speak to you.’

‘Chambers in the Citadel? While my fellows rot down here in the filth? The least a leader can do is to share the burdens of his people. I have little other comfort to give them.’ It was sweltering hot down here in the Lower City, but Kahdia did not seem uncomfortable. His gaze was level, his eyes were fixed on Glokta’s, dark and cool as deep water. ‘Do you disapprove?’

Glokta rubbed at his aching neck. ‘Not in the least. Martyrdom suits you, but you’ll have to forgive me if I don’t join in.’ He licked at his empty gums. ‘I’ve made my sacrifices.’

‘Perhaps not all of them. Ask your questions.’ *Straight to business, then. Nothing to hide? Or nothing to lose?*

‘Do you know what became of my predecessor, Superior Davoust?’

‘It is my earnest hope that he died in great pain.’ Glokta felt his eyebrows lift. *The very last thing I expected – an honest answer. Perhaps the first honest answer that I have received to that question, but hardly one that frees him from suspicion.*

‘In great pain, you say?’

‘Very great pain. And I will shed no tears if you join him.’

Glokta smiled. ‘I don’t know that I can think of anyone who will, but Davoust is the matter in hand. Were your people involved in his

disappearance?'

'It is possible. Davoust gave us reasons enough. There are many families missing husbands, fathers, daughters, because of his purges, his tests of loyalty, his making of examples. My people number many thousands, and I cannot watch them all. The one thing I can tell you is that I know nothing of his disappearance. When one devil falls they always send another, and here you are. My people have gained nothing.'

'Except Davoust's silence. Perhaps he discovered that you had made a deal with the Gurkish. Perhaps joining the Union was not all your people hoped for.'

Kahdia snorted. 'You know nothing. No Dagoskan would ever strike a deal with the Gurkish.'

'To an outsider, the two of you seem to have much in common.'

'To an ignorant outsider, we do. We both have dark skin, and we both pray to God, but that is the full extent of the similarity. We Dagoskans have never been a warlike people. We remained here on our peninsula, confident in the strength of our defences, while the Gurkish Empire spread like a cancer across the Kantic continent. We thought their conquests were none of our concern. That was our folly. Emissaries came to our gates, demanding that we kneel before the Gurkish Emperor, and acknowledge that the prophet Khalul speaks with the voice of God. We would do neither, and Khalul swore to destroy us. Now, it seems, he will finally succeed. All of the South will be his dominion.' *And the Arch Lector will not be in the least amused*.

'Who knows? Perhaps God will come to your aid.'

'God favours those who solve their own problems.'

'Perhaps we can solve some problems between us.'

'I have no interest in helping you.'

'Even if you help yourself as well? I have it in mind to issue a decree. The gates of the Upper City will be opened, your people will be allowed to come and go in their own city as they please. The Spicers will be turned out of the Great Temple, and it shall once again be your sacred ground. The Dagoskans will be permitted to carry arms; indeed, we will provide you with weapons from our own armouries. The natives will be treated like full citizens of the Union. They deserve nothing less.'

‘So. So.’ Kahdia clasped his hands together and sat back in his creaking chair. ‘Now, with the Gurkish knocking at the gates, you come to Dagoska, flaunting your little scroll as though it was the word of God, and you choose to do the right thing. You are not like all the others. You are a good man, a fair man, a just man. You expect me to believe this?’

‘Honestly? I don’t care a shit what you believe, and I care about doing the right thing even less – that’s all a matter of who you ask. As for being a good man,’ and Glokta curled his lip, ‘that ship sailed long ago, and I wasn’t even there to wave it off. I’m interested in holding Dagoska. That and nothing else.’

‘And you know you cannot hold Dagoska without our help.’

‘Neither one of us is a fool, Kahdia. Don’t insult me by acting like one. We can bicker with each other until the Gurkish tide sweeps over the land walls, or we can cooperate. You never know, together we might even beat them. Your people will help us dig the ditch, repair the walls, hang the gates. You will provide a thousand men to serve in the defence of the city, to begin with, and more later.’

‘Will I? Will I indeed? And if, with our help, the city stands? Will our deal stand with it?’

If the city stands, I will be gone. More than likely, Vurms and the rest will be back in charge, and our deal will be dust. ‘If the city stands, you have my word that I will do everything possible.’

‘Everything possible. Meaning nothing.’ You get the idea.

‘I need your help, so I’m offering you what I can. I’d offer you more, but I don’t have more. You could sulk down here in the slums with the flies for company, and wait for the Emperor to come. Perhaps the great Uthman-ul-Dosht will offer you a better deal.’ Glokta looked Kahdia in the eye for a moment. ‘But we both know he won’t.’

The priest pursed his lips, stroked his beard, then gave a deep sigh. ‘They say a man lost in the desert must take such water as he is offered, no matter who it comes from. I accept your deal. Once the temple is empty we will dig your holes, and carry your stone, and wear your swords. Something is better than nothing, and, as you say, perhaps together we can even beat the Gurkish. Miracles do happen.’

‘So I’ve heard,’ said Glokta as he shoved on his cane and grunted his way to his feet, shirt sticking to his sweaty back. ‘So I’ve heard.’ *But I’ve never*

seen one.

Glokta stretched out on the cushions in his chambers, head back, mouth open, resting his aching body. *The same chambers that were once occupied by my illustrious predecessor, Superior Davoust.* They were a wide, airy, well-furnished set of rooms. Perhaps they once belonged to a Dagoskan Prince, or a scheming vizier, or a dusky concubine, before the natives were thrown out into the dust of the Lower City. *Better by far than my poky shit-hole in the Agriont, except that Superiors of the Inquisition have been known to go missing from these rooms.*

One set of windows faced northward, out towards the sea, on the steepest side of the rock, the other looked over the baking city. Both were equipped with heavy shutters. Outside it was a sheer drop over bare stone to jagged rocks and angry salt water. The door was six fingers thick, studded with iron, fitted with a heavy lock and four great bolts. *Davoust was a cautious man, and with good reason, it would seem. So how could assassins have got in, and having got in, how could they remove the body?*

He felt his mouth curving into a smile. *How will they remove mine, when they come? Already my enemies mount up – the sneering Vurms, the punctilious Vissbruck, the merchants whose profits I threaten, the Practicals who served Harker and Davoust, the natives with good reason to hate anyone who wears black, my old enemies the Gurkish, of course, and all that providing his Eminence does not get anxious at the lack of progress, and decide to have me replaced himself. Will anyone come searching for my twisted corpse, I wonder?*

'Superior.'

Opening his eyes and lifting his head was a great and painful effort. Everything hurt from his exertions of the past few days. His neck clicked like a snapping twig with every movement, his back was stiff and brittle as a mirror, his leg veered between nagging agony and trembling numbness.

Shickel was standing in the doorway, head bowed. The cuts and bruises on her dark face were healed. There was no outward sign of the ordeal she had suffered in the cells below. She never looked him in the eye, though, always at the floor. *Some wounds take time to heal, and others never do. I should know.*

'What is it, Shickel?'

‘Magister Eider sends you an invitation to dinner.’

‘Does she indeed?’

The girl nodded.

‘Send word that I will be honoured to attend.’

Glokta watched her pad out of the room, head bowed, then he sagged back onto his cushions. *If I disappear tomorrow, at least I will have saved one person. Perhaps that means my life has not been a total waste of time. Sand dan Glokta, shield to the helpless. Is it ever too late to be . . . a good man?*

‘Please!’ squealed Harker. ‘Please! I know nothing!’ He was bound tightly to his chair, unable to move his body far. *But he makes up for it with his eyes.* They darted back and forth over Glokta’s instruments, glittering in the harsh lamplight on the scarred table top. *Oh yes, you understand better than most how this will work. Knowledge is so often the antidote to fear. But not here. Not now.* ‘I know nothing!’

‘I will be the judge of what you know.’ Glokta wiped some sweat from his face. The room was hot as a busy forge and the glowing coals in the brazier were far from helping. ‘If a thing smells like a liar, and is the colour of a liar, the chances are it is a liar, would you not agree?’

‘Please! We are all on the same side!’ Are we? Are we really? ‘I have told you only the truth!’

‘Perhaps, but not as much of it as I need.’

‘Please! We are all friends here!’

‘Friends? In my experience, a friend is merely an acquaintance who has yet to betray you. Is that what you are, Harker?’

‘No!’

Glokta frowned. ‘Then you are our enemy?’

‘What? No! I just . . . I just . . . I wanted to know what happened! That’s all! I didn’t mean to . . . *please!’ Please, please, please, I tire of hearing it.* ‘You have to believe me!’

‘The only thing I have to do is get answers.’

‘Only ask your questions, Superior, I beg of you! Only give me the opportunity to cooperate!’ *Oh indeed, the firm hand does not seem such a fine idea any longer, does it?* ‘Ask your questions, I will do my best to answer!’

‘Good.’ Glokta perched himself on the edge of the table just beside his tightly bound prisoner and looked down at him. ‘Excellent.’ Harker’s hands were tanned deep brown, his face was tanned deep brown, the rest of his body was pale as a white slug with thick patches of dark hair. *Hardly a fetching look. But it could be worse.* ‘Answer me this, then. Why is it that men have nipples?’

Harker blinked. He swallowed. He looked up at Frost, but there was no help there. The albino stared back, unblinking, white skin round his mask beaded with sweat, eyes hard as two pink jewels. ‘I . . . I am not sure I understand, Superior.’

‘Is it not a simple question? Nipples, Harker, on men. What purpose do they serve? Have you not often wondered?’

‘I . . . I . . .’

Glokta sighed. ‘They chafe and become painful in the wet. They dry out and become painful in the heat. Some women, for reasons I could never fathom, insist on fiddling with them in bed, as though we derive anything but annoyance from having them interfered with.’ Glokta reached towards the table, while Harker’s wide eyes followed his every movement, and slid his hand slowly around the grips of the pincers. He lifted them up and examined them, the well-sharpened jaws glinting in the bright lamplight. ‘A man’s nipples,’ he murmured, ‘are a positive hindrance to him. Do you know? Aside from the unsightly scarring, I don’t miss mine in the least.’

He grabbed the tip of Harker’s nipple and dragged it roughly towards him. ‘Ah!’ squawked the one-time Inquisitor, the chair creaking as he tried desperately to twist away. ‘No!’

‘You think that hurts? Then I doubt you’ll enjoy what’s coming.’ And Glokta slid the open jaws of the pincers around the stretched out flesh and squeezed them tight.

‘Ah! Ah! Please! Superior, I beg you!’

‘Your begging is worthless to me. What I need from you is answers. What became of Davoust?’

‘I swear on my life that I don’t know!’

‘Not good enough.’ Glokta began to squeeze harder, the metal edges starting to bite into the skin.

Harker gave a despairing shriek. ‘Wait! I took money! I admit it! I took money!’

‘Money?’ Glokta let the pressure release a fraction and a drop of blood dripped from the pincers and spattered on Harker’s hairy white leg. ‘What money?’

‘Money Davoust took from the natives! After the rebellion! He had me round up any that I thought might be rich, and he had them hanged along with the rest, and we requisitioned everything they had and split it between us! He kept his share in a chest in his quarters, and when he disappeared . . . I took it!’

‘Where is this money now?’

‘Gone! I spent it! On women . . . and on wine, and, and, on anything!’

Glokta clicked his tongue. ‘Tut, tut.’ *Greed and conspiracy, injustice and betrayal, robbery and murder. All the ingredients of a tale to titillate the masses. Saucy, but hardly relevant.* He worked his hand around the pincers. ‘It is the Superior himself, not his money, that interests me. Believe me when I say that I grow tired of asking the question. What became of Davoust?’

‘I . . . I . . . I don’t know!’

True, perhaps. But hardly the answer I need. ‘Not good enough.’ Glokta squeezed his hand and the metal jaws bit cleanly through flesh and met in the middle with a gentle click. Harker bellowed, and thrashed, and roared in agony, blood bubbling from the red square of flesh where his nipple used to be and running down his pale belly in dark streaks. Glokta winced at a twinge in his neck and stretched his head out until he heard it click. *Strange how, with time, even the most terrible suffering of others can become . . . tedious.*

‘Practical Frost, the Inquisitor is bleeding! If you please!’

‘I’th thorry.’ The iron scraped as Frost dragged it from the brazier, glowing orange. Glokta could feel the heat of it even from where he was sitting. *Ah, hot iron. It keeps no secrets, it tells no lies.*

‘No! No! I—’ Harker’s words dissolved into a bubbling scream as Frost ground the brand into the wound and the room filled slowly with the salty aroma of cooking meat. A smell which, to Glokta’s disgust, caused his empty stomach to rumble. *How long is it since I had a good slice of meat?* He wiped a fresh sheen of sweat from his face with his free hand and worked his aching shoulders under his coat.

An ugly business, that we find ourselves in. So why do I do this? The only answer was the soft crunch as Frost slid the iron carefully back into the coals, sending up a dusting of orange sparks. Harker twisted, and whimpered, and shook, his weeping eyes bulging, a strand of smoke still curling up from the blackened flesh on his chest. *An ugly business, of course. No doubt he deserves it, but that changes nothing. Probably he has no clue what became of Davoust, but that changes nothing either. The questions must be asked, and exactly as if he did know the answers.*

'Why do you insist on defying me, Harker? Could it be . . . that you suppose . . . that once I'm done with your nipples I'll have run out of ideas? Is that what you're thinking? That your nipples are where I'll stop?'

Harker stared at him, bubbles of spit forming and breaking on his lips. Glokta leaned closer. 'Oh, no, no, no. This is only the beginning. This is before the beginning. Time opens up ahead of us in pitiless abundance. Days, and weeks, and months of it, if need be. Do you seriously believe that you can keep your secrets for that long? You belong to me, now. To me, and to this room. This cannot stop until I know what I need to know.' He reached forward and gripped Harker's other nipple between thumb and forefinger. He took up the pincers and opened their bloody jaws. 'How difficult can that be to understand?'

Magister Eider's dining chamber was fabulous to behold. Cloths of silver and crimson, gold and purple, green and blue and vivid yellow, rippled in the gentle breeze from the narrow windows. Screens of filigree marble adorned the walls, great pots as high as a man stood in the corners. Heaps of pristine cushions were tossed about the floor, as though inviting passers-by to sprawl in comfortable decadence. Coloured candles burned in tall glass jars, casting warm light into every corner, filling the air with sweet scent. At one end of the marble hall clear water trickled gently in a star-shaped pool. There was more than a touch of the theatrical about the place. *Like a Queen's boudoir from some Kantic legend.*

Magister Eider, head of the Guild of Spicers, was herself the centrepiece. *The very Queen of merchants.* She sat at the top of the table in a pristine white gown, shimmering silk with just the slightest, fascinating hint of transparency. A small fortune in jewels flashed on every inch of tanned skin, her hair was piled up and held in place with ivory combs, excepting a few

strands, curling artfully around her face. It looked very much as if she had been preparing herself all day. *And not a moment was wasted.*

Glokta, hunched in his chair at the opposite end with a bowl of steaming soup before him, felt as if he had shuffled into the pages of a storybook. *A lurid romance, set in the exotic south, with Magister Eider as the heroine, and myself the disgusting, the crippled, the black-hearted villain. How will this fable end, I wonder?* 'So, tell me, Magister, to what do I owe this honour?'

'I understand that you have spoken to the other members of the council. I was surprised, and just a little hurt, that you had not sought an audience with me already.'

'I apologise if you felt left out. It seemed only fitting that I saved the most powerful until last.'

She looked up with an air of injured innocence. *And a most consummately acted one.* 'Powerful? Me? Vurms controls the budget, issues the decrees, Vissbruck commands the troops, holds the defences. Kahdia speaks for the great majority of the populace. I scarcely figure.'

'Come now.' Glokta grinned his toothless grin. 'You are radiant, of course, but I am not quite blinded. Vurms' budget is a pittance compared to what the Spicers make. Kahdia's people have been rendered almost helpless. Through your pickled friend Cosca you command more than twice the troops that Vissbruck does. The only reason the Union is even interested in this thirsty rock is for the trade that your guild controls.'

'Well, I don't like to boast.' The Magister gave an artless shrug. 'But I suppose that I do have some passing influence in the city. You have been asking questions, I see.'

'That's what I do.' Glokta raised his spoon to his mouth, trying his best not to slurp between his remaining teeth. 'This soup is delicious, by the way.' *And, one hopes, not fatal.*

'I thought you might appreciate it. You see, I have been asking questions also.'

The water plopped and tinkled in the pool, the fabric rustled on the walls, the silverware clicked gently against the fine pottery of their bowls. *I would call that first round a draw.* Carlot dan Eider was the first to break the silence.

‘I realise, of course, that you have a mission from the Arch Lector himself. A mission of the greatest importance. I see that you are not a man to mince your words, but you might want to tread a little more carefully.’

‘I admit my gait is awkward. A war wound, compounded by two years of torture. It’s a wonder I got to keep the leg at all.’

She smiled wide, displaying two rows of perfect teeth. ‘I am thoroughly tickled, but my colleagues have found you somewhat less entertaining. Vurms and Vissbruck have both taken a decided dislike to you. High-handed was the phrase they used, I believe, among others I had better not repeat.’

Glokta shrugged. ‘I am not here to make friends.’ And he drained his glass of a predictably excellent wine.

‘But friends can be useful. If nothing else, a friend is one less enemy. Davoust insisted on upsetting everyone, and the results have not been happy.’

‘Davoust did not enjoy the support of the Closed Council.’

‘True. But no document will stop a knife thrust.’

‘Is that a threat?’

Carlot dan Eider laughed. It was an easy, open, friendly laugh. It was hard to believe that anyone who made such a sound could be a traitor, or a threat, or anything other than a perfectly charming host. *And yet I am not entirely convinced.* ‘That is advice. Advice born of bitter experience. I would prefer it if you did not disappear quite yet.’

‘Really? I had no idea I was such a winning dinner guest.’

‘You are terse, confrontational, slightly frightening, and impose severe restrictions on the menu, but the fact is you are more use to me here than . . .’ and she waved her hand, ‘wherever Davoust went to. Would you care for more wine?’

‘Of course.’

She got up from her chair and swept towards him, feet padding on the cool marble like a dancer’s. Bare feet, in the Kantic fashion. The breeze stirred the flowing garments around her body as she leaned forwards to fill Glokta’s glass, wafted her rich scent in his face. *Just the sort of woman my mother would have wanted me to marry – beautiful, clever, and oh so very rich. Just the sort of woman I would have wanted to marry, for that matter, when I was younger. When I was a different man.*

The flickering candlelight shone on her hair, flashed on the jewels around her long neck, glowed through the wine as it sloshed from the neck of the bottle. *Does she try and charm me merely because I hold the writ of the Closed Council? Nothing more than good business, to be on good terms with the powerful? Or does she hope to fool me, and distract me, and lure me away from the unpleasant truth?* Her eyes met his briefly, and she gave a tiny, knowing smile and looked back to his glass. *Am I to be her little urchin boy, dirty face pressed up against the baker's window, mouth watering for the sweetmeats I know I can never afford? I think not.*

'Where did Davoust go to?'

Magister Eider paused for a moment, then carefully set down the bottle. She slid into the nearest chair, put her elbows on the table, her chin on her hands, and held Glokta's eye. 'I suspect that he was killed by a traitor in the city. Probably an agent of the Gurkish. At the risk of telling you what you already know, Davoust suspected there was a conspiracy afoot within the city's ruling council. He confided as much to me shortly before his disappearance.'

Did he indeed? 'A conspiracy within the ruling council?' Glokta shook his head in mock horror. 'Is such a thing possible?'

'Let us be honest with each other, Superior. I want what you want. We in the Guild of Spicers have invested far too much time and money in this city to see it fall to the Gurkish, and you seem to offer a better chance of holding on to it than those idiots Vurms and Vissbruck. If there is a traitor within our walls I want him found.'

'Him . . . or her.'

Magister Eider raised one delicate eyebrow. 'It cannot have escaped your notice that I am the only woman on the council.'

'It has not.' Glokta slurped noisily from his spoon. 'But forgive me if I don't discount you quite yet. It will require more than good soup and pleasant conversation to convince me of anyone's innocence.' *Although it's a damn sight more than anyone else has offered me.*

Magister Eider smiled as she raised her glass. 'Then how can I convince you?'

'Honestly? I need money.'

'Ah, money. It always comes back to that. Getting money out of my Guild is like trying to dig up water in the desert – tiring, dirty, and almost always a

waste of time.' *Somewhat like asking questions of Inquisitor Harker.* 'How much were you thinking of?'

'We could begin with, say, a hundred thousand marks.'

Eider did not actually choke on her wine. *More of a gentle gurgle.* She set her glass down carefully, quietly cleared her throat, dabbed at her mouth with the corner of a cloth, then looked up at him, eyebrows raised. 'You very well know that no such amount will be forthcoming.'

'I'll settle for whatever you can give me, for now.'

'We'll see. Are your ambitions limited to a mere hundred thousand marks, or is there anything else I can do for you?'

'Actually there is. I need the merchants out of the Temple.'

Eider rubbed gently at her own temples, as though Glokta's demands were giving her a headache. 'He wants the merchants out,' she murmured.

'It was necessary to secure Kahdia's support. With him against us we cannot hope to hold the city for long.'

'I've been telling those arrogant fools the same thing for years, but stamping on the natives has become quite the popular pastime nonetheless. Very well, when do you want them out?'

'Tomorrow. At the latest.'

'And they call you high-handed?' She shook her head. 'Very well. By tomorrow evening I could well be the most unpopular Magister in living memory, if I still have my post at all, but I'll try and sell it to the Guild.'

Glokta grinned. 'I feel confident that you could sell anything.'

'You're a tough negotiator, Superior. If you ever get tired of asking questions, I have no doubt you've a bright future as a merchant.'

'A merchant? Oh, I'm not that ruthless.' Glokta placed his spoon in the empty bowl and licked at his gums. 'I mean no disrespect, but how does a woman come to head the most powerful Guild in the Union?'

Eider paused, as though wondering whether to answer or not. *Or judging how much truth to tell when she does.* She looked down at her glass, turned the stem slowly round and round. 'My husband was Magister before me. When we married I was twenty-two years old, he was near sixty. My father owed him a great deal of money, and offered my hand as payment for the debt.' *Ah, so we all have our sufferings.* Her lip twisted in a faint scowl. 'My husband always had a good nose for a bargain. His health began to decline soon after we married, and I took a more and more active role in the

management of his affairs, and those of the Guild. By the time he died I was Magister in all but name, and my colleagues were sensible enough to formalise the arrangement. The Spicers have always been more concerned for profit than propriety.' Her eyes flicked up to look at Glokta. 'I mean no disrespect, but how does a war hero come to be a torturer?'

It was his turn to pause. *A good question. How did that happen?* 'There are precious few opportunities for cripples.'

Eider nodded slowly, her eyes never leaving Glokta's face. 'That must have been hard. To come back, after all that time in the darkness, and to find that your friends had no use for you. To see in their faces only guilt, and pity, and disgust. To find yourself alone.'

Glokta's eyelid was twitching, and he rubbed at it gently. He had never discussed such things with anyone before. *And now here I am, discussing them with a stranger.* 'There can be no doubt that I'm a tragic figure. I used to be a shit of a man, now I'm a husk of one. Take your pick.'

'I imagine it makes you sick, to be treated that way. Very sick, and very angry.' *If only you knew.* 'It still seems a strange decision, though, for the tortured to turn torturer.'

'On the contrary, nothing could be more natural. In my experience, people do as they are done to. You were sold by your father and bought by your husband, and yet you choose to buy and sell.'

Eider frowned. *Something for her to think about, perhaps?* 'I would have thought your pain would give you empathy.'

'Empathy? What's that?' Glokta winced as he rubbed at his aching leg. 'It's a sad fact, but pain only makes you sorry for yourself.'

Campfire Politics

Logen shifted uncomfortably in his saddle, and squinted up at the few birds circling around over the great flat plain. Damn but his arse hurt. His thighs were sore, his nose was all full of the smell of horse. Couldn't find a comfortable position to put his fruits in. Always squashed, however often he jammed his hand down inside his belt to move 'em. A damn uncomfortable journey this was turning out to be, in all sorts of ways.

He used to talk on the road, back in the North. When he was a boy he'd talked to his father. When he was a young man he'd talked to his friends. When he'd followed Bethod he'd talked to him, all the day long, for they'd been close back then, like brothers almost. Talk took your mind off the blisters on your feet, or the hunger in your belly, or the endless bloody cold, or who'd got killed yesterday.

Logen used to laugh at the Dogman's stories while they slogged through the snow. He used to puzzle over tactics with Threetrees while they rode through the mud. He used to argue with Black Dow while they waded through bogs, and no subject was ever too small. He'd even traded a joke or two with Harding Grim in his time, and there weren't too many who could say that.

He sighed to himself. A long, painful sigh that caught at the back of his throat. Good times, no doubt, but far behind him now, in the sunny valleys of the past. Those boys were all gone back to the mud. All silent, forever. Worse yet, they'd left Logen out in the middle of nowhere with this lot.

The great Jezal dan Luthar wasn't interested in anyone's stories except his own. He sat stiff upright and aloof the whole time, chin held high, displaying his arrogance, and his superiority, and his contempt for everything like a young man might show off his first sword, long before he learned that it was nothing to be proud of.

Bayaz had no interest in tactics. When he spoke at all he barked in single words, in yeses and in nos, frowning out across the endless grass like a man who's made a bad mistake and can't see his way clear of it. His apprentice too seemed changed since they left Adua. Quiet, hard, watchful. Brother Longfoot was away across the plain, scouting out the route. Probably best

that way. No one else had any talk at all. The Navigator, Logen had to admit, had far too much.

Ferro rode some distance away from the rest of this friendly gathering, her shoulders hunched, her brows drawn down in a constant scowl, the long scar on her cheek puckered up an angry grey, doing her best to make the others look like a sack of laughs. She leaned forwards, into the wind, pushing at it, as if she hoped to hurt it with her face. More fun to trade jokes with the plague than with her, Logen reckoned.

And that was the merry band. His shoulders slumped. 'How long until we get to the Edge of the World?' he asked Bayaz, without much hope.

'Some way yet,' growled the Magus through barely open teeth.

So Logen rode on, tired, and sore, and bored, and watched those few birds gliding slowly over the endless plain. Nice, big, fat birds. He licked his lips. 'We could do with some meat,' he muttered. Hadn't had fresh meat in a good long time now. Not since they left Calcis. Logen rubbed his stomach. The fatty softness from his time in the city was already tightening. 'Nice bit of meat.'

Ferro frowned over at him, then up at the few birds circling above. She shrugged her bow off her shoulder.

'Hah!' chuckled Logen. 'Good luck.' He watched her slide an arrow smoothly out from her quiver. Futile gesture. Even Harding Grim could never have made that shot, and he was the best man Logen had ever seen with a bow. He watched Ferro nock her shaft to the curved wood, back arched, yellow eyes fixed on the gliding shapes overhead.

'You'll never bag one of those, not in a thousand years of trying.' She pulled back the string. 'Waste of a shaft!' he shouted. 'You've got to be realistic about these things!' Probably the arrow would drop back down and stab him in the face. Or stick his horse through the neck, so it died and fell over and crushed him under it. A fitting end to this nightmare of a journey. A moment later one of the birds tumbled down into the grass, Ferro's arrow stuck right through it.

'No,' he whispered, gawping open-mouthed at her as she bent the bow again. Another arrow sailed up into the grey sky. Another bird flopped to the earth, just beside the first. Logen stared at it, disbelieving. 'No!'

'Don't tell me you haven't seen stranger things,' said Bayaz. 'A man who talks to spirits, who travels with Magi, the most feared man in all the

North?’

Logen pulled his horse up and slithered down from the saddle. He walked through the long grass, bent down on wobbly, aching legs and picked up one of the birds. The shaft had stuck it right through the centre of the breast. If Logen had stabbed it with the arrow at a distance of a foot, he could hardly have done it more neatly. ‘That’s wrong.’

Bayaz grinned down, hands crossed on the saddle before him. ‘In ancient days, before history, so the legends say, our world and the Other Side were joined. One world. Demons walked the land, free to do as they pleased. Chaos, beyond dreaming. They bred with humans, and their offspring were half breeds. Part man, part demon. Devil-bloods. Monsters. One among them took the name Euz. He delivered humanity from the tyranny of devils, and the fury of his battle with them shaped the land. He split the world above from the world below, and he sealed the gates between. To prevent such terror ever coming again, he pronounced the First Law. It is forbidden to touch the Other Side direct, or to speak with devils.’

Logen watched the others watch Ferro. Luthar and Quai, both frowning at this uncanny display of archery. She leaned right back in her saddle, bow string drawn as tight as it would go, glittering point of the next shaft held perfectly steady, still managing to nudge her mount this way and that with her heels. Logen could scarcely make a horse do what he wanted with the reins in his hands, but he failed to see what Bayaz’ crazy story had to do with it. ‘Devils and so on, the First Law.’ Logen waved his hand. ‘So what?’

‘From the start the First Law was filled with contradictions. All magic comes from the Other Side, falling upon the land as the light falls from the sun. Euz himself was part devil, and so were his sons – Juvens, Kanedias, Glustrod – and others beside. Their blood brought them gifts, and curses. Power, and long life, and strength or sight beyond the limits of simple men. Their blood passed on into their children, growing ever thinner, into their children’s children, and so on through the long centuries. The gifts skipped one generation, then another, then came but rarely. The devil-blood grew thin, and died out. It is rare indeed now, when our world and the world below have drifted so far apart, to see those gifts made flesh. We truly are privileged to witness it.’

Logen raised his eyebrows. ‘Her? Half devil?’

‘Much less than half, my friend.’ Bayaz chuckled. ‘Euz himself was half, and his power threw up the mountains and gouged out the seas. Half could strike a horror and a desire into your blood to stop your heart. Half could blind you to look upon. Not half. No more than a fraction. But in her, there is a trace of the Other Side.’

‘The Other Side, eh?’ Logen looked down at the dead bird in his hand. ‘So if I was to touch her, would I break the First Law?’

Bayaz chuckled. ‘Now that is a sharp question. You always surprise me, Master Ninefingers. I wonder what Euz would say to it?’ The Magus pursed his lips. ‘I think I could find it in myself to forgive you. She however,’ and Bayaz nodded his bald head at Ferro, ‘would most likely cut your hand off.’

Logen lay on his belly, peering through the tall grass into a gentle valley with a shallow brook in its bottom. There was a huddle of buildings on the side nearest them, or the shells of buildings. No roofs left, nothing but the tumbledown walls, mostly no more than waist high, the fallen stones from them scattered across the valley’s slopes, in amongst the waving grass. It could have been a scene out of the North. Lots of villages abandoned there, since the wars. People driven out, dragged out, burned out. Logen had watched it happen, often. He’d joined in more than once. He wasn’t proud of it, but he wasn’t proud of much from those times. Or any other, come to think of it.

‘Not a lot left to live in,’ whispered Luthar.

Ferro scowled at him. ‘Plenty left to hide behind.’

Evening was coming on, the sun had dropped low on the horizon and filled the broken village up with shadows. There was no sign of anyone down there. No sounds beyond the giggling water, the slow wind slithering through the grass. No sign of anyone, but Ferro was right. No sign didn’t necessarily mean no danger.

‘You had best go down there and take a look,’ murmured Longfoot.

‘I best?’ Logen glanced sideways at him. ‘You’re staying here then, eh?’

‘I have no talent for fights. You are well aware of that.’

‘Huh,’ muttered Logen. ‘No talent for the sorting of fights, plenty for the finding of ’em though.’

‘Finding things is what I do. I’m here to Navigate.’

‘Maybe you could find me a decent meal and a bed to sleep in,’ snapped Luthar, in his whining Union accent.

Ferro sucked her teeth with disgust. ‘Someone’s got to go,’ she growled, sliding over the lip of the slope on her belly. ‘I’ll take the left.’

No one else moved. ‘Us too,’ Logen grunted at Luthar.

‘Me?’

‘Who else? Three’s a good number. Let’s go, and let’s keep it stealthy.’

Luthar peered through the grass into the valley, licked his lips, rubbed his palms together. Nervous, Logen could tell, nervous but proud at the same time, like an untried boy before a battle, trying to show he’s not scared by sticking his chin out. Logen wasn’t fooled. He’d seen it all a hundred times before.

‘You planning to wait for the morning?’ he grunted.

‘Just keep your mind on your own shortcomings, Northman,’ hissed Luthar as he started to wriggle forward down the slope. ‘You’ve enough of them!’ The rowels of his big, shiny spurs rattled loud as he dragged himself over the edge, clumsy and unpractised, his arse sticking up in the air.

Logen grabbed hold of his coat before he got more than a stride. ‘You’re not leaving those on are you?’

‘What?’

‘Those fucking spurs! Stealthy I said! You might as well hang a bell off your cock!’

Luthar scowled as he sat up to pull them off.

‘Stay down!’ hissed Logen, pushing him back into the grass on his back. ‘You want to get us killed?’

‘Get off me!’

Logen shoved him down again, then stabbed at him with his finger to make sure he got the point. ‘I’m not dying over your fucking spurs and that’s a fact! If you can’t keep quiet you can stay here with the Navigator.’ He glowered over at Longfoot. ‘Maybe you both can navigate your way into the village once we’ve made sure it’s safe.’ He shook his head and crawled down the slope after Ferro.

She was already halfway to the brook, rolling and slithering over the crumbled walls, sneaking across the spaces in between them, keeping low, hand on the grip of her curved sword, quick and silent as the wind over the plain.

Impressive, no doubt, but Logen was nobody's fool when it came to a spot of sneaking. He'd been known for it, when he was younger. Lost count of the number of Shanka, the number of men he'd come up behind. The first you'll hear of the Bloody-Nine is the blood hissing out of your neck, that used to be the rumour. Say one thing for Logen Ninefingers, say that he's stealthy.

He flowed up to the first wall, slid one leg over it, silent as a mouse. He lifted himself up, smooth as butter, keeping quiet, keeping low. His back foot caught on a set of loose stones, dragged them scraping with him. He grabbed at them, fumbled them, knocked over even more with his elbow and they clattered down loud around him. He stumbled onto his weak ankle, twisted it, squawked with pain, fell over and rolled through a patch of thistles.

'Shit,' he grunted, struggling up, one hand clutching at the hilt of his sword, all tangled up with his coat. Good thing he hadn't had it out, or he could've stuck himself through with it. Happened to a friend of his. So busy shouting that he tripped on a tree root and cut a big piece out of his head on his own axe. Back to the mud double time.

He crouched among the fallen stones, waiting for someone to jump him. No one came. Just the wind breathing through the gaps in the old walls, the water chuckling away in the brook. He crept along beside a heap of rough stones, through an old doorway, slithered over a slumping wall, limping and gasping on his bad foot, scarcely making any effort to stay quiet any longer. There was no one there. He'd known it as soon as he fell. No way they could have missed that sorry performance. The Dogman would most likely have been weeping right about now, had he been alive. He waved up at the ridge, and a moment later he saw Longfoot stand up and wave as well.

'No one here,' he muttered to himself.

'Just as well,' hissed Ferro's voice, not more than a stride or two behind. 'You got a new way of scouting, pink. Make so much noise that they come to you.'

'Out of practice,' grunted Logen. 'Still, no harm done. No one here.'

'There was.' She was standing in the shell of one of the ruined buildings, frowning down at the ground. A burned patch in the grass, a few stones set around it. A campfire.

‘No more ’n a day or two old,’ muttered Logen, poking at the ashes with a finger.

Luthar walked up behind them. ‘No one here after all.’ He had a smug, sucked-in look on his face, like he’d somehow been right about something all along. Logen didn’t see what.

‘Lucky for you there isn’t, or we might be stitching you together right about now!’

‘I’d be stitching the fucking pair of you!’ hissed Ferro. ‘I ought to stitch your useless pink heads together! You’re both as worthless as a bag of sand in the desert! There’s tracks over there. Horses, more than one cart.’

‘Merchants maybe?’ asked Logen, hopefully. He and Ferro looked at each other for a moment. ‘Might be better if we stay off the track from now on.’

‘Too slow.’ Bayaz had made it down into the village now. Quai and Longfoot weren’t far behind with the cart and the horses. ‘Far too slow. We stick to the track. We’ll see anyone coming in good time out here. Plenty of time.’

Luthar didn’t look convinced. ‘If we see them, they’ll see us. What then?’

‘Then?’ Bayaz raised an eyebrow. ‘Then we have the famous Captain Luthar to protect us.’ He looked round at the ruined village. ‘Running water, and shelter, of a kind. Seems like a good place to camp.’

‘Good enough,’ muttered Logen, already rooting through the cart for logs to start a fire of their own. ‘I’m hungry. What happened to those birds?’

Logen sat, and watched the others eat over the rim of his pot.

Ferro squatted at the very edge of the shifting light from the campfire, hunched over, shadowy face almost stuck right into her bowl, staring around suspiciously and shoving food in with her fingers like she was worried it might be snatched away any moment. Luthar was less enthusiastic. He was nibbling daintily at a wing with his bared front teeth, as though touching it with his lips might poison him, discarded morsels lined up carefully along the side of his platter. Bayaz chewed away with some relish, his beard glistening with gravy. ‘It’s good,’ he muttered around a mouthful. ‘You might want to consider cookery as a career, Master Ninefingers, if you should ever grow tired of . . .’ he waved his spoon, ‘whatever it is you do.’

‘Huh,’ said Logen. In the North everyone took their turn at the fire, and it was reckoned an honour to do it. A good cook was almost as valued as a good fighter. Not here. These were a sorry crowd when it came to minding the pot. Bayaz could just about get his tea boiled, and that was as far as he went. Quai could get a biscuit out of the box on a good day. Logen doubted whether Luthar would even have known which way up the pot went. As for Ferro, she seemed to despise the whole notion of cooking. Logen reckoned she was used to eating her food raw. Perhaps while it was still alive.

In the North, after a hard day on the trail, when the men gathered around the long fires to eat, there was a strict order to who sat where. The chief would go at the top, with his sons and the Named Men of the clan around him. Next came the Carls, in order of fame. Thralls were lucky to get their own small fires further out. Men would always have their place, and only change it when their chief offered, out of respect for some great service they’d done him, or for showing rare good bones in a fight. Sitting out of place could earn you a kicking, or a killing even. Where you sat round the fire was where you stood in life, more or less.

It was different out here on the plains, but Logen could still see a pattern in who sat where, and it was far from a happy one. He and Bayaz were close enough to the fire, but the others were further than comfort would have put them. Drawn close by the wind, and the cold, and the damp night, pushed further out by each other. He glanced over at Luthar, sneering down into his bowl as though it was full of piss. No respect. He glanced over at Ferro, staring yellow knives at him through narrowed eyes. No trust. He shook his head sadly. Without trust and respect the group would fall apart in a fight like walls without mortar.

Still, Logen had won over tougher audiences, in his time. Threetrees, Tul Duru, Black Dow, Harding Grim, he’d fought each one in single combat, and beaten them all. Spared each man’s life, and left him bound to follow. Each one had tried their best to kill him, and with good reasons too, but in the end Logen had earned their trust, and their respect, and their friendship even. Small gestures and a lot of time, that was how he’d done it. ‘Patience is the chief of virtues,’ his father used to say, and ‘you won’t cross the mountains in a day.’ Time might be against them, but there was nothing to be gained by rushing. You have to be realistic about these things.

Logen uncrossed his stiff legs, took hold of the water-skin and got up, walked slowly over to where Ferro was sitting. Her eyes followed him all the way across. She was a strange one, no doubt, and not just the looks of her, though the dead knew her looks were strange enough. She seemed hard and sharp and cold as a new sword, ruthless as any man that Logen could think of. You would have thought she wouldn't throw a log to save a drowning man, but she'd done more than that to save him, and more than once. Out of all of them, she was the one he'd trust first, and furthest. So he squatted down and held the skin out to her, its bulbous shadow flickering and shifting on the rough wall behind her.

She frowned at it for a moment, then frowned up at Logen. Then she snatched it off him and bent back over her pot, half turning her bony shoulders on him. Not a word of thanks, or a gesture even, but he didn't mind. You won't cross the mountains in a day, after all.

He dropped down again beside the fire, watched the flames dancing, casting shifting light across the grim faces of the group. 'Anyone know any stories?' he asked, hopefully.

Quai sucked at his teeth. Luthar curled his lip at Logen across the fire. Ferro gave no sign that she had even heard. Hardly an encouraging start.

'Not any?' No reply. 'Alright then, I know a song or two, if I can remember the words,' he cleared his throat.

'Very well!' cut in Bayaz. 'If it will save us from a song, I know hundreds of stories. What did you have it in mind to hear about? A romance? A comedy? A tale of bravery against the odds?'

'This place,' cut in Luthar. 'The Old Empire. If it was such a great nation, how did it come to this?' He jerked his head over at the crumbling walls, and what they all knew lay beyond. The miles and miles of nothing. 'A wasteland.'

Bayaz sighed. 'I could tell that tale, but we are lucky enough to have a native of the Old Empire with us on our little trip, and a keen student of history to boot. Master Quai?' The apprentice looked up lazily from the fire. 'Would you care to enlighten us? How did the Empire, once the glittering centre of the world, come to this pass?'

'That story is long in the telling,' murmured the apprentice. 'Shall I start from the beginning?'

'Where else should a man ever start?'

Quai shrugged his bony shoulders and began to speak. ‘Almighty Euz, vanquisher of demons, closer of gates, father of the World, had four sons, and to each he gave a gift. To his eldest, Juvens, he gave the talent of High Art, the skill to change the world with magic, tempered by knowledge. To his second son, Kanedias, went the gift of making, of shaping stone and metal to his own purposes. To his third son, Bedesh, Euz gave the skill of speaking with spirits, and of making them do his bidding.’ Quai gave a wide yawn, smacked his lips and blinked at the fire. ‘So were born the three pure disciplines of magic.’

‘I thought he had four sons,’ grumbled Luthar.

Quai’s eyes slid sideways. ‘So he did, and therein lies the root of the Empire’s destruction. Glustrod was the youngest son. To him should have gone the gift of communing with the Other Side. The secrets of summoning devils from the world below and binding them to one’s will. But such things were forbidden by the First Law, and so Euz gave nothing to his youngest son but his blessing, and we all know what those are worth. He taught the other three their share of his secrets and left, ordering his sons to bring order to the world.’

‘Order.’ Luthar tossed his platter down on the grass beside him and glanced disdainfully round at the shadowy ruins. ‘They didn’t get far.’

‘At first they did. Juvens set about his purpose with a will, and bent all his power and all his wisdom to it. He found a people that pleased him, living beside the Aos, and favoured them with laws and learning, government and science. He gave to them the skills to conquer their neighbours, and made of their chief an Emperor. Son followed father, year followed year, and the nation grew and prospered. The lands of the Empire stretched as far as Isparda in the south, Anconus in the north, the very shores of the Circle Sea to the east, and beyond. Emperor followed Emperor, but always Juvens was there – guiding, advising, shaping all things according to his grand design. All was civilised, all was peaceful, all was content.’

‘Almost all,’ muttered Bayaz, poking at the guttering fire with a stick.

Quai gave a smirk. ‘We have forgotten Glustrod, just as his father did. The ignored son. The shunned son. The cheated son. He begged all three brothers for a share of their secrets, but they were jealous of their gifts, and all three refused him. He looked upon what Juvens had achieved, and was bitter beyond words. He found dark places in the world, and in secret he

studied those sciences forbidden by the First Law. He found dark places in the world, and he touched the Other Side. He found dark places, and he spoke in the tongue of devils, and he heard their voices answer him.' Quai's voice dropped down to a whisper. 'And the voices told Glustrod where to dig . . .'

'Very good, Master Quai,' cut in Bayaz, sternly. 'Your grip on the histories seems much improved. Let us not tarry on the details, however. We can leave Glustrod's diggings for another day.'

'Of course,' murmured Quai, his dark eyes glittering in the firelight, his gaunt face full of gloomy hollows. 'You know best, master. Glustrod laid plans. He watched from the shadows. He garnered secrets. He flattered, and he threatened, and he lied. It did not take him long to turn the weak-willed to his purposes, and the strong-willed against each other, for he was cunning, and charming, and fair to look upon. He heard the voices always, now, from the world below. They suggested that he sow discord everywhere, and he listened. They urged him to eat the flesh of men, and steal their power, and he did so. They commanded him to seek out those devil-bloods that remained in our world, spurned, hated, exiled, and make from them an army, and he obeyed.'

Something touched Logen's shoulder from behind and he near jumped in the air. Ferro was standing over him, the water-skin held out in her hand. 'Thanks,' he growled as he took it from her, pretending that his heart wasn't knocking at his ribs. He took a quick swig and banged the stopper in with his palm, then put it down beside him. When he looked up, Ferro hadn't moved. She stood there above him, looking down at the dancing flames. Logen shuffled up a step, making room. Ferro scowled, sucked her teeth, kicked at the ground, then slowly squatted down on her haunches, making sure to leave plenty of space between them. She held her hands out to the fire and bared her shining teeth at it.

'Cold over there.'

Logen nodded. 'These walls don't keep the wind off much.'

'No.' Her eyes swept across the group and found Quai. 'Don't stop for me,' she snapped.

The apprentice grinned. 'Strange and sinister was the host that Glustrod gathered. He waited for Juvens to leave the Empire, then he crept into the capital at Aulcus and set his well-laid schemes in motion. It seemed as if a

madness swept the city. Son fought with father, wife with husband, neighbour with neighbour. The Emperor was cut down on the steps of his palace by his own sons and then, maddened with greed and envy, they turned upon each other. Glustrod's twisted army had slithered into the sewers beneath the city and rose up, turning the streets into charnel pits, the squares into slaughter yards. Some among them could take forms, stealing the faces of others.'

Bayaz shook his head. 'Taking forms. A dread and insidious trick.' Logen remembered a woman, in the cold darkness, who had spoken with the voice of his dead wife, and he frowned and hunched his shoulders.

'A dread trick indeed,' said Quai, his sickly grin growing even wider. 'For who can be trusted if one cannot trust one's own eyes, one's own ears, to tell friend from foe? But worse was to come. Glustrod summoned demons from the Other Side, bound them to his will and sent them to destroy those who might resist him.'

'Summoning and sending,' hissed Bayaz. 'Cursed disciplines. Dire risks. Terrible breaches of the First Law.'

'But Glustrod recognised no law beyond his own strength. Soon he sat in the Emperor's throne room upon a pile of skulls, sucking the flesh of men as a baby sucks milk, basking in his awful victory. The Empire descended into chaos, the very slightest taste of the chaos of ancient days, before the coming of Euz, when our world and the world below were one.'

A gust of wind sighed through the chinks in the ancient stonework around them, and Logen shivered and pulled his blanket tight around him. Damn story was making him nervous. Stealing faces, and sending devils, and eating men. But Quai did not stop. 'When he found out what Glustrod had done, Juvens' fury was terrible, and he sought the aid of his brothers. Kanedias would not come. He stayed sealed in his house, tinkering with his machines, caring nothing for the world outside. Juvens and Bedesh raised an army without him, and they fought a war against their brother.'

'A terrible war,' muttered Bayaz, 'with terrible weapons, and terrible casualties.'

'The fighting spread across the continent from one end to the other, and drew in every petty rivalry, and gave birth to a host of feuds, and crimes, and vengeances, whose consequences still poison the world today. But in the end Juvens was victorious. Glustrod was besieged in Aulcus, his

changelings unmasked, his army scattered. Now, in his most desperate moment, the voices from the world below whispered to him a plan. Open a gate to the Other Side, they said. Pick the locks, and crack the seals, and throw wide the doors that your father made. Break the First Law one last time, they said, and let us back into the world, and you will never again be ignored, be shunned, be cheated.'

The First of the Magi nodded slowly to himself. 'But he was cheated once more.'

'Poor fool! The creatures of the Other Side are made of lies. To deal with them is to grasp the most awful peril. Glustrod made ready his rituals, but in his haste he made some small mistake. Only a grain of salt out of place, perhaps, but the results were horrible indeed. The great power that Glustrod had gathered, strong enough to tear a hole in the fabric of the world, was released without form or reason. Glustrod destroyed himself. Aulcus, great and beautiful capital of the Empire, was laid waste, the land around it forever poisoned. No one ventures within miles of the place now. The city is a shattered graveyard. A blasted ruin. A fitting monument to the folly and the pride of Glustrod and his brothers.' The apprentice glanced up at Bayaz. 'Do I speak the truth, master?'

'You do,' murmured the Magus. 'I know. I saw it. A young fool with a full and lustrous head of hair.' He ran a hand over his bald scalp. 'A young fool who was as ignorant of magic, and wisdom, and the ways of power as you are now, Master Quai.'

The apprentice inclined his head. 'I live only to learn.'

'And in that regard, you seem much improved. How did you like that tale, Master Ninefingers?'

Logen puffed out his cheeks. 'I'd been hoping for something with a few more laughs, but I guess I'll take what's offered.'

'A pack of nonsense, if you ask me,' sneered Luthar.

'Huh,' snorted Bayaz. 'How fortunate for us that no one did. Perhaps you ought to get the pots washed, Captain, before it gets too late.'

'Me?'

'One of us caught the food, and one of us cooked it. One of us has entertained the group with a tale. You are the only one among us who has as yet contributed nothing.'

'Apart from you.'

‘Oh, I am far too old to be sloshing around in streams at this time of night.’ Bayaz’ face grew hard. ‘A great man must first learn humility. The pots await.’

Luthar opened his mouth to speak, thought better of it, pushed himself angrily up from his place and threw his blanket down in the grass. ‘Damn pots,’ he cursed as he snatched them up from around the fire and stomped off towards the brook.

Ferro watched him go, a strange expression on her face that might even have been her version of a smile. She looked back at the fire, and licked her lips. Logen pulled the stopper from the water skin and held it out to her.

‘Uh,’ she grunted, snatched it from his hand, took a quick swallow. While she was wiping her mouth on her sleeve, she glanced sideways at him, and frowned. ‘What?’

‘Nothing,’ he said quickly, looking away and holding up his empty palms. ‘Nothing at all.’ He was smiling on the inside, though. Small gestures and time. That was how he’d get it done.

Small Crimes

‘Cold, eh, Colonel West?’ ‘Yes, your Highness, winter is nearly upon us.’ There had been a kind of snow in the night. A cold, wet sleet that covered everything in icy moisture. Now, in the pale morning, the whole world seemed half-frozen. The hooves of their horses crunched and slurped in the half-frozen mud. Water dripped sadly from the half-frozen trees. West was no exception. His breath smoked from his runny nose. The tips of his ears tingled unpleasantly, numb from the cold.

Prince Ladisla hardly seemed to notice, but then he was swathed in an enormous coat, hat and mittens of shining black fur, no doubt several hundred marks worth of it. He grinned over. ‘The men seem good and fit, though, in spite of it all.’

West could scarcely believe his ears. The regiment of the King’s Own that had been placed under Ladisla’s command seemed happy enough, it was true. Their wide tents were pitched in orderly rows in the middle of the camp, cooking fires in front, horses tethered nearby in good order.

The position of the levies, who made up a good three quarters of their strength, was less happy. Many were shamefully ill-prepared. Men with no training or no weapons, some who were plainly too ill or too old for marching, let alone for battle. Some had little more than the clothes they stood up in, and those were in a woeful state. West had seen men huddled together under trees for warmth, nothing but half a blanket to keep the rain off. It was a disgrace.

‘The King’s Own are well provided for, but I’m concerned about the situation of some of the levies, your—’

‘Yes,’ said Ladisla, talking over him precisely as if he had not spoken, ‘good and fit! Chomping at the bit! Must be the fire in their bellies keeps ’em warm, eh, West? Can’t wait to get at the enemy! Damn shame we have to wait here, kicking our heels behind this damn river!’

West bit his lip. Prince Ladisla’s incredible powers of self-deception were becoming more frustrating with every passing day. His Highness had fixed upon the idea of being a great and famous general, with a matchless force of fighting men under his command. Of winning a famous victory, and being

celebrated as a hero back in Adua. Rather than exerting a single particle of effort to make it happen, however, he behaved as if it already had, utterly regardless of the truth. Nothing which was distasteful, or displeasing, or at odds with his cock-eyed notions could be permitted to be noticed. Meanwhile, the dandies on his staff, without a month's military experience between them, congratulated him on his fine judgement, slapped each other on the back, and agreed with his every utterance, no matter how ludicrous.

Never to want for anything, or work for anything, or show the tiniest grain of self-discipline in a whole life must give a man a strange outlook on the world, West supposed, and here was the proof, riding along beside him, smiling away as though the care of ten thousand men was a light responsibility. The Crown Prince and the real world, as Lord Marshal Burr had observed, were entire strangers to one another.

'Cold,' Ladisla murmured. 'Not much like the deserts of Gurkhul now, eh, Colonel West?'

'No, your Highness.'

'But some things are the same, eh? I'm speaking of war, West! War in general! The same everywhere! The courage! The honour! The glory! You fought with Colonel Glokta, didn't you?'

'Yes, your Highness, I did.'

'I used to love to hear stories of that man's exploits! One of my heroes, when I was young. Riding round the enemy, harassing his lines of communication, falling on the baggage train and whatnot. ' The Prince's riding crop rode around, harassed, and fell on imaginary baggage in the air before him. 'Capital! And I suppose you saw it all?'

'Some of it, your Highness, yes.' He had seen a great deal of saddle-soreness, sunburn, looting, drunkenness, and vainglorious showing-off.

'Colonel Glokta, I swear! We could do with some of that dash here, eh, West? Some of that vim! That vigour! Shame that he's dead.'

West looked up. 'He isn't dead, your Highness.'

'He isn't?'

'He was captured by the Gurkish, and then returned to the Union when the war ended. He . . . er . . . he joined the Inquisition.'

'The Inquisition?' The Prince looked horrified. 'Why on earth would a man give up the soldiering life for that?'

West groped for words, but then thought better of it. ‘I cannot imagine, your Highness.’

‘Joined the Inquisition! Well, I never.’ They rode in silence for a moment. Gradually, the Prince’s smile returned. ‘But we were talking of the honour of war, were we not?’

West grimaced. ‘We were, your Highness.’

‘First through the breach at Ulrioch, weren’t you? First through the breach, I heard! There’s honour for you, eh? There’s glory, isn’t it? That must have been quite an experience, eh, Colonel? Quite an experience!’

Struggling through a mass of broken stones and timbers, littered with twisted corpses. Half-blind with the smoke, half-choking on the dust, shrieks and wails and the clashing of metal coming at him from all around, hardly able to breathe for fear. Men pressing in on all sides, groaning, shoving, stumbling, yelling, running with blood and sweat, black with grime and soot, half-seen faces twisted with pain and fury. Devils, in hell.

West remembered screaming ‘Forward!’, over and over until his throat was raw, even though he had no idea which way forward was. He remembered stabbing someone with his sword, friend or enemy, he did not know, then or now. He remembered falling and cutting his head on a rock, tearing his jacket on a broken timber. Moments, fragments, as if from a story he once heard someone else telling.

West pulled his coat tighter round his chilly shoulders, wishing it was thicker. ‘Quite an experience, your Highness.’

‘Damn shame that bloody Bethod won’t be coming this way!’ Prince Ladisla slashed petulantly at the air with his riding crop. ‘Little better than damn guard duty! Does Burr take me for a fool, eh, West, does he?’

West took a deep breath. ‘I couldn’t possibly say, your Highness.’

The Prince’s fickle mind had already moved off. ‘What about those pets of yours? Those Northmen. The ones with the comical names. What’s he called, that dirty fellow? Wolfman, is it?’

‘Dogman.’

‘Dogman, that’s it! Capital!’ The Prince chuckled to himself. ‘And that other one, biggest damn fellow I ever saw! Excellent! What are they up to?’

‘I sent them scouting north of the river, your Highness.’ West rather wished he was with them. ‘The enemy are probably far away, but if they aren’t, we need to know about it.’

‘Of course we do. Excellent idea. So that we can prepare to attack!’

A timely withdrawal and a fast messenger to Marshal Burr was more what West had in mind, but there was no point in saying so. Ladisla’s whole notion of war was of ordering a glorious charge, then retiring to bed. Strategy and retreat were not words in his vocabulary.

‘Yes,’ the Prince was muttering to himself, eyes fixed intently on the trees beyond the river. ‘Prepare an attack and sweep them back across the border . . .’

The border was a hundred leagues away. West seized his moment. ‘Your Highness, if I may, there is a great deal for me to do.’

It was no lie. The camp had been organised, or disorganised, without a thought for convenience or defence. An unruly maze of ramshackle canvas in a great clearing near the river, where the ground was too soft and had soon been turned into a morass of sticky mud by the supply carts. At first there had been no latrines, then they had been dug too shallow and much too close to the camp, not far from where the provisions were being stored. Provisions which, incidentally, had been badly packed, inadequately prepared, and were already close to spoiling, attracting every rat in Angland. If it had not been for the cold, West did not doubt that the camp would already have been riddled with disease.

Prince Ladisla waved his hand. ‘Of course, a great deal to do. You can tell me more of your stories tomorrow, eh, West? About Colonel Glokta and so forth. Damn shame he’s dead!’ he shouted over his shoulder as he cantered off towards his enormous purple tent, high up on the hill above the stink and confusion.

West turned his mount with some relief and urged it down the slope into the camp. He passed men tottering through the half-frozen sludge, shivering, breath steaming, hands wrapped in dirty rags. He passed men sitting in sorry groups before their patched tents, no two dressed the same, as close to meagre fires as they dared, fiddling with cooking pots, playing miserable games of damp cards, drinking and staring into the cold air.

The better-trained levies had gone with Poulder and Kroy to seek out the enemy. Ladisla had been left with the rump: those too weak to march well, too poorly equipped to fight well, too broken even to do nothing with any conviction. Men who might never have left their homes in all their lives,

forced to cross the sea to a land they knew nothing of, to fight an enemy they had no quarrel with, for reasons they did not understand.

Some few of them might have felt some trace of patriotic fervour, some swell of manly pride when they left, but by now the hard marching, the bad food and the cold weather had truly worn, starved, and frozen all enthusiasm out of them. Prince Ladisla was scarcely the inspirational leader to put it back, had he even been making the slightest effort to do so.

West looked down at those grim, tired, pinched faces as he rode past, and they stared back, beaten already. All they wanted was to go home, and West could hardly blame them. So did he.

'Colonel West!'

There was a big man grinning over at him, a man with a thick beard, wearing the uniform of an officer in the King's Own. West realised with a start that it was Jalenhorm. He slid down from his saddle and grabbed hold of the big man's hand in both of his. It was good to see him. A firm, honest, trustworthy presence. A reminder of a past life, when West did not move among the great men of the world, and things were an awful lot simpler. 'How are you, Jalenhorm?'

'Alright, thank you, sir. Just taking a turn round the camp, waiting.' The big man cupped his hands and blew into them, rubbed them together. 'Trying to stay warm.'

'That's what war is, in my experience. A great deal of waiting, in unpleasant conditions. A great deal of waiting, with occasional moments of the most extreme terror.'

Jalenhorm gave a dry grin. 'Something to look forward to then. How're things on the Prince's staff?'

West shook his head. 'A competition to see who can be most arrogant, ignorant, and wasteful. How about you? How's the camp life?'

'We're not so badly off. It's some of these levies I feel sorry for. They're not fit to fight. I heard a couple of the older ones died last night from the cold.'

'It happens. Let's just hope they bury them deep, and a good way from the rest of us.' West could see that the big man thought him heartless, but there it was. Few of the casualties in Gurkhul had died in battle. Accidents, illness, little wounds gone bad. You came to expect it. As badly equipped as

some of the levies were? They would be burying men every day. ‘Nothing you need?’

‘There is one thing. My horse dropped a shoe in this mud, and I tried to find someone to fit a new one.’ Jalenhorm spread his hands. ‘I could be wrong, but I don’t think there’s a smith in the whole camp.’

West stared at him. ‘Not one?’

‘I couldn’t find any. There are forges, anvils, hammers and all the rest but . . . no one to work them. I spoke to one of the quartermasters. He said General Poulder refused to release any of his smiths, and so did General Kroy, so, well,’ and Jalenhorm shrugged his shoulders, ‘we don’t have any.’

‘No one thought to check?’

‘Who?’

West felt the familiar headache tugging at the back of his eyes. Arrows need heads, blades need sharpening, armour and saddles and the carts that haul the supplies break, and need to be repaired. An army with no smiths is little better than an army with no weapons. And here they were, out in the frozen country, miles from the nearest settlement. Unless . . .

‘We passed a penal colony on the way.’

Jalenhorm squinted as he tried to remember. ‘Yes, a foundry, I think. I saw smoke above the trees . . .’

‘They would have some skilled metal-workers.’

The big man’s eyebrows went up. ‘Some criminal metal-workers. ’

‘I’ll take whatever we can get. Today your horse is short a shoe, tomorrow we might have nothing to fight with! Get a dozen men together, and a wagon. We’ll leave at once.’

The prison loomed up out of the trees through the cold rain, a fence of great, mossy logs tipped with bent and rusted spikes. A grim-looking place with a grim purpose. West swung from his saddle while Jalenhorm and his men reined up behind him, then squelched across the rutted track to the gate and hammered on the weathered wood with the pommel of his sword.

It took a while, but eventually a small hatch snapped open. A pair of grey eyes frowned at him through the slot. Grey eyes above a black mask. A Practical of the Inquisition.

‘My name is Colonel West.’

The eyes regarded him coldly. ‘So?’

‘I am in the service of Crown Prince Ladisla, and I need to speak to the commandant of this camp.’

‘Why?’

West frowned, doing his very best to look impressive with his hair plastered to his scalp and the rain dripping off his chin. ‘There is a war on and I do not have time to bandy words with you! I need to speak to the commandant most urgently!’

The eyes narrowed. They looked at West for a while, and then at the dozen bedraggled soldiers behind him. ‘Alright,’ said the Practical. ‘You can come in, but only you. The rest will have to wait.’

The main street was a stretch of churned-up mud between leaning shacks, water trickling from the eaves, spattering into the dirt. There were two men and a woman in the road, wet through, struggling to move a cart laden with stones, up to the axles in mush. All three had heavy chains on their ankles. Ragged, bony, hollow faces, as empty of hope as they were empty of food.

‘Get that fucking cart shifted,’ the Practical growled at them, and they stooped back to their unenviable task.

West struggled through the muck towards a stone building at the far end of the camp, trying to hop from one dry patch to another, without success. Another dour Practical was standing on the threshold, water running from a stained oilskin over his shoulders, hard eyes following West with a mixture of suspicion and indifference. He and his guide stepped past without a word and into the dim hall beyond, full of the noise of drumming rain. The Practical knocked at an ill-fitting door.

‘Come in.’

A small, spare room with grey walls, cold and smelling slightly of damp. A mean fire flickered in the grate, a sagging shelf was stacked with books. A portrait of the King of the Union stared regally down from one wall. A lean man in a black coat sat writing at a cheap desk. He looked at West for a while, then carefully put down his pen and rubbed at the bridge of his nose with an inky thumb and forefinger.

‘We have a visitor,’ grunted the Practical.

‘So I see. I am Inquisitor Lorsen, commandant of our little camp.’

West gave the bony hand the most perfunctory of squeezes. ‘Colonel West. I am here with Prince Ladisla’s army. We are camped a dozen miles to the north.’

‘Of course. How might I be of assistance to his Highness?’

‘We are desperately in need of skilled metal-workers. You run a foundry here, correct?’

‘A mine, a foundry, and a smithy for the manufacture of farming tools, but I fail to see what—’

‘Excellent. I will take a dozen or so men back with me, the most skilled men you have available.’

The commandant frowned. ‘Out of the question. The prisoners here are guilty of the most serious crimes. They cannot be released without a signed order from the Arch Lector himself.’

‘Then we have a problem, Inquisitor Lorsen. I have ten thousand men with weapons that need sharpening, armour that needs mending, horses that need shoeing. We might be called into action at any moment. I cannot wait for orders from the Arch Lector or anyone else. I must leave with smiths, and there it is.’

‘But you must understand that I cannot allow—’

‘You fail to realise the gravity of the situation!’ barked West, his temper already fraying. ‘By all means send a letter to the Arch Lector! I will send a man back to my camp for a company of soldiers! We can see who gets help first!’

The commandant thought about that for a while. ‘Very well,’ he said eventually, ‘follow me.’

Two dirty children stared at West from the porch of one of the shacks as he stepped out of the commandant’s building, back into the incessant drizzle.

‘You have children here?’

‘We have whole families, if they are judged a danger to the state.’ Lorsen glanced sideways at him. ‘A shame, but holding the Union together has always required harsh measures. I gather from your silence that you disapprove.’

West watched one of the shabby children limping through the muck, doomed, perhaps, to spend their whole life in this place. ‘I think it’s a crime.’

The commandant shrugged. ‘Don’t deceive yourself. Everyone is guilty of something, and even the innocent can be a threat. Perhaps it takes small crimes to prevent bigger ones, Colonel West, but it’s up to bigger men than

us to decide. I only make sure they work hard, don't prey upon each other, and don't escape.'

'You only do your job, eh? A well-trodden way to avoid responsibility.'

'Which of us is it who lives among them, out here in the middle of nowhere? Which of us is it who watches over them, dresses them, feeds them, cleans them, fights the endless, pointless war against their damn lice? Is it you who stops them beating, and raping, and killing each other? You're an officer in the King's Own, eh, Colonel? So you live in Adua? In fine quarters in the Agriont, among the rich and well groomed?' West frowned, and Lorsen chuckled at him. 'Which of us has truly avoided the responsibility, as you put it? My conscience has never been cleaner. Hate us if you like, we're used to it. No one likes to shake hands with the man who empties the latrine pits either, but pits have to be emptied all the same. Otherwise the world fills up with shit. You can have your dozen smiths, but don't try to take the high ground with me. There is no high ground here.'

West didn't like it, but he had to admit the man made a good case, so he set his jaw and struggled on in silence, head down. They squelched towards a long, windowless, stone-built shed, thick smoke roiling up into the misty air from tall chimneys at each corner. The Practical slid back the bolt on the heavy door and heaved it open, and West followed him and Lorsen into the darkness.

The heat was like a slap in the face after the freezing air outside. Acrid smoke stung at West's eyes, nipped at his throat. The din in the narrow space was frightening. Bellows creaked and wheezed, hammers clanged on anvils sending up showers of angry sparks, red hot metal hissed furiously in water barrels. There were men everywhere, packed in tight together, sweating, and groaning, and coughing, hollow faces half lit by the orange glow from the forges. Devils, in hell.

'Stop your work!' roared Lorsen. 'Stop and form up!'

The men slowly set down their tools, lurched and stumbled and rattled forward to form a line while four or five Practicals looked on from the shadows. A shabby, broken, stooping, sorrowful line. A couple of the men had irons on their wrists as well as their ankles. They scarcely looked like the answer to all of West's problems, but he had no choice. This was all there was.

'We have a visitor, from outside. Say your piece, Colonel.'

‘My name is Colonel West,’ he croaked, voice cracking on the stinging air. ‘There are ten thousand soldiers camped a dozen miles down the road, under Crown Prince Ladisla. We have need of smiths.’ West cleared his throat, tried to speak louder without coughing his lungs out. ‘Who among you can work metals?’

No one spoke. The men stared at their threadbare shoes or their bare feet, with the odd sidelong glance at the glowering Practicals.

‘You need not be afraid. Who can work metals?’

‘I can, sir.’ A man stepped forward from the line, the irons on his ankles rattling. He was lean and sinewy, slightly stooped. As the lamplight fell across his head West found himself wincing. He was disfigured by hideous burns. One side of his face was a mass of livid, slightly melted-looking scars, no eyebrow, scalp patchy with pink bald spots. The other side was little better. The man scarcely had a face at all. ‘I can work a forge, and I did some soldiering too, in Gurkhul.’

‘Good,’ muttered West, doing his best to swallow his horror at the man’s appearance. ‘Your name?’

‘Pike.’

‘Are any of these others good with metal, Pike?’

The burned man shuffled and clanked his way down the line, pulling men forward by their shoulders while the commandant looked on, his frown growing deeper with every passing moment.

West licked his dry lips. Hard to believe that in so little time he could have gone from so horribly cold to so horribly hot, but here he was, more uncomfortable than ever. ‘I’ll need keys to their irons, Inquisitor.’

‘There are no keys. The irons are melted shut. They are not intended ever to be removed and I would strongly advise you not to. Many of these prisoners are extremely dangerous, and you should bear in mind that you will be returning them to us as soon as you can make alternative arrangements. The Inquisition is not in the business of early releases.’ He stalked off to speak to one of the Practicals.

Pike sidled up, pulling another convict by the elbow. ‘Pardon me, sir,’ he murmured, growling voice kept low. ‘But could you find a place for my daughter?’

West shrugged his shoulders, uncomfortable. He would have liked to take everyone and burn the damn place to the ground, but he was already

pushing his luck. ‘It’s not a good idea, a woman in amongst all those soldiers. Not a good idea at all.’

‘A better idea than staying here, sir. I can’t leave her on her own. She can help me at the forge. She can swing a hammer herself if it comes to that. She’s strong.’

She didn’t look strong. She looked skinny and ragged, bony face smeared with soot and grease. West could have taken her for a boy. ‘I’m sorry, Pike, but it’s no easy ride where we’re going.’

She grabbed hold of West’s arm as he turned away. ‘It’s no easy ride here.’ Her voice was a surprise. Soft, smooth, educated. ‘Cathil is my name. I can work.’ West looked down at her, ready to shake his arm free, but her expression reminded him of something. Painless. Fearless. Empty eyes, flat, like a corpse.

Ardee. Blood smeared across her cheek.

West grimaced. The memory was like a wound that wouldn’t heal. The heat was unbearable, every part of him was twitching with discomfort, his uniform like sandpaper against his clammy skin. He had to get out of this horrible place.

He looked away, his eyes stinging. ‘Her too,’ he barked.

Lorsen snorted. ‘Are you joking, Colonel?’

‘Believe me, I’m not in a joking mood.’

‘Skilled men is one thing. I daresay you need them, but I cannot allow you to simply take whatever prisoners catch your eye—’

West turned on him with a snarl, his patience worn right through. ‘Her too, I said!’

If the commandant was impressed by West’s fury, he didn’t show it. They stood there for a long moment, staring at each other, while the sweat ran down West’s face and the blood pounded loud in his temples.

Then Lorsen nodded slowly. ‘Her too. Very well. I cannot stop you.’ He leaned in a little closer. ‘But the Arch Lector will hear about this. He is far away, and it might take time for him to hear, but hear he will.’ Even closer yet, almost whispering in West’s ear. ‘Perhaps one day you will find yourself visiting us again, but this time to stay. Perhaps, in the meantime, you should prepare your little lecture on the rights and wrongs of penal colonies. There’ll be plenty of time for it.’ Lorsen turned away. ‘Now take my prisoners and go. I have a letter to write.’

Rain

Jezal had always found a good storm a thorough amusement. Raindrops lashing at the streets, and walls, and roofs of the Agriont, hissing from the gutters. Something to be smiled out at through the wet window while one sat, warm and dry in one's quarters. Something that took the young ladies in the park by surprise and made them squeal, sticking their dresses excitingly to their clammy skin. Something to be dashed through, laughing with one's friends, as one made one's way from tavern to tavern, before drying out before a roaring fire with a mug of hot spiced wine. Jezal used to enjoy the rain almost as much as the sun.

But that was before.

Out here on the plains, storms were of a different stamp. This was no petulant child's tantrum, best ignored and soon ended. This was a cold and murderous, merciless and grudge-bearing, bitter and relentless fury of a storm, and somehow it made all the difference that the nearest roof, let alone the nearest tavern, was hundreds of miles behind them. The rain came down in sheets, dousing the endless plain and everything on it with icy water. The fat drops stung at Jezal's scalp like sling-stones, nipped at his exposed hands, the tops of his ears, the back of his neck. Water trickled through his hair, through his eyebrows, down his face in rivulets and into his sodden collar. The rain was a grey curtain across the land, obliterating anything more than a hundred strides ahead, although out here of course, there was nothing ahead or anywhere else.

Jezal shivered and clutched the collars of his coat together with one hand. A pointless gesture, he was already soaked to his skin. Damn shopkeeper back in Adua had assured him that this coat was entirely waterproof. It had certainly cost him enough, and he had looked very well in it in the shop, quite the rugged outdoorsman, but the seams had begun to leak almost as soon as the first drops fell. For some hours now he had been every bit as wet as if he had climbed into the bath with his clothes on, and a good deal colder.

His boots were full of icy water, his thighs were chafed ragged against his wet trousers, the waterlogged saddle creaked and squelched with every

movement of his unhappy horse. His nose was running, his nostrils and his lips were sore, the very reins were painful in his wet palms. His nipples in particular were two points of agony in a sea of discomfort. The whole business was utterly unbearable.

'When will it end?' he muttered bitterly to himself, hunching his shoulders and looking up beseechingly at the gloomy heavens, the rain pattering on his face, in his mouth, in his eyes. Happiness seemed at that moment to consist of nothing more than a dry shirt. 'Can't you do something?' he moaned at Bayaz.

'Like what?' the Magus snapped back at him, water coursing down his face and dripping from his bedraggled beard. 'You think that I'm enjoying this? Out on the great plain in a bastard of a storm at my age? The skies make no special dispensation for Magi, boy, they piss on everyone the same. I suggest you adjust to it and keep your whining to yourself. A great leader must share the hardships of his followers, of his soldiers, of his subjects. That is how he wins their respect. Great leaders do not complain. Not ever.'

'Fuck them then,' muttered Jezal under his breath. 'And this rain, too!'

'You call this rain?' Ninefingers rode past him, a big smile spread across his ugly lump of a face. Not long after the drops began to come down hard, Jezal had been most surprised to see the Northman shrug off first his battered coat, and then his shirt, roll them up in an oilskin and ride on stripped to the waist, heedless of the water running down his great slab of scarred back, happy as a great hog wallowing in the mud.

Such behaviour had, at first, struck Jezal as another unforgivable display of savagery, and he had only thanked his stars that the primitive had deigned to keep his trousers on, but as the cold rain began to seep through his coat he had become less sure. It would have been impossible for him to be any colder or wetter without his clothes, but at least he would have been free of the endless, horrible chafing of wet cloth. Ninefingers grinned over at him as though he could read his thoughts. 'Nothing but a drizzle. The sun can't always shine. You have to be realistic!'

Jezal ground his teeth. If he was told to be realistic one more time he would stab Ninefingers with his short steel. Damn half-naked brute. It was bad enough that he had to ride, and eat, and sleep within a hundred strides

of a cave-dweller like that, but that he had to listen to his fool advice was an insult almost too deep to bear.

'Damn useless primitive,' he muttered to himself.

'If it comes to a fight I reckon you'll be glad to have him along.' Quai was looking sideways at Jezal, swaying back and forth on the seat of his creaking cart, long hair plastered to his gaunt cheeks by the rain, looking more pale and sickly than ever with a sheen of wet on his white skin.

'Who asked your opinion?'

'A man who doesn't want opinions should keep his own mouth shut.' The apprentice nodded his dripping head at Ninefingers' back. 'That there is the Bloody-Nine, the most feared man in the North. He's killed more men than the plague.' Jezal frowned over at the Northman, sitting sloppy in his saddle, thought about it for a moment, and sneered.

'Doesn't scare me any,' he said, as loud as he could without Ninefingers actually hearing him.

Quai snorted. 'I'll bet you've never even drawn a blade in anger.'

'I could start now,' growled Jezal, giving his most threatening frown.

'Very fierce,' chuckled the apprentice, disappointingly unimpressed. 'But if you're asking me who's the useless one here, well, I know who I'd rather have left behind.'

'Why, you—'

Jezal jumped in his saddle as a bright flash lit the sky, and then another, frighteningly close. Fingers of light clawed at the bulging undersides of the clouds, snaked through the darkness overhead. Long thunder rolled out across the gloomy plain, popped and crackled under the wind. By the time it faded the wet cart had already rolled away, robbing Jezal of his chance to retort. 'Damn idiot apprentice,' he murmured, frowning at the back of his head.

At first, when the flashes had come, Jezal had tried to keep his spirits up by imagining his companions struck down by lightning. It would have been oddly appropriate, for instance, had Bayaz been cooked to a cinder by a stroke from the heavens. Jezal soon despaired of any such deliverance, however, even as a fantasy. The lightning would never kill more than one of them in a day, and if one of them had to go, he had slowly begun to hope it might be him. A moment of brilliant illumination, then sweet oblivion. The kindest escape from this nightmare.

A trickle of water ran down Jezal's back, tickling at his raw skin. He longed to scratch it, but he knew that if he did he would only create ten more itches, spread across his shoulder blades and his neck and all the places hardest to reach with a hooked finger. He closed his eyes, and his head slowly drooped under the weight of his desperation until his wet chin hung against his wet chest.

It had been raining the last time he saw her. He remembered it all with a painful clarity. The bruise on her face, the colour of her eyes, the set of her mouth, one side twisted up. Just thinking of it made him have to swallow that familiar lump in his throat. The lump he swallowed twenty times a day. First thing in the morning, when he woke, and last thing at night, as he lay on the hard ground. To be back with Ardee now, safe and warm, seemed like the realisation of all his dreams.

He wondered how long she might wait, as the weeks dragged on, and she received no word. Might she even now be writing daily letters to Angland that he would never receive? Letters expressing her tender feelings. Letters desperately seeking news. Letters begging for replies. Now her worst expectations would all be confirmed. That he was a faithless ass, and a liar, and had forgotten all about her, when nothing could have been further from the truth. He ground his teeth in frustration and despair at the thought, but what could he do? Replies were hard to send from a blighted, blasted, ruined wasteland, even supposing he could have written one in this epic downpour. He inwardly cursed the names of Bayaz and Ninefingers, of Longfoot and Quai. He cursed the Old Empire and he cursed the endless plain. He cursed the whole demented expedition. It was becoming an hourly ritual.

Jezal began to perceive, dimly, that he had until now had rather an easy life. It seemed strange that he had moaned so long and hard about rising early to fence, or about lowering himself to play cards with Lieutenant Brint, or about how his sausages were always a touch overdone of a morning. He should have been laughing, bright-eyed and with a spring in his step, simply to have been out of the rain. He coughed, and sniffed, and wiped at his sore nose with his sore hand. At least with so much water around, no one would notice him weeping.

Only Ferro looked as if she was enjoying herself even less than him, occasionally glaring at the pissing clouds, her face wrinkled up with hatred

and horror. Her spiky hair was plastered flat to her skull, her waterlogged clothes hung limp from her scrawny shoulders, water ran down her scarred face and dripped from the end of her sharp nose, the point of her sharp chin. She looked like a mean-tempered cat dunked unexpectedly in a pond, its body suddenly seeming a quarter of the size it had been, stripped of all its air of menace. Perhaps a woman's voice might be the thing to lift him from this state of mind, and Ferro was the nearest thing to a woman within a hundred miles.

He spurred his horse up alongside her, doing his best to smile, and she turned her scowl on him. Jezal found to his discomfort that at close quarters, much of the menace returned. He had forgotten about those eyes. Yellow eyes, sharp as knives, pupils small as pin-pricks, strange and disconcerting. He wished he had never approached her now, but he could hardly go without saying something.

'Bet it doesn't rain much where you come from, eh?'

'Are you going to shut your fucking hole, or do I have to hurt you?'

Jezal cleared his throat, and quietly allowed his mount to drop back away from her. 'Crazy bitch,' he whispered under his breath. Damn her, then, she could keep her misery. He wasn't about to start wallowing in self-pity. That wasn't his way at all.

The rain had finally stopped when they came upon the place, but the air was still full of heavy damp, the sky above was still full of strange colours. The evening sun pierced the swirling clouds with pink and orange, casting an eerie glow over the grey plain.

Two empty carts stood upright, another was tipped up on its side, one wheel broken off, a dead horse still tethered to it, lying with its pink tongue lolling out of its mouth, a pair of broken arrows sticking from its bloody side. The corpses were scattered all around in the flattened grass, like dolls discarded by a bad-tempered child. Some had deep wounds, or limbs broken, or arrows poking from their bodies. One had an arm off at the shoulder, a short length of snapped bone sticking out as if from a butcher's joint.

Rubbish was scattered all around them. Broken weapons, splintered wood. A few trunks smashed open, rolls of cloth ripped out and slashed

across the wet ground. Burst barrels, shattered boxes, rooted through and looted.

'Merchants,' grunted Ninefingers, looking down. 'Like we're pretending to be. Life's cheap out here alright.'

Ferro curled her lip. 'Where isn't it?'

The wind whipped cold across the plain, cutting clean through Jezal's damp clothes. He had never seen a corpse before, and here were laid out . . . how many? At least a dozen. He started to feel slightly peculiar halfway through counting them.

No one else seemed much moved, though familiarity with violence was hardly surprising among these characters. Ferro was crawling around the bodies, peering down and prodding them with as little emotion as an undertaker. Ninefingers looked as though he had seen far worse, which Jezal did not doubt he had, and done far worse besides. Bayaz and Longfoot both looked mildly troubled, but not much more so than if they had come upon some unknown horse tracks. Quai scarcely even looked interested.

Jezal could have done with a share of their indifference at that moment. He would not have admitted it, but he was feeling more than a little sick. That skin: slack, and still, and waxy pale, beaded with wet from the rain. That clothing: ripped and rifled through, missing boots, or coats, or shirts even. Those wounds. Ragged red lines, blue and black bruises, rips and tears and gaping mouths in flesh.

Jezal turned suddenly in his saddle, looking behind, to the left, to the right, but every view was the same. Nowhere to run to, if he had even known in what direction the nearest settlement lay. In a group of six and yet he felt utterly alone. In a vast, open space, and yet he felt utterly trapped.

One of the corpses seemed to be staring, unnervingly, straight at him. A young man, no more than Jezal's age, with sandy hair and protruding ears. He could have done with a shave, except, of course, that it hardly mattered now. There was a yawning red gash across his belly, his bloody hands lying on either side of it, as though trying to squeeze it shut. His guts glistened wetly inside, all purple-red. Jezal felt his gorge rising. He was already feeling faint from eating too little that morning. Damn sick of dry biscuit, and he could hardly force down the slops the others put together. He turned away from the sickening scene and stared down at the grass, pretending to be searching for important clues while his stomach clenched and heaved.

He gripped his reins as tightly as he could, forcing down the spit as it rushed into his mouth. He was a proud son of the Union, damn it. What was more he was a nobleman, of a distinguished family. What was still more he was a bold officer of the King's Own, and a winner of the Contest. To vomit at the sight of a little gore would be to disgrace himself before this mixture of fools and primitives, and that could under no circumstances be permitted. The honour of his nation was at stake. He glared fixedly at the wet ground, and he clamped his teeth shut, and he ordered his stomach to be still. Gradually, it began to work. He sucked in deep breaths through his nose. Cool, damp, calming air. He was in complete control. He looked back at the others.

Ferro was squatting on the ground with her hand in one of the victim's gaping wounds as far almost as her wrist. 'Cold,' she snapped at Ninefingers, 'been dead since this morning at least.' She pulled her hand out, fingers slimy with gore.

Jezal had belched half his meagre breakfast down his coat before he had time even to slide out of his saddle. He staggered a couple of drunkard's steps, took a gasping breath and retched again. He bent over, hands on his knees, head spinning, spitting bile out onto the grass.

'You alright?'

Jezal glanced up, doing his best to look nonchalant with a long string of bitter drool hanging from his face. 'Something I ate,' he muttered, wiping at his nose and mouth with his trembling hand. A pitiful ruse, he had to admit.

Ninefingers only nodded, though. 'That meat this morning, most likely. I been feeling sick myself.' He gave one of his revolting smiles and offered Jezal a water skin. 'Best keep drinking. Flush it away, uh?'

Jezal sloshed a mouthful of water round his mouth and spat it out, watching Ninefingers walk back to the bodies, and frowning. That had been strange. Coming from another source it might have seemed almost a generous gesture. He took another swig of water, and began to feel better. He made, somewhat unsteadily, for his horse, and clambered back into the saddle.

'Whoever did it was well armed, and in numbers,' Ferro was saying. 'The grass is full of tracks.'

'We should be careful,' said Jezal, hoping to impose himself on the conversation.

Bayaz turned sharply to look at him. ‘We should always be careful! That goes without saying! How far are we from Darmium?’

Longfoot squinted up at the sky, then out across the plain. He licked his finger and held it up to the wind. ‘Even for a man of my talents, it is hard to be accurate without the stars. Fifty miles or thereabouts.’

‘We’ll need to turn off the track soon.’

‘We are not crossing the river at Darmium?’

‘The city is in chaos. Cabrian holds it, and admits no one. We cannot take the risk.’

‘Very well. Aostum it is. We will take a wide route round Darmium and off westward. A slightly longer path but—’

‘No.’

‘No?’

‘The bridge at Aostum lies in ruins.’

Longfoot frowned. ‘Gone, eh? Truly, God loves to test his faithful. We may have to ford the Aos then—’

‘No,’ said Bayaz. ‘The rains have been heavy and the great river is deep. The fords are all closed to us.’

The Navigator looked puzzled. ‘You, of course, are my employer, and as a proud member of the order of Navigators I will always do my utmost to obey, but I am afraid that I can see no other way. If we cannot cross at Darmium, or at Aostum, and we cannot ford the river . . .’

‘There is one other bridge.’

‘There is?’ Longfoot looked baffled for a moment, then his eyes suddenly widened. ‘You cannot mean—’

‘The bridge at Aulcus still stands.’

Everyone glanced at each other for a moment, frowning. ‘I thought you said the place was a ruin,’ said Ninefingers.

‘A shattered graveyard, I heard,’ murmured Ferro.

‘I thought you said no one goes within miles of the place.’

‘It would hardly have been my first choice, but there are no others. We will join the river and follow the northern bank to Aulcus.’ Nobody moved. Longfoot in particular had a look of stunned horror on his face. ‘Now!’ snapped Bayaz. ‘It is plainly not safe to remain here.’ And with that he turned his horse away from the corpses. Quai shrugged and flicked his reigns and the cart grumbled off through the grass after the First of the

Magi. Longfoot and Ninefingers followed behind, all frowns and foreboding.

Jezal stared at the bodies, still lying where they had found them, their eyes staring accusingly up into the darkening sky. ‘Shouldn’t we bury them?’

‘If you like,’ grunted Ferro, springing up into the saddle in one easy motion. ‘Maybe you could bury them in puke.’

Bloody Company

Riding, that was what they were doing. That was what they'd been doing for days. Riding, looking for Bethod, with winter coming on. Bog and forest, hill and valley. Rain and sleet, fog and snow. Looking for signs that he was coming their way, and knowing that there wouldn't be any. A lot of wasted time, to the Dogman's mind, but once you've been fool enough to ask for a task, you better do the one you're given.

'Stupid bloody job, this,' snarled Dow, wincing and twitching and fussing with his reins. He'd never been too much of a one for horseback. Liked to keep his feet on the ground and pointed at the enemy. 'Waste of our fucking time. How d'you put up with scouting, Dogman? Stupid bloody job!'

'Someone's got to get it done, don't they? Least I got a horse now.'

'Well I'm right delighted for you!' he sneered. 'You got a horse!'

The Dogman shrugged his shoulders. 'Better than walking.' 'Better than walking, eh?' scoffed Dow. 'That just binds it all up!'

'I got new breeches and all. Not to mention good woollens. The wind don't blow half so cold round my fruits no more.'

That got a chuckle from Tul, but it seemed Dow wasn't in a laughing mood. 'Wind round your fruits? By the fucking dead, boy, is this what we're come to? You forgotten who you are? You was Ninefingers' closest! You came over the mountains with him in the first place! You're in all them songs along with him! You scouted at the head of armies. A thousand men, all following your say-so!'

'That didn't turn out too happy for anyone concerned,' muttered Dogman, but Dow was already laying into Tul.

'And how about you, big man? Tul Duru Thunderhead, strongest bastard in the North. Wrestled bears and won, I heard. Held the pass all alone, while your clan got clean away. A giant, they say, ten feet tall, born under a storm, and with a belly full o' thunder. What about it, giant? The only thunder I've heard you make lately is when you take a shit!'

'What of it?' snarled Tul. 'You any different? Men used to whisper your name, scared to speak it out loud. They'd grip their weapons tight and stick close by the fire if they thought you was within ten leagues! Black Dow,

they used to say, quiet and cunning and ruthless as the wolf! He's killed more men than winter, and he's got less pity in him! Who cares a shit now, eh? Times have changed, and you rolled just as far downhill as the rest of us!'

Dow only smiled. 'That's my point, big lad, that's just my point. We used to be something, each one of us. Named Men. Known men. Feared men. I remember my brother telling me that there ain't no better man than Harding Grim with bow nor blade, no better man in all the North. Steadiest damn hand in the whole Circle of the World! How about that, eh, Grim?'

'Uh,' said Grim.

Dow nodded his head. 'Exactly what I'm saying. Now look at us. We ain't so much rolled downhill as fell off a bloody cliff! Running errands for these Southerners? These fucking women in men's trousers? These damn salad-eaters with their big words and their thin little swords?'

Dogman shifted in his saddle, uncomfortable. 'That West knows what he's about.'

'That West!' sneered Dow. 'He knows his arse from his mouth, and in that he's a damn stretch better than the rest, but he's soft as pig fat, and you know it. Got no bones in him at all! None of 'em have! I'd be shocked to my roots if the better part of 'em have ever seen a skirmish. You reckon they'd stand a charge from Bethod's Carls?' He snorted hard laughter to himself. 'Now there's a joke!'

'It can't be denied they're a piss-weak crowd,' muttered Tul, and the Dogman couldn't very well disagree. 'Half of 'em are too hungry to lift a weapon, let alone swing one with some fire, if they could even work out how. All the good ones went north to fight Bethod, leaving us here with the scrapings from the pot.'

'Scrapings from a piss-pot, I'm thinking. What about you, Threetrees?' called Dow. 'The Rock of Uffrith, eh? You were the spike up Bethod's arse for six months, a hero to every right-thinking man in the North! Rudd Threetrees! There's a man carved out of stone! There's a man who never backs down! You want honour? You want dignity? You want to know what a man should be? Look no fucking further! What do you make of all this, eh? Running errands! Checking these bogs for Bethod where we all know he ain't! Work fit for boys and we're lucky to get it, I suppose?'

Threetrees pulled up his horse and turned it slowly round. He sat in his saddle, hunched up, tired looking, and he stared at Dow for a minute. ‘Open your ears and listen for once,’ he said, ‘’cause I don’t want to be telling you this every mile we go. The world ain’t how I’d like it in all kind o’ ways. Ninefingers has gone back to the mud. Bethod’s made himself King of the Northmen. The Shanka are fixing to come swarming over the mountains. I’ve walked too far, and fought too long, and heard enough shit from you to fill a lifetime, and all at an age when I should have my feet up with sons to take care o’ me. So you can see I got bigger problems than that life hasn’t turned out the way you hoped. You can harp on the past all you please, Dow, like some old woman upset cause her tits used to stay up by themselves, or you can shut your fucking hole and help me get on with things.’

He gave each one of ’em a look in the eye, and the Dogman felt a touch shamed for doubting him. ‘As for checking for Bethod where he ain’t, well, Bethod’s never been one to turn up where he’s supposed to be. Scouting’s the task we’ve been given, and scouting’s the task I mean to get done.’ He leaned forward in his saddle. ‘So how’s this for a fucking formula? Mouth shut. Eyes open.’ And he turned and nudged his horse on through the trees.

Dow took a deep breath. ‘Fair enough, chief, fair enough. It’s just a shame is all. That’s what I’m saying. Just a shame.’

‘There’s three of ’em,’ said Dogman. ‘Northmen, for certain, but hard to tell their clan. Being as they’re down here, I’m guessing they follow Bethod.’

‘More ’n likely,’ said Tul. ‘Seems that’s the fashion these days.’

‘Just three?’ asked Threetrees. ‘No reason for Bethod to have three men on their own all the way out here. Must be more nearby.’

‘Let’s deal with the three,’ growled Dow, ‘and get to the rest later. I came here to fight.’

‘You came here ’cause I dragged you here,’ snapped Threetrees. ‘You was all for turning back an hour ago.’

‘Uh,’ said Grim.

‘We can get around ’em if we need to.’ Dogman pointed through the cold woods. ‘They’re up on the slope there, in the trees. No trouble to get around ’em.’

Threetrees looked up at the sky, pink and grey through the branches, and shook his head. ‘No. We’re losing the light, and I wouldn’t like leaving ’em behind us in the dark. Since we’re here, and since they’re here, we’d best deal with ’em. Weapons it is.’ He squatted down, talking quiet. ‘Here’s how we’ll do it. Dogman, get round and above, up on that slope there. Take the one on the left when you hear the signal. You follow me? The one on the left. And best not to miss.’

‘Aye,’ said Dogman, ‘on the left.’ Not missing more or less went without saying.

‘Dow, you slide in quiet and take the middle.’

‘The middle,’ growled Dow. ‘He’s done.’

‘That leaves one for you, Grim.’ Grim nodded without looking up, rubbing at his bow with a rag. ‘Nice and clean, boys. I don’t want to be putting one o’ you in the mud over this. Places, then.’

The Dogman found a good spot up above Bethod’s three scouts and watched from behind a tree trunk. Seemed like he’d done this a hundred times, but it never got any easier on the nerves. Probably just as well. It’s when it gets easy that a man makes mistakes.

Dogman was watching for him, so he just caught sight of Dow in the fading light, slithering up through the brush, eyes fixed ahead on his task. He was getting close now, real close. Dogman nocked an arrow and took an aim at the one on the left, breathing slow to keep his hands steady. It was then that he realised. Now he was on the other side, the one that had been on the left was on the right. So which one should he shoot?

He cursed to himself, struggling to remember what Threetrees said. Get around and take the one on the left. Worst thing of all would have been to do nothing, so he aimed up at the one on his left and hoped for the best.

He heard Threetrees call from down below, sounding like a bird out in the woods. Dow gathered himself to jump. Dogman let his arrow fly. It thudded into the back of his task just as Grim’s arrow stuck him in the front, and Dow seized hold of the middle one and stabbed him from behind. That left one of ’em untouched, and very surprised-looking.

‘Shit,’ whispered the Dogman.

‘Help!’ screamed the last of ’em, before Dow jumped on him. They rolled in the leaves, grunting and thrashing. Dow’s arm went up and down – once, twice, three times, then he stood up, glaring through the trees and looking

mighty annoyed. Dogman was just shrugging his shoulders when he heard a voice behind him.

'What?'

Dogman froze, cold all over. Another one, out in the bushes, not ten strides away. He reached for an arrow and nocked it, real quiet, then turned slowly round. He saw two of 'em, and they saw him, and his mouth went sour as old beer. They all stared. Dogman aimed at the bigger one and pulled the string right back.

'No!' he shouted. The arrow thudded into his chest and he groaned and stumbled, fell down on his knees. Dogman dropped his bow and made a snatch at his knife, but he hadn't got it drawn before the other one was on him. They went down hard in the brush, and started rolling.

Light, dark, light, dark. Over and over they went, down the slope, kicking and tearing and punching at each other. Dogman's head smacked against something and he was down on his back, wrestling with this bastard. They hissed at each other, not words exactly, sounds like dogs make fighting. The man pulled his hand free and got a blade out from somewhere and Dogman caught his wrist before he could stab it home.

He was pushing down with all his weight, both hands on the knife. Dogman was pushing the other way, both hands on his wrists, hard as he could, but not hard enough. The blade was coming down slowly, down towards Dogman's face. He was staring at it cross-eyed, a tooth of bright metal not a foot from his nose.

'Die, you fucker!' and it came down another inch. The Dogman's shoulders, his arms, his hands were burning, running out of strength. Staring at his face. Stubble on his chin, yellow teeth, pock marks on his bent nose, hair hanging down around it. The point of the blade nudged closer. Dogman was dead, and there was no help for it.

Snick.

And his head wasn't there any more. Blood washed over Dogman's face, hot and sticky and reeking. The corpse went slack and he shoved it away, blood in his eyes, blood up his nose, blood in his mouth. He staggered up, gasping and choking and spitting.

'Alright, Dogman. You're alright.' Tul. Must've come up on them while they were struggling.

‘I’m still alive,’ Dogman whispered, the way Logen used to when a fight was done. ‘Still alive.’ By the dead, though, that had been a close thing.

‘They ain’t got too much in the way of gear,’ Dow was saying, poking round the campsite. Cookpot on the fire, weapons and such like, but not much food. Not enough to be all alone out there in the woods.

‘Scouts maybe,’ said Threetrees. ‘Outriders for some bigger band?’

‘Reckon they must be,’ said Dow.

Threetrees slapped his hand down on the Dogman’s shoulder. ‘You alright?’

He was still busy trying to rub the blood off his face. ‘Aye, I think so.’ Bit shaky still, but that would settle. ‘Cuts and scrapes, I reckon. Nothing I’ll die of.’

‘Good, ’cause I can’t spare you. Why don’t you take a creep up through them trees and have a look-see, while we clear up this mess here? Find who these bastards were scouting for.’

‘Right enough,’ said the Dogman, sucking in a big breath and blowing it out. ‘Right enough.’

‘Stupid bloody job, eh, Dow?’ whispered Threetrees. ‘Work fit for boys and we’re lucky to get it? What do you say now?’

‘Could be I made a mistake.’

‘A big one,’ said the Dogman.

There were a hundred fires burning down there on the dark slopes, a hundred fires and more. There were men down there too, it hardly needed saying. Thralls mostly, lightly armed, but plenty of Carls as well. Dogman could see the last light of the day glinting on their spear tips, and their shield-rims, and their mail coats, polished up and ready for a fight, clustered round close to the flapping standards of each clan’s chieftain. Lots of standards. Twenty of ’em, or thirty even, at a quick count. The Dogman had never seen more than ten together before.

‘Biggest army there’s ever been out of the North,’ he muttered.

‘Aye,’ said Threetrees. ‘All fighting for Bethod, and not five days’ ride from the Southerners.’ He pointed down at one of the banners. ‘That Littlebone’s standard down there?’

‘Aye,’ growled Dow, and spat into the brush. ‘That’s his mark alright. I got scores with that bastard.’

‘There’s a world o’ scores down there,’ said Threetrees. ‘That’s Pale-as-Snow’s banner, and Whitesides, and Crendel Goring’s over by them rocks. That’s some bloody company. Them as went over to Bethod near the beginning. All grown fat on it now, I reckon.’

‘What about them ones?’ asked the Dogman, pointing out at some that he didn’t recognise – evil-looking signs, all leather and bones. Looked like hillmen’s marks to him, maybe. ‘That ain’t Crummock-i-Phail’s standard, is it?’

‘Nah! He’d never have kneeled to Bethod or anyone else. That mad bastard’ll still be up there in the mountains somewhere, calling to the moon and all the rest.’

‘Less Bethod done for him,’ grunted Dow.

Threetrees shook his head. ‘Doubt it. Canny bastard, that Crummock. Been holding Bethod off for years, up in the High Places. He knows all the ways, they say.’

‘Whose signs are they then?’ asked Dogman.

‘Don’t know, could be some boys from out east, past the Crinna. There’s some strange folk out that way. You know any o’ them banners, Grim?’

‘Aye,’ said Grim, but that was all he said.

‘Don’t hardly matter whose signs they are,’ muttered Dow, ‘just look at the numbers of ’em. There’s half the fucking North down there.’

‘And the worst half,’ said Dogman. He was looking at Bethod’s sign, set up in the middle of the host. A red circle daubed on black hides, an acre of ’em, it looked like, big as a field, mounted on a tall pine trunk, flapping evil in the wind. Huge great thing. ‘Wouldn’t fancy carrying it,’ he muttered.

Dow slithered over and leaned in close. ‘Might be that we could sneak in there in the dark,’ he whispered. ‘Might be we could sneak in and put a blade in Bethod.’

They all looked at each other. It was a terrible risk, but Dogman had no doubts it was worth the trying. Wasn’t a one of them hadn’t dreamed of sending Bethod back to the mud.

‘Put a blade in him, the bastard,’ muttered Tul, and he had a smile right across his face.

‘Uh,’ grunted Grim.

‘That’s a task worth doing,’ hissed Dow. ‘That’s real work!’

Dogman nodded, looking down at all them fires. ‘No doubt.’ Noble work. Work for Named Men like them, or like they used to be, maybe. There’d be some songs about that, alright. Dogman’s blood was rushing at the thought, skin prickling on his hands, but Threetrees was having none of it.

‘No. We can’t risk it. We got to go back and tell the Union. Tell ’em they got guests coming. Bad guests, and in numbers.’ He tugged at his beard, and Dogman could tell he didn’t like it, backing off. None of ’em did, but they knew he was right, even Dow. Chances were they’d never get to Bethod, and if they did they’d never get out.

‘We got to go back,’ said Dogman.

‘Fair enough,’ said Dow. ‘We go back. Shame though.’

‘Aye,’ said Threetrees. ‘Shame.’

Long Shadows

‘By the dead.’ Ferro said nothing, but for the first time since Logen met her, the scowl had slipped off. Her face was slack, mouth hanging slightly open. Luthar, on the other hand, was grinning like a fool.

‘You ever see anything like that?’ he shouted over the noise, pointing out at it with a trembling hand.

‘There is nothing else like that,’ said Bayaz.

Logen had to admit that he’d been wondering what all the fuss was about when it came to crossing a river. Some of the bigger ones in the North could be a problem, especially in the wrong season and with a lot of gear to carry. But if there was no bridge, you found a good ford, held your weapons over your head, and sloshed across. Might take a while for your boots to dry out, and you had to keep your eyes well opened for an ambush, but otherwise there was nothing much to fear from a river. Good place to fill your water-skin.

Filling your skin at the Aos would have been a dangerous business, at least without a hundred strides of rope.

Logen had once stood on the cliffs near Uffrith, and watched the waves crash against the rocks far below, the sea stretching away, grey and foaming out of sight. A dizzy, and a humbling, and a worrying place to stand. The feeling at the brink of the great river’s canyon was much the same, except that a quarter mile away or so another cliff rose up from the water. The far bank, if you could use the word about a towering rock face.

He shuffled up gingerly to the very edge, prodding at the soft ground with the toes of his boots, and peered over the brink. Not a good idea. The red earth overhung slightly, bound up with white grass roots, and then the jagged rocks dropped away, almost sheer. Where the frothing water slapped against them, far below, it sent great plumes of bright spray into the air, clouds of damp mist that Logen could almost feel on his face. Tufts of long grass clung to the cracks and the ledges, and birds flitted between them, hundreds of small white birds. Logen could just make out their twittering calls over the mighty rumble of the river.

He thought on being dropped into that thundering weight of dark water – sucked, and whirled, and ripped around like a leaf in the storm. He swallowed, and shuffled cautiously back from the edge, looking around for something to cling on to. He felt tiny, and weightless, as if a strong gust of wind might snatch him away. He could almost feel the water moving through his boots, the surging, rolling, unstoppable power of it, making the very earth tremble.

'So you can see why a bridge might be such a good idea!' shouted Bayaz in his ear.

'How can you even build a bridge across that?'

'At Aostum the river splits in three, and the canyon is much less deep. The Emperor's architects built islands, and made their bridges of many small arches. Even so, it took them twelve years to build. The bridge at Darmium is the work of Kanedias himself, a gift to his brother Juvens when they were yet on good terms. It crosses the river in a single span. How he did it, none now can say.' Bayaz turned for the horses. 'Get the others, we should keep moving!'

Ferro was already walking back from the brink. 'So much rain.' She looked over her shoulder, frowned and shook her head.

'Don't get rivers like that where you come from, eh?'

'Out in the Badlands, water is the most precious thing you can have. Men kill over a bottle of it.'

'That's where you were born? The Badlands?' A strange name for a place, but it sounded about right for her.

'There are no births in the Badlands, pink. Only deaths.'

'Harsh land, eh? Where were you born, then?'

She scowled. 'What do you care?'

'Just trying to be friendly.'

'Friends!' she sneered, brushing past him towards the horses.

'Why? You got so many out here you couldn't use another?'

She stopped, half turned, and looked at him through narrowed eyes. 'My friends don't last, pink.'

'Nor do mine, but I reckon I'll take the risk if you will.'

'Alright,' she said, but there was nothing friendly in her face. 'The Gurkish conquered my home when I was a child, and they took me for a slave. They took all the children.'

‘A slave?’

‘Yes, fool, a slave! Bought and sold like meat by the butcher! Owned by someone else, and they do as they please with you, like they would with a goat, or a dog, or the dirt in their gardens! That what you want to know, friend?’

Logen frowned. ‘We don’t have that custom in the North.’

‘Ssss,’ she hissed, lip curling with scorn. ‘Good for fucking you!’

The ruin loomed over them. A forest of shattered pillars, a maze of broken walls, the ground around it strewn with fallen blocks as long as a man was tall. Crumbling windows and empty doorways yawned like wounds. A ragged black outline, chopped out from the flying clouds like a giant row of broken teeth.

‘What city was this?’ asked Luthar.

‘No city,’ said Bayaz. ‘At the height of the Old Time, at the greatest extent of the Emperor’s power, this was his winter palace.’

‘All this?’ Logen squinted at the sprawling wreck. ‘One man’s house?’

‘And not even the whole year round. Most of the time, the court would stay in Aulcus. In winter, when the cold snows swept down off the mountains, the Emperor would bring his retinue here. An army of guardsmen, of servants, of cooks, of officials, of princes, and children, and wives, making their way across the plain ahead of the cold winds, taking up residence here for three short months in the echoing halls, the beautiful gardens, the gilded chambers.’ Bayaz shook his bald head. ‘In times long past, before the war, this place glittered like the sea beneath the rising sun.’

Luthar sniffed. ‘So Glustrod tore it down, I suppose?’

‘No. It was not in that war, but another that it fell, many years later. A war fought by my order, after the death of Juvens, against his eldest brother.’

‘Kanedias,’ muttered Quai, ‘the Master Maker.’

‘A war just as bitter, just as brutal, just as merciless as the one before. And even more was lost. Juvens and Kanedias both, in the end.’

‘Not a happy family,’ muttered Logen.

‘No.’ Bayaz frowned up at the mighty wreckage. ‘With the death of the Maker, the last of the four sons of Euz, the Old Time ended. We are left only with the ruins, and the tombs, and the myths. Little men, kneeling in the long shadows of the past.’

Ferro stood up in her stirrups. ‘There are riders,’ she barked, staring off at the horizon. ‘Forty or more.’

‘Where?’ snapped Bayaz, shading his eyes. ‘I don’t see anything. ’ Nor could Logen. Only the waving grass and the towering clouds.

Longfoot frowned. ‘I see no riders, and I am blessed with perfect vision. Why, I have often been told that—’

‘You want to wait until you see them,’ hissed Ferro, ‘or get off the road before they see us?’

‘We’ll head into the ruins,’ snapped Bayaz over his shoulder. ‘And wait for them to pass. Malacus! Turn the cart!’

The wreck of the winter palace was full of shadows, and stillness, and decay. The outsize ruins towered around them, all covered with old ivy and wet moss, streaked and crusted with the droppings of bird and bat. The animals had made the place their palace now. Birds sang from a thousand nests, high in the ancient masonry. Spiders had spun great glistening webs in leaning doorways, heavy with sparkling beads of dew. Tiny lizards sunned themselves in patches of light on the fallen blocks, swarming away as they came near. The rattling of the cart over the broken ground, the footfalls and the hoof beats echoed back from the slimy stones. Everywhere, water dripped, and ran, and plopped in hidden pools.

‘Take this, pink.’ Ferro slapped her sword into Logen’s hands.

‘Where are you going?’

‘You wait down here, and stay out of sight.’ She jerked her head upwards. ‘I’ll watch them from up there.’

As a boy, Logen had never been out of the trees round the village. As a young man he’d spent days in the High Places, testing himself against the mountains. At Heonan in the winter, the hillmen had held the high pass. Even Bethod had thought that there was no way round, but Logen had found a way up the frozen cliff and settled that score. He could see no way up here, though. Not without an hour or two to spare. Cliffs of leaning blocks heavy with dead creeper, crags of tottering stonework slick with moss, seeming to lean and tip as the clouds moved fast above.

‘How the hell you planning to get up . . .’

She was already halfway up one of the pillars. She didn’t so much climb as swarm like an insect, hand over hand. She paused at the top for a moment, found a footing she liked, then sprang through the air, right over

Logen's head, landed on the wall behind and scrambled up onto it, sending a shower of broken mortar down into his face. She squatted on the top and frowned down at him. 'Just try not to make too much noise!' she hissed, then was gone.

'Did you see . . .' muttered Logen, but the others had already moved further into the damp shadows, and he hurried after them, not wanting to be left alone in this overgrown graveyard. Quai had pulled his cart up further on, and was leaning against it beside the restless horses. The First of the Magi was kneeling near him in the weeds, rubbing at the lichen-crusted wall with his palms.

'Look at this,' snapped Bayaz as Logen tried to edge past. 'These carvings here. Masterpieces of the ancient world! Stories, and lessons, and warnings from history.' His thick fingers brushed gently at the scarred stone. 'We might be the first men to look upon these in centuries!'

'Mmm,' muttered Logen, puffing out his cheeks.

'Look here!' Bayaz gestured at the wall. 'Euz gives his gifts to his three oldest sons, while Glustrod looks on from the shadows. The birth of the three pure disciplines of magic. Some craftsmanship, eh?'

'Right.'

'And here,' grunted Bayaz, knocking some weeds away and shuffling along to the next mossy panel, 'Glustrod plans to destroy his brother's work.' He had to tear at a tangle of dead ivy to get at the one beyond. 'He breaks the First Law. He hears voices from the world below, you see? He summons devils and sends them against his enemies. And in this one,' he muttered, tugging at the weight of brown creeper, 'let me see now . . .'

'Glustrod digs,' muttered Quai. 'Who knows? In the next one he might even have found what he's looking for.'

'Hmm,' grumbled the First of the Magi, letting the ivy fall back across the wall. He glowered at his apprentice as he stood up, frowning. 'Perhaps, sometimes, the past is better left covered.'

Logen cleared his throat and edged away, ducked quickly under a leaning archway. The wide space beyond was filled with small, knotty trees, planted in rows, but long overgrown. Great weeds and nettles, brown and sagging rotten from the rain, stood almost waist high around the mossy walls.

'Perhaps I should not say it myself,' came Longfoot's cheerful voice, 'but it must be said! My talent for navigation stands alone! It rises above the

skills of every other Navigator as the mountain rises over the deep valley!' Logen winced, but it was Bayaz' anger or Longfoot's bragging, and that was no choice at all.

'I have led us across the great plain to the river Aos, without a deviation of even a mile!' The Navigator beamed at Logen and Luthar, as though expecting an avalanche of praise. 'And without a single dangerous encounter, in a land reckoned among the most dangerous under the sun!' He frowned. 'Perhaps a quarter of our epic journey is now safely behind us. I am not sure that you appreciate the difficulty involved. Across the featureless plain, as autumn turns to winter, and without even the stars to reckon by!' He shook his head. 'Huh. Truly, the pinnacle of achievement is a lonely place.'

He turned away and wandered over to one of the trees. 'The lodgings are a little past their best, but at least the fruit trees are still in working order.' Longfoot plucked a green apple from a low hanging branch and began to shine it on his sleeve. 'Nothing like a fine apple, and from the Emperor's orchard, no less.' He grinned to himself. 'Strange, eh? How the plants outlast the greatest works of men.'

Luthar sat down on a fallen statue nearby, slid the longer of his two swords from its sheath and laid it across his knees. Steel glinted mirror-bright as he turned it over in his lap, frowned at it, licked a finger and scrubbed at some invisible blemish. He pulled out his whetstone, spat on it, and carefully set to work on the long, thin blade. The metal rang gently as the stone moved back and forward. It was soothing, somehow, that sound, that ritual, familiar from a thousand campfires of Logen's past.

'Must you?' asked Brother Longfoot. 'Sharpening, polishing, sharpening, polishing, morning and night, it makes my head hurt. It's not as if you've even made any use of them yet. Probably find when you need them that you've sharpened them away to nothing, eh?' He chuckled at his own joke. 'Where will you be then?'

Luthar didn't even bother to look up. 'Why don't you keep your mind on getting us across this damn plain, and leave the swords to those who know the difference?' Logen grinned to himself. An argument between the two most arrogant men he had ever met was well worth watching, in his opinion.

‘Huh,’ snorted Longfoot, ‘show me someone who knows the difference and I’ll happily never mention blades again.’ He lifted the apple to his mouth, but before he could bite into it, his hand was empty. Luthar had moved almost too fast to follow, and speared it on the glinting point of his sword. ‘Give me that back!’

Luthar stood up. ‘Of course,’ he tossed it off the end of the blade with a practised flick of his wrist. Before Longfoot’s reaching hands could close around it, Luthar had snatched his short sword from its sheath and whipped it blurring through the air. The Navigator was left juggling with the two even halves for a moment before dropping them both in the dirt.

‘Damn your showing off!’ he snapped.

‘We can’t all have your modesty,’ muttered Luthar. Logen chuckled to himself while Longfoot stomped back over to the tree, staring up into the branches for another apple.

‘Nice trick,’ he grunted, strolling through the weeds to where Luthar was sitting. ‘You’re quick with those needles.’

The young man gave a modest shrug. ‘It has been remarked upon.’

‘Mmm.’ Stabbing an apple and stabbing a man were two different things, but quickness was some kind of start. Logen looked down at Ferro’s sword, turned it over in his hands, then slid it out from its wooden sheath. It was a strange weapon to his mind, grip and blade both gently curved, thicker at the end than at the hilt, sharpened only down one edge, with scarcely any point on it at all. He swung it in the air a couple of times. Strange weight, more like an axe than a sword.

‘Odd-looking thing,’ muttered Luthar.

Logen checked the edge with his thumb. Rough-feeling, it dragged at the skin. ‘Sharp, though.’

‘Don’t you ever sharpen yours?’

Logen frowned. He reckoned he must have spent weeks of his life, all told, sharpening the weapons he’d carried. Every night, out on the trail, after the meal, men would sit and work at their gear, steel scraping on metal and stone, flashing in the light of the campfires. Sharpening, cleaning, polishing, tightening. His hair might have been caked with mud, his skin stiff with old sweat, his clothes riddled with lice, but his weapons had always gleamed like the new moon.

He took hold of the cold grip and pulled the sword that Bayaz had given him out of its stained scabbard. It looked a slow and ugly thing compared to Luthar's swords, and to Ferro's too, if it came to that. There was hardly any shine on the heavy grey blade at all. He turned it over in his hand. The single silver letter glinted near the hilt. The mark of Kanedias.

'Don't know why, but it doesn't need sharpening. I tried it to begin with, but all it did was wear down the stone.' Longfoot had hauled himself up into one of the trees, and was slithering along a thick branch towards an apple hanging out of reach near its end.

'If you ask me,' grunted the Navigator, 'the weapons suit their owners to the ground. Captain Luthar – flash and fine-looking but never used in combat. The woman Maljinn – sharp and vicious and worrying to look upon. The Northman Ninefingers – heavy, solid, slow and simple. Hah!' he chuckled, dragging himself slightly further down the limb. 'A most fitting metaphor! Juggling with words has always been but one among my many remarkable—'

Logen grunted as he swung the sword over his head. It bit through the branch where it met the trunk, clean through, almost to the other side. More than far enough that Longfoot's weight ripped through the rest, and brought the whole limb, Navigator and all, crashing down into the weeds below. 'Slow and simple enough for you?'

Luthar spluttered with laughter as he sharpened his short sword, and Logen laughed as well. Laughing with a man was a good step forward. First comes the laughter, then the respect, then the trust.

'God's breath!' shouted Longfoot, scrabbling his way out from under the branch. 'Can a man not eat without disturbance?'

'Sharp enough,' chuckled Luthar. 'No doubt.'

Logen hefted the sword in his hand. 'Yes, this Kanedias knew how to make a weapon, alright.'

'Making weapons is what Kanedias did.' Bayaz had stepped through the crumbling archway and into the overgrown orchard. 'He was the Master Maker, after all. The one that you hold is among the very least of what he made, forged to be used in a war against his brothers.'

'Brothers,' snorted Luthar. 'I know exactly how he felt. There's always something. Usually a woman, in my experience.' He gave his short sword

one last stroke with the whetstone. ‘And where women are concerned, I always come out on top.’

‘Is that so?’ Bayaz snorted. ‘As it happens, a woman did enter the case, but not in the way you’re thinking.’

Luthar gave a sickening grin. ‘What other way is there to think about women? If you ask me – gah!’ A large clod of bird shit splattered against the shoulder of his coat, throwing specks of black and grey all over his hair, his face, his newly cleaned swords. ‘What the . . . ?’ He scrambled from his seat and stared up at the wall above him. Ferro was squatting on top, wiping her hand on a spray of ivy. It was hard to tell with the bright sky behind, but Logen wondered if she might not have the trace of a smile on her face.

Luthar certainly wasn’t smiling. ‘You fucking mad bitch!’ he screamed, scraping the white goo from his coat and flinging it at the wall. ‘Bunch of bloody savages!’ And he shoved angrily past and through the fallen arch. Laughter was one thing, it seemed, but the respect might be a while coming.

‘In case any of you pinks are interested,’ called Ferro, ‘the riders are gone.’

‘Which way?’ asked Bayaz.

‘Away east, the way we came, riding hard.’

‘Looking for us?’

‘Who knows? They didn’t have signs. But if they are looking, more than likely they will find our trail.’

The Magus frowned. ‘Then you’d best get down from there. We need to move.’ He thought about it for a moment. ‘And try not to throw any more shit!’

And Next . . . My Gold

To Sand dan Glokta,
Superior of Dagoska, and for his eyes alone.
I am most troubled to discover that you think yourself short of both men and money.
As far as soldiers are concerned, you must make do with what you have, or what you can procure. As you are already well aware, the great majority of our strength is committed in Angland. Unfortunately, a certain rebellious temper among the peasantry throughout Midderland is more than occupying what remains.
As to the question of funds, I fear that nothing can be spared. You will not ask again. I advise you to squeeze what you can from the Spicers, from the natives, from anyone else who is to hand. Borrow and make do, Glokta. Demonstrate that resourcefulness that made you so famous in the Kantic War.
I trust that you will not disappoint me.
Sult
Arch Lector of his Majesty's Inquisition.
'Matters proceed with the greatest speed, Superior, if I may say so. Since the gates to the Upper City were M opened the work-rate of the natives has tripled! The ditch is down below sea level across the entire peninsula, and deepening every day! Only narrow dams hold back the brine at either end, and at your order the entire business is ready to be flooded!' Vissbruck sat back with a happy smile on his plump face. *Quite as if the whole thing had been his idea.*

Below them in the Upper City, the morning chanting was beginning. A strange wailing that drifted from the spires of the Great Temple, out over Dagoska and into every building, even here, in the audience chamber of the Citadel. *Kahdia calls his people to prayer.*

Vurms' lip curled at the sound. 'That time again already? Damn those natives and their bloody superstitions! We should never have let them back into their temple! Damn their bloody chanting, it gives me a headache!'

And it's worth it for that alone. Glokta grinned. 'If it makes Kahdia happy, your headache is something I can live with. Like it or not, we need the natives, and the natives like to chant. Get used to it, is my advice. That or wrap a blanket round your head.'

Vissbruck sat back in his chair and listened while Vurms sulked. 'I have to admit that I find the sound rather soothing, and we cannot deny the effect the Superior's concessions have had on the natives. With their help the land walls are repaired, the gates are replaced, and the scaffolds are already being dismantled. Stone has been acquired for new parapets but, ah, and here is the problem, the masons refuse to work another day without money. My soldiers are on quarter pay, and morale is low. Debt is the problem, Superior.'

'I'll say it is,' muttered Vurms angrily. 'The granaries are close to capacity, and two new wells have been dug in the Lower City, at great expense, but my credit is utterly exhausted. The grain merchants are after my blood!' *A damn sight less keenly than every merchant in the city is after mine, I daresay.* 'I can scarcely show my face any longer for their clamouring. My reputation is in jeopardy, Superior!'

As if I had no larger concerns than the reputation of this dolt. 'How much do we owe?'

Vurms frowned. 'For food, water, and general equipment, no less than a hundred thousand.' *A hundred thousand? The Spicers love making money, but they hate spending it more. Eider will not come up with half so much, if she even chooses to try.*

'What about you, General?'

'The cost of hiring mercenaries, excavating the ditch, of the repairs to the walls, of extra weapons, armour, ammunition . . .' Vissbruck puffed out his cheeks. 'In all, it comes to nearly four hundred thousand marks.'

It was the most Glokta could do to keep from choking on his own tongue. *Half a million? A king's ransom and more besides. I doubt that Sult could provide so much, even if he had the mind, and he does not. Men die all the time over debts a fraction of the size.* 'Work however you can. Promise whatever you want. The money is on its way, I assure you.'

The General was already collecting his notes. 'I am doing all I can, but people are beginning to doubt that they will ever be paid.'

Vurms was more direct. ‘No one trusts us any longer. Without money, we can do nothing.’

‘Nothing,’ growled Severard. Frost slowly shook his head.

Glokta rubbed at his sore eyes. ‘A Superior of the Inquisition vanishes without leaving so much as a smear behind. He retires to his chambers at night, the door is locked. In the morning he does not answer. They break down the door and find . . .’ *Nothing.* ‘The bed has been slept in, but there is no body. Not the slightest sign of a struggle even.’

‘Nothing,’ muttered Severard.

‘What do we know? Davoust suspected a conspiracy within the city, a traitor intending to deliver Dagoska to the Gurkish. He believed a member of the ruling council was involved. It would seem likely that he uncovered the identity of this person, and was somehow silenced.’

‘But who?’

We must turn the question on its head. ‘If we cannot find our traitor, we must make them come to us. If they work to get the Gurkish in, we need only succeed in keeping them out. Sooner or later, they will show themselves.’

‘Rithky,’ mumbled Frost. *Risky indeed, especially for Dagoska’s latest Superior of the Inquisition, but we have no choices.*

‘So we wait?’ asked Severard.

‘We wait, and we look to our defences. That and we try to find some money. Do you have any cash, Severard?’

‘I did have some. I gave it to a girl, down in the slums.’

‘Ah. Shame.’

‘Not really, she fucks like a madman. I’d thoroughly recommend her, if you’re interested.’

Glokta winced as his knee clicked. ‘What a thoroughly heart-warming tale, Severard, I never had you down for a romantic. I’d sing a ballad if I wasn’t so short of funds.’

‘I could ask around. How much are we talking about?’

‘Oh, not much. Say, half a million marks?’

One of the Practical’s eyebrows went up sharply. He reached into his pocket, dug around for a moment, pulled his hand out and opened it. A few copper coins shone in his palm.

‘Twelve bits,’ he said. ‘Twelve bits is all I can raise.’

‘Twelve thousand is all I can raise,’ said Magister Eider. *Scarcely a drop in the bucket.* ‘My Guild are nervous, business has not been good, the great majority of their assets are bound up in ventures of one kind or another. I have little cash to hand either.’

I daresay you have a good deal more than twelve thousand, but what’s the difference? I doubt even you have half a million tucked away. There probably isn’t that amount in the whole city. ‘One would almost think they didn’t like me.’

She snorted. ‘Turning them out of the temple? Arming the natives? Then demanding money? It might be fair to say you’re not their favourite person.’

‘Might it be fair to say they’re after my blood?’ *And plenty of it, I shouldn’t wonder.*

‘It might, but for the time being, at least, I think I’ve managed to convince them that you’re a good thing for the city.’ She looked levelly at him for a moment. ‘You are a good thing, aren’t you?’

‘If keeping the Gurkish out is your priority.’ *That is our priority, isn’t it?* ‘More money wouldn’t hurt, though.’

‘More money never hurts, but that’s the trouble with merchants. They much prefer making it to spending it, even when it’s in their own best interests.’ She gave a heavy sigh, rapped her fingernails on the table, looked down at her hand. She seemed to consider a moment, then she began to pull the rings from her fingers. When she had finally got them all off, she tossed them into the box along with the coins.

Glokta frowned. ‘A winning gesture, Magister, but I could not possibly—’

‘I insist,’ she said, unclasping her heavy necklace and dropping it into the box. ‘I can always get more, once you’ve saved the city. In any case, they’ll do me no good when the Gurkish rip them from my corpse, will they?’ She slipped her heavy bracelets off her wrists, yellow gold, studded with green gemstones. They rattled down amongst the rest. ‘Take the jewels, before I change my mind. A man lost in the desert should take such water—’

‘As he is offered, regardless of the source. Kahdia told me the very same thing.’

‘Kahdia is a clever man.’

‘He is. I thank you for your generosity, Magister.’ Glokta snapped the lid of the box shut.

‘The least I could do.’ She got up from her chair and walked to the door, her sandals hissing across the carpet. ‘I will speak with you soon.’

‘He says he must speak with you now.’

‘What was his name, Shickel?’

‘Mauthis. A banker.’

One more creditor, come clamouring for his money. Sooner or later I’ll have to just arrest the pack of them. That will be the end of my little spending spree, but it will almost be worth it to see the looks on their faces. Glokta gave a hopeless shrug. ‘Send him in.’

He was a tall man in his fifties, almost ill-looking in his gauntness, hollow-cheeked and sunken-eyed. There was a stern precision to his movements, a steady coldness to his gaze. *As though he is weighing the value of all he looks at in silver marks, including me.*

‘My name is Mauthis.’

‘I was informed, but I am afraid that there are no funds available at the present moment.’ Unless you count Severard’s twelve bits. ‘Whatever debt the city has with your bank will have to wait. It will not be for much longer, I assure you.’ *Just until the sea dries up, the sky falls in, and devils roam the earth.*

Mauthis gave a smile. *If you could call it that. A neat, precise, and utterly joyless curving of the mouth.* ‘You misunderstand me, Superior Glokta. I have not come to collect a debt. For seven years, I have had the privilege of acting as the chief representative in Dagoska, of the banking house of Valint and Balk.’

Glokta paused, then tried to sound off-hand. ‘Valint and Balk, you say? Your bank financed the Guild of Mercers, I believe.’

‘We had some dealings with that guild, before their unfortunate fall from grace.’ *I’ll say you did. You owned them, from the ground up.* ‘But then we have dealings with many guilds, and companies, and other banks, and individuals, great and small. Today I have dealings with you.’

‘Dealings of what nature?’

Mauthis turned to the door and snapped his fingers. Two burly natives entered, grunting, sweating, struggling under the weight of a great casket: a

box of polished black wood, bound with bands of bright steel, sealed with a heavy lock. They set it down carefully on the fine carpet, wiped sweat from their foreheads, and tramped out the way they came while Glokta frowned after them. *What is this?* Mauthis pulled a key from his pocket and turned it in the lock. He reached forward and lifted the lid of the chest. He moved out of the way, carefully and precisely, so Glokta could see the contents.

'One hundred and fifty thousand marks in silver.'

Glokta blinked. *And so it is.* The coins flashed and glittered in the evening light. Flat, round, silver, five mark pieces. Not a jingling heap, not some barbarian's horde. Neat, even stacks, held in place by wooden dowels. *As neat and even as Mauthis himself.*

The two porters were gasping their way back into the room, carrying between them a second box, slightly smaller than the first. They placed it on the floor and strode out, not so much as glancing at the fortune glittering in plain view beside them.

Mauthis unlocked the second chest with the same key, raised the lid, and stood aside. 'Three hundred and fifty thousand marks in gold.'

Glokta knew his mouth was open, but he could not close it. Bright, clean, gold, glowing yellow. All that wealth seemed almost to give off warmth, like a bonfire. It tugged at him, dragged at him, pulled him forward. He took a hesitant step, in fact, before he stopped himself. Great big, golden, fifty mark pieces. Neat, even stacks, just as before. *Most men would never in their lives see such coins. Few men indeed can ever have seen so many.*

Mauthis reached into his coat and pulled out a flat leather case. He placed it carefully on the table and unfolded it: once, twice, three times.

'One half of one million marks in polished stones.'

There they lay on the soft black leather, on the hard brown table top, burning with all the colours under the sun. Two large handfuls, perhaps, of multi-coloured, glittering gravel. Glokta stared down at them, numb, and sucked at his gums. *Magister Eider's jewels seem suddenly rather quaint.*

'In total, I have been ordered by my superiors to advance to you, Sand dan Glokta, Superior of Dagoska, the sum of precisely one million marks.' He unrolled a heavy paper. 'You will sign here.'

Glokta stared from one chest to another and back. His left eye gave a flurry of twitches. 'Why?'

'To certify that you received the money.'

Glokta almost laughed. ‘Not that! Why the money?’ He flailed one hand at it all. ‘Why all this?’

‘It would appear that my employers share your concern that Dagoska should not fall to the Gurkish. More than that I cannot tell you.’

‘Cannot, or will not?’

‘Cannot. Will not.’

Glokta frowned at the jewels, at the silver, at the gold. His leg was throbbing, dully. *All that I wanted, and far more. But banks do not become banks by giving money away.* ‘If this is a loan, what is the interest?’

Mauthis flashed his icy smile again. ‘My employers would prefer to call it a contribution to the defence of the city. There is one condition, however.’

‘Which is?’

‘It may be that in the future, a representative of the banking house of Valint and Balk will come to you requesting . . . favours. It is the most earnest hope of my employers that, if and when that time comes, you will not disappoint them.’

One million marks worth of favours. And I place myself in the power of a most suspect organisation. An organisation whose motives I do not begin to understand. An organisation that, until recently, I was on the point of investigating for high treason. But what are my options? Without money, the city is lost, and I am finished. I needed a miracle, and here it is, sparkling before me. A man lost in the desert must take such water as is offered . . .

Mauthis slid the document across the table. Several blocks of neat writing, and a space, for a name. For my name. Not at all unlike a paper of confession. *And prisoners always sign their confessions. They are only offered when there is no choice.*

Glokta reached for the pen, dipped it in the ink, wrote his name in the space provided.

‘That concludes our business.’ Mauthis rolled up the document, smoothly and precisely. He slipped it carefully into his coat. ‘My colleagues and I are leaving Dagoska this evening.’ *A great deal of money to contribute to the cause, but precious little confidence in it.* ‘Valint and Balk are closing their offices here, but perhaps we will meet in Adua, once this unfortunate situation with the Gurkish is resolved.’ The man gave his mechanical smile one more time. ‘Don’t spend it all at once.’ And he turned on his heel and strode out, leaving Glokta alone with his monumental windfall.

He shuffled over to it, breathing hard, and stared down. There was something obscene about all that money. Something disgusting. Something frightening, almost. He snapped shut the lids of the two chests. He locked them with trembling hands. He shoved the key in his inside pocket. He stroked the metal bindings of the two boxes with his fingertips. His palms were greasy with sweat. *I am rich.*

He picked up a clear, cut stone the size of an acorn, and held it up to the window between finger and thumb. The dim light shone back at him through the many facets, a thousand brilliant sparks of fire – blue, green, red, white. Glokta did not know much about gemstones, but he was reasonably sure that this one was a diamond. *I am very, very rich.*

He looked back at the rest, sparkling on the flat piece of leather. Some of them were small, but many were not. Several were larger than the one he held in his hand. *I am immensely, fabulously wealthy. Imagine what one could do with so much money. Imagine what one could control . . . perhaps, with this much, I can save the city. More walls, more supplies, more equipment, more mercenaries. The Gurkish, thrown back from Dagoska in disarray. The Emperor of Gurkhul, humbled. Who would have thought it? Sand dan Glokta, once more the hero.*

He rolled the shining little pebbles around with a finger-tip, lost in thought. *But so much spending in so little time could raise questions. My faithful servant Practical Vitari would be curious, and she would make my noble master the Arch Lector curious. One day I beg for money, the next I spend it as if it burns? I was forced to borrow, your Eminence. Indeed? How much? No more than a million marks. Indeed? And who would lend such a sum? Why, our old friends at the banking house of Valint and Balk, your Eminence, in return for unspecified favours, which they might call in at any moment. Of course, my loyalty is still beyond question. You understand, don't you? I mean to say, it's only a fortune in jewels. Body found floating by the docks . . .*

He pushed his hand absently through the cold, hard, glittering stones, and they tickled pleasantly at the skin between his fingers. *Pleasant, but perilous. We must still tread carefully. More carefully than ever . . .*

Fear

It was a long way to the edge of the World, of that there could be no doubt. A long, and a lonely, and a nervous way. The sight of the corpses on the plain had worried everyone. The passing riders had made matters worse. The discomforts of the journey had in no way diminished. Jezal was still constantly hungry, usually too cold, often wet through, and would probably be saddle-sore for the rest of his days. Every night he stretched out on the hard and lumpy ground, dozed and dreamed of home, only to wake to the pale morning more tired and aching than when he lay down. His skin crawled, and chafed, and stung with the unfamiliar feeling of dirt, and he was forced to admit that he had begun to smell almost as vile as the others. It was enough, altogether, to make a civilised man run mad, and now, to add to all of this, there was the constant nagging of danger.

From that point of view, the terrain was not on Jezal's side. Hoping to shake off any pursuers, Bayaz had ordered them away from the river a few days earlier. The ancient road wound now through deep scars in the plain, through rocky gullies, through shadowy gorges, alongside chattering streams in deep valleys.

Jezal began to think on the endless, grinding flatness almost with nostalgia. At least out there one did not look at every rock, and shrub, and fold in the ground and wonder whether there was a crowd of bloodthirsty enemies behind it. He had chewed his fingernails almost until the blood ran. Every sound made him bite his tongue and spin around in his saddle, clutching at his steels, staring for a murderer, who turned out to be a bird in a bush. It was not fear, of course, for Jezal dan Luthar, he told himself, would laugh in the face of danger. An ambush, or a battle, or a breathless pursuit across the plain – these things, he imagined, he could have taken in his stride. But this endless waiting, this mindless tension, this merciless rubbing-by of slow minutes was almost more than he could stand.

It might have helped had there been someone with whom he could share his unease, but, as far as companionship went, little had changed. The cart still rolled along the cracked old road while Quai sat grim and silent on top. Bayaz said nothing but for the occasional lecture on the qualities of great

leadership, qualities which seemed markedly absent in himself. Longfoot was off scouting out the route, only appearing every day or two to let them know how skilfully he was doing it. Ferro frowned at everything as though it was her personal enemy, and at Jezal most of all, it sometimes seemed, her hands never far from her weapons. She spoke rarely, and then only to Ninefingers, to snarl about ambushes, or covering their tracks better, or the possibilities of being followed.

The Northman himself was something of a puzzle. When Jezal had first laid eyes on him, gawping at the gate of the Agriont, he had seemed less than an animal. Out here in the wild, though, the rules were different. One could not simply walk away from a man one disliked, then do one's best to avoid him, belittle him in company, and insult him behind his back. Out here you were stuck with the companions you had, and, being stuck with him, Jezal had come slowly to realise that Ninefingers was just a man, after all. A stupid, and a thuggish, and a hideously ugly one, no doubt. As far as wit and culture went, he was a cut below the lowliest peasant in the fields of the Union, but Jezal had to admit that out of all the group, the Northman was the one he had come to hate least. He had not the pomposity of Bayaz, the watchfulness of Quai, the boastfulness of Longfoot, or the simple viciousness of Ferro. Jezal would not have been ashamed to ask a farmer his opinion on the raising of crops, or a smith his opinion on the making of armour, however dirty, ugly or low-born they might have been. Why not consult a hardened killer on the subject of violence?

'I understand that you have led men in battle,' Jezal tried as his opening.

The Northman turned his dark, slow eyes on him. 'More than once.'

'And fought in duels.'

'Aye.' He scratched at the ragged scars on his stubbly cheek. 'I didn't come to look like this from a wobbly hand at shaving.'

'If your hand was that wobbly, you would choose, perhaps, to grow a beard.'

Ninefingers chuckled. Jezal was almost used to the sight now. It was still hideous, of course, but smacked more of good-natured ape than crazed murderer. 'I might at that,' he said.

Jezal thought about it a moment. He did not wish to make himself appear weak, but honesty might earn the trust of a simple man. If it worked with

dogs, why not with Northmen? ‘I myself,’ he ventured, ‘have never fought in a full-blooded battle.’

‘You don’t say?’

‘No, truly. My friends are in Angland now, fighting against Bethod and his savages.’ Ninefingers’ eyes swivelled sideways. ‘I mean . . . that is to say . . . fighting against Bethod. I would be with them myself, had not Bayaz asked me to come on this . . . venture.’

‘Their loss is our gain.’

Jezal looked sharply across. From a subtler source, that might almost have sounded like sarcasm. ‘Bethod started this war, of course. A most dishonourable act of unprovoked aggression on his part.’

‘You’ll get no argument from me on that score. Bethod’s got a gift when it comes to starting wars. The only thing he’s better at is the finishing of ’em.’

Jezal laughed. ‘You can’t mean that you think he’ll beat the Union?’

‘He’s beaten worse odds, but you know best. We don’t all have your experience.’

The laughter stuttered out in Jezal’s throat. He was almost sure that had been irony, and it made him think for a moment. Was Ninefingers looking at him now, and behind that scarred, that plodding, that battered mask thinking, ‘what a fool’? Could it be that Bayaz had been right? That there was something to be learned from this Northman after all? There was only one way to find out.

‘What’s a battle like?’ he asked.

‘Battles are like men. No two are ever quite the same.’

‘How do you mean?’

‘Imagine waking up at night to hear a crashing and a shouting, scrambling out of your tent into the snow with your trousers falling down, to see men all around you killing one another. Nothing but moonlight to see by, no clue who’re enemies and who’re friends, no weapon to fight with.’

‘Confusing,’ said Jezal.

‘No doubt. Or imagine crawling in the mud, between the stomping boots, trying to get away but not knowing where to go, with an arrow in your back and a sword cut across your arse, squealing like a pig and waiting for a spear to stick you through, a spear you won’t even see coming.’

‘Painful,’ agreed Jezal.

‘Very. Or imagine standing in a circle of shields no more than ten strides across, all held by men roaring their loudest. There’s just you and one other man in there, and that man’s won a reputation for being the hardest bastard in the North, and only one of you can leave alive.’

‘Hmm,’ murmured Jezal.

‘That’s right. You like the sound of any of those?’ Jezal did not, and Ninefingers smiled. ‘I didn’t think so, and honestly? Nor do I. I’ve been in all kind of battles, and skirmishes, and fights. Most of them started in chaos, and all of ’em ended in it, and not once did I not come near to shitting myself at some point.’

‘You?’

The Northman chuckled. ‘Fearlessness is a fool’s boast, to my mind. The only men with no fear in them are the dead, or the soon to be dead, maybe. Fear teaches you caution, and respect for your enemy, and to avoid sharp edges used in anger. All good things in their place, believe me. Fear can bring you out alive, and that’s the very best anyone can hope for from any fight. Every man who’s worth a damn feels fear. It’s the use you make of it that counts.’

‘Be scared? That’s your advice?’

‘My advice would be to find a good woman and steer well clear of the whole bloody business, and it’s a shame no one told me the same twenty years ago.’ He looked sideways at Jezal. ‘But if, say, you’re stuck out on some great wide plain in the middle of nowhere and can’t avoid it, there’s three rules I’d take to a fight. First, always do your best to look the coward, the weakling, the fool. Silence is a warrior’s best armour, the saying goes. Hard looks and hard words have never won a battle yet, but they’ve lost a few.’

‘Look the fool, eh? I see.’ Jezal had built his whole life around trying to appear the cleverest, the strongest, the most noble. It was an intriguing idea, that a man might choose to look like less than he was.

‘Second, never take an enemy lightly, however much the dullard he seems. Treat every man like he’s twice as clever, twice as strong, twice as fast as you are, and you’ll only be pleasantly surprised. Respect costs you nothing, and nothing gets a man killed quicker than confidence.’

‘Never underestimate the foe. A wise precaution.’ Jezal was beginning to realise that he had underestimated this Northman. He wasn’t half the idiot

he appeared to be.

'Third, watch your opponent as close as you can, and listen to opinions if you're given them, but once you've got your plan in mind, you fix on it and let nothing sway you. Time comes to act, you strike with no backward glances. Delay is the parent of disaster, my father used to tell me, and believe me, I've seen some disasters.'

'No backward glances,' muttered Jezal, nodding slowly to himself. 'Of course.'

Ninefingers puffed out his pitted cheeks. 'There's no replacement for seeing it, and doing it, but master all that, and you're halfway to beating anyone, I reckon.'

'Halfway? What about the other half?'

The Northman shrugged. 'Luck.'

'I don't like this,' growled Ferro, frowning up at the steep sides of the gorge. Jezal wondered if there was anything in the world she did like.

'You think we're followed?' asked Bayaz. 'You see anyone?'

'How could I see anyone from down here? That's the point!'

'Good ground for an ambush,' muttered Ninefingers. Jezal looked around him, nervously. Broken rocks, bushes, scrubby trees, the ground was full of hiding places.

'Well, this is the route that Longfoot picked for us,' grumbled Bayaz. 'and there's no purpose in hiring a cleaner if you're going to swab the latrines yourself. Where the hell is that damn Navigator anyway? Never around when you want him, only turns up to eat and boast for hours on end! If you knew how much that bastard cost me—'

'Damn it.' Ninefingers pulled his horse up and clambered stiffly down from his saddle. A fallen tree trunk, wood cracked and grey, lay across the gorge, blocking the road.

'I don't like this.' Ferro shrugged her bow from her shoulder.

'Neither do I,' grumbled Ninefingers, taking a step towards the fallen tree. 'But you have to be real—'

'That's far enough!' The voice echoed back and forth around the valley, brash and confident. Quai hauled on the reins and brought the cart to a sudden halt. Jezal looked along the lip of the gorge, his heart thumping in his mouth. He saw the speaker now. A big man dressed in antique leather

armour, sitting carelessly on the edge of the drop with one leg dangling, his long hair flapping softly in the breeze. A pleasant and a friendly-looking man, as far as Jezal could tell at this distance, with a wide smile on his face.

'My name is Finnius, a humble servant of the Emperor Cabrian!'

'Cabrian?' shouted Bayaz. 'I heard he'd lost his reason!'

'He's got some interesting ideas.' Finnius shrugged. 'But he's always seen us right. Let me explain matters – we're all around you!' A serious-seeming man with a short sword and shield stepped out from behind the dead tree trunk. Two more appeared, and then three more, creeping out from behind the rocks, behind the bushes, all with serious faces and serious weapons. Jezal licked his lips. He would laugh in the face of danger, of course, but now it came to it nothing seemed at all amusing. He looked over his shoulder. More men had come from behind the rocks they had passed a few moments before, blocking the valley in the other direction.

Ninefingers folded his arms. 'Just once,' he murmured, 'I'd like to take someone else by surprise.'

'There's a couple more of us,' shouted Finnius, 'up here, with me! Good hands with bows, and ready with arrows.' Jezal saw their outlines now against the white sky, the curved shapes of their weapons. 'So you see that you'll be going no further down this road!'

Bayaz spread his palms. 'Perhaps we can come to some arrangement that suits us both! You need only name your price and—'

'Your money's no good to us, old man, and I'm deeply wounded by the assumption! We're soldiers, not thieves! We have orders to find a certain group of people, a group of people wandering out in the middle of nowhere, far from the travelled roads! An old bald bastard with a sickly-looking boy, some stuck-up Union fool, a scarred whore, and an ape of a Northerner! You seen a crowd that might fit that description?'

'If I'm the whore,' shouted Ninefingers, 'who's the Northerner?'

Jezal winced. No jokes, please no jokes, but Finnius only chuckled. 'They didn't tell me you were funny. Reckon that's a bonus. At least until we kill you. Where's the other one, eh? The Navigator?'

'No idea,' growled Bayaz, 'unfortunately. If anyone dies it should be him.'

'Don't take it too hard. We'll catch up with him later.' And Finnius laughed an easy laugh, and the men around them grinned and fingered their

weapons. ‘So if you’d be good enough to give your arms to those fellows ahead of you, we can get you trussed up and start back towards Darmium before nightfall!’

‘And when we get there?’

Finnius gave a happy shrug. ‘Not my business. I don’t ask questions of the Emperor, and you don’t ask questions of me. That way, no one gets skinned alive. Do you take my meaning, old man?’

‘Your meaning is hard to miss, but I am afraid that Darmium is quite out of our way.’

‘What are you,’ called Finnius, ‘soft in the head?’

The nearest man stepped forward and grabbed hold of Bayaz’ bridle. ‘That’s enough of that,’ he growled.

Jezal felt that horrible sucking in his guts. The air around Bayaz’ shoulders trembled, like the hot air above a forge. The foremost of the men frowned, opened his mouth to speak. His face seemed to flatten, then his head broke open and he was suddenly snatched away as though flicked by a giant, unseen finger. He had not even time to scream.

Nor had the four men who stood behind him. Their ruined bodies, the broken remnants of the grey tree trunk, and a great quantity of earth and rocks around them were ripped from the ground and flung through the air to shatter against the rocky wall of the gorge a hundred strides distant with a sound like a house collapsing.

Jezal’s mouth hung open. His body froze. It had taken only a terrifying instant. One moment five men had been standing there, the next they were slaughtered meat among a heap of settling debris. Somewhere behind him he heard the hum of a bowstring. There was a cry and a body dropped down into the valley, bounced from the sheer rocks and flopped rag-like, face down in the stream.

‘Ride, then!’ roared Bayaz, but Jezal could only sit in his saddle and gape. The air around the Magus was still moving, more than ever. The rocks behind him rippled and twisted like the stones on the bed of a stream. The old man frowned, stared down at his hands. ‘No . . .’ he muttered, turning them over before him.

The brown leaves on the ground were lifting up into air, fluttering as though on a gust of wind. ‘No,’ said Bayaz, his eyes opening wide. His whole body had begun to shake. Jezal gawped as the loose stones around

them rose from the ground, drifting impossibly upwards. Sticks began to snap from the bushes, clods of grass began to tear themselves away from the rocks, his coat rustled and flapped, dragged upwards by some unseen force.

'No!' screamed Bayaz, then his shoulders hunched in a sudden spasm. A tree beside them split apart with a deafening crack and splinters of wood showered out into the whipping air. Someone was shouting but Jezal could scarcely hear them. His horse reared and he had not the wit to hold on. He crashed onto his back on the earth while the whole valley shimmered, trembled, vibrated around him.

Bayaz' head snapped back, rigid, one hand up and clawing at the air. A rock the size of a man's head flew past Jezal's face and burst apart against a boulder. The air was filled with a storm of whipping rubbish, of fragments of wood, and stone, and soil, and broken gear. Jezal's ears were ringing with a terrifying clattering, rattling, howling. He flung himself down on his face, crossed his arms over his head and squeezed his eyes shut.

He thought of his friends. Of West, and Jalenhorm, and Kaspa, of Lieutenant Brint, even. He thought of his family and his home, of his father and his brothers. He thought of Ardee. If he lived to see them again, he would be a better man. He swore it to himself with silent, trembling lips as the unnatural wind ripped the valley apart around him. He would no longer be selfish, no longer be vain, no longer be lazy. He would be a better friend, a better son, a better lover, if only he lived through this. If only he lived through this. If only . . .

He could hear his own terrified breath coming in quick gasps, the blood surging in his head.

The noise had stopped.

Jezal opened his eyes. He lifted his hands from his head and a shower of twigs and soil fell around him. The gorge was full of settling leaves, misty with choking dust. Ninefingers was standing nearby, red blood running down his dirty face from a cut on his forehead. He was walking slowly sideways. He had his sword drawn, hanging down by his leg. Someone was facing him. One of the men that had blocked the way behind them, a tall man with a mop of red hair. Circling each other. Jezal watched, kneeling, mouth wide open. He felt in some small way that he should intervene, but he had not the beginnings of an idea how to do so.

The red-haired man moved suddenly, leaping forwards and swinging his sword over his head. He moved fast, but Ninefingers was faster. He stepped sideways so that the whistling blade missed his face by inches, then he slashed his opponent across the belly as he passed. The man grunted, stumbled a step or two. Ninefingers' heavy sword chopped into the back of his skull with a hollow clicking sound. He tripped over his own feet and pitched onto his face, blood bubbling from the gaping wound in his head. Jezal watched it spread slowly out through the dirt around the corpse. A wide, dark pool, slowly mingling with the dust and the loose soil on the valley floor. No second touch. No best of three.

He became aware of a scuffling, grunting sound, and looked up to see Ninefingers staggering around with another man, a great big man. The two of them were growling and clawing at each other, wrestling over a knife. Jezal gawped at them. When had that happened?

'Stab him!' shouted Ninefingers as the two of them grappled. 'Fucking stab him!' Jezal knelt there, staring up. One hand gripped the hilt of his long steel as though he were hanging off a cliff and this was the last handful of grass, the other hung limp.

There was a gentle thud. The big man grunted. There was an arrow sticking out of his side. Another thud. Two arrows. A third appeared, tightly grouped. He slid slowly out of Ninefingers' grip, onto his knees, coughing and moaning. He crawled towards Jezal, sat back slowly, grimacing and making a strange mewling sound. He lay back in the road, the arrows sticking up into the air like rushes in the shallows of a lake. He was still.

'What about that Finnius bastard?'

'He got away.'

'He'll get others!'

'It was deal with him or deal with that one there.'

'I had that one!'

'Course you did. If you could have held him another year, maybe Luthar might have got round to drawing a blade, eh?'

Strange voices, nothing to do with him. Jezal wobbled slowly up to his feet. His mouth was dry, his knees were weak, his ears were ringing. Bayaz lay in the road on his back a few strides away, his apprentice kneeling beside him. One of the wizard's eyes was closed, the other slightly open, the lid twitching, a slit of white eyeball showing underneath.

‘You can let go of that now.’ Jezal looked down. His hand was still clenched around the grip of his steel, knuckles white. He willed his fingers to relax and they slowly uncurled, far away. His palm ached from all that gripping. Jezal felt a heavy hand on his shoulder. ‘You alright?’ Ninefingers’ voice.

‘Eh?’

‘You hurt?’

Jezal stared at himself, turning his hands over stupidly. Dirty, but no blood. ‘I don’t think so.’

‘Good. The horses ran. Who can blame them, right? If I had four legs I’d be halfway back to the sea by now.’

‘What?’

‘Why don’t you catch them?’

‘Who made you the leader?’

Ninefingers heavy brows drew in slightly. Jezal became aware that they were standing very close to one another, and that the Northman’s hand was still on his shoulder. It was only resting there, but he could feel the strength of it through his coat, and it felt strong enough to twist his arm off. Damn his mouth, it got him in all kinds of trouble. He expected a punch in the face at the very least, if not a fatal wound in his head, but Ninefingers only pursed his lips thoughtfully and began to speak.

‘We’re a lot different, you and me. Different in all kind of ways. I see you don’t have much respect for my kind, or for me in particular, and I don’t much blame you. The dead know I got my shortcomings, and I ain’t entirely ignorant of ’em. You may think you’re a clever man, and I’m a stupid one, and I daresay you’re right. There’s sure to be a very many things that you know more about than I do. But when it comes to fighting, I’m sorry to say, there’s few men with a wider experience than me. No offence, but we both know you’re not one of ’em. No one made me the leader, but this is the task that needs doing.’ He stepped closer still, his great paw gripping Jezal’s shoulder with a fatherly firmness, halfway between reassurance and threat. ‘Is that a worry?’

Jezal thought about it for a moment. He was out of his depth, and the events of the past few minutes had demonstrated beyond question just how far. He looked down at the man that Ninefingers had killed only a moment

before, and the cleft in the back of his head yawned wide. Perhaps, for the moment, it would be best if he simply did as he was told.

'No worry,' he said.

'Good!' Ninefingers grinned, clapped him on the shoulder and let him go. 'Horses still need catching, and you're the man for the job, I reckon.'

Jezal nodded, and stumbled away to look for them.

One Hundred Words

There was something peculiar afoot, that was sure. Colonel Glokta tested his limbs, but he appeared unable to move. The sun was blinding bright in his eyes. ‘Did we beat the Gurkish?’ he asked.

‘We certainly did,’ said Haddish Kahdia, leaning over into Glokta’s field of view. ‘With God’s help we put them to the sword. Butchered them like cattle.’ The old native went back to chewing on the severed hand he held. He’d already got through a couple of fingers.

Glokta raised his arm to take it, but there was nothing there, only a bloody stump, chewed off at the wrist. ‘I swear,’ murmured the Colonel, ‘it’s my hand you’re eating.’

Kahdia smiled. ‘And it is entirely delicious. I do congratulate you.’

‘Utterly delicious,’ muttered General Vissbruck, taking the hand from Kahdia and sucking a strip of ragged flesh from it. ‘Must be all that fencing you did as a young man.’ There was blood smeared across his plump, smiling face.

‘The fencing, of course,’ said Glokta. ‘I’m glad you like it,’ though the whole business did seem somewhat strange.

‘We do, we do!’ cried Vurms. He was cupping the remains of Glokta’s foot in his hands like a slice of melon, and nibbling at it daintily. ‘All four of us are delighted! Tastes like roast pork!’

‘Like good cheese!’ shouted Vissbruck.

‘Like sweet honey!’ cooed Kahdia, sprinkling a little salt onto Glokta’s midriff.

‘Like sweet money,’ purred Magister Eider’s voice from somewhere down below.

Glokta propped himself up on his elbows. ‘Why, what are you doing down there?’

She looked up and grinned at him. ‘You took my rings. The least you can do is give me something in return.’ Her teeth sank into his right thigh, deep in like tiny daggers, and scooped out a neat ball of flesh. She slurped blood hungrily from the wound, tongue darting out across his skin.

Colonel Glokta raised his eyebrows. ‘You’re right, of course. Quite right.’ It really hurt a great deal less than one would have expected, but sitting upright was rather draining. He fell back onto the sand and lay there, looking up at the blue sky. ‘All of you are quite right.’

She had made it up to his hip now. ‘Ah,’ giggled the Colonel, ‘that tickles!’ What a pleasure it was, he thought, to be eaten by such a beautiful woman. ‘A little to the left,’ he murmured, closing his eyes, ‘just a little to the left . . .’

Glokta sat up in bed with an agonising jerk, back arched as tight as a full-drawn bow. His left leg trembled under the clammy sheet, wasted muscles knotted hard with searing cramps. He bit down on his lip with his remaining teeth to keep from screaming, snorted heaving gasps through his nose, face screwed up with his furious efforts to control the pain.

Just when it seemed that his leg would rip itself apart, the sinews suddenly relaxed. Glokta collapsed back into his clammy bed and lay there, breathing hard. *Damn these fucking dreams.* Every part of him was aching, every part of him was weak and trembling, wet with cold sweat. He frowned in the darkness. There was a strange sound filling the room. A rushing, hissing sound. *What is that?* Slowly, gingerly, he rolled over and levered himself out of bed, hobbled to the window and stood there, looking out.

It was as though the city beyond his room had vanished. A grey curtain had descended, cutting him off from the world. *Rain*. It spattered against the sill, fat drops bursting into soft spray, throwing a cool mist into the chamber, dampening the carpet beneath the window, the drapes around the opening, soothing Glokta’s clammy skin. *Rain*. He had forgotten that such a thing existed.

There was a flash, lightning in the distance. The spires of the Great Temple were cut out black through the hissing murk for an instant, and then the darkness closed back in, joined by a long, angry muttering of distant thunder. Glokta stuck his arm out through the window, felt the water pattering cold against his skin. A strange, unfamiliar feeling.

‘I swear,’ he murmured to himself.

‘The first rains come.’ Glokta nearly choked as he spun around, stumbled, clutched at the wet stones around the window for support. It was dark as

hell in the room, there was no telling where the voice had come from. *Did I only imagine it? Am I still dreaming?* 'A sublime moment. The world seems to live again.' Glokta's heart froze in his chest. A man's voice, deep and rich. *The voice of the one who took Davoust? Who will soon take me?*

The room was illuminated by another brilliant flash. The speaker sat cross-legged on the carpet. An old black man with long hair. *Between me and the door. No way past, even if I was a considerably better runner than I am.* The light was gone as soon as it arrived, but the image persisted for a moment, burned into Glokta's eyes. Then came the crash of thunder splitting the sky, echoing in the darkness of the wide chamber. *No one would hear my despairing screams for help, even if anyone cared.*

'Who the hell are you?' Glokta's voice was squeaky with shock.

'Yulwei is my name. You need not be alarmed.'

'Not alarmed? Are you fucking joking?'

'If I had a mind to kill you, you would have died in your sleep. I would have left a body, though.'

'Some comfort.' Glokta's mind raced, thinking over the objects within reach. *I might make it as far as the ornamental tea-jar on the table. He almost laughed. And do what with it? Offer him tea? Nothing to fight with, even if I was a considerably more effective fighter than I am.* 'How did you get in?'

'I have my ways. The same ways in which I crossed the wide desert, travelled the busy road from Shaffa unobserved, passed through the Gurkish host and into the city.'

'And to think, you could have just knocked.'

'Knocking does not guarantee an entrance.' Glokta's eyes strained against the gloom, but he could see nothing beyond the vague grey outlines of furniture, the arched grey spaces of the other windows. The rain pattered on the sill behind, hissed quietly on the roofs of the city below. Just when he was wondering if his dream was over, the voice came again. 'I have been watching the Gurkish, as I have these many years. That is my allotted task. My penance, for the part I played in the schism that has split my order.'

'Your order?'

'The Order of Magi. I am the fourth of Juvens' twelve apprentices.'

A Magus. I might have known. Like that bald old meddler Bayaz, and I gained nothing but confusion from him. As if there were not enough to

worry about with politics and treachery, now we must have myth and superstition to boot. Still, it looks as if I will last out the night, at least.

'A Magus, eh? Forgive me if I don't celebrate. Such dealings as I've had with your order have been a waste of my time, at best.'

'Perhaps I can repair our reputation, then. I bring you information.'

'Free of charge?'

'This time. The Gurkish are moving. Five of their golden standards pass down the peninsula tonight, under cover of the storm. Twenty thousand spears, with great engines of war. Five more standards wait behind the hills, and that is not all. The roads from Shaffa to Ul-Khatif, from Ul-Khatif to Daleppa, from Daleppa to the sea, all are thick with soldiers. The Emperor puts forth all his strength. The whole South moves. Conscripts from Kadir and Dawah, wild riders from Yashtavit, fierce savages from the jungles of Shamir, where men and women fight side by side. They all come northwards. Coming here, to fight for the Emperor.'

'So many, just to take Dagoska?'

'And more besides. The Emperor has built himself a navy. One hundred sail of great ships.'

'The Gurkish are no sailors. The Union controls the seas.'

'The world changes, and you must change with it or be swept aside. This war will not be like the last. Khalul finally sends forth his own soldiers. An army many long years in the making. The gates of the great temple-fortress of Sarkant are opening, high in the barren mountains. I have seen it. Mamun comes forth, thrice-blessed and thrice-cursed, the fruit of the desert, first apprentice of Khalul. Together they broke the Second Law, together they ate the flesh of men. The Hundred Words come behind, Eaters all, disciples of the Prophet, bred for battle and fed over these long years, adepts in the disciplines of arms and of High Art. No peril like it has faced the world since the Old Time, when Juvens fought with Kanedias. Since before that, perhaps, when Glustrod touched the Other Side, and sought to open the gates to the world below.'

And blah, blah, blah. A shame. He had been making surprising sense for a Magus. 'You want to give me information? Keep your bed-time stories and tell me what happened to Davoust.'

'There is an Eater here. I smell it. A dweller in the shadows. One whose only task is to destroy those who oppose the Prophet.' *And myself the first*

of them? ‘Your predecessor never left these chambers. The Eater took him, to protect the traitor who works within the city.’

Yes. Now we speak my language. ‘Who is the traitor?’ Glokta’s voice sounded shrill, sharp, greedy in his own ear.

‘I am no fortune-teller, cripple, and if I could give you the answer, would you believe me? Men must learn at their own pace.’

‘Bah!’ snapped Glokta. ‘You are just like Bayaz. You talk, and talk, and yet you say nothing. Eaters? Nothing but old stories and nonsense!’

‘Stories? Did Bayaz not take you within the Maker’s House?’ Glokta swallowed, his hand clinging trembling tight to the damp stone under the window. ‘Yet still you doubt me? You are slow to learn, cripple. Have I not seen the slaves march to Sarkant, dragged from every land the Gurkish conquer? Have I not seen the countless columns, driven up into the mountains? To feed Khalul and his disciples, to swell their power ever further. A crime against God! A breach of the Second Law, written in fire by Euz himself! You doubt me, and perhaps you are wise to doubt me, but at first light you will see the Gurkish have come. You will count five standards, and you will know I spoke the truth.’

‘Who is the traitor?’ hissed Glokta. ‘Tell me, you riddling bastard!’ Silence, but for the splashing of rain, the trickling of water, the rustling of wind in the hangings about the window. A stroke of lightning threw sudden light into every corner.

The carpet was empty. Yulwei was gone.

The Gurkish host came slowly forward in five enormous blocks, two in front, three behind, covering the whole neck of land from sea to sea. They moved together in perfect formation to the deep thumping of great drums, rank upon rigid rank, the sound of their tramping boots like the distant thunder of the night before. Already, the sun had sucked away all evidence of the rain, and now it flashed mirror-bright on thousands of helmets, thousands of shields, thousands of swords, glittering arrow-heads, coats of armour. A forest of shining spears, moving inexorably forwards. A merciless, tireless, irresistible tide of men.

Union soldiers were scattered around the top of the land walls, squatting behind the parapet, fingering their flatbows, peering out nervously at the advancing host. Glokta could sense their fear. *And who can blame them? We*

must be outnumbered ten to one already. There were no drums up here in the wind, no shouted orders, no hurried preparations. Only silence.

'And here they come,' mused Nicomo Cosca, grinning out at the scene. He alone seemed untouched by fear. *He has either an iron nerve or a leaden imagination. Lazing in a drinking-hole or waiting for death all seems to be one to him.* He was standing with one foot up on the parapet, forearms crossed on his knee, half-full bottle dangling from one hand. The mercenary's battle dress was much the same as his drinking gear. The same sagging boots, the same ruined trousers. His one allowance for the dangers of the battlefield was a black breastplate, etched front and back with golden scrollwork. It too had seen better days, the enamel chipped, the rivets stained with rust. *But it must once have been quite the masterpiece.*

'That's a fine piece of armour you have there.'

'What, this?' Cosca looked down at his breastplate. 'In its day, perhaps, but it's seen some hard use over the years. Been left out in the rain more than once. A gift from the Grand Duchess Sefeline of Ospria, in return for defeating the army of Sipani in the five month war. It came with a promise of her eternal friendship.'

'Nice, to have friends.'

'Not really. That very night she tried to have me killed. My victories had made me far too popular with Sefeline's own subjects. She feared I might try to seize power. Poison, in my wine.' Cosca took a long swig from his bottle. 'Killed my favourite mistress. I was forced to flee, with little more than this damn breastplate, and seek employment with the Prince of Sipani. That old bastard didn't pay half so well, but at least I got to lead his army against the Duchess, and have the satisfaction of seeing her poisoned in her turn.' He frowned. 'Made her face turn blue. Bright blue, believe me. Never get too popular, that's my advice.'

Glokta snorted. 'Over-popularity is scarcely my most pressing worry.'

Vissbruck cleared his throat noisily, evidently upset at being ignored. He gestured towards the endless ranks of men advancing down the isthmus. 'Superior, the Gurkish approach.' *Indeed? I had not noticed.* 'Do I have your permission to flood the ditch?'

Oh yes, your moment of glory. 'Very well.'

Vissbruck strutted to the parapet with an air of the greatest self-importance. He slowly raised his arm, then chopped it portentously through

the air. Somewhere, out of sight below, whips cracked and teams of mules strained on ropes. The complaining squeal of wood under great pressure reached them on the battlements, then a creaking and a cracking as the dams gave way, and then an angry thundering as the great weight of salt water broke through and surged down the deep ditch from both ends, foaming angry white. Water met water just beneath them, throwing glittering spray into the air as high as the battlements and higher yet. A moment later, and this new ribbon of sea was calm. The ditch had become a channel, the city had become an island.

'The ditch is flooded!' announced General Vissbruck.

'So we see,' said Glokta. 'Congratulations.' *Let us hope the Gurkish have no strong swimmers among them. They certainly have no shortage of men to choose from.*

Five tall poles waved gently above the tramping mass of soldiers, Gurkish symbols glittering upon them in solid gold. *Symbols of battles fought, and battles won.* The standards of five legions, flashing in the merciless sun. *Five legions. Just as the old man told me. Will ships follow, then?* Glokta turned his head and peered out across the Lower City. The long wharves stuck into the bay like the spines of a hedgehog, still busy with ships. *Ships carrying our supplies in, and a last few nervous merchants out. There were no walls there.* Few defences of any kind. *We did not think we needed them. The Union has always ruled the seas. If ships should come . . .*

'Do we still have supplies of wood and stone?'

The General nodded vigorously, all eagerness. *Finally adjusted to the changes in the chain of command, it seems.* 'Abundant supplies, Superior, precisely as your orders specified.'

'I want you to build a wall behind the docks and along the shoreline. As strong, and as high, and as soon as possible. Our defences there are weak. The Gurkish may test them sooner or later.'

The General frowned out at the swarming army of soldiers crawling over the peninsula, looked down towards the calm docks, and back. 'But surely the threat from the landward side is a little more . . . pressing? The Gurkish are poor sailors, and in any case have no fleet worthy of the name—'

'The world changes, General. The world changes.'

'Of course.' Vissbruck turned to speak to his aides.

Glokta shuffled up to the parapet beside Cosca. ‘How many Gurkish troops, would you judge?’

The Styrian scratched at the flaky rash on the side of his neck. ‘I count five standards. Five of the Emperor’s legions, and plenty more besides. Scouts, engineers, irregulars from across the South. How many troops . . .’ He squinted up into the sun, lips moving silently as though his head was full of complex sums. ‘A fucking lot.’ He tipped his head back and sucked the last drops from his bottle, then he smacked his lips, pulled back his arm and hurled it towards the Gurkish. It flashed in the sun for a moment, then shattered against the hard dirt on the other side of the channel. ‘Do you see those carts at the back?’

Glokta squinted down his eye-glass. There did indeed seem to be a shadowy column of great wagons behind the mass of soldiery, barely visible in the shimmering haze and the clouds of dust kicked up by the stomping boots. *Soldiers need supplies of course, but then again* . . . Here and there he could see long timbers sticking up like spider’s legs. ‘Siege engines,’ muttered Glokta to himself. *All just as Yulwei said.* ‘They are in earnest.’

‘Ah, but so are you.’ Cosca stood up beside the parapet, started to fiddle with his belt. A moment later, Glokta heard the sound of his piss spattering against the base of the wall, far below. The mercenary grinned over his shoulder, thin hair fluttering in the salt wind. ‘Everyone’s in lots of earnest. I must speak to Magister Eider. I’d say I’ll be getting my battle money soon.’

‘I think so.’ Glokta slowly lowered his eye-glass. ‘And earning it too.’

The Blind Lead the Blind

The First of the Magi lay twisted on his back in the cart, wedged between a water barrel and a sack of horse feed, a coil of rope for his pillow. Logen had never seen him look so old, and thin, and weak. His breath came shallow, his skin was pale and blotchy, drawn tight over his bones and beaded with sweat. From time to time he'd twitch, and squirm, and mutter strange words, his eyelids flickering like a man trapped in a bad dream.

'What happened?'

Quai stared down. 'Whenever you use the Art, you borrow from the Other Side, and what is borrowed has to be repaid. There are risks, even for a master. To seek to change the world with a thought . . . the arrogance of it.' The corners of his mouth twitched up into a smile. 'Borrow too often, perhaps, one time you touch the world below, and leave a piece of yourself behind . . .'

'Behind?' muttered Logen, peering down at the twitching old man. He didn't much like the way Quai was talking. It was no smiling matter, as far as he could see, to be stuck out in the middle of nowhere without a clue where they were going.

'Just think,' whispered the apprentice. 'The First of the Magi himself, helpless as a baby.' He laid his hand gently on Bayaz' chest. 'He clings on to life by a thread. I could reach out now, with this weak hand . . . and kill him.'

Logen frowned. 'Why would you want to do that?'

Quai looked up, and smiled his sickly smile. 'Why would anyone? I was merely saying.' And he snatched his hand away.

'How long will he stay like this?'

The apprentice sat back in the cart and stared up at the sky. 'There's no saying. Maybe hours. Maybe forever.'

'Forever?' Logen ground his teeth. 'Where does that leave us? You have any idea where we're going? Or why? Or what we do when we get there? Should we turn back?'

'No.' Quai's face was sharp as a blade. Sharper than Logen would ever have expected from him. 'We have enemies behind us. To turn back now

would be more dangerous than to continue. We carry on.'

Logen winced, and rubbed at his eyes. He felt tired, and sore, and sick. He wished he'd asked Bayaz his plans when he'd had the chance. He wished he'd never left the North, if it came to that. He could have sought out a reckoning with Bethod, and died in a place he knew, at the hands of men that he at least understood.

Logen had no wish to lead. The time was he'd hungered after fame, and glory, and respect, but the winning of them had been costly, and they'd proved to be hollow prizes. Men had put their faith in him, and he'd led them by a painful and a bloody route straight back to the mud. There was no ambition in him any more. He was cursed when it came to making decisions.

He took his hands away and looked around him. Bayaz still lay muttering in his fevered sleep. Quai was gazing carelessly up at the clouds. Luthar was standing with his back to the others, staring down the gorge. Ferro was sitting on a rock, cleaning her bow with a rag, and scowling. Longfoot had reappeared, predictably, just as the danger ended, and was standing not far away, looking pleased with himself. Logen grimaced, and gave a long sigh. There was no help for it. There was no one else.

'Alright, we head for this bridge, at Aulcus, then we see.'

'Not a good idea,' tutted Longfoot, wandering up to the cart and peering in. 'Not a good idea in the least. I warned our employer of that before his . . . mishap. The city is deserted, destroyed, ruined. A blighted, and a broken, and a dangerous place. The bridge may still stand, but according to rumour —'

'Aulcus was the plan, and I reckon we'll stick with it.'

Longfoot carried on as though he hadn't spoken. 'I think, perhaps, that it would be best if we headed back towards Calcis. We are still less than halfway to our ultimate destination, and have ample food and water for the return journey. With some luck—'

'You were paid to go all the way?'

'Well, er, indeed I was, but—'

'Aulcus.'

The Navigator blinked. 'Well, yes, I see that you are decided. Decisiveness, and boldness, and vigour, it would seem, are among your

talents, but caution, and wisdom, and experience, if I may say, are among mine, and I am in no doubt whatsoever that—'

'Aulcus,' growled Logen.

Longfoot paused with his mouth half open. Then he snapped it shut. 'Very well. We will follow the road back onto the plains, and head westward to the three lakes. Aulcus is at their head, but the journey is still a long and dangerous one, especially with winter well upon us. There should be—'

'Good.' Logen turned away before the Navigator had the chance to say anything more. That was the easy part. He sucked his teeth, and walked over to Ferro.

'Bayaz is . . .' he struggled for the right word. 'Out. We don't know how long for.'

She nodded. 'We going on?'

'Er . . . I reckon . . . that's the plan.'

'Alright.' She got up from her rock and slung the bow over her shoulder. 'Best get moving then.'

Easier than he'd expected. Too easy, perhaps. He wondered if she was thinking of sneaking off again. He was considering it himself, truth be told. 'I don't even know where we're going.'

She snorted. 'I've never known where I was going. You ask me, it's an improvement, you in charge.' She walked off towards the horses. 'I never trusted that bald bastard.'

And that only left Luthar. He was standing with his back to the others, shoulders slumped, thoroughly miserable-looking. Logen could see the muscles on the side of his head working as he stared at the ground.

'You alright?'

Luthar hardly seemed to hear him. 'I wanted to fight. I wanted to, and I knew how to, and I had my hand on my steels.' He slapped angrily at the hilt of one of his swords. 'I was helpless as a fucking baby! Why couldn't I move?'

'That it? By the dead, boy, that happens to some men the first time!'

'It does?'

'More than you'd believe. At least you didn't shit yourself.'

Luthar raised his eyebrows. 'That happens?'

'More than you'd believe.'

'Did you freeze up, the first time?'

Logen frowned. ‘No. Killing comes too easy to me. Always has done. Believe me, you’re the lucky one.’

‘Unless I’m killed for doing nothing.’

‘Well,’ Logen had to admit, ‘there is that.’ Luthar’s head dropped even lower, and Logen clapped him on the arm. ‘But you didn’t get killed! Cheer up, boy, you’re lucky! You’re still alive, aren’t you?’ He gave a miserable nod. Logen slid his arm round his shoulder and guided him back towards the horses. ‘Then you’ve got the chance to do better next time.’

‘Next time?’

‘Course. Doing better next time. That’s what life is.’

Logen climbed back into the saddle, stiff and sore. Stiff from all the riding, sore from the fight in the gorge. Some bit of rock had cracked him on the back, that and he’d got a good punch on the side of his head. Could have been a lot worse.

He looked round at the others. They were all mounted up, staring at him. Four faces, as different as could be, but all with the same expression, more or less. Waiting for his say. Why did anyone ever think he had the answers? He swallowed, and dug his heels in.

‘Let’s go.’

Prince Ladisla's Stratagem

'You really should spend less time in here, Colonel West.' Pike set down his hammer for a moment, the orange light from his forge reflecting in his eyes, shining bright on his melted face. 'People will start to talk.'

West cracked a nervous grin. 'It's the only warm place in the whole damn camp.' It was true enough, but a long way from the real reason. It was the only place in the whole damn camp where no one would look for him. Men who were starving, men who were freezing, men who had no water, or no weapon, or no clue what they were doing. Men who'd died of cold or illness and needed burying. Even the dead couldn't manage without West. Everyone needed him, day and night. Everyone except Pike and his daughter, and the rest of the convicts. They alone seemed self-sufficient, and so their forge had become his refuge. A noisy, and a crowded, and a smoky refuge, no doubt, but no less sweet for that. He preferred it immeasurably to being with the Prince and his staff. Here among the criminals it was more . . . honest.

'You're in the way, Colonel. Again.' Cathil shoved past him, a knife-blade glowing orange in the tongs in one gloved hand. She shoved it into the water, frowning, turning it this way and that while steam hissed up around her. West watched her move, quick and practised, beads of moisture on her sinewy arm, the back of her neck, hair dark and spiky with sweat. Hard to believe he'd ever taken her for a boy. She might handle the metal as well as any of the men, but the shape of her face, not to mention her chest, her waist, the curve of her backside, all unmistakably female . . .

She glanced over her shoulder and caught him looking. 'Don't you have an army to run?'

'They'll last ten minutes without me.'

She drew the cold, black blade from the water and tossed it clattering onto the heap beside the whetstone. 'You sure?'

Maybe she was right at that. West took a deep breath, sighed, turned with some reluctance, and ventured out through the door of the shed and into the camp.

The winter air nipped at his cheeks after the heat of the smithy, and he pulled up the collars of his coat, hugged himself as he struggled down the camp's main road. It was deathly quiet out here at night, once he had left the rattling of the forge behind him. He could hear the frozen mud sucking at his boots, his breath rasping in his throat, the faint cursing of some distant soldier, grumbling his way through the darkness. He stopped a moment and looked up, arms folded round himself for warmth. The sky was perfectly clear, the stars prickling bright, spread across the blackness like shining dust.

'Beautiful,' he murmured to himself.

'You get used to it.'

It was Threetrees, picking his way between the tents with the Dogman at his shoulder. His face was in shadow, all dark pits and white angles like a cliff in the moonlight, but West could tell there was some ill news coming. The old Northman could hardly have been described as a figure of fun at the best of times, but now his frown was grim indeed.

'Well met,' said West in the Northern tongue.

'You think? Bethod is inside five days' march of your camp.' The cold seemed suddenly to cut through West's coat and make him shiver. 'Five days?'

'If he's stayed put since we saw him, and that ain't likely. Bethod was never one for staying put. If he's marching south, he could be three days away. Less even.'

'What are his numbers?'

The Dogman licked his lips, breath smoking round his lean face in the chill air. 'I'd guess at ten thousand, but he might have more behind.'

West felt colder yet. 'Ten thousand? That many?'

'Around ten, aye. Mostly Thralls.'

'Thralls? Light infantry?'

'Light, but not like this rubbish you have here.' Threetrees scowled around at the shabby tents, the badly built camp fires, close to guttering out. 'Bethod's Thralls are lean and bloody from battles and tough as wood from marching. Those bastards can run all day and still fight at the end of it, if it's needed. Bowmen, spearmen, all well-practised.'

'There's no shortage of Carls and all,' muttered the Dogman.

‘That there ain’t, with strong mail and good blades, and plenty of horses into the bargain. There’ll be Named Men too, no doubt. It’s the pick of the crop Bethod’s brought with him, and some sharp war leaders in amongst ’em. That and some strange folk from out east. Wild men, from beyond the Crinna. Must have left a few boys dotted about up north, for your friends to chase around after, and brought his best fighters south with him, against your weakest.’ The old warrior stared grimly round at the slovenly camp from under his thick eyebrows. ‘No offence, but I don’t give you a shit of a chance if it comes to a battle.’

The worst of all outcomes. West swallowed. ‘How fast could such an army move?’

‘Fast. Their scouts might be with us day after tomorrow. Main body a day later. If they’ve come right on, that is, and it’s hard to say if they will. Wouldn’t put it past Bethod to try and cross the river lower down, come round behind us.’

‘Behind us?’ They were scarcely equipped for a predictable enemy. ‘How could he have known we were here?’

‘Bethod always had a gift for guessing out his enemies. Good sense for it. That and he’s a lucky bastard. Loves to take chances. Ain’t nothing more important in war than a good slice o’ luck.’

West looked around him, blinking. Ten thousand battle-hardened Northmen, descending on their ramshackle camp. Lucky, unpredictable Northmen. He imagined trying to turn the ill-disciplined levies, up to their ankles in mud, trying to get them to form a line. It would be a slaughter. Another Black Well in the making. But at least they had a warning. Three days to prepare their defences, or better still, to begin to retreat.

‘We must speak to the Prince at once,’ he said.

*

Soft music and warm light washed out into the chill night air as West jerked back the tent flap. He stooped through, reluctantly, with the two Northmen close behind him.

‘By the dead . . .’ muttered Threetrees, gaping round.

West had forgotten how bizarre the Prince's quarters must appear to a newcomer, especially one who was a stranger to luxury. It was less a tent than a huge hall of purple cloth, ten strides or more in height, hung with Styrian tapestries and floored with Kantic carpets. The furniture would have been more in keeping in a palace than a camp. Huge carved dressers and gilt chests held the Prince's endless wardrobe, enough to clothe an army of dandies. The bed was a gargantuan four-poster, bigger than most tents in the camp on its own. A highly polished table in one corner sagged under the weight of heaped-up delicacies, silver and gold plate twinkling in the candlelight. One could hardly imagine that only a few hundred strides away, men were cramped, and cold, and had not enough to eat.

Crown Prince Ladisla himself sat sprawled in a huge chair of dark wood, a throne, one could have said, upholstered in red silk. An empty glass dangled from one hand, while the other waved back and forth to the music of a quartet of expert musicians, plucking, fiddling, and blowing gently at their shining instruments in the far corner. Around his Highness were four of his staff, impeccably dressed and fashionably bored, among them the young Lord Smund, who had perhaps become, over the past few weeks, West's least favourite person in the entire world.

'It does you great credit,' Smund was braying loudly to the Prince. 'Sharing the hardships of the camp has always been a fine way to win the respect of the common soldier—'

'Ah, Colonel West!' chirped Ladisla, 'and two of his Northern scouts! What a delight! You must take some food!' He made a floppy, drunken gesture towards the table.

'Thank you, your Highness, but I have eaten. I have some news of the greatest—'

'Or some wine! You must all have wine, this is an excellent vintage! Where did that bottle get to?' He fumbled about beneath his chair.

The Dogman had already crossed to the table and was leaning over it, sniffing at the food like . . . a dog. He snatched a large slice of beef from the plate with his dirty fingers, folded it carefully and stuffed it whole into his mouth, while Smund looked on, lip curled with contempt. It would have been embarrassing, under normal circumstances, but West had larger worries.

‘Bethod is within five days march of us,’ he nearly shouted, ‘with the best part of his strength!’

One of the musicians fumbled his bow and hit a screeching, discordant note. Ladisla jerked his head up, nearly sliding from his seat. Even Smund and his companions were pulled from their indolence.

‘Five days,’ muttered the Prince, his voice hoarse with excitement, ‘are you sure?’

‘Perhaps no more than three.’

‘How many are they?’

‘As many as ten thousand, and veterans to a—’

‘Excellent!’ Ladisla slapped the arm of his chair as if it were a Northman’s face. ‘We are on equal terms with them!’

West swallowed. ‘Perhaps in numbers, your Highness, but not in quality.’

‘Come now, Colonel West,’ droned Smund. ‘One good Union man is worth ten of their kind.’ He stared down his nose at Threetrees.

‘Black Well proved that notion a fantasy, even if our men were properly fed, trained, and equipped. Aside from the King’s Own, they are none of these things! We would be well advised to prepare defences, and make ready to withdraw if we must.’

Smund snorted his contempt for that idea. ‘There is nothing more dangerous in war,’ he disclaimed airily, ‘than too much caution.’

‘Except too little!’ growled West, the fury already starting to pulse behind his eyes.

But Prince Ladisla cut him off before he had the chance to lose his temper. ‘Gentlemen, enough!’ He sprang up from his chair, eyes dewy with drunken enthusiasm. ‘I have already decided on my strategy! We will cross the river and intercept these savages! They think to surprise us? Hah!’ He lashed at the air with his wine glass. ‘We will give them a surprise they will not soon forget! Drive them back over the border! Just as Marshal Burr intended!’

‘But, your Highness,’ stammered West, feeling slightly queasy, ‘the Lord Marshal explicitly ordered that we remain behind the river—’

Ladisla flicked his head, as though bothered by a fly. ‘The spirit of his orders, Colonel, not the letter! He can hardly complain if we take the fight to our enemy!’

‘These men are fucking fools,’ rumbled Threetrees, luckily in the Northern tongue.

‘What did he say?’ inquired the Prince.

‘Er . . . he concurs with me that we should hold here, your Highness, and send to Lord Marshal Burr for help.’

‘Does he indeed? And I thought these Northmen were all fire and vinegar! Well, Colonel West, you may inform him that I am resolved on an attack, and cannot be moved! We will show this so-called King of the Northmen that he does not hold a mono-poly on victory!’

‘Good show!’ shouted Smund, stamping his foot on the thick carpet. ‘Excellent!’ The rest of the Prince’s staff voiced their ignorant support.

‘Kick them back across the border!’

‘Teach them a lesson!’

‘Excellent! Capital! Is there more wine?’

West clenched his fists with frustration. He had to make one more effort, however embarrassing, however pointless. He dropped to one knee, he clasped his hands together, he fixed the Prince with his eye and gathered every ounce of persuasiveness he possessed. ‘Your Highness, I ask you, I entreat you, I beg you to reconsider. The lives of every man in this camp depend on your decision.’

The Prince grinned. ‘Such is the weight of command, my friend! I realise your motives are of the best, but I must agree with Lord Smund. Boldness is the best policy in war, and boldness shall be my strategy! It was through boldness that Harod the Great forged the Union, through boldness that King Casamir conquered Angland in the first place! We will get the better of these Northmen yet, you’ll see. Give the orders, Colonel! We march at first light!’

West had studied Casamir’s campaigns in detail. Boldness had been one tenth of his success, the rest had been meticulous planning, care for his men, attention to every detail. Boldness without the rest was apt to be deadly, but he saw that it was pointless to say so. He would only anger the Prince and lose whatever influence he might still have. He felt like a man watching his own house burn down. Numb, sick, utterly helpless. There was nothing left for him to do but to give the orders, and do his best to see that everything was conducted as well as it could be.

‘Of course, your Highness,’ he managed to mutter.

‘Of course!’ The Prince grinned. ‘We are all in agreement, then! Capital! Stop that music!’ he shouted at the musicians. ‘We need something with more vigour! Something with blood in it!’ The quartet switched effortlessly to a jaunty martial theme. West turned, limbs heavy with hopelessness, and trudged out of the tent into the icy night.

Threetrees was hard on his heels. ‘By the dead, but I can’t work you people out! Where I come from a man earns the right to lead! His men follow because they know his quality, and respect him because he shares their hardships with ’em! Even Bethod won his place!’ He strode up and down before the tent, waving his big hands. ‘Here you pick the ones who know the least to lead, and fix on the biggest fool o’ the whole pack for a commander!’

West could think of nothing to say. He could hardly deny it.

‘That prick’ll march the lot o’ you right into your fucking graves! Back to the mud with you all, but I’m damned if I’ll follow, or any of my boys. I’m done paying for other folks’ mistakes, and I’ve lost enough to that bastard Bethod already! Come on, Dogman. This boat o’ fools can sink without us!’ And he turned and stalked away into the night.

The Dogman shrugged. ‘Ain’t all bad.’ He closed to a conspiratorial distance, reached deep into his pocket and pulled something out. West stared down at an entire poached salmon, no doubt pilfered from the Prince’s table. The Northman grinned. ‘I got me a fish!’ And he followed his chief, leaving West alone on the bitter hillside, Ladisla’s martial music floating through the chill air behind him.

Until Sunset

‘Oy.’ A rough hand shook Glokta from his sleep. He rolled his head gingerly from the side he had been sleeping on, clenching his teeth at the pain as his neck clicked. *Does death come early in the morning, today?* He opened his eyes a crack. *Ah. Not quite yet, it seems. Perhaps at lunch time.* Vitari stared down at him, spiky hair silhouetted black in the early morning sun streaming through the window. ‘Very well, Practical Vitari, if you really can’t resist me. You’ll have to go on top, though, if you don’t mind.’

‘Ha ha. The Gurkish ambassador is here.’

‘The what?’

‘An emissary. From the Emperor himself, I hear.’

Glokta felt a stab of panic. ‘Where?’

‘Here in the Citadel. Speaking to the ruling council.’

‘Shit on it!’ snarled Glokta, scrambling out of bed, ignoring the stabbing pain in his leg as he swung his ruined left foot onto the floor. ‘Why didn’t they call for me?’

Vitari scowled down at him. ‘Maybe they preferred to talk to him without you. You think that could be it?’

‘How the hell did he get here?’

‘He came in by boat, under sign of parley. Vissbruck says he was duty bound to admit him.’

‘Duty-bound!’ spat Glokta as he struggled to pull his trousers up his numb and trembling leg, ‘That fat fucker! How long has he been here?’

‘Long enough for him and the council to make some pretty mischief together, if that’s their aim.’

‘Shit!’ Glokta winced as he shrugged his shirt on.

*

The Gurkish ambassador was, without doubt, a majestic presence.

His nose was prominent and hooked, his eyes burned bright with intelligence, his long, thin beard was neatly brushed. Gold thread in his sweeping white robe and his tall head-dress glittered in the bright sun. He

held his body awesomely erect, long neck stretched out, chin held high, so that he looked always down at everything he deigned to look upon. Hugely tall and thin, he made the lofty, magnificent room seem low and shabby. *He could pass for an Emperor himself.*

Glokta was keenly aware of how bent and awkward he must look as he shuffled, grimacing and sweating, into the audience chamber. *The miserable crow faces the magnificent peacock. Still, battles are not always won by the most beautiful. Fortunately for me.*

The long table was surprisingly empty. Only Vissbruck, Eider, and Korsten dan Vurms were in their seats, and none of them looked pleased to see him arrive. *Nor should they, the bastards.*

'No Lord Governor today?' he barked.

'My father is not well,' muttered Vurms.

'Shame you couldn't stay and comfort him in his illness. What about Kahdia?' No one spoke. 'Didn't think he'd take to a meeting with them, eh?' he nodded rudely at the emissary. 'How lucky for everyone that you three have stronger stomachs. I am Superior Glokta and, whatever you might have heard, I am in charge here. I must apologise for my late arrival, but no one told me you were coming.' He looked daggers at Vissbruck, but the general was not interested in meeting his eye. *That's right, you blustering fool. I won't forget this.*

'My name is Shabbed al Islik Burai.' The ambassador spoke the common tongue perfectly, in a voice every bit as powerful, as authoritative, as arrogant as his bearing. 'I come as emissary from the rightful ruler of all the South, mighty Emperor of mighty Gurkhul and all the Kantic lands, Uthman-ul-Dosht, loved, feared, and favoured above all other men within the Circle of the World, anointed by God's right hand, the Prophet Khalul himself.'

'Good for you. I would bow, but I strained my back getting out of bed.'

Islik gave a delicate sneer. 'Truly a warrior's injury. I have come to accept your surrender.'

'Is that so?' Glokta dragged out the nearest chair and sank into it. I*'m damned if I'm going to stand a moment longer, just for the benefit of this towering oaf.* 'I thought it was traditional to make such offers once the fighting is over.'

‘If there is to be fighting, it will not last long.’ The ambassador swept across the tiles to the window. ‘I see five legions, arrayed in battle order upon the peninsula. Twenty thousand spears, and they are but a fraction of what comes. The troops of the Emperor are more numerous than the grains of sand in the desert. To resist us would be as futile as to resist the tide. You all know this.’ His eyes swept proudly across the guilty faces of the ruling council and came to rest on Glokta’s with a piercing contempt. *The look of a man who believes he has already won. No one could blame him much for thinking so. Perhaps he has.*

‘Only fools or madmen would choose to stand against such odds. You pinks have never belonged here. The Emperor offers you the chance to leave the South with your lives. Open the gates to us and you will be spared. You can leave on your little boats and float back to your little island. Let it never be said that Uthman-ul-Dosht is not generous. God fights beside us. Your cause is lost.’

‘Oh, I don’t know, we held our own in the last war. I’m sure we all remember the fall of Ulrioch. I know I do. The city burned brightly. The temples especially.’ Glokta shrugged. ‘God must have been elsewhere that day.’

‘That day, yes. But there were other battles. I am sure you also remember a certain engagement, at a certain bridge, where a certain young officer fell into our hands.’ The emissary smiled. ‘God is everywhere.’

Glokta felt his eyelid flickering. *He knows I am not likely to forget.* He remembered his surprise as a Gurkish spear cut into his body. Surprise, and disappointment, and the most intense pain. *Not invulnerable, after all.* He remembered his horse rearing, dumping him from the saddle. The pain growing worse, the surprise turning into fear. Crawling among the boots and the bodies, gasping for air, mouth sour with dust, salty with blood. He remembered the agony as the blades cut into his leg. The fear turning to terror. He remembered how they dragged him, screaming and crying, from that bridge. *That night they began to ask their questions.*

‘We won,’ said Glokta, but his mouth was dry, his voice was cracked. ‘We proved the stronger.’

‘That was then. The world changes. Your nation’s entanglements in the icy North put you at a most considerable disadvantage. You have managed to break the first rule of warfare. Never fight two enemies at once.’

His reasoning is hard to fault. ‘The walls of Dagoska have frustrated you before,’ Glokta said, but it did not sound convincing, even to his own ear. *Hardly the words of a winner.* He felt the eyes of Vurms, and Vissbruck, and Eider on him, making his back itch. *Trying to decide who holds the upper hand, and I know who I’d pick in their shoes.*

‘Perhaps some of you have more confidence in your walls than others. I will return at sunset for your answer. The Emperor’s offer lasts for this one day only, and will never be repeated. He is merciful, but his mercy has limits. You have until sunset.’ And he swept from the room.

Glokta waited until the door had clicked shut before he slowly turned his chair around to face the others. ‘What in hell was that?’ he snarled at Vissbruck.

‘Er . . .’ The General tugged at his sweaty collar. ‘It was incumbent upon me, as a soldier, to admit an unarmed representative of the enemy, in order to hear his terms—’

‘Without telling me?’

‘We knew you would not want to listen!’ snapped Vurms. ‘But he speaks the truth! Despite all our hard work, we are greatly outnumbered, and can expect no relief as long as the war drags on in Angland. We are nothing more than a pinprick in the foot of a huge and hostile nation. It might serve us well to negotiate while we still hold a position of some strength. You may depend upon it that we will receive no terms beyond a massacre once the city has fallen!’

True enough, but the Arch Lector is unlikely to agree. Negotiating a surrender was hardly the task for which I was appointed. ‘You are unusually quiet, Magister Eider.’

‘I am scarcely qualified to speak on the military aspects of such a decision. But as it turns out, his terms are generous. One thing is certain. If we refuse this offer, and the Gurkish do take the city by force, the slaughter will be terrible.’ She looked up at Glokta. ‘There will be no mercy then.’

All too true. On Gurkish mercy I am the expert. ‘So all three of you are for capitulation?’ They looked at each other, and said nothing. ‘It has not occurred to you that once we surrender, they might not honour your little agreement?’

‘It had occurred,’ said Vissbruck, ‘but they have honoured their agreements before, and surely some hope . . .’ and he looked down at the

table top, ‘is better than none.’ *You have more confidence in our enemy than in me, it would seem. Hardly that surprising. My own confidence could be higher.*

Glokta wiped some wet from under his eye. ‘I see. Then I suppose I must consider his offer. We will reconvene when our Gurkish friend returns. At sunset.’ He rocked his body back and winced as he pushed himself up.

‘You’ll consider it?’ hissed Vitari in his ear as he limped down the hall away from the audience chamber. ‘You’ll fucking consider it?’

‘That’s right,’ snapped Glokta. ‘I make the decisions here.’

‘Or you let those worms make them for you!’

‘We’ve each got our jobs. I don’t tell you how to write your little reports to the Arch Lector. How I manage those worms is none of your concern.’

‘None of my concern?’ Vitari snatched hold of Glokta’s arm and he tottered on his weak leg. She was stronger than she looked, a lot stronger. ‘I told Sult you could handle things!’ she snarled in his face. ‘If we lose the city, without so much as a fight even, it’s both our heads! And my head is my concern, cripple!’

‘This is no time to panic,’ growled Glokta. ‘I don’t want to end up floating in the docks any more than you do, but this is a delicate balance. Let them think they might get their way, then no one will make any rash moves. Not until I’m good and ready. Understand me when I say, Practical, that this will be the first and the last time that I explain myself to you. Now take your fucking hand off me.’

Her hand did not let go, rather the fingers tightened, cutting into Glokta’s arm as hard as a vice. Her eyes narrowed, furious lines cut into her freckled face at their corners. *Might I have misjudged her? Might she be about to cut my throat?* He almost grinned at the thought. But Severard chose that moment to step out of the shadows further down the dim hall.

‘Look at the two of you,’ he murmured as he padded towards them. ‘It always amazes me, how love blooms in the least likely places, and between the least likely people. A rose, forcing its way through the stony ground.’ He pressed his hands to his chest. ‘It warms my heart.’

‘Have we got him?’

‘Of course. Soon as he stepped out of the audience chamber.’

Vitari’s hand had gone limp, and Glokta brushed it off and began to shuffle towards the cells. ‘Why don’t you come with us?’ he called over his

shoulder, having to stop himself rubbing the bruised flesh on his arm. ‘You can put this in your next report to Sult.’

Shabbed al Islik Burai looked considerably less majestic sitting down. Particularly in a scarred, stained chair in one of the close and sweaty cells beneath the Citadel.

‘Now isn’t this better, to speak on level terms? Quite disconcerting, having you looming over me like that.’ Islik sneered and looked away, as though talking to Glokta were a task far beneath him. *A rich man, harassed by beggars in the street, but we’ll soon cure him of that illusion.*

‘We know we have a traitor within our walls. Within the ruling council itself. Most likely one of those three worthies to whom you were just now giving your little ultimatum. You will tell me who.’ No response. ‘I am merciful,’ exclaimed Glokta, waving his hand airily, as the ambassador himself had done but a few short minutes before, ‘but my mercy has limits. Speak.’

‘I am here under a flag of parley, on a mission from the Emperor himself! To harm an unarmed emissary would be expressly against the rules of war!’

‘Parley? Rules of war?’ Glokta chuckled. Severard chuckled. Vitari chuckled. Frost was silent. ‘Do they even have those any more? Save that rubbish for children like Vissbruck, that’s not the way grown-ups play the game. Who is the traitor?’

‘I pity you, cripple! When the city falls—’

Save your pity. You’ll need it for yourself. Frost’s fist scarcely made any sound as it sank into the ambassador’s stomach. His eyes bulged out, his mouth hung open, he coughed a dry cough, somewhere close to vomiting, tried to breathe and coughed again.

‘Strange, isn’t it,’ mused Glokta as he watched him struggle for air. ‘Big men, small men, thin men, fat men, clever men, stupid men, they all respond the same to a fist in the guts. One minute you think you’re the most powerful man in the world. The next you can’t even breathe by yourself. Some kinds of power are nothing but tricks of the mind. Your people taught me that, below your Emperor’s palace. There were no rules of war there, I can tell you. You know all about certain engagements, and certain bridges, and certain young officers, so you know that I’ve been just where you are now. There is one difference, however. I was helpless, but you can stop this

unpleasantness at any time. You need only tell me who the traitor is, and you will be spared.'

Islik had got his breath back now. *Though a good deal of his arrogance is gone, one suspects for good.* 'I know nothing of any traitor!'

'Really? Your master the Emperor sends you here to negotiate without all the facts? Unlikely. But if it's true, you really aren't any use to me at all, are you?'

Islik swallowed. 'I know nothing of any traitor.'

'We'll see.'

Frost's big white fist clubbed him in the face. It would have thrown him sideways if the albino's other fist hadn't caught his head before it fell, smashed his nose and knocked him clean over the back of the chair. Frost and Severard dragged him up between them, righted the chair and dumped him gasping into it. Vitari looked on, arms folded.

'All very painful,' said Glokta, 'but pain can be put to one side, if one knows that it will not last long. If it cannot last, say, past sunset. To truly break a man quickly, you have to threaten to deprive him of something. To hurt him in a way that will never heal. I should know.'

'Gah!' squawked the ambassador, thrashing in his chair. Severard wiped his knife on the shoulder of the man's white robe, then tossed his ear onto the table. It lay there, on the wood: a forlorn and bloody half-circle of flesh. Glokta stared at it. *In a baking cell just like this, over the course of long months, the Emperor's servants turned me into this revolting, twisted mockery of a man. One might have hoped that the chance at doing the same to one of them, the chance at cutting out vengeance, pound for pound, would provide some dull flicker of pleasure.* And yet he felt nothing. Nothing but my own pain. He winced as he stretched his leg out and felt the knee click, hissed air through his empty gums. *So why do I do this?*

Glokta sighed. 'Next will come a toe. Then a finger, an eye, a hand, your nose, and so on, do you see? It'll be at least an hour before you're missed, and we are quick workers.' Glokta nodded at the severed ear. 'We could have a pile of your flesh a foot high by that time. I'll carve you until you're nothing but a tongue and a bag of guts, if that's what it takes, but I'll know who the traitor is, that I promise you. Well? Do you know anything yet?'

The ambassador stared at him, breathing hard, dark blood running from his magnificent nose, down his chin, dripping from the side of his head.

Speechless with shock, or thinking on his next move? It hardly matters. 'I grow bored. Start on his hands, Frost.' The albino seized hold of his wrist.

'Wait!' wailed the ambassador, 'God help me, wait! It was Vurms. Korsten dan Vurms, the governor's own son!'

Vurms. Almost too obvious. But then again, the most obvious answers are usually the right ones. That little bastard would sell his own father if he only thought that he could find a buyer—

'And the woman, Eider!'

Glokta frowned. 'Eider? You sure?'

'She planned it! She planned the whole thing!' Glokta sucked slowly at his empty gums. They tasted sour. *An awful sense of disappointment, or an awful sense of having known all along? She was always the only one with the brains, or the guts, or the resources, for treason. A shame. But we know better than to hope for happy endings.*

'Eider and Vurms,' muttered Glokta. 'Vurms and Eider. Our sordid little mystery comes to a close.' He looked up at Frost. 'You know what to do.'

Long Odds

The hill rose out of the grass, a round, even cone like a thing man-made. Strange, this one great mound standing out in the midst of the level plain. Ferro did not trust it. Weathered stones stood in a rough circle around its top and scattered about the slopes, some up on end, some lying on their sides, the smallest no more than knee high, the biggest twice as tall as a man. Dark, bare stones, standing defiant against the wind. Ancient, cold, angry. Ferro frowned at them.

It felt as though they frowned back.

'What is this place?' asked Ninefingers.

Quai shrugged. 'Old is what this place is, terribly old. Older than the Empire itself. Built before the time of Euz, perhaps, when devils roamed the earth.' He grinned. 'Built by devils, for all I know. Who can say? Some temple to forgotten gods? Some tomb?'

'Our tomb,' whispered Ferro.

'What?'

'Good place to stop,' she said out loud. 'Get a look across the plain.'

Ninefingers frowned up at it. 'Alright. We stop.'

Ferro stood on one of the stones, hands on hips, staring out across the plain through narrowed eyes. The wind tore at the grass and made waves from it, like the waves on the sea. It tore at the great clouds too, twisting them, ripping them open, dragging them through the sky. It lashed at Ferro's face, nipped at her eyes, but she ignored it.

Damn wind, just like always.

Ninefingers stood beside her, squinting into the cold sun. 'Anything out there?'

'We are followed.' They were far away, but she could see them. Tiny dots in the far distance. Tiny riders moving on the ocean of grass.

Ninefingers grimaced. 'You sure?'

'Yes. You surprised?'

'No.' He gave up looking and rubbed at his eyes. 'Bad news is never a surprise. Just a disappointment.'

‘I count thirteen.’

‘You can count ’em? I can’t even see ’em. They coming for us?’ She raised her arms. ‘You see anything else out here? Might be that laughing bastard Finnius found some more friends.’

‘Shit.’ He looked down at the cart, drawn up at the base of the hill. ‘We can’t outrun them.’

‘No.’ She curled her lip. ‘You could ask the spirits for their opinion.’

‘So they could tell us what? That we’re fucked?’ Silence for a moment. ‘Better to wait, and fight them here. Bring the cart up to the top. At least we’ve got a hill, and a few rocks to hide behind.’

‘That’s what I was thinking. Gives us some time to prepare the ground.’

‘Alright. We’d best get to it.’

The point of the shovel bit into the ground with the sharp scrape of metal on earth. An all too familiar sound. Digging pits and digging graves. What was the difference?

Ferro had dug graves for all kinds of people. Companions, or as close as she had come to companions. Friends, or as close as she had come to friends. A lover or two, if you could call them that. Bandits, killers, slaves. Whoever hated the Gurkish. Whoever hid in the Badlands, for whatever reason.

Spade up and spade down.

When the fighting is over, you dig, if you are still alive. You gather up the bodies in a line. You dig the graves in a row. You dig for your fallen comrades. Your slashed, your punctured, your hacked and your broken comrades. You dig as deep as you can be bothered, you dump them in, you cover them up, they rot away and are forgotten, and you go on, alone. That’s the way it’s always been.

But here, on this strange hill in the middle of this strange country, there was still time. Still a chance for the comrades to live. That was the difference, and for all her scorn, and her scowls, and her anger, she clung to it as she clung to the spade, desperate tight.

Strange how she never stopped hoping.

‘You dig well,’ said Ninefingers. She squinted up at him, standing over her at the edge of the pit.

‘Lots of practice.’ She dug the spade into the earth beside the hole, planted her hands on the sides and jumped out, sat on the edge with her legs hanging down. Her shirt was stuck to her with sweat, her face was running with it. She wiped her forehead with her dirty hand. He handed her the water-skin and she took it from him, pulled the stopper out with her teeth.

‘How long do we have?’

She sucked a mouthful out of the skin and worked it round, spat it out. ‘Depends how hard they go.’ She took another mouthful and swallowed. ‘They are going hard now. They keep that up, they could be on us late tonight, or maybe dawn tomorrow.’ She handed the skin back.

‘Dawn tomorrow.’ Ninefingers slowly pushed the stopper back in. ‘Thirteen you said, eh?’

‘Thirteen.’

‘And four of us.’

‘Five, if the Navigator comes to help.’

Ninefingers scratched at his jaw. ‘Not very likely.’

‘That apprentice any use in a fight?’

Ninefingers winced. ‘Not much.’

‘How about Luthar?’

‘I’d be surprised if he’s ever thrown a fist in anger, let alone a blade.’

Ferro nodded. ‘Thirteen against two, then.’

‘Long odds.’

‘Very.’

He took a deep breath and stared down into the pit. ‘If you had a mind to run, I can’t say I’d blame you.’

‘Huh,’ she snorted. Strange, but she hadn’t even thought about it. ‘I’ll stick. See how it turns out.’

‘Alright. Good. Can’t say I don’t need you.’

The wind rustled in the grass and sighed against the stones. There were things that should be said at a time like this, Ferro guessed, but she did not know what. She had never had much talk in her.

‘One thing. If I die, you bury me.’ She held her hand out to him. ‘Deal?’

He raised an eyebrow at it. ‘Done.’ It was a long time, she realised, since she touched another person without the purpose of hurting them. It was a strange feeling, his hand gripped in hers, his fingers tight round hers, his

palm pressed against hers. Warm. He nodded at her. She nodded at him. Then they let go.

‘What if we both die?’ he said.

She shrugged. ‘Then the crows can pick us clean. After all, what’s the difference?’

‘Not much,’ he muttered, starting off down the slope. ‘Not much.’

The Road to Victory

West stood by a clump of stunted trees, in the cutting wind, on the high ground above the river Cumnur, and watched the long column move. More accurately, he watched it not move.

The neat blocks of the King's Own, up at the head of Prince Ladisla's army, marched smartly enough. You could tell them from their armour, glinting in the odd ray of pale sun that broke through the ragged clouds, from the bright uniforms of their officers, from the red and golden standards snapping at the front of each company. They were already across the river, formed up in good order, a stark contrast with the chaos on the other side.

The levies had started eagerly, early that morning, no doubt relieved to be leaving the miserable camp behind, but it hadn't been an hour before a man here or a man there, older than the others, or worse shod, had started to lag, and the column had grown ragged. Men slipped and stumbled in the half-frozen muck, cursing and barging into their neighbours, boots tripping on the boots of the man in front. The battalions had twisted, stretched, turned from neat blocks into shapeless blobs, merged with the units in front and behind, until the column moved in great ripples, one group hurrying forward while the next was still, like the segments of some monstrous, filthy earthworm.

As soon as they reached the bridge they had lost all semblance of order. The ragged companies squeezed into that narrow space, shoving and grunting, tired and bad-tempered. Those waiting behind pressed in tighter and tighter, impatient to be across so they could rest, slowing everything down still further with the weight of their bodies. Then a cart, which had no business being there in any case, had lost a wheel halfway across, and the sluggish flow of men over the bridge had become a trickle. No one seemed to know how to move it, or who to get to fix it, and contented themselves with clambering over it, or slithering around it, and holding up the thousands behind.

Quite a press had built up in the mud on this side of the fast-flowing water. Men barged and grumbled shoulder to shoulder, spears sticking up into the air at all angles, surrounded by shouting officers and an ever

increasing detritus of rubbish and discarded gear. Behind them the great snake of shambling men continued its spastic forward movement, feeding ever more soldiers into the confusion before the bridge. There was not the slightest evidence that anyone had even thought about trying to make them stop, let alone succeeded.

All this in column, under no pressure from the enemy, and with a half decent road to march on. West dreaded to imagine trying to manoeuvre them in a battle line, through trees or over broken ground. He jammed his tired eyes shut, rubbed at them with his fingers, but when he opened them the horrifying, hilarious spectacle was still there before him. He hardly knew whether to laugh or cry.

He heard the sound of hooves on the rise behind him. Lieutenant Jalenhorm, big and solid in his saddle. Short on imagination, perhaps, but a fine rider, and a trustworthy man. A good choice for the task that West had in mind.

'Lieutenant Jalenhorm reporting, sir.' The big man turned in his saddle and looked down towards the river. 'Looks like they're having some trouble on the bridge.'

'Doesn't it just. Only the start of our troubles, I fear.'

Jalenhorm grinned down. 'I understand we have the advantage of numbers, and of surprise—'

'As far as numbers go, maybe. Surprise?' West gestured down at the men milling around on the bridge, heard the vague, desperate shouts of their officers. 'This rabble? A blind man would hear us coming from ten miles distance. A blind and a deaf one would probably smell us before we were halfway to battle order. We'll be all day just getting across the river. And that's hardly the worst of our shortcomings. In the area of command, I fear, the gulf between us and our enemy could not possibly be wider. The Prince lives in a dream, and his staff exist only to keep him there, at any price.'

'But surely—'

'The price could be our lives.'

Jalenhorm frowned. 'Come on, West, I hardly want to be going into battle with that thought first on my mind—'

'You won't be going.'

'I won't?'

‘You will pick out six good men from your company, with spare mounts. You will ride as hard as possible for Ostenhorm, then north to Lord Marshal Burr’s camp.’ West reached into his coat and pulled out his letter. ‘You will give him this. You will inform him that Bethod is already behind him with the greater part of his strength, and that Prince Ladisla has most ill-advisedly decided to cross the river Cumnur and give the Northmen battle, directly against the Marshal’s orders.’ West clenched his teeth. ‘Bethod will see us coming from miles away. We are handing the choice of the ground to our enemy, so that Prince Ladisla can appear bold. Boldness is the best policy in war, apparently.’

‘West, surely it’s not that bad?’

‘When you reach Marshal Burr, tell him that Prince Ladisla has almost certainly been defeated, quite possibly destroyed, and the road to Ostenhorm left open. He’ll know what to do.’

Jalenhorm stared down at the letter, reached out to take it, then paused. ‘Colonel, I really wish that you’d send someone else. I should fight—’

‘Your fighting cannot possibly make any real difference, Lieutenant, but your carrying this message might. There is no sentiment in this, believe me. I have no more important task than this one, and you are the man I trust to get it done. Do you understand your orders?’

The big man swallowed, then he took the letter, undid a button and slid it carefully down inside his coat. ‘Of course, sir. I am honoured to carry it.’ He began to turn his horse.

‘There is one more thing.’ West took a deep breath. ‘If I should . . . get myself killed. When this is over, could you carry a message to my sister?’

‘Come on, there’ll be no need for—’

‘I hope to live, believe me, but this is war. Not everyone will. If I don’t come back, just tell Ardee . . .’ He thought about it for a moment. ‘Just tell her I’m sorry. That’s all.’

‘Of course. But I hope you’ll tell her yourself.’

‘So do I. Good luck.’ West held out his hand.

Jalenhorm reached down and squeezed it in his own. ‘And to you.’ He spurred his mount down the rise, away from the river. West watched him go for a minute, then he took a deep breath and set off in the other direction, towards the bridge.

Someone had to get that damn column moving again.

Necessary Evils

The sun was half a shimmering golden disc beyond the land walls, throwing orange light into the hallway down which Glokta shuffled, Practical Frost looming at his shoulder. Through the windows as he passed painfully by he could see the buildings of the city casting long shadows up towards the rock. He could almost tell, at each window that he came to, that the shadows were longer and less distinct, the sun was dimmer and colder. *Soon it would be gone. Soon it will be night.*

He paused for a moment before the doors to the audience chamber, catching his breath, letting the ache in his leg subside, licking at his empty gums. 'Give me the bag, then.'

Frost handed him the sack, put one white hand against the doors. 'You reathy?' he mumbled.

Ready as I'll ever be. 'Let's get on with it.'

General Vissbruck was sitting stiff in his well-starched uniform, jowls bulging slightly over his high collar, hands plucking nervously at each other. Korsten dan Vurms was doing his best to look nonchalant, but his darting tongue betrayed his anxiety. Magister Eider was sitting upright, hands clasped on the table before her, face stern. *All business.* A necklace of large rubies glowed with the last embers of the setting sun. *Didn't take her too long to find some more jewels, I see.*

There was one more member of the gathering, and he showed not the slightest sign of nerves. Nicomo Cosca was lounging against the far wall, not far behind his employer, arms crossed over his black breastplate. Glokta noted that he had a sword at his hip, and a long dagger at the other.

'What's he doing here?'

'This concerns everyone in the city,' said Eider calmly. 'It is too important a decision for you to make alone.'

'So he's going to ensure that you get a fair say, eh?' Cosca shrugged and examined his dirty fingernails. 'And what of the writ, signed by all twelve chairs on the Closed Council?'

'Your paper will not save us from the Emperor's vengeance if the Gurkish take the city.'

‘I see. So you have it in mind to defy me, to defy the Arch Lector, to defy the King?’

‘I have it in mind to hear out the Gurkish emissary, and to consider the facts.’

‘Very well,’ said Glokta. He stepped forwards and upended the bag. ‘Give him your ear.’ Islik’s head dropped onto the table with a hollow clonking sound. It had no expression to speak of, beyond an awful slackness, eyes open and staring off in different directions, tongue lolling slightly. It rolled awkwardly along the beautiful table top, leaving an uneven curve of bloody smears on the brightly polished wood, and came to rest, face up, just in front of General Vissbruck.

A touch theatrical, perhaps, but dramatic. You’d have to give me that. No one can be left in any doubt as to my level of commitment. Vissbruck gawped down at the bloody head on the table before him, his mouth slowly falling further and further open. He started up from his seat and stumbled back, his chair clattering over on the tiles. He raised a shaking finger to point at Glokta.

‘You’re mad! You’re mad! There’ll be no mercy for anyone! Every man, woman, and child in Dagoska! If the city falls now, there’s no hope for any of us!’

Glokta smiled his toothless smile. ‘Then I suggest that every one of you commits themselves wholeheartedly to ensuring that the city does not fall.’ He looked over at Korsten dan Vurms. ‘Unless it’s already too late for that, eh? Unless you’ve already sold the city to the Gurkish, and you can’t go back!’

Vurms’ eyes flickered to the door, to Cosca, to the horrified General Vissbruck, to Frost, hulking ominous in the corner, and finally to Magister Eider, still sitting steely calm and composed. *And our little conspiracy is jerked from the shadows.*

‘He knows!’ screamed Vurms, shoving back his chair and stumbling up, taking a step towards the windows.

‘Clearly he knows.’

‘Then do something, damn it!’

‘I already have,’ said Eider. ‘By now, Cosca’s men will have seized the land walls, bridged your channel, and opened the gates to the Gurkish. The docks, the Great Temple, and even the Citadel itself, are also in their hands.’

There was a faint rattling beyond the door. ‘I do believe that I can hear them now, just outside. I am sorry, Superior Glokta, indeed I am. You have done everything his Eminence could have expected, and more, but the Gurkish will already be pouring into the city. You see that further resistance is pointless.’

Glokta looked up at Cosca. ‘May I retort?’ The Styrian gave a small smile, a stiff bow. ‘Most kind. I hate to disappoint you, but the gates are in the hands of Haddish Kahdia, and several of his most committed priests. He said that he would open them to the Gurkish – what was his phrase – “when God himself commanded it.” Do you have a divine visitation planned?’ It was plain from Eider’s face that she had not. ‘As for the Citadel, it has been seized by the Inquisition, for the safety of his Majesty’s loyal subjects, of course. Those are my Practicals that you can hear outside. As for Master Cosca’s mercenaries—’

‘At their posts on the walls, Superior, as ordered!’ The Styrian snapped his heels together and gave an impeccable salute. ‘They stand ready to repel any assault by the Gurkish.’ He grinned down at Eider. ‘I do apologise that I must leave your service at such a crucial time, Magister, but you understand that I had a better offer.’

There was a stunned pause. Vissbruck could hardly have looked more flabbergasted if he had been struck by lightning. Vurms stared around, wild-eyed. He took one more step back and Frost took a stride towards him. Magister Eider’s face had drained of colour. *And so the chase ends, and the foxes are at bay.*

‘You should hardly be surprised.’ Glokta settled back comfortably in his chair. ‘Nicomo Cosca’s disloyalty is a legend throughout the Circle of the World. There’s hardly a land under the sun in which he hasn’t betrayed an employer.’ The Styrian smiled and bowed once more.

‘It is your wealth,’ muttered Eider, ‘not his disloyalty, that surprises me. Where did you get it?’

Glokta grinned. ‘The world is full of surprises.’

‘You fucking stupid bitch!’ screamed Vurms. His steel was only halfway out before Frost’s white fist crunched into his jaw and flung him senseless against the wall. Almost at the same moment the doors crashed open and Vitari burst into the room, half a dozen Practicals behind her, weapons at the ready.

‘Everything alright?’ she asked.

‘Actually, we’re just finishing up. Take out the rubbish would you, Frost?’

The albino’s fingers closed around Vurms’ ankle and hauled him bodily across the floor and out of the audience chamber. Eider watched his slack face slide across the tiles, then looked up at Glokta. ‘What now?’

‘Now the cells.’

‘Then?’

‘Then we’ll see.’ He snapped his fingers at the Practicals, jerked his thumb towards the door. Two of them tramped round the table, seized the Queen of merchants by her elbows and bundled her impassively out of the room.

‘So,’ asked Glokta, looking over at Vissbruck. ‘Does anyone else wish to accept the ambassador’s offer of surrender?’

The General, who had been standing silently the whole time, snapped his mouth shut, took a deep breath and stood to stiff attention. ‘I am a simple soldier. Of course I will obey any order from his Majesty, or his Majesty’s chosen representative. If the order is to hold Dagoska to the last man, I will give the last drop of my blood to do it. I assure you that I knew nothing of any plot. I acted rashly, perhaps, but at all times honestly, in what I felt were the best interests of—’

Glokta waved his hand. ‘I am convinced. Bored, but convinced.’ *I have already lost half the ruling council today. To lose any more might make me look greedy.* ‘The Gurkish will no doubt make their assault at first light. You should look to our defences, General.’

Vissbruck closed his eyes, swallowed, wiped some sweat from his forehead. ‘You will not regret your faith in me, Superior.’

‘I trust that I will not. Go.’

The General hurried from the room, as though worried that Glokta might change his mind, and the rest of the Practicals followed him. Vitari bent and lifted Vurms’ fallen chair and slid it carefully back under the table.

‘A neat job.’ She nodded slowly to herself. ‘Very neat. I’m happy to say I was right about you all along.’

Glokta snorted. ‘Your approval is worth less to me than you can ever know.’

Her eyes smiled at him above her mask. ‘I didn’t say that I approved. I just said that it was neat,’ and she turned and sauntered out into the hallway.

That only left him and Cosca. The mercenary leaned against the wall, arms folded carelessly across his breastplate, regarding Glokta with a faint smile. He had not moved the whole time.

'You'd do well in Styria, I think. Very . . . ruthless? Is that the word? Anyway,' and he gave a flamboyant shrug, 'I look forward very much to serving with you.' *Until such time as someone offers you more, eh, Cosca?* The mercenary waved a hand at the severed head on the table. 'Would you like me to do something with that?'

'Stick it on the battlements of the land walls, somewhere it can be easily seen. Let the Gurkish understand the strength of our resolve.'

Cosca clicked his tongue. 'Heads on spikes, eh?' He dragged the head off the table by its long beard. 'Never goes out of fashion.'

The doors clicked shut behind him, and Glokta was left alone in the audience chamber. He rubbed at his stiff neck, stretched his stiff leg out beneath the bloody table. *A good day's work, all in all. But the day is over now.* Outside the tall windows, the sun had finally set over Dagoska.

The sky was dark.

Among the Stones

The first traces of dawn were creeping over the plain. A glimmer of light on the undersides of the towering clouds and along the edges of the ancient stones, a muddy flare on the eastern horizon. A sight a man rarely saw, that first grey glow, or one that Jezal had rarely seen anyway. At home he would have been safely in his quarters now, sleeping soundly in a warm bed. None of them had slept last night. They had spent the long, cold hours in silence, sitting in the wind, peering into the dark for shapes out on the plain, and waiting. Waiting for the dawn.

Ninefingers frowned at the rising sun. 'Almost time. Soon they'll be coming.'

'Right,' muttered Jezal numbly.

'Listen to me, now. Stay here, and watch the cart. There's plenty of 'em, and more than likely some will get round the back of us. That's why you're here. You understand?'

Jezal swallowed. His throat was tight with the tension. All he could think about was how unfair it was. How unfair, that he should die so young.

'Alright. Me and her will be round the front of the hill there, in around the stones. Most of 'em will come up that way, I reckon. You get in trouble, you shout for us, but if we don't come, well . . . do what you can. Might be we're busy. Might be we're dead.'

'I'm scared,' said Jezal. He hadn't meant to say it, but it hardly seemed to matter, now.

Ninefingers only nodded, though. 'And me. We're all scared.'

Ferro had a fierce smile on her face as she tightened the straps of her quiver around her chest, pulled the buckle on her sword-belt one notch further, dragged on her archery guard and worked her fingers, twanged at her bow-string, everything neat, and quick, and ready for violence. While she prepared for a fight that would most likely be the death of them all, she looked as Jezal might have done dressing for a night round the taverns of Adua. Yellow eyes shining, excited in the half light, as if she couldn't wait to get started. He had never seen her look happy before. 'She doesn't look scared.' he said.

Ninefingers frowned over at her. ‘Well, maybe not her, but she’s not an example I’d want to follow.’ He watched her for a moment. ‘Sometimes, when someone lives in danger for too long, the only time they feel alive is when death’s breathing on their shoulder.’

‘Right,’ muttered Jezal. The sight of the buckle on his own sword-belt, of the grips of his own steels, so proudly polished, made him feel sick now. He swallowed again. Damn it, but his mouth had never been so full of spit.

‘Try to think about something else.’

‘Like what?’

‘Whatever gets you through it. You got family?’

‘A father, two brothers. I don’t know how much they like me.’

‘Shit on them, then. You got children?’

‘No.’

‘Wife?’

‘No.’ Jezal grimaced. He had done nothing with his life but play cards and make enemies. No one would miss him.

‘A lover then? Don’t tell me there ain’t a girl waiting.’

‘Well, maybe . . .’ But he did not doubt that Ardee would already have found someone else. She had never seemed overly sentimental. Perhaps he should have offered to marry her when he had the chance. At least then someone might have wept for him. ‘What about you?’ he mumbled.

‘What? A family?’ Ninefingers frowned, rubbing grimly at the stump of his middle finger. ‘I did have one. And now I’ve got another. You don’t pick your family, you take what you’re given and you make the best of it.’ He pointed at Ferro, then at Quai. ‘You see her, and him, and you?’ He slapped his hand down on Jezal’s shoulder. ‘That’s my family now, and I don’t plan on losing a brother today, you understand?’

Jezal nodded slowly. You don’t pick your family. You make the best of it. Ugly, stupid, stinking, strange, it hardly seemed to matter now. Ninefingers held out his hand, and Jezal gripped it in his own, as hard as he could.

The Northman grinned. ‘Luck then, Jezal.’

‘And to you.’

Ferro knelt beside one of the pitted stones, her bow in one hand, an arrow nocked and ready. The wind made patterns in the tall grass on the plain below, whipped at the shorter grass on the slope of the hill, plucked at the

flights of the seven arrows stuck into the earth in front of her in a row. Seven arrows was all she had left.

Nothing like enough.

She watched them ride up to the base of the hill. She watched them climb from their horses, staring upwards. She watched them tighten the buckles on their scuffed leather armour, ready their weapons. Spears, swords, shields, a bow or two. She counted them. Thirteen. She had been right.

But that wasn't much of a comfort.

She recognised Finnius, laughing and pointing up at the stones. Bastard. She would shoot him first, if she got the chance, but there was no point risking a shot at this range. They would be coming soon. Crossing the open ground, struggling uphill.

She could shoot them then.

They began to spread out, peering up at the stones over the tops of their shields, their boots rustling in the long grass below. They had not seen her yet. There was one at the front without a shield, pounding up the slope with a fierce grin on his face, a bright sword in each hand.

She drew the string back, unhurried, felt it dig reassuringly into her chin. The arrow took him in the centre of his chest, right through his leather breastplate. He sank to his knees, wincing and gasping. He pushed himself up with one of his swords, took a lurching step. Her second arrow stuck into his body just above the first and he fell to his knees again, dribbled bloody spit onto the hillside, then rolled onto his back.

But there were plenty more, and still coming on. The nearest one was hunched down behind a big shield, pressing slowly up the slope with it held in front of him, trying not to expose a single inch of flesh. Her arrow thudded into the edge of the heavy wood.

'Ssss,' she hissed, snatching another shaft from the earth. She drew back the string again, taking careful aim.

'Argh!' he cried, as the arrow stuck him through his exposed ankle. The shield faltered and wobbled, drifted to the side.

Her next shaft arced through the air and caught him cleanly through the neck, just above the shield rim. Blood bubbled down his skin, his eyes went wide and he toppled backwards, the shield sliding down the slope after him with her wasted arrow sticking from it.

But that one had taken too long, and too many shafts. They were well up the hillside now, halfway to the first stones, zig-zagging left and right. She snatched her last two arrows from the earth and slithered through the grass, up the slope. That was all she could do, for now. Ninefingers would have to look after himself.

Logen waited, his back pressed against the stone, trying to keep his breathing quiet. He watched Ferro crawl further up the hill, away from him.

'Shit,' he muttered. Outnumbered and in trouble, yet again. He had known this would happen from the first moment he took charge. It always did. Well. He'd fought his way out of scrapes before, and he would fight his way out of this one now. Say one thing for Logen Ninefingers, say he's a fighter.

He heard hurrying footsteps in the grass, and breathless grunting. A man labouring up the hill, just to the left of the stone. Logen held his sword by his right side, fingered the hard metal of the grip, clenched his jaws together. He saw the point of the man's spear wobble past, then his shield.

He stepped out with a fighting roar, swinging the sword round in a great wide circle. It chopped deep into the man's shoulder and opened a huge gash across his chest, spraying blood into the air, lifting him off his feet and sending him crashing down the hill, flopping over and over.

'Still alive!' Logen panted as he sprinted away up the slope. A spear whistled past and sank into the turf beside him as he slid in behind the next stone. A poor effort, but they'd have plenty more. He peered round the edge. He saw quick shapes, rushing from rock to rock. He licked his lips and hefted the Maker's sword. There was blood on the dark blade now, blood on the silver letter near the hilt. But there was much more work to do.

He came up the hillside towards her, peering over the top of his shield, ready to block an arrow if it came. No way to get at him from here, he was watching too hard.

She ducked away behind the stone and slipped into the shallow trench she had dug, started crawling. She came up to the far end, just behind another great rock. She edged round behind it and peered out. She could see him, his side to her, creeping up carefully towards the stone where she had been hiding. It seemed that God was feeling generous today.

Towards her, if not towards him.

The shaft buried itself in his side, just above his waist. He stumbled, stared down at it. She pulled out her last arrow and nocked it. He was trying to pull the first one out when the second one stuck him in the middle of his chest. Right through the heart, she guessed, from the way he fell.

The arrows were gone. Ferro tossed her bow away and drew out the Gurkish sword.

It was time to get close.

Logen stepped round one of the stones and found himself looking straight into a face, close enough almost to feel its breath on his cheek. A young face. A good-looking one, with clean skin and a sharp nose, wide open brown eyes. Logen smashed his forehead into it. The head snapped back and the young man stumbled, enough time for Logen to pull his knife from his belt with his left hand. He let go of his sword, grabbed the edge of the man's shield and tore it out of the way. Brown Eyes' head came up again, blood bubbling from his broken nose, snarling as he pulled back his sword arm for a thrust.

Logen grunted as he stabbed the knife into the man's body. Once, twice, three times. Hard, fast, underhand thrusts that half lifted him off his feet. Blood leaked out from the holes in his guts and over Logen's hands. He groaned, dropped his sword, started to slide down the stone, his legs giving way, and Logen watched him go. A choice between killing and dying is no choice at all. You have to be realistic about these things.

The man sat in the grass, holding his bloody stomach. He looked up at Logen.

'Guh,' he grunted. 'Gurruh.'

'What?'

Nothing else. His brown eyes were glassy.

'Come on!' screamed Ferro. 'Come on, you fucking son of a whore!' She squatted on the grass, ready to spring.

He did not speak her language, but he got the gist. His spear arced spinning through the air. Not a bad throw. She moved to the side and it clattered away into the stones.

She laughed at him and he came charging – a big, bald, bull of a man. Fifteen strides away and she could see the grain on the handle of his axe.

Twelve strides, and she could see the creases on his snarling face, the lines at the corners of his eyes, across the bridge of his nose. Eight strides, and she could see the scratches on his leather breastplate. Five strides, and he raised his axe high. ‘Thaargh!’ he squealed as the grass in front of her suddenly collapsed beneath his feet and he pitched flailing into one of the pits, the weapon flying from his hand.

Should have watched where he stepped.

She sprang forward hungrily, swinging the sword without looking. He yelled as the heavy blade bit deep into his shoulder, squealed and gibbered, trying to get away, scrambling at the loose earth. The sword chopped a hole in the top of his head and he gurgled, thrashed, slid down into the bottom of the pit. The grave. His grave.

He did not deserve one, but never mind. She could drag him out later, and let him rot on the hillside.

He was a big bastard, this one. A great, fat giant of a man, half a head taller than Logen. He had a huge club, big as half a tree, but he threw it around easily enough, shouting and roaring like a madman, little eyes rolling with fury in his pudgy face. Logen dodged and tottered between the stones. Not easy, trying to keep one eye on the ground behind him and one on that huge flailing tree limb. Not easy. Something was bound to go wrong.

Logen stumbled on something. The boot of the brown-eyed man he’d killed a minute before. There’s justice for you. He righted himself just in time to see the giant’s fist crack him in the mouth. He waddled, dizzy, spitting blood. He saw the club swinging at him and he leaped back. Not far enough. The very tip of the great lump of wood clipped Logen’s thigh and nearly dragged him off his feet. He staggered against one of the stones, squawking and dribbling and grimacing from the pain, fumbled his sword and nearly stabbed himself with it, snatched it up just in time to tumble and fall on his back as the club smashed away a great chunk of rock beside him.

The giant lifted his club high over his head, bellowing like a bull. A fearsome move, perhaps, but not a clever one. Logen sat up and stabbed him through his gut, the dark blade sliding right up to the hilt almost, clean through his back. The club dropped from his hands and thudded on the turf behind him, but with some last desperate effort he leaned down, grabbed

hold of a fistful of Logen's shirt and hauled him close, roaring and baring his bloody teeth. He started to raise his great ham of a fist.

Logen pulled the knife out of his boot and rammed the blade into the side of the giant's neck. He looked surprised, for just a moment, then blood dribbled from his mouth and down his chin. He let go of Logen's shirt, stumbled back, spun slowly round, bounced off one of the stones and crashed on his face. Seemed that Logen's father had been right. You can never have too many knives.

Ferro heard the bow string, but by then it was too late. She felt the arrow pierce her through the back of her shoulder, and when she looked down she could see the point sticking out the front of her shirt. It made her arm numb. Dark blood leaked out into the dirty cloth. She hissed to herself as she ducked behind one of the stones.

She still had the sword though, and one good arm to use it. She slithered round the rock, the rough surface scraping at her back, listening. She could heard the archer's footfalls in the grass, searching for her, the soft ringing as he drew a blade. She saw him now, his back to her, looking right and left.

She jumped at him with the sword, but he turned in time and caught the blade on his own. They crashed down into the grass together and rolled over in a tangle. He scrambled up, thrashing and screaming, clutching at his bloody face. The arrow sticking from her shoulder had stabbed him through the eye as they struggled on the floor.

Lucky for her.

She sprang forward and the Gurkish sword chopped his foot out from under him. He screamed again, falling onto his side, mangled leg flopping. He was just pushing himself up when the curved blade hacked halfway through his neck from behind. Ferro scrambled through the grass, away from the body, her left arm hanging nearly useless, her right fist gripped tight around the grip of the sword.

Looking for more work.

Finnius moved this way and that, dancing around, light on his feet. He had a big square shield on his left arm, a short, thick sword in the other hand. He twirled it around as he moved, watery sun flashing on the edge, grinning all the while, long hair flapping round his face in the wind.

Logen was too tired to move much, so he just stood there and caught his breath, the Maker's sword hanging down by his side.

'What happened to your sorcerer?' grinned Finnius. 'No tricks this time, eh?'

'No tricks.'

'Well, you've led us a merry dance, I'll give you that, but we got here in the end.'

'Got where?' Logen looked down at the corpse of the brown-eyed man, sat against the stone beside him. 'If this was what you wanted you could have killed yourselves days ago and saved me the trouble.'

Finnius frowned. 'You'll find I'm made of different stuff from these fools, Northman.'

'We're all made of the same stuff. I don't need to carve another body to find that out.' Logen stretched his neck out, hefted the Maker's sword in his hand. 'But if you're set on showing me your contents, I'll not disappoint you.'

'Alright, then!' Finnius started forward. 'If you're that keen to see hell!'

He came on fast and hard, the shield up in front of him, herding Logen through the stones, jabbing and chopping quick with the sword. Logen stumbled back, short of breath, looking for an opening but not finding one.

The shield barged into his chest and knocked his breath out, pressed him back. He tried to dodge away but he lurched on his weak leg, and the short sword darted out and caught him across the arm. 'Gah!' squawked Logen, staggering against a stone, drops of blood pattering from the cut into the grass.

'One to me!' chuckled Finnius, dancing sideways and waving his sword around.

Logen stood and watched him, breathing hard. The shield was a big one and this smiling bastard used it well. Gave him quite the advantage. He was quick, no doubt. Quicker than Logen, now, with a bad leg, a cut arm and a thick head from a punch in the mouth. Where was the Bloody-Nine when you wanted him? Logen spat on the ground. This fight he'd have to win alone.

He edged back, stooping more and panting harder than he needed to, letting his arm dangle as if it was useless, blood dripping from his limp fingers, blinking and wincing. He edged back past the stones into a space

with more room. A nice wide space, where he could get a decent swing. Finnius followed him, shield held up in front. ‘That it?’ he grinned as he came on. ‘Already fading, eh? I can’t say I’m not disappointed, I was hoping for a—’

Logen roared, springing suddenly forward and lifting the Maker’s sword above his head in both hands. Finnius scrambled back, but not quite far enough. The grey blade tore a chunk from the corner of his shield, sliced clean through and chopped deep into the side of one of the stones with a mighty clang, sending chips of rock spinning. The impact nearly tore the sword from Logen’s hands, sent him flailing sideways.

Finnius groaned. Blood was running from a cut on his shoulder, a cut right through his leather armour and into the flesh. The tip of the sword must have gashed him as it passed. Not deep enough to kill, unfortunately, but deep enough to make the point alright.

It was Logen’s turn to grin. ‘That it?’

They moved at the same moment. The two blades clanged together, but Logen’s grip was the stronger. Finnius’ sword twittered as it spun from his hand and away down the hillside. He gasped, snatching at his belt for a dagger, but before he could get there Logen was on him, growling and grunting as he chopped mindlessly away at the shield, hacking great scars in the wood and sending splinters flying, driving Finnius stumbling away. One last blow crashed into the shield and he staggered from the force of it, tripped over the corner of a fallen stone poking through the grass and tumbled onto his back. Logen gritted his teeth and swung the Maker’s sword down.

It sliced clean through the greave on Finnius’ shin and took his foot off just above the ankle, splattering blood into the grass. He dragged himself backwards, started to scramble up, shrieked as he tried to put his weight on his missing foot, dropped onto the stump and sprawled on his back again, coughing and groaning.

‘My foot!’ he wailed.

‘Put it out of your mind,’ growled Logen, kicking the dead thing out of his way and stepping forward.

‘Wait!’ gurgled Finnius, shoving himself back through the grass with his good leg towards one of the standing stones, leaving a bloody trail behind him.

‘For what?’

‘Just wait!’ He dragged himself up the rock, hopped on his remaining foot, cringing away. ‘Wait!’ he screamed.

Logen’s sword caught the inside rim of the shield, tore the straps away from Finnius’ limp arm and flung it bouncing down the slope on its chewed-up edge. Finnius gave a desperate wail and pulled out his knife, poised himself on his one good leg to lunge. Logen chopped a great gash in his chest. Blood sprayed out and showered down his breastplate. His eyes bulged, he opened his mouth wide but all that came out was a gentle wheeze. The dagger dropped from his fingers and fell silently into the grass. He slid sideways and dropped onto his face.

Back to the mud with that.

Logen stood, and blinked, and breathed. The cut on his arm was starting to sting like fire, his leg was aching, his breath was coming in ragged gasps. ‘Still alive,’ he muttered to himself. ‘Still alive.’ He closed his eyes for a moment.

‘Shit,’ he gasped. The others. He started to hobble back up the slope towards the summit.

The arrow in her shoulder had made her slow. Her shirt was wet with blood and she was getting thirsty, and stiff, and sluggish. He slid out from behind one of the stones, and before she knew it he was on her.

There was no room to use the sword any longer, so she let it drop. She made a grab for her knife but he caught her by the wrist, and he was strong. He threw her back against the stone and her head cracked against it, made her dizzy for a moment. She could see a muscle trembling under his eye, the black pores on his nose, the fibres standing out on his neck.

She twisted and struggled, but his weight bore down on her. She snarled and spat, but even Ferro’s strength was not endless. Her arms trembled, her elbows bent. His hand found her throat, and tightened round it. He muttered something through clenched teeth, squeezing and squeezing. She could not breathe any longer, and the strength was ebbing out of her.

Then, through her half-closed eyes, she saw a hand slither round his face from behind. A big, pale, three-fingered hand, caked with dry blood. A big, pale forearm followed it, and another, from the other side, folding his head tightly. He wriggled, and struggled, but there was no escape. The thick

sinews flexed and squirmed under the skin and the pale fingers dug into his face, dragging his head back and to the side, further and further. He let go of Ferro, and she sagged against the stone, sucking in air. He scrabbled uselessly at the arms with his fingernails. He made a long, strange hissing sound as his head was twisted relentlessly round.

'Ssssss . . .' Crunch.

The arms let go and he crumpled on the floor, head hanging. Ninefingers stood behind. There was dry blood across his face, blood on his hands, blood soaked through his torn clothes. His face was pale and twitchy, streaked with dirt and sweat.

'You alright?'

'About like you,' she croaked. 'Any left?'

He put one hand on the stone beside her and leaned over, spat blood out onto the grass. 'Don't know. Couple, maybe.'

She squinted up at the summit of the hill. 'Up there?' 'Could be.'

She bent and snatched the curved sword up from the grass, started to limp up the slope, using it like a crutch. She heard Ninefingers struggling after her.

For some minutes now, Jezal had heard occasional shouting, screaming, and clashing of metal on metal. Everything was vague and distant, filtering to his ears through the blustering wind across the hilltop. He had no clue what was happening beyond the circle of stones at the hill's summit, and he was not sure he wanted to know. He strode up and down, his hands opening and closing, and all the while Quai sat on the cart, looking down at Bayaz, silent and infuriatingly calm.

It was then that he saw it. A man's head, rising up over the brow of the hill between two tall stones. Next came his shoulders, then his chest. Another appeared not far away. A second man. Two killers, advancing up the slope towards him.

One of them had piggy eyes and a heavy jaw. The other was thinner, with a tangled thatch of fair hair. They moved cautiously up onto the summit of the hill until they stood within the circle of stones, examining Jezal, and Quai, and the cart with no particular urgency.

Jezal had never fought two men at once before. He had never fought to the death before either, but he tried not to think about that. This was simply

a fencing match. Nothing new. He swallowed, and drew his steels. The metal rang reassuringly as it slid out, the familiar weight in his palms was a small comfort. The two men stared at him and Jezal stared back, trying to remember what Ninefingers had told him.

Try to look weak. That, at least, did not present much difficulty. He did not doubt that he appeared suitably scared. It was the most he could do not to turn and run. He backed slowly away towards the cart, licking his lips with a nervousness that was anything but feigned.

Never take an enemy lightly. He looked them over, these two. Strong-looking men, well equipped. They both wore armour of rigid leather, carried square shields. One had a short sword, the other an axe with a heavy blade. Deadly-looking weapons, well worn. Taking them lightly was hardly his problem. They spread out, moving round to either side of him, and he watched them go.

The time comes to act, you strike with no backward glances. The one on Jezal's left came at him. He saw the man snarl, saw him rear up, saw the great unwieldy backswing. It was an absurdly simple matter for him to step out of the way and let it thud into the turf beside him. On an instinct he thrust with his short steel and buried it in the man's side up to the hilt, between his breastplate and his backplate, just under his bottom rib. Even as Jezal was ripping the blade back he was ducking under the other's axe and whipping his long steel across at neck height. He danced past them and spun around, steels held ready, waiting for the referee's call.

The one he had stabbed staggered a step or two, wheezing and grabbing at his side. The other stood there, swaying, his piggy eyes bulging, his hand clutched to his neck. Blood began to pour out between his fingers from his slit throat. They fell almost at the same time, face down, right next to each other.

Jezal frowned at the blood on his long steel. He frowned at the two corpses he had made. Almost without thinking he had killed two men. He should have felt guilty, but he felt numb. No. He felt proud. He felt exhilarated! He looked up at Quai, watching him calmly from the back of the cart.

'I did it,' he muttered, and the apprentice nodded slowly. 'I did it!' he shouted, waving his bloody short steel in the air.

Quai frowned, and then his eyes went wide. ‘Behind you!’ he shouted, half jumping up out of his seat. Jezal turned, bringing up his steels, saw something moving out of the very corner of his eye.

There was a mighty crunching and his head exploded with brilliant light.

Then all was darkness.

The Fruits of Boldness

The Northmen stood on the hill, a thin row of dark figures with the white sky behind them. It was still early, and the sun was nothing more than a bright smear among thick clouds. Patches of half-melted snow were scattered cold and dirty in the hollows of the valley sides, a thin layer of mist was still clinging to the valley floor.

West watched that row of black shapes, and frowned. He did not like the flavour of this. Too many for a scouting, or a foraging party, far too few to mount any challenge, and yet they stayed there on the high ground, watching calmly as Ladisla's army continued its interminable, clumsy deployment in the valley beneath them.

The Prince's staff, and a small detachment of his guards, had made their headquarters on a grassy knoll opposite the Northmen's hill. It had seemed a fine, dry spot when the scouts found it early that morning, well below the enemy perhaps, but still high enough to get a good view of the valley. Since then the passage of thousands of sliding boots, squashing hooves, and churning cartwheels, had ground the wet earth to sticky black muck. West's own boots and those of the other men around were caked with it, their uniforms spattered with it. Even Prince Ladisla's pristine whites had acquired a few smears.

A couple of hundred strides ahead, on lower ground, was the centre of the Union battle line. Four battalions of the King's Own infantry formed the backbone, each one a neat block of bright red cloth and dull steel, looking at this distance as though they had been positioned with a giant ruler. In front of them were a few thin ranks of flatbowmen in their leather jerkins and steel caps; behind were the cavalry, dismounted for the time being, the riders looking strangely ungainly in full armour. Spread out to either side were the haphazard shapes of the levy battalions, with their assortment of mismatched equipment, their officers bellowing and waving their arms, trying to get the gaps to close up, the skewed ranks to straighten, like sheepdogs barking at a flock of wayward sheep.

Ten thousand men, perhaps, all told. Every one of them, West knew, was looking up at that thin screen of Northmen, no doubt with the same nervous

mixture of fear and excitement, curiosity and anger that he was feeling at his first sight of the enemy.

They hardly seemed too fearsome through his eye-glass. Shaggy-headed men, dressed in ragged hides and furs, gripping primitive looking weapons. Just what the least imaginative members of the Prince's staff might have been expecting. They scarcely looked like any part of the army that Threetrees had described, and West did not like that. There was no way of knowing what was on the far side of that hill, no reason for those men to be there but to distract them, or draw them on. Not everyone shared his doubts, however.

'They mock us!' snapped Smund, squinting up through his own eye-glass. 'We should give them a taste of Union lances! A swift charge and our horsemen will sweep that rabble aside and carry that hill!' He spoke almost as if the carrying of that hill, irrelevant except for the fact that the Northmen were standing on it, would bring the campaign to a swift and glorious conclusion.

West could do nothing but grit his teeth and shake his head, as he had done a hundred times already today. 'They have the high ground,' he explained, taking care to speak slowly and patiently. 'Poor terrain for a charge, and they may have support. Bethod's main body, for all we know, just over the rise.'

'They look like nothing more than scouts,' muttered Ladisla.

'Looks can lie, your Highness, and that hill is worthless. Time is with us. Marshal Burr will be marching to our aid, while Bethod can expect no help. We have no reason to seek a battle now.'

Smund snorted. 'No reason except that this is a war, and the enemy stand before us on Union soil! You are always carping on the poor state of the men's morale, Colonel!' He jabbed his finger up at the hill. 'What could be more damaging to their spirits than to sit idle in the face of the enemy?'

'A sharp and purposeless defeat?' growled West.

It was an unfortunate chance that one of the Northmen chose that moment to loose an arrow down into the valley. A tiny black sliver sailed up into the sky. It came only from a shortbow. Even with the advantage of height the shaft plopped down harmlessly into open ground a hundred strides or more from the front lines. A singularly pointless gesture, but its effect on Prince Ladisla was immediate.

He abandoned his folding field chair and leaped to his feet. ‘Damn them!’ he cursed, ‘they are mocking us! Issue orders!’ He strode up and down, shaking his fist. ‘Have the cavalry form up for a charge immediately!’

‘Your Highness, I urge you to reconsider—’

‘Damn it, West!’ The heir to the throne hurled his hat down on the muddy ground. ‘You oppose me at every turn! Would your friend Colonel Glokta have hesitated with the enemy before him?’

West swallowed. ‘Colonel Glokta was captured by the Gurkish, and caused the deaths of every man under his command.’ He bent slowly and picked up the hat, offered it respectfully up to the Prince, wondering all the while whether he had just brought his career to an abrupt end.

Ladisla ground his teeth, breathing hard through his nose, snatched the hat out of West’s hand. ‘I have made my decision! Mine is the burden of command, and mine alone!’ He turned back towards the valley. ‘Sound the charge!’

West felt suddenly, terribly tired. It seemed he scarcely had the strength to stand as the confident bugle call rang out in the crisp air, as the horsemen struggled into their saddles, eased forward between the blocks of infantry, trotted down the gentle slope, lances up. They broke into a gallop as they crossed the valley floor, half-obscured in a sea of mist, the thunder of their hoof-beats echoing round the valley. A few scattered arrows fell among them, glancing harmlessly from their heavy armour as they streamed forward. They began to lose momentum as they hit the upward slope, their lines breaking as they pushed on over the gorse and the broken ground, but the sight of all that weight of steel and horseflesh had its effect on the Northmen above. Their ragged line began to waver, then to break. They turned tail and fled, some of them tossing away their weapons as they disappeared over the brow of the hill.

‘That’s the damn recipe!’ yelled Lord Smund. ‘Drive ’em, damn it! Drive ’em!’

‘Ride them down!’ laughed Prince Ladisla, tearing off his hat again and waving it in the air. A scattering of cheers floated up from the levies in the valley, over the distant hammering of hooves.

‘Drive them,’ muttered West, clenching his fists. ‘Please.’

The riders crested the ridge and gradually disappeared from view. Silence fell over the valley. A long, strange, unexpected silence. A few crows circled

overhead, croaking their harsh calls to one another. West would have given anything for their view of the battlefield. The tension was almost unbearable. He strode back and forth while the long minutes stretched out, and still no sign.

'Taking their time, eh?'

Pike was standing right next to him, his daughter just behind. West winced and looked away. He still found it somehow painful to look at that burned face for long, especially coming on him sudden and unannounced. 'What are you two doing here?'

The convict shrugged his shoulders. 'There's plenty for a smith to do before a battle. Even more after it. Not much while the fighting's happening, though.' He grinned, slabs of burned flesh folding up like leather on one side of his face. 'Thought I'd take a look at Union arms in action. Besides, what safer place could there be than the Prince's headquarters?'

'Don't mind us,' muttered Cathil, a thin smile on her face, 'we'll make sure to keep out of your way.'

West frowned. If that was a reference to his being constantly in their way he was in no mood to enjoy it. There was still no sign of the cavalry.

'Where the hell are they?' snapped Smund.

The Prince took a break from chewing down his fingernails. 'Give 'em time, Lord Smund, give 'em time.'

'Why doesn't this mist dry up?' murmured West. There was enough sunlight breaking through the clouds now, but the mist only seemed to be thickening, creeping up the valley towards the archers. 'Damn mist, it'll work against us.'

'That's them!' yelled one of the Prince's staff, shrill with excitement, finger stretched out rigid towards the crest of the hill.

West raised his eye-glass, breathless, scanned quickly across the green line. He saw the spear-points, stiff, and regular, rising slowly over the brow. He felt a surge of relief. Rarely had he been happier to be proved wrong.

'It's them!' yelled Smund, grinning broadly. 'They're back! What did I tell you? They're . . .' Helmets appeared beneath the spear-points, and then mailed shoulders. West felt the relief seeping away, horror creeping up his throat. An organised body of armoured men, their round shields painted with faces, and animals, and trees, and a hundred other patterns, no two

alike. More men appeared over the crest of the hill to either side of them. More mailed figures.

Bethod's Carls.

They halted just beyond the highest point of the hill. A scattering of men came forward from the even ranks, knelt in the short grass.

Ladisla lowered his eye-glass. 'Are those . . . ?'

'Flatbows,' muttered West.

The first volley drifted up, gently almost, a shifting grey cloud of bolts, like a flock of well trained birds. They were silent for a moment, then the angry rattling of the bow strings reached West's ears. The bolts began to drop towards the Union lines. They fell among the King's Own, clattered down onto their heavy shields, their heavy armour. There were some cries, a few gaps appeared in their lines.

The mood in the headquarters had turned, in the space of a minute, from brash confidence, to mute surprise, to stupefied dismay. 'They have flatbows?' someone spluttered. West stared at the archers on the hill through his eye-glass, slowly cranking back their bowstrings, pulling bolts from their quivers, fitting them into position. The range had been well judged. Not only did they have flatbows, but they knew how to use them. West hurried over to Prince Ladisla, who was gaping at a wounded man being carried, head lolling, from between the ranks of the King's Own.

'Your Highness, we must advance and close the distance so that our archers can return fire, or withdraw to higher ground!' Ladisla only stared at him, giving no sign that he had heard, let alone understood. A second volley arced down into the infantry in front of them. This time it fell among the levies, a unit without shields or armour. Holes opened up all across the ragged formation, holes filled by the rising mist, and the whole battalion seemed to groan and waver. Some wounded man began to make a thin, animal screeching, and would not stop. 'Your Highness, do we advance, or withdraw?'

'I . . . we . . .' Ladisla gaped over at Lord Smund, but for once the young nobleman was at a loss for words. He looked even more stupefied than the Prince, if that was possible. Ladisla's lower lip trembled. 'How . . . I . . . Colonel West, what is your opinion?'

The temptation to remind the Crown Prince that his was the burden of command, and his alone, was almost overpowering, but West bit his tongue.

Without some sense of purpose, this rag-tag army might swiftly dissolve. Better to do the wrong thing, than nothing at all. He turned to the nearest bugler. ‘Sound the retreat!’ he roared.

The bugles called the withdrawal: blaring, discordant. Hard to believe they were the same instruments that had so brazenly called the charge just a few short minutes before. The battalions began to edge slowly backwards. Another volley fell among the levies, and another. Their formations were beginning to come apart, men hurrying backwards to escape the murderous fire, stumbling over each other, ranks dissolving into mobs, the air full of shrieks and confusion. West could scarcely tell where the next set of flatbow bolts fell, the mist had risen so high. The Union battalions had become nothing more than wobbling spears and the odd insubstantial helmet above a grey cloud. Even here, high up among the baggage, the mist was curling round West’s ankles.

Up on the hill the Carls began to move. They thrust their weapons in the air and clashed them against their painted shields. They gave a great shout, but not the deep roar that West might have expected. Instead, a weird and chilling howl floated over the valley, a keening wail that cut through the rattling and scraping of metal and into the ears of those watching, down below. A mindless, a furious, a primitive sound. A sound made by monsters, not by men.

Prince Ladisla and his staff gawped at one another, and stuttered, and stared, as the Carls began to tramp down the hill, rank upon rank of them, towards the thickening mist in the valley’s bottom where the Union troops were still blindly trying to pull back. West shouldered his way through the frozen officers to the bugler.

‘Battle lines!’

The lad turned from staring at the advancing Northmen to staring at West, his bugle hanging from his nerveless fingers.

‘Lines!’ roared a voice from behind. ‘Form lines!’ It was Pike, bellowing loud enough to match any drill sergeant. The bugler snapped his instrument to his lips and blew lines for all he was worth. Answering calls echoed through the mist, risen up all around them, now. Muffled bugles, muffled shouts.

‘Halt and form up!’

‘Form lines now, lads!’

‘Prepare!’

‘Steady!’

A chorus of rattles and clanks came through the murk. Men moving in armour, spears being set, swords drawn, calls from man to man and from unit to unit. Above all, growing steadily louder, the unearthly howling of the Northmen as they began their charge, surging down from the high ground and into the valley. West felt a chill in his own blood, even with a hundred strides of earth and a few thousand armed men between him and the enemy. He could well imagine the fear those in the front lines were feeling now, as the shapes of the Carls began to rise out of the mist before them, screaming their war cries with their weapons held high.

There was no sound that signified the moment of contact. The clattering grew louder and louder, the shouts and the howls were joined by high-pitched cries, low-pitched growls, shrieks of pain or rage mixed into the terrifying din with ever greater frequency. Nobody in the headquarters spoke. Every man, West among them, was peering into the murk, straining with every sense to get some hint of what might be happening just before them in the valley.

‘There!’ someone shouted. A faint figure was moving through the gloom ahead. All eyes were fixed on it as it took shape before them. A young, breathless, mud-splattered and highly confused lieutenant. ‘Where the hell is the headquarters?’ he shouted as he stumbled up the slope towards them.

‘This is it.’

The man gave West a flamboyant salute. ‘Your Highness—’

‘I am Ladisla,’ snapped the real Prince. The man turned, bewildered, began to salute once more. ‘Speak your message, man!’

‘Of course, sir, your Highness, Major Bodzin has sent me to tell you that his battalion is heavily engaged, and . . .’ he was still gasping for breath, ‘he needs reinforcement.’

Ladisla stared at the young man as though he had been speaking in a foreign language. He looked at West. ‘Who is Major Bodzin?’

‘Commander of the first battalion of the Stariksa levies, your Highness, on our left wing.’

‘Left wing, I see . . . er . . .’

A semi-circle of brightly dressed staff officers had congealed around the breathless lieutenant. ‘Tell the Major to hold!’ shouted one of them.

‘Yes!’ said Ladisla, ‘tell your Major to hold, and to, er, to drive back the enemy. Yes indeed!’ He was warming to his role now. ‘To drive them back, and to fight to the last man! Tell Major Clodzin that help is on the way. Most definitely . . . on the way!’ And the Prince strode off manfully.

The young Lieutenant turned, peered into the murk. ‘Which way is my unit?’ he muttered.

More figures were already beginning to take form. Running figures, scrambling through the mud, panting for breath. Levies, West saw straight away, broken from the backs of crumbling units as soon as they had made contact with the enemy. As though there had ever been any chance that they would stand for long.

‘Cowardly dogs!’ cursed Smund at their receding backs. ‘Get back here!’ He might as well have given orders to the mist. Everyone was running: deserters, adjutants, messengers seeking for help, for direction, for reinforcement. The first wounded too. Some were limping under their own power, or using broken spears for crutches, some were half-carried by comrades. Pike started forward to help a pale fellow with a flatbow bolt sticking from his shoulder. Another casualty was dragged past on a stretcher, muttering to himself. His left arm was off just below the elbow, oozing blood through a tightly bound stretch of dirty cloth.

Ladisla looked greasy pale. ‘I have a headache. I must sit down. What has become of my field chair?’

West chewed at his lip. He had no inkling of what to do. Burr had sent him with Ladisla for his experience, but he was every bit as clueless as the Prince. Every plan relied on being able actually to see the enemy, or at any rate one’s own positions. He stood there, frozen, as useless and frustrated as a blind man in a fist fight.

‘What is happening, damn it!’ The Prince’s voice cut across the din, shrill and petulant. ‘Where did this damn mist come from? I demand to know what is happening! Colonel West! Where is the Colonel? What is going on out there?’

If only he had been able to provide an answer. Men stumbled and darted and charged through the muddy headquarters, apparently at random. Faces loomed up from the mist and were gone, faces full of fear, confusion, determination. Runners with garbled messages or garbled orders, soldiers

with bloody wounds or no weapons. Disembodied voices floated on the cold air, speaking over one another, anxious, hurried, panicked, agonised.

'. . . Our regiment has made contact with the enemy, and are falling back, or were falling back, I think . . .'

'My knee! Damn it, my knee!'

'. . . His Highness the Prince? I have an urgent message from . . .'

'Send, er . . . someone! Whoever is available . . . who is available?'

'. . . King's Own are heavily engaged! They request permission to withdraw . . .'

'What happened to the cavalry? Where are the cavalry?'

'. . . devils not men! The Captain's dead and . . .'

'We are falling back!'

'. . . fighting hard on the right wing and in need of support! In desperate need of support . . .'

'Help me! Somebody, please!'

'. . . And then counterattack! We are attacking all across the line . . .'

'Quiet!' West could hear something in the grey gloom. The jingling of a harness. The mist was so dense now that he could see no more than thirty strides, but the sound of trotting hooves drawing closer was unmistakable. His hand closed round the hilt of his sword.

'The cavalry, they've returned!' Lord Smund started eagerly forwards.

'Wait!' hissed West, to no effect. His eyes strained into the grey. He saw the outlines of horsemen, coming steadily through the gloom. The shapes of their armour, of their saddles, of their helmets were those of the King's Own, and yet there was something in the way they rode – slouching, loose. West drew his sword. 'Protect the Prince,' he muttered taking a step towards Ladisla.

'You there!' shouted Lord Smund at the foremost horseman. 'Prepare your men for another—' The rider's sword chopped into his skull with a hollow clicking sound. A spray of blood went up, black in the white mist, and the horsemen broke into a charge, screaming at the tops of their voices. Terrifying, eerie, inhuman sounds. Smund's limp body was flung out of the way by the leading horse, trampled under the flailing hooves of the one beside it. Northmen, now, unmistakably, growing more horrifyingly distinct as they loomed up out of the murk. The foremost of them had a thick beard, long hair streaming out from beneath an ill-fitting Union helmet, yellow

teeth bared, eyes of horse and rider both wide with fury. His heavy sword flashed down and hacked one of the Prince's guards between the shoulder blades as he dropped his spear and turned to run.

'Protect the Prince!' screamed West. Then it was chaos. Horses thundered past all around, riders yelled, hacked about them with swords and axes, men ran in all directions, slipped, fell, were cut down where they stood, were trampled where they lay. The heavy air was full of the wind of passing horsemen, flying mud, screams and panic and fear.

West dived out of the way of flailing hooves, sprawled on his face in the muck, slashed uselessly at a passing horse, rolled and spun and gasped at the mist. He had no idea which way he was facing, everything sounded the same, looked the same. 'Protect the Prince!' he shouted again, pointlessly, voice hoarse, drowned out in the din, spinning round and round.

'Over on the left!' someone shrieked. 'Form a line!' There were no lines. There was no left. West stumbled over a body, a hand clutched at his leg and he slashed at it with his sword.

'Ah.' He was on his face. His head hurt terribly. Where was he? Fencing practice, perhaps. Had Luthar knocked him down again? That boy was getting too good for him. He stretched for the grip of his sword, lying trampled in the mud. A hand slithered through grass, far away, fingers stretching. He could hear his own breathing, painfully loud, echoing in his thumping head. Everything was blurred, shifting, mist before his eyes, mist in his eyes. Too late. He could not reach his sword. His head was throbbing. There was mud in his mouth. He rolled over onto his back, slowly, breathing hard, up onto his elbows. He saw a man coming. A Northman, by his shaggy outline. Of course. There was a battle. West watched him walk slowly forward. There was a dark line in his hand. A weapon. Sword, axe, mace, spear, what was the difference? The man took one more unhurried step, planted his boot on West's jacket, and shoved his limp body down into the mud.

Neither of them said anything. No last words. No pithy phrases. No expressions of anger, or remorse, or of victory, or defeat. The Northman raised his weapon.

His body jolted. He lurched forward a step. He blinked and swayed. He half-turned, slowly, stupidly. His head jolted again.

‘Got something in . . .’ he said, lips fumbling with the words. He felt at the back of his head with his free hand. ‘Where’s my . . .’ He swivelled round, falling sideways, one leg in the air, and crashed onto his side in the muck. Somebody stood behind him. They came close, leaned over. A woman’s face. She seemed familiar, somehow.

‘You alive?’

Like that, West’s mind clicked back into place. He took a great coughing breath, rolled over and grabbed hold of his sword. There were Northmen, Northmen behind their lines! He scrambled to his feet, clawed the blood out of his eyes. They had been tricked! His head was pounding, spinning. Bethod’s cavalry, disguised, the Prince’s headquarters, overrun! He jerked around, wild-eyed, boot heels slipping in the mud, looking for enemies in the mist, but there was no one. Only him and Cathil. The sound of hooves had faded, the horsemen had passed, at least for now.

He looked down at his steel. The blade was snapped off a few inches from the hilt. Worthless. He let it fall, prised the Northman’s dead fingers from his sword and grabbed hold of the hilt, his head thumping all the time. A heavy weapon with a thick, notched blade, but it would serve.

He stared down at the corpse, lying on its side. The man who had been about to kill him. The back of his skull was a caved in mess of red splinters. Cathil had a smith’s hammer in her hand. The head was sticky dark with blood and strands of matted hair.

‘You killed him.’ She had saved his life. They both knew it, so there hardly seemed any point in saying it.

‘What do we do now?’

Head for the front lines. That was what the dashing young officer always did in the stories West had read as a boy. March for the sounds of battle. Rally a new unit from stragglers and lead them into the fray, turn the tide of the fighting at the critical moment. Home in time for dinner and medals.

Looking down at the wreckage and the broken corpses the horsemen had left behind, West almost laughed at the idea. It was suddenly too late for heroics, and he knew it. It had been too late for a long time.

The fates of the men down in the valley had been set long ago. When Ladisla chose to cross the river. When Burr set upon his plan. When the Closed Council decided to send the Crown Prince to win a reputation in the North. When the great noblemen of the Union sent beggars instead of

soldiers to fight for their King. A hundred different chances, from days, and weeks, and months before, all coming together here, on this worthless stretch of mud. Chances which neither Burr, nor Ladisla, nor West himself could have predicted or done anything to prevent.

He could make no difference now, no one could. The day was lost.

'Protect the Prince,' he muttered.

'What?'

West began to cast around on the ground, rooting through the scattered junk, rolling over bodies with his dirty hands. A messenger stared up at him, the side of his face split open, bloody pulp hanging out. West retched, covered his mouth, crawled on his hands and knees to the next corpse. One of the Prince's staff, still with a look of faint surprise on his features. There was a ragged sword cut through the heavy gold braid of his uniform, reaching all the way down to his belly.

'What the hell are you doing?' Pike's gruff voice. 'There's no time for this!' The convict had got an axe from somewhere. A heavy northern axe, with blood on the edge. Not a good idea, most likely, for a criminal to have a weapon like that, but West had other worries.

'We must find Prince Ladisla!'

'Shit on him!' hissed Cathil, 'let's go!'

West shook off her hand, stumbled to a heap of broken boxes, wiping more blood out of his eye. Somewhere here. Somewhere near here, Ladisla had been standing—

'No, I beg of you, no!' squealed a voice. The heir to the throne of the Union was lying on his back in a hollow in the dirt, half-obscured by the twisted corpse of one of his guards. His eyes were squeezed shut, arms crossed in front of his face, white uniform spotted with red blood, caked with black mud. 'There will be a ransom!' he whimpered, 'a ransom! More than you can imagine.' One eye peered out from between his fingers. He grabbed at West's hand. 'Colonel West! Is it you? You're alive!'

There was no time for pleasantries. 'Your Highness, we have to go!'

'Go?' mumbled Ladisla, his face streaked with tear tracks. 'But surely . . . you can't mean . . . have we won?'

West nearly bit his own tongue off. It was bizarre that the task should fall to him, but he had to save the Prince. The vain and useless idiot might not deserve saving but that changed nothing. It was for his own sake that West

had to do it, not for Ladisla's. It was his duty, as a subject to save his future King, as a soldier to save his general, as one man to save another. It was all he could do, now. 'You are the heir to the throne and cannot be spared.' West reached down and grabbed the Prince by the elbow.

Ladisla fumbled with his belt. 'I lost my sword somewhere—'

'We have no time!' West hauled him up, fully prepared to carry him if he had to. He struck off through the mist, the two convicts close behind him.

'Are you sure this is the right way?' growled Pike.

'I'm sure.' He was anything but. The mist was thicker than ever. The pounding in his head and the blood trickling into his eye made it hard to concentrate. The sounds of fighting seemed to come from all around: clashing and grating metal, groans and wails and yells of fury, all echoing in the mist and seeming one moment far away, the next terrifyingly near. Shapes loomed and moved and swam, vague and threatening outlines, shadows drifting, just out of sight. A rider seemed to rise out of the mist and West gasped and raised his sword. The clouds swirled. It was only a supply cart, laden down with barrels, mule standing still before it, driver sprawled out beside, with a broken spear sticking from his back.

'This way,' hissed West, scuttling towards it, trying to keep close to the mud. Carts were good. Carts meant the baggage train, the supplies, the food and the surgeons. Carts meant they were heading up out of the valley, away from the front lines at least, if there still were any such things. West thought about it for a moment. Carts were bad. Carts meant plunder. The Northmen would swarm to them like flies to honey, eager for booty. He pointed off into the mist, away from the empty wagons, the broken barrels, the upended boxes, and the others followed him, silent but for their squelching footfalls, their rasping breath.

They slogged on, over open ground, dirty clumps of wet grass, gently rising. The others passed him, one by one, and he waved them on. Their only chance was to keep moving, but every step was harder than the one before. Blood from the cut on his scalp was tickling away under his hair, down the side of his face. The pain in his head was growing worse, not better. He felt weak, sick, horribly dizzy. He clung to the grip of the heavy sword as though it was keeping him up, bent over double, struggling to stay on his feet.

'You alright?' asked Cathil.

‘Keep moving!’ he managed to grunt at her. He could hear hooves, or thought that he could. Fear kept him going, and fear alone. He could see the others, ahead of him, labouring forwards. Prince Ladisla well in front, Pike next, Cathil just ahead, looking back over her shoulder. There was a group of trees, he could see them through the thinning mist. He fixed on their ghostly shapes and made for them, his breath rasping in his throat as he floundered up the slope.

He heard Cathil’s voice. ‘No.’ He turned, horror creeping up his throat. He saw the outline of a rider, not far behind them.

‘Make for the trees!’ he gasped. She didn’t move, so he grabbed her arm and shoved her forwards, fell on his face in the mud as he did it. He rolled over, floundered up, began to stumble away from her, away from the trees, away from safety, sideways across the slope. He watched the Northman take shape as he rode up out of the mist. He had seen West now, was trotting up towards him, his spear lowered.

West carried on creeping sideways, legs burning, lungs burning, using his last grains of strength to lead the rider away. Ladisla was already in the trees. Pike was just sliding into the bushes. Cathil took one last look over her shoulder and followed him. West could go no further. He stopped, crouching on the hillside, too tired even to stand, let alone fight, and watched the Northman come on. The sun had broken through the clouds, was glinting on the blade of his spear. West had no idea what he would do when he arrived. Apart from die.

Then the horseman reared up in his saddle, scrabbled at his side. There were feathers there. Grey feathers, blowing in the wind. He let go a short scream. His scream stopped, and he stared at West. There was an arrow-head sticking out of his neck. He dropped his spear and tumbled slowly backwards out of his saddle. His horse trotted past, curved away up the slope, slowed to a walk, and stopped.

West crouched against the wet ground for a moment, unable to understand how he had escaped death. He tottered towards the trees, each stride a vast undertaking, all his joints floppy as a puppet’s. He felt his knees give way and he crashed down into the brush. There were strong fingers plucking at the wound on his scalp, words muttered in Northern. ‘Ah,’ yelped West, prising his eyes open a crack.

‘Stop whining.’ The Dogman was staring down at him. ‘Just a scrape. You got off light. Came right to me, but you’re lucky still. I been known to miss.’

‘Lucky,’ muttered West. He turned over in the wet bracken and stared across the valley between the tree trunks. The mist was finally starting to clear, slowly revealing a trail of broken carts, of broken gear, of broken bodies. All the ugly detritus of a terrible defeat. Or a terrible victory, if you stood with Bethod. A few hundred strides away he watched a man running desperately towards another stand of trees. A cook maybe, by his clothes. A horseman followed him, spear couched in his arm. He missed at the first pass, caught him on the way back and knocked him to the ground. West should have felt horror as he watched the rider trot up and stab the helpless runner with his spear, but he only felt a guilty gladness. Glad that it wasn’t him.

There were other figures, other horsemen, moving on the slopes of the valley. Other bloody little dramas, but West could watch no more. He turned away, slid back down into the welcoming safety of the bushes.

The Dogman was chuckling softly to himself. ‘Threetrees’ll shit when he sees what I’ve caught me.’ He pointed at the strange, exhausted, mud-spattered group one by one. ‘Half-dead Colonel West, girl with a bloody hammer, man with a face like the back end of a cook-pot, and this one here, less I’m deceived, is the boy who had charge o’ this fucking disaster. By the dead but fate plays some tricks.’ He shook his head slowly, grinning down at West as he lay on his back, gasping like a landed fish.

‘Threetrees . . . is going . . . to shit.’

One for Dinner

To Arch Lector Sult,
head of his Majesty's Inquisition.
Your Eminence,
I have happy news. The conspiracy is unmasked, and torn up by the roots. Korsten dan Vurms, the son of the Lord Governor, and Carlot dan Eider, the Magister of the Guild of Spicers, were the principals. They will be questioned, and then punished in such a manner that our people will understand the price of treason. It would appear that Davoust fell victim to a Gurkish agent, long hidden within the city. The assassin is still at large, but with the plotters in our power it cannot be long before we catch him.
I have had Lord Governor Vurms placed under close arrest. The treason of the son renders the father unreliable, and he has been a hindrance in the administration of the city in any case. I will send him back to you by the next ship, so that you and your colleagues on the Closed Council may decide his fate. Along with him will come one Inquisitor Harker, responsible for the deaths of two prisoners who might otherwise have rendered us valuable information. I have questioned him, and am fully satisfied he had no part in any plot, but he is nonetheless guilty of incompetence tantamount to treason. I leave his punishment in your hands.
The Gurkish assault came at first light. Picked troops rushed forwards with ready-made bridges and tall ladders, straight across open ground, and were met with a murderous volley from five hundred flatbows ranged along our walls. It was a brave effort, but a rash one, and was repulsed with much slaughter on their side. Only two bold parties made it to our man-made channel, where bridge, ladder, and men were quickly swept away by a fierce current that flows from the sea into the bay at certain times of day, a happy and unforeseen chance of nature.
Gurkish corpses now litter the empty ground between our channel and their lines, and I have ordered our men to fire upon anyone who attempts to offer succour to the wounded. The groans of the dying and the sight of Gurkish bodies rotting in the sun cannot but cause a useful weakening of their morale.

Though the first taste of victory has come to us, in truth, this attack was little more than a first feeling out of our defences. The Gurkish commander but dips his toe in the water, to test the temperature. His next attack, I do not doubt, will be on a different scale altogether. Three mighty catapults, assembled within four hundred strides of our walls, and more than capable of hurling huge stones clean into the Lower City, yet stand silent. Perhaps they hope to take Dagoska intact, but if our resistance holds, this hesitation cannot long continue.

They certainly do not want for men. More Gurkish soldiers pour onto the peninsula every day. The standards of eight legions are now plainly visible above the throng, and we have spotted detachments of savages from every corner of the Kantic continent. A mighty host, perhaps fifty thousand strong or more, is ranged against us. The Gurkish Emperor, Uthman-ul-Dosht, bends all his power against our walls, but we will hold firm.

You will hear from me soon. Until then, I serve and obey.

Sand dan Glokta,

Superior of Dagoska.

Magister Carlot dan Eider, head of the Guild of Spicers, sat in her chair, hands in her lap, and did her best to maintain her dignity. Her skin was pale and oily, there were dark rings under her eyes. Her white garments were stained with the dirt of the cells, her hair had lost its sheen and hung lank and matted across her face. She looked older without her powder and her jewels, but she still seemed beautiful. *More than ever, in a way. The beauty of the candle flame that has almost burned out.*

'You look tired,' she said.

Glokta raised his brows. 'It has been a trying few days. First there was the questioning of your accomplice Vurms, then the small matter of an assault by the Gurkish army camped outside our walls. You appear somewhat fatigued yourself.'

'The floor of my tiny cell is not that comfortable, and then I have my own worries.' She looked up at Severard and Vitari, leaning against the walls on either side of her, arms folded, masked and implacable. 'Am I going to die in this room?'

Undoubtedly. 'That remains to be seen. Vurms has already told us most of what we need to know. You came to him, you offered him money to forge his father's signature on certain documents, to give orders in his father's

name to certain guardsmen, to participate, in short, in the betrayal of the city of Dagoska to the enemies of the Union. He has named everyone involved in your scheme. He has signed his confession. His head, in case you were wondering, is decorating the gate beside that of your friend Islik, the Emperor's ambassador.'

'Both together, on the gate,' sang Severard.

'There are only three things he was not able to give me. Your reasons, your signature, and the identity of the Gurkish spy who killed Superior Davoust. I will have those three from you. Now.'

Magister Eider carefully cleared her throat, carefully smoothed the front of her long gown, sat up as proudly as she could. 'I do not believe that you will torture me. You are not Davoust. You have a conscience.'

The corner of Glokta's mouth twitched slightly. *A brave effort. I do applaud you. But how wrong you are.* 'I have a conscience, but it's a feeble, withered shred of a thing. It couldn't protect you or anyone else from a stiff breeze.' Glokta sighed, long and hard. The room was too hot, too bright, his eyes were sore and twitchy and he rubbed at them slowly as he spoke. 'You could not even guess at the things that I have done. Awful, evil, obscene, the telling of them alone could make you puke.' He shrugged. 'They nag at me from time to time, but I tell myself I had good reasons. The years pass, the unimaginable becomes everyday, the hideous becomes tedious, the unbearable becomes routine. I push it all into the dark corners of my mind, and it's incredible the room back there. Amazing what one can live with.'

Glokta glanced up at Severard's eyes, and Vitari's, glittering hard and pitiless. 'But even supposing you were right, can you seriously pretend that my Practicals would have any such compunction? Well, Severard?'

'Any such a what?'

Glokta gave a sad smile. 'You see. He doesn't even know what one is.' He sagged back in his chair. *Tired. Terribly tired.* He seemed to lack even the energy to lift his hands. 'I have already made all manner of allowances for you. Treason is not normally so gently dealt with. You should have seen the beating that Frost gave to your friend Vurms, and we all know that he was the junior partner in this. He was shitting blood throughout his last few miserable hours. No one has laid a finger on you, yet. I have allowed you to keep your clothes, your dignity, your humanity. You have one chance to sign your confession, and to answer my questions. One chance to comply

utterly and completely. That is the full measure of my conscience.' Glokta leaned forwards and stabbed at the table with his finger. 'One chance. Then we strip you and start cutting.'

Magister Eider seemed to cave in, all at once. Her shoulders slumped, her head fell, her lip quivered. 'Ask your questions,' she croaked. *A broken woman. Many congratulations, Superior Glokta. But questions must have answers.*

'Vurms told us who was to be paid, and how much. Certain guards. Certain officials of his father's administration. Himself, of course, a tidy sum. One name was strangely absent from the list. Your own. You, and you alone, asked for nothing. The very Queen of merchants, passing on a certain sale? My mind boggles. What did they offer you? Why did you betray your King and country?'

'Why?' echoed Severard.

'Fucking answer him!' screamed Vitari.

Eider cringed away. 'The Union should never have been here in the first place!' she blurted. 'Greed is all it was! Greed, plain and simple! The Spicers were here before the war, when Dagoska was free. They made fortunes, all of them, but they had to pay taxes to the natives, and how they chafed at that! How much better, they thought, if we owned the city ourselves, if we could make our own rules. How much richer we could be. When the chance came they leaped on it, and my husband was at the front of the queue.'

'And so the Spicers came to rule Dagoska. I am waiting for your reasons, Magister Eider.'

'It was a shambles! The merchants had no interest in running a city, and no skill at doing it. The Union administrators, Vurms and his like, were the scrapings from the barrel, men who were only interested in lining their own pockets. We could have worked with the natives, but we chose to exploit them, and when they spoke out against us we called for the Inquisition, and you beat them and tortured them and hung their leaders in the squares of the Upper City, and soon they despised us as much as they had the Gurkish. Seven years, we have been here, and we have done nothing but evil! It has been an orgy of corruption, and brutality, and waste!' *That much is true. I have seen it for myself.*

‘And the irony is, we did not even turn a profit! Even at the start, we made less than before the war! The cost of maintaining the walls, of paying for the mercenaries, without the help of the natives it was crippling!’ Eider began to laugh, a desperate, sobbing laughter. ‘The Guild is nearly bankrupt, and they brought it on themselves, the idiots! Greed, plain and simple!’

‘And then the Gurkish approached you.’

Eider nodded, her lank hair swaying. ‘I have many contacts in Gurkhul. Merchants with whom I have dealt over the years. They told me that Uthman’s first word as Emperor was a solemn oath to take Dagoska, to erase the stain his father had brought upon his nation, that he would never rest until his oath was fulfilled. They told me there were already Gurkish spies within the city, that they knew our weakness. They told me there might be a way to prevent the carnage, if Dagoska could be delivered to them without a fight.’

‘Then why did you delay? You had control of Cosca and his mercenaries, before Kahdia’s people were armed, before the defences were strengthened, before I even arrived. You could have seized the city, if you had wanted. Why did you need that dolt Vurms?’

Carlot dan Eider’s eyes were fixed on the floor. ‘As long as Union soldiers held the Citadel, and the city gates, taking them would have meant bloodshed. Vurms could give me the city without a fight. My entire purpose, believe it or not, the purpose you have so ably frustrated, was to avoid killing.’

I do believe it. But that means nothing now. ‘Go on.’

‘I knew that Vurms could be bought. His father has not long to live, and the post is not hereditary. The son might only have this last chance to profit from his father’s position. We fixed a price. We set about the preparations. Then Davoust found out.’

‘He meant to inform the Arch Lector.’

Eider gave a sharp laugh. ‘He had not your commitment to the cause. He wanted what everyone else wanted. Money, and more than I could raise. I told the Gurkish that the plan was finished. I told them why. The next day Davoust was . . . gone.’ She took a deep breath. ‘And so there was no going back. We were ready to move, shortly after you arrived. All was arranged. And then . . .’ she paused.

‘Then?’

‘Then you began to strengthen the defences, and Vurms got greedy. He felt that our position was suddenly improved. He demanded more. He threatened to tell you of my plans. I had to go back to the Gurkish to get more. It all took time. Finally we were ready to move again, but by then, it was too late. The chance had passed.’ She looked up. ‘All greed. But for my husband’s greed, we would never have come to Dagoska. But for the Spicers’ greed, we might have succeeded here. But for Vurms’ greed, we might have given it away, and not a drop of blood spilled over this worthless rock.’ She sniffed, and looked back at the floor, her voice growing faint. ‘But greed is everywhere.’

‘So you agreed to surrender the city. You agreed to betray us.’

‘Betray who? There would have been no losers! The merchants could have stepped away quietly! The natives would have been no worse off under Gurkish tyranny than they had been under ours! The Union would have lost nothing but a fraction of its pride, and what is that worth besides the lives of thousands?’ Eider stretched forward across the table, her voice growing rough, her eyes wide and shining wet with tears. ‘Now what will happen? Tell me that. It will be a massacre! A slaughter! Even if you can hold the city, what will be the price? And you cannot hold it. The Emperor has sworn, and will not be denied. The lives of every man, woman and child in Dagoska are forfeit! For what? So that Arch Lector Sult and his like can point at a map, and say this dot or that is ours? How much death will satisfy him? What were my reasons? What are yours? Why do you do this? Why?’

Glokta’s left eye was twitching, and he pressed his hand against it. He stared at the woman opposite through the other. A tear ran down her pale cheek and dripped onto the table. *Why do I do this?*

He shrugged. ‘What else is there?’

Severard reached down and slid the paper of confession across the table. ‘Sign!’ he barked.

‘Sign,’ hissed Vitari, ‘sign, bitch!’

Carlot dan Eider’s hand was trembling as she reached for the pen. It rattled against the inside of the inkwell, dripped black spots on the table top, scratched against the paper. There was no flush of triumph. *There never is, but we have one more matter to discuss.*

‘Where will I find the Gurkish agent?’ Glokta’s voice was sharp as a cleaver.

‘I don’t know. I never knew. Whoever it is will come for you now, as they did for Davoust. Perhaps tonight . . .’

‘Why have they waited so long?’

‘I told them you were no threat. I told them that Sult would only send someone else . . . I told them I could handle you.’ *And so you would have, I do not doubt, were it not for the unexpected generosity of Masters Valint and Balk.*

Glokta leaned forward. ‘Who is the Gurkish agent?’

Eider’s bottom lip was quivering so badly that her teeth were nearly rattling in her head. ‘I don’t know,’ she whispered.

Vitari smashed her hand down on the table. ‘Who? Who? Who is it, bitch? Who?’

‘I don’t know!’

‘Liar!’ The Practical’s chain rattled over Eider’s head and snapped taut around her throat. The one-time Queen of merchants was hauled over the back of her chair, legs kicking at the air, hands fumbling at the chain round her neck, and flung face down onto the floor.

‘Liar!’ The bridge of Vitari’s nose was screwed up with rage, red brows drawn in with effort, eyes narrowed to furious slits. Her boot ground into the back of Eider’s head, her back arched, the chain cut white into her clenched fists. Severard looked down on this brutal scene with a slight smile around his eyes, tuneless whistling vaguely audible over the choking, hissing, gurgling of Eider’s last breaths.

Glokta licked at his empty gums as he watched her thrashing on the cell floor. *She has to die. There are no options. His Eminence demands harsh punishment. His Eminence demands examples made. His Eminence demands scant mercy.* Glokta’s eyelid flickered, his face twitched. The room was airless, hot as a forge. He was damp with sweat, thirsty as hell. He could scarcely draw a breath. He felt almost as if he was the one being strangled.

And the irony is that she is right. My victory is a loss for everyone in Dagoska, one way or another. Already the first fruits of my labours are groaning their last in the waste ground before the city gates. There will be no end to the carnage now. Gurkish, Dagoskan, Union, the bodies will pile

up until we're all buried under them, and all my doing. It would be better by far if her scheme had succeeded. It would be better by far if I had died in the Emperor's prisons. Better for the Guild of Spicers, better for the people of Dagoska, better for the Gurkish, for Korsten dan Vurms, for Carlot dan Eider. Better even for me.

Eider's kicking had almost stopped. *One more thing to scrape into the dark corners. One more thing to nag at me when I'm alone. She has to die, whatever the rights and wrongs of it. She has to die.* Her next breath was a muffled rattle. The next was a gentle wheeze. *Almost done now. Almost done.*

'Stop!' barked Glokta. *What?*

Severard looked up sharply. 'What?'

Vitari seemed not to have noticed, the chain was as tight as ever.

'Stop, I said!'

'Why?' she hissed.

Why indeed? 'I give you orders,' he barked, 'not fucking reasons!'

Vitari let go the chain, sneering her disgust, and took her boot off the back of Eider's head. She did not move. Her breathing was shallow, a rustling scarcely audible. *But she is breathing. The Arch Lector will expect an explanation, and a good one. What will my explanation be, I wonder?* 'Take her back to the cells,' he said, leaning on his cane and getting wearily out of his chair. 'We might still find a use for her.'

Glokta stood by the window, frowned out into the night, and watched the wrath of God rain down upon Dagoska. The three huge catapults, ranged far out of bowshot beyond the city walls, had been in action now since the afternoon. It took perhaps an hour for each one to be loaded and made ready. He had watched the procedure through his eye-glass.

First the machine would be aligned, the range would be judged. A group of white robed, bearded engineers would argue with one another, peering through eye-glasses of their own, holding up swinging plumb-lines, fiddling with compasses, and papers, and abacuses, making minute adjustments to the huge bolts that held the catapult in place.

Once they were satisfied, the great arm was bent back into position. A team of twenty horses, well-whipped and well-lathered, was required to lift

the enormous counterweight, a block of black iron carved in the shape of a frowning Gurkish face.

Next the huge shot, a barrel not much less than a stride across, was painstakingly manoeuvred into the waiting scoop by a system of pulleys and a team of frowning, bellowing, arm-waving labourers. Then men stepped away, hurried back fearfully. A lone slave was sent slowly forward with a long pole, a burning wad at its end. He placed it to the barrel. Flames leaped up, and somewhere a lever was hauled down, the mighty weight fell, the great arm, long as a pine trunk, cut through the air, and the burning ammunition was flung up towards the clouds. They had been flying up, and roaring down, for hours now, while the sun slowly sank in the west, the sky darkened around them, the hills of the mainland became a black outline in the distance.

Glokta watched as one of the barrels soared, searing bright against the black heavens, the path of it a fizzing line burned into his eye. It seemed to hang over the city for an age, as high almost as the Citadel itself, and then tumbled, crackling from the sky like a meteor, a trail of orange fire blazing behind. It fell to earth in the midst of the Lower City. Liquid flames shot upwards, spurted outwards, pounced hungrily upon the tiny silhouettes of the slum-huts. A few moments later, the thunder-clap of the detonation reached Glokta at his window and made him wince. *Explosive powder. Who could have supposed, when I saw it fizzing on the bench of the Adeptus Chemical, that it might make such an awesome weapon?*

He half-saw, half-imagined, tiny figures rushing here or there, trying to pull the injured from the burning wreckage, trying to save what they could from their ruined dwellings, chains of ash-blackened natives grimly passing buckets from hand to hand, struggling vainly to contain the spreading inferno. *Those with the least always lose the most in war.* There were fires all across the Lower City now. Glowing, shimmering, flickering in the wind off the sea, reflecting orange, yellow, angry red in the black water. Even up here, the air smelled heavy, oily and choking from the smoke. *Down there it must be hell itself. My congratulations once more, Superior Glokta.*

He turned, aware of someone in the doorway. Shickel, her slight shape black in the lamplight.

'I'm alright,' he murmured, looking back to the majestic, the lurid, the awful spectacle outside the window. *After all, you don't get to see a city*

burn every day. But his servant did not leave. She took a step forward into the room.

'You should go, Shickel. I'm expecting a visitor, of a sort, and it could be trouble.'

'A visitor, eh?'

Glokta looked up. Her voice sounded different. Deeper, harder. Her face looked different too, one side in shadow, one side lit in flickering orange from the fires outside the window. A strange expression, teeth half-bared, eyes fixed on Glokta and glittering with a hungry intensity as she padded slowly forward. A fearsome expression, almost. *If I was prone to fear . . .* And the wheels clicked into place.

'You?' he breathed.

'Me.'

You? Glokta could not help himself. He let out a burst of involuntary chuckling. 'Harker had you! That idiot stumbled on you by mistake, and I let you go! And I thought I was the hero!' He could not stop laughing. 'There's a lesson for you, eh? Never do a good turn!'

'I don't need lessons from you, cripple.' She took one more step. Not three strides away from him now.

'Wait!' He held up his hand. 'Just tell me one thing!' She paused, one brow raised, questioning. *Just stay there.* 'What happened to Davoust?'

Shickel smiled. Sharp, clean teeth. 'He never left the room.' She stroked her stomach gently. 'He is here.' Glokta forced himself not to look up as the loop of chain descended slowly from the ceiling. 'And now you can join him.' She got half a step forward before the chain hooked her under the chin and jerked up, dragging her off her feet into the air, hissing and spitting, kicking and thrashing.

Severard sprang up from his hiding-place beneath a table, tried to grab hold of Shickel's flailing legs. He yelped as her bare foot cracked into his face, sent him sprawling across the carpet.

'Shit,' gasped Vitari as Shickel wedged her hand under the chain and began to drag her down from the rafters. 'Shit!' They crashed onto the floor together, struggled for a moment, then Vitari flew through the air, a flailing black shadow in the darkness. She wailed as she crashed into a table in the far corner of the room, flopped senseless on the floor. Severard was still groaning, rolling slowly onto his back in a daze, hands clasped to his mask.

Glokta and Shickel were left staring at one another. *Me and my Eater. This is unfortunate.*

He backed against the wall as the girl sprang at him, but she only got a step before Frost barrelled into her at full tilt, crashed on top of her onto the carpet. They lay there for a moment, then she slowly rolled on to her knees, slowly fought her way up to standing, all of the hulking Practical's great weight bearing down on her, slowly took a shuffling step towards Glokta.

The albino's arms were wrapped tight round her, straining with every sinew to drag her away, but she kept moving slowly forward, teeth gritted, one thin arm pinned to her thin body while her free hand clawed out furiously towards Glokta's neck.

'Thhhhh!' hissed Frost, the muscles in his heavy forearms bulging, his white face screwed up with effort, his pink eyes starting from his head. Still it was not enough. Glokta was pressed back against the wall, watching fascinated as the hand came closer, and closer still, just inches from his throat. *This is very unfortunate.*

'Fuck you!' screamed Severard. His stick whistled down and cracked into the grasping arm, breaking it clean in half. Glokta could see the bones poking through the ripped and bloody skin, and yet the fingers still twitched, reaching for him. The stick cracked into her face and her head snapped back. Blood sprayed out of her nose, her cheek was cut right open. Still she came on. Frost was gasping with the effort of keeping her other arm pinned as she strained forwards, mouth snarling, teeth bared, ready to bite Glokta's throat out.

Severard threw down his stick and grabbed her round the neck, dragging her head backwards, grunting with the effort, veins pulsing on his forehead. It was a bizarre sight, two men, one of them big and strong as a bull, trying desperately to wrestle a slip of a girl to the ground. Slowly, the two Practicals began to drag her back. Severard had one of her feet off the floor. Frost gave a great bellow, lifted her and with one last effort flung her against the wall.

She scrabbled at the floor, clawing her way up, broken arm flopping. Vitari growled from the shadows, one of Superior Davoust's heavy chairs raised high in the air. It burst apart over Shickel's head with an almighty crash, and then the three Practicals were on her like hounds on a fox, kicking, punching, grunting with rage.

‘Enough!’ snapped Glokta. ‘We still have questions!’ He shuffled up beside the panting Practicals and looked down. Shickel was a broken mess, motionless. A pile of rags, and not even a big one. *Much as when I first found her. How could this girl almost have overcome these three?* Her broken arm was stretched out across the carpet, fingers limp and bloody. *Safe to say no threat to anyone, now.*

Then the arm began to move. The bone slid back into the flesh, made a sickening crunching sound as it straightened out. The fingers twitched, jerked, scratched at the floor, began to slide toward Glokta, reaching for his ankle.

‘What is she?’ gasped Severard, staring down.

‘Get the chains,’ said Glokta, cautiously stepping back out of the way. ‘Quickly!’

Frost dragged two pairs of great irons clanking from a sack, grunting with the effort of lifting them. They were made for the most powerful and dangerous of prisoners, bands of black iron, thick as a sapling trunk, heavy as anvils. He squeezed one pair tight shut around her ankles, the other round her wrists, ratchets scraping into place with a reassuring finality.

Meanwhile Vitari had hauled a great length of rattling chain from the sack and was winding it round and round Shickel’s limp body while Severard held her up, dragging it tight, winding it round and round again. Two great padlocks completed the job.

They were snapped shut just in time. Shickel suddenly came alive, began thrashing on the floor. She snarled up at Glokta, straining at the chains. Her nose had already snapped back into place, the cut across her face had already closed. *As though she was never hurt at all. So Yulwei spoke the truth.* The chains rattled as she lunged forward with her teeth, and Glokta had to stumble back out of the way.

‘It’s persistent,’ muttered Vitari, shoving her back against the wall with her boot. ‘You’d have to give it that.’

‘Fools!’ hissed Shickel. ‘You cannot resist what comes! God’s right hand is falling upon this city, and nothing can save it! All your deaths are already written!’ A particularly bright detonation flared across the sky, casting orange light onto the Practicals’ masked faces. A moment later the thunder of it echoed around the room. Shickel began to laugh, a crazy, grating

cackle. ‘The Hundred Words are coming! No chains can bind them, no gates can keep them out! They are coming!’

‘Perhaps.’ Glokta shrugged. ‘But they will come too late for you.’

‘I am dead already! My body is nothing but dust! It belongs to the Prophet! Try as you might, you will learn nothing from me!’

Glokta smiled. He could almost feel the warmth of the flames, far below, on his face.

‘That sounds like a challenge.’

One of Them

Ardee smiled at him, and Jezal smiled back. He grinned like an idiot. He could not help it. He was so happy to be back where things made sense. Now they need never be parted. He wanted only to tell her how much he loved her. How much he missed her. He opened his mouth but she pressed her finger to his lips. Firmly.

'Shhh.'

She kissed him. Gently at first, then harder.

'Uh,' he said.

Her teeth nipped at his lip. Playful, to begin with.

'Ah,' he said.

They bit harder, and harder still.

'Ow!' he said.

She sucked at his face, her teeth ripping at his skin, scraping on his bones. He tried to scream, but nothing came out. It was dark, his head swam. There was a hideous tugging, an unbearable pulling on his mouth.

'Got it,' said a voice. The agonising pressure released.

'How bad is it?'

'Not as bad as it looks.'

'It looks very bad.'

'Shut up and hold that torch higher.'

'What's that?'

'What?'

'That there, sticking out?'

'His jaw, fool, what do you think it is?'

'I think I'm going to be sick. Healing is not among my remarkable—'

'Shut your fucking hole and hold the torch up! We'll have to push it back in!' Jezal felt something pressing on his face, hard. There was a cracking sound and an unbearable lance of pain stabbed through his jaw and into his neck, like nothing he had ever felt before. He sagged back.

'I'll hold it, you move that.'

'What, this?'

‘Don’t pull his teeth out!’

‘It fell out by itself!’

‘Damn fool pink!’

‘What’s happening?’ said Jezal. But all that came out was a kind of gurgle. His head was throbbing, pulsing, splitting with pain.

‘He’s waking up now!’

‘You stitch then, I’ll hold him.’ There was a pressure round his shoulders, across his chest, folding him tight. His arm hurt. Hurt terribly. He tried to kick but his leg was agony, he couldn’t move it.

‘You got him?’

‘Yes I’ve got him! Get stitching!’

Something stabbed into his face. He had not thought the pain could grow any worse. How wrong he had been.

‘Get off me!’ he bellowed, but all he heard was, ‘thugh.’

He struggled, tried to wriggle free, but he was folded tight, and it only made his arm hurt more. The pain in his face got worse. His upper lip, his lower lip, his chin, his cheek. He screamed and screamed and screamed, but heard nothing. Only a quiet wheezing. When he thought his head would surely explode, the pain grew suddenly less.

‘Done.’

The grip was released and he lay back, floppy as a rag, helpless. Something turned his head. ‘That’s good stitching. That’s real good. Wish you’d been around when I got these. Might still have my looks.’

‘What looks, pink?’

‘Huh. Best get started on his arm. Then there’s the leg to set an’ all.’

‘Where did you put that shield?’

‘No,’ groaned Jezal, ‘please . . .’ Nothing but a click in his throat.

He could see something now, blurry shapes in the half-light. A face loomed towards him, an ugly face. Bent and broken nose, skin torn and crossed with scars. There was a dark face, just behind it, a face with a long, livid line from eyebrow to chin. He closed his eyes. Even the light seemed painful.

‘Good stitching.’ A hand patted the side of his face. ‘You’re one of us, now, boy.’

Jezal lay there, his face a mass of agony, and the horror crept slowly through every limb.

‘One of us.’

PART II

‘He is not fit for battle that has never seen his own blood flow, who has not heard his teeth crunch under the blow of an opponent, or felt the full weight of his adversary upon him.’

Roger of Howden

Heading North

So the Dogman was just lying there on his face, wet to the skin and trying to keep still without freezing solid, looking out across the valley from the trees, and watching Bethod's army marching. He couldn't see that much of them from where he was lying, just a stretch of the track over a ridge, enough to see the Carls tramping by, painted shields bright on their backs, mail glistening with specks of melted snow, spears sticking up high between the tree trunks. Rank after rank of 'em, marching steady.

They were a good way off, but he was taking quite a risk even getting this close. Bethod was just as careful as ever. He'd got men out all around, up on the ridges and the high points, anywhere where he thought someone could get a sight of what he was up to. He'd sent a few scouts south and some others east, hoping to trick anyone was watching, but he hadn't got the Dogman fooled. Not this time. Bethod was heading back the way he'd come. He was heading north.

Dogman breathed in sharp, and gave a long, sad sigh. By the dead, he felt tired. He watched the tiny figures filing past through the pine branches. He'd spent all those years scouting for Bethod, keeping an eye on armies like this one for him, helping him win battles, helping to make him a King, though he'd never dreamed it at the time. In some ways everything had changed. In others it was just the same as ever. Here he was still, face down in the muck with a sore neck from looking up. Ten years older and not a day better off. He could hardly remember what his ambitions used to be, but this hadn't ever been among 'em, he was sure of that. All that wind blown past, all that snow fallen, all that water flowed by. All that fighting, all that marching, all that waste. Logen gone, and Forley gone, and the candle burning down fast on the rest of 'em.

Grim slithered through the frozen scrub beside him, propped himself on his elbows and peered out towards the Carls moving on the road. 'Huh,' he grunted.

'Bethod's moving north,' whispered Dogman.

Grim nodded.

‘He’s got scouts out all over, but he’s heading north, no doubt. We’d best let Threetrees know.’

Another nod.

Dogman lay there in the wet. ‘I’m getting tired.’

Grim looked up, lifted an eyebrow.

‘All this effort, and for what? Everything the same as ever. Whose side is it we’re on now?’ Dogman waved his hand over at the men slogging down the road. ‘We supposed to fight all this lot? When do we get a rest?’

Grim shrugged his shoulders, squeezed his lips together like he was thinking about it. ‘When we’re dead?’

And wasn’t that the sorry truth.

Took Dogman a while to find the others. They were nowhere near where they should’ve been by now. Being honest, they weren’t far from where they were when he left. Dow was the first one he saw, sat on a big stone with the usual scowl on his face, glaring down into a gully. Dogman came up next to him, saw what he was looking at. The four Southerners, clambering over the rocks, slow and clumsy as new-born calves. Tul and Threetrees were waiting for them at the bottom, looking mighty short on patience.

‘Bethod’s heading north,’ said Dogman.

‘Good for him.’

‘Not surprised?’

Dow licked his teeth and spat. ‘He’s beat every clan that dared face him, made himself a King where there wasn’t one before, gone to war with the Union and he’s giving ’em a kicking. He’s turned the world on its head, the bastard. Nothing he does surprises me now.’

‘Huh.’ Dogman reckoned he was right enough there. ‘You lot ain’t got far.’

‘No we ain’t. This is some right fucking baggage you’ve saddled us with here, and no mistake.’ He watched the four of ’em fumbling their way down the gully below, shaking his head like he’d never seen such a waste of flesh. ‘Some right fucking baggage.’

‘If you’re telling me to feel shamed ’cause I saved some lives that day, I don’t. What should I have done?’ asked Dogman. ‘Left ’em to die?’

‘That’s one idea. We’d be moving twice the speed without ’em, and eating a deal better and all.’ He flashed a nasty grin. ‘There’s only one that I could find a use for.’

Dogman didn’t have to ask which one. The girl was at the back. He could hardly see a woman’s shape to her, all wrapped up as she was against the cold, but he could guess it was under there, and it made him nervous. Strange thing, having a woman along. Quite the sorry rarity, since they went north over the mountains, all them months ago. Even seeing one seemed like some kind of a guilty treat. Dogman watched her clambering on the rocks, dirty face half turned towards them. Tough-looking girl, he thought. Seemed like she’d had her share of knocks.

‘I reckon she’d struggle,’ Dow muttered to himself. ‘I reckon she’d kick some.’

‘Alright, Dow,’ snapped Dogman. ‘Best calm yourself down, lover. You know how Threetrees feels about all that. You know what happened to his daughter. He’d cut your fucking fruits off if he heard you talking that way.’

‘What?’ Dow said, all innocence. ‘I’m just talking, aren’t I? You can’t hardly blame me for that. When’s the last time any one of us had a woman?’

Dogman frowned. He knew exactly when it was for him. Pretty much the last time he was ever warm. Curled up with Shari in front of the fire, smile on his face wide as the sea. Just before Bethod chucked him and Logen and all the rest of them in chains, then kicked ’em out into exile.

He could still remember that last sight of her, mouth open wide with shock and fright as they dragged him from the blankets, naked and half asleep, squawking like a rooster that knows it’s about to get its neck twisted. It had hurt, to be dragged away from her. Not as bad as Scale kicking him in the fruits had hurt, mind you. A painful night, all in all, one he’d never thought to live through. The sting from the kicks had faded with time, but the ache of losing her never had done, quite.

Dogman remembered the smell of her hair, the sound of her laugh, the feel of her back, pressed warm and soft against his belly while she slept. Well-used memories, picked over and worn thin like a favourite shirt. He remembered it like it was last night. He had to make himself stop thinking about it. ‘Don’t know that my memory goes back that far,’ he grunted.

‘Nor mine,’ said Dow. ‘Ain’t you getting tired of fucking your hand?’ He peered back down the slope and smacked his lips. Had a light in his eyes

that Dogman didn't much like the look of. 'Funny, how you don't miss it so bad until you see it right in front of you. It's like holding out the meat to a hungry man, so close he can smell it. Don't tell me you ain't thinking the same thing.'

Dogman frowned at him. 'I don't reckon I'm thinking quite the same as you are. Stick your cock in the snow if you have to. That should keep you cooled off.'

Dow grinned. 'I'll have to stick it in something soon, I can tell you that.'

'Aaargh!' came a wail from down the slope. Dogman started for his bow, staring to see if some of Bethod's scouts had caught them out. It was just the Prince, slipped and fallen on his arse. Dow watched him rolling on his back, face all squashed up with scorn.

'He's some new kind o' useless, that one, eh? All he does is slow us down to half the rate we need, whine louder than a hog giving birth, eat more 'n his share and shit five times a day.' West was helping him up, trying to brush some of the dirt off his coat. Well, not his coat. The coat that West had given him. Dogman still couldn't see why a clever man would do a damn fool thing like that. Not as cold as it was getting now, middle of winter an' all. 'Why the hell would anyone follow that arsehole?' asked Dow, shaking his head.

'They say his father's the King o' the Union his self.'

'What does it matter whose son y'are, if you ain't worth no more than a turd? I wouldn't piss on him if he was burning, the bastard.' Dogman had to nod. Neither would he.

They were all sat in a circle round where the fire would've been, if Threetrees had let them have one. He wouldn't, of course, for all the Southerners' pleading. He wouldn't, no matter how cold it got. Not with Bethod's scouts about. It would have been good as shouting they were there at the tops of their voices. Dogman and the rest were on one side – Threetrees, Dow and Tul, Grim propped on his elbow like none of this had aught to do with him. The Union were opposite.

Pike and the girl were putting a brave enough face on being cold, tired and hungry. There was something to them told the Dogman they were used to it. West looked like he was near the end of his rope, blowing into his cupped hands like they were about to turn black and fall off. Dogman

reckoned he should've kept his coat on, rather than give it to the last of the band.

The Prince was sitting in the midst, holding his chin high, trying to look like he wasn't knackered, covered in dirt, and starting to smell as bad as the rest of 'em. Trying to look like he might be able to give orders that someone might listen to. Dogman reckoned he'd made a mistake there. A crew like his chose leaders because of what they'd done, not whose son they were. They chose leaders with some bones to them, and from that point of view they'd sooner have taken a telling from the girl than from this prick.

'It is high time that we discussed our plans,' he was whining. 'Some of us are labouring in the dark.' Dogman could see Threetrees starting to frown already. He didn't like having to drag this idiot along, let alone pretend he cared a shit for his opinion.

It didn't help much that not everyone could make sense of everyone else. Of the Union, only West spoke Northern. Of the Northmen, only Dogman and Threetrees spoke Union. Tul might've caught the sense of what was being said, more or less. Dow weren't even catching that. As for Grim, well, silence means pretty much the same in every tongue.

'What's he saying now?' growled Dow.

'Something about plans, I reckon,' said Tul back to him.

Dow snorted. 'All an arsehole knows about is shit.' Dogman saw West swallowing. He knew what was being said well enough, and he could tell some folk were running short on patience.

The Prince wasn't near so clever, though. 'It would be useful to know how many days you think it will take us to get to Ostenhorm—'

'We're not going south,' said Threetrees in Northern, before his Highness even finished talking.

West stopped blowing into his hands for a moment. 'We're not?'

'We haven't been since we set out.'

'Why?'

'Because Bethod's heading back north.'

'That's a fact,' said Dogman. 'I seen him today.'

'Why would he turn back?' asked West. 'With Ostenhorm undefended?'

Dogman sighed. 'I didn't stick around to ask. Me and Bethod ain't on the best of terms.'

‘I’ll tell you why,’ sneered Dow. ‘Bethod ain’t interested in your city. Not yet anyhow.’

‘He’s interested in breaking you up into pieces small enough to chew on,’ said Tul.

Dogman nodded. ‘Like that one you was with, that he just finished spitting out the bones of.’

‘Excuse me,’ snapped the Prince, no idea what was being said, ‘but it might help if we continued in the common tongue—’

Threetrees ignored him and carried on in Northern. ‘He’s going to pull your army into little bits. Then he’s going to squash ’em one by one. You think he’s going south, so he hopes your Marshal Burr will send some men south. He’ll catch ’em napping on his way back north, and if they’re few enough he’ll cut ’em to pieces like he did those others.’

‘Then,’ rumbled Tul, ‘when all your pretty soldiers are stuck back in the mud or run back across the water . . .’

‘He’ll crack the towns open like nuts in winter, no rush, and his Carls will make free with the contents.’ Dow sucked his teeth, staring across at the girl. Staring like a mean dog might stare at a side of bacon. She stared right back, which was much to her credit, the Dogman thought. He doubted he’d have had the bones to do the same in her position.

‘Bethod’s going north and we’ll be following.’ Threetrees said it in a way that made it clear it weren’t a matter for discussion. ‘Keep an eye on him, hope to move fast and keep ahead, so that if your friend Burr comes blundering through these woods, we can warn him where Bethod’s at before he stumbles on him like a blind man falling down a fucking well.’

The Prince slapped angry at the ground. ‘I demand to know what is being said!’

‘That Bethod is heading north with his army,’ hissed West at him through gritted teeth. ‘And that they intend to follow him.’

‘This is intolerable!’ snapped the fool, tugging at his filthy cuffs. ‘That course of action puts us all in danger! Please inform them that we will be setting out southwards without delay!’

‘That’s settled, then.’ They all turned to see who spoke, and got quite the shock. Grim, talking Union as smooth and even as the Prince himself. ‘You’re going south. We’re going north. I need to piss.’ And he got up and wandered off into the dark. Dogman stared after him, mouth open. Why did

he need to learn someone else's language when he never spoke more than two words together in his own?

'Very well!' squawked the Prince, shrill and panicky. 'I should have expected no better!'

'Your Highness!' hissed West at him. 'We need them! We won't make it to Ostenhorm or anywhere else without their help!'

The girl's eyes slid sideways. 'Do you even know which way south is?' Dogman stifled a chuckle, but the Prince weren't laughing.

'We should head south!' he snarled, dirty face twitching with anger.

Threetrees snorted. 'The baggage don't get a vote, boy, even supposing this was a voting band, which it ain't.' He was finally speaking Union, but Dogman didn't reckon the Prince would be too happy to know what was being said. 'You had your chance to give the orders, and look where it's got you. Not to mention those were fools enough to do what you told 'em. You'll not be adding any of our names to their list, I can tell you that. If you want to follow us, you'd best learn to keep up. If you want to give the orders, well—'

'South is that way,' said the Dogman, jerking his thumb into the woods. 'Good luck.'

Scant Mercy

To Arch Lector Sult,
head of his Majesty's Inquisition.
Your Eminence,
The siege of Dagoska continues. Three days in a row the Gurkish have made assaults against our walls, each one greater in size and determination. They strive to fill in our channel with boulders, to cross it with bridges, to scale our walls and bring rams against our gates. Three times they have attacked and three times we have thrown them back. Their losses have been heavy, but losses they can well afford. The Emperor's soldiers crawl like ants across the peninsula. Still, our men are bold, our defences are strong, our resolve is unshakeable, and Union vessels still ply the bay, keeping us well supplied. Be assured, Dagoska will not fall.
On a subject of lesser importance, you will, no doubt, be pleased to learn that the issue of Magister Eider has been put to rest. I had suspended her sentence while I considered the possibility of using her connection with the Gurkish against them. Unfortunately for her, the chances of such subtle measures bearing fruit have dropped away, leaving us with no further use for her. The sight of a woman's head decorating the battlements might have been detrimental to the morale of our troops. We, after all, are the civilised faction. The one-time Magister of the Guild of Spicers has therefore been dealt with quietly, but, I can assure you, quite finally. Neither one of us need spare her, or her failed conspiracy, any further thought.
As always, your Eminence, I serve and obey.
Sand dan Glokta
Superior of Dagoska.

It was quiet down by the water. Quiet, and dark, and still. The gentle waves slapped at the supports of the wharf, the timbers of the boats creaked softly, a cool breeze washed in off the bay, the dark sea glittered in the moonlight under a sky dusted with stars.

You could never guess that a few short hours ago men were dying in their hundreds less than half a mile away. That the air was split with screams of pain and fury. That even now the ruins of two great siege towers are still

smouldering beyond the land walls, corpses scattered round them like leaves fallen in autumn . . .

'Thhhhh.' Glokta felt his neck click as he turned and squinted into the darkness. Practical Frost emerged from the shadows between two dark buildings, peering suspiciously around, herding a prisoner in front of him; someone much smaller, hunched over and wrapped in a cloak with the hood up, arms secured behind them. The two figures crossed the dusty quay and came down the wharf, their footfalls clapping hollow on the wooden planks.

'Alright, Frost,' said Glokta as the albino pulled his prisoner up. 'I don't think we need that any more.' The white fist pulled back the cowl.

In the pale moonlight, Carlot dan Eider's face looked gaunt and wasted, full of sharp edges, with a set of black grazes across her hollow cheek. Her head had been shaved, after the fashion of confessed traitors, and without that weight of hair her skull seemed strangely small, almost child-like, her neck absurdly long and fragile. Especially with a ring of angry bruises round it, the dark after-images left by the links of Vitari's chain. There was hardly any remnant of the sleek and masterful woman who had taken him by the hand in the Lord Governor's audience chamber, it seemed an age ago. *A few weeks in the darkness, sleeping on the rotten floor of a sweltering cell, not knowing if you'll live another hour – that can ruin the looks. I should know.*

She lifted her chin at him, nostrils wide, eyes gleaming in black shadows. *That mixture of fear and defiance that comes on some people when they know they are about to die.* 'Superior Glokta, I hardly dared hope I would see you again.' Her words might have been jaunty, but there was no disguising the edge of fear in her voice. 'What now? A rock tied round the legs and into the bay? Isn't that all a touch dramatic?'

'It would be, but that isn't what I have in mind.' He looked up at Frost and gave the barest of nods. Eider flinched, squeezing her eyes shut and biting on her lip, hunching her shoulders as she felt the hulking Practical loom up behind her. *Waiting for the crushing blow on the back of the skull? The stabbing point between the shoulder blades? The choking wire across the throat? The terrible anticipation. Which shall it be?* Frost raised his hand. There was a flash of metal in the darkness. Then a gentle clicking as the key slid smoothly into Eider's manacles and unlocked them.

She slowly prised open her eyes, slowly brought her hands round in front of her, blinked down as though she had never seen them before. ‘What’s this?’

‘This is exactly what it appears to be.’ He nodded his head down the wharf. ‘This is a ship leaving for Westport on the next tide. You have contacts in Westport?’

The tendons in her thin neck fluttered as she swallowed. ‘I have contacts everywhere.’

‘Good. Then this is me setting you free.’

There was a long silence. ‘Free?’ She lifted one hand to her head and rubbed absently at her stubbly scalp, staring at Glokta for a drawn-out moment. *Not sure whether to believe it, and who can blame her? I’m not sure that I believe it*. ‘His Eminence must have mellowed beyond recognition.’

Glokta snorted. ‘Not likely. Sult knows nothing about this. If he did, I rather think we both might be swimming with rocks round our ankles.’

Her eyes narrowed. *The merchant Queen judges the bargain.* ‘Then what’s the price?’

‘The price is you’re dead. You’re forgotten. Put Dagoska from your mind, it’s finished. Find some other people to save. The price is you leave the Union and never come back. Not. Ever.’

‘That’s it?’

‘That’s it.’

‘Why?’

Ah, my favourite question. Why do I do this? He shrugged. ‘What does it matter? A woman lost in the desert—’

‘Should take such water as she is offered, no matter who it comes from. Don’t worry. I won’t be saying no.’ She reached out suddenly and Glokta half-jerked away, but her fingertips only touched him gently on his cheek. They rested there for a moment, while his skin tingled, and his eye twitched, and his neck ached. ‘Perhaps,’ she whispered, ‘if things had been different . . .’

‘If I weren’t a cripple and you weren’t a traitor? Things are as they are.’

She let her hand drop, half smiling. ‘Of course they are. I would say I’ll see you again—’

‘I’d rather you didn’t.’

She nodded slowly. ‘Then goodbye.’ She pulled the hood over her head, throwing her face back into shadow, then brushed past Glokta and walked quickly towards the end of the wharf. He stood, weight on his cane, and watched her go, scratching his cheek slowly where her fingers had rested. *So. To get women to touch you, you need only spare their lives. I should try it more often.*

He turned away, limped a few painful steps onto the dusty quay, peering up into the dark buildings. *I wonder if Practical Vitari is in there somewhere, watching? I wonder if this little episode will find its way into her next report to the Arch Lector?* He felt a sweaty shiver up his aching back. *I won’t be putting it in mine, that’s sure, but what does it really matter?* He could smell it, as the wind shifted, the smell that seemed to find its way into every corner of the city now. The sharp smell of burning. Of smoke. Of ash. *Of death. Without a miracle, none of us will leave this place alive.* He looked back. Carlot dan Eider was already crossing the gangway. *Well. Perhaps just one of us will.*

‘Things are going well,’ sang Cosca in his rich Styrian accent, grinning out over the parapet at the carnage beyond the walls. ‘A good day’s work, yesterday, considering.’

A good day’s work. Below them, on the other side of the ditch, the bare earth was scarred and burned, bristling with spent flatbow bolts like stubble on a brown chin. Everywhere, siege equipment lay wrecked and ruined. Broken ladders, fallen barrows spilling rocks, burned and shattered wicker screens, trampled into the hard dirt. The shell of one of the great siege towers was still half standing, a framework of blackened timbers sticking twisted from a heap of ash, scorched and tattered leather flapping in the salt wind.

‘We taught those Gurkish fuckers a lesson they won’t soon forget, eh, Superior?’

‘What lesson?’ muttered Severard. *What lesson indeed? The dead learn nothing.* The corpses were dotted about before the Gurkish front line, two hundred strides or so from the land walls. They were scattered across the no-man’s-land between, surrounded by a flotsam of broken weapons and armour. They had dropped so heavily just before the ditch that you could almost have walked from the sea on one side of the peninsula to the sea on

the other without once stepping on the earth. In a few places they were crowded together into huddled groups. *Where the wounded crawled to take cover behind the dead, then bled to death themselves.*

Glokta had never seen slaughter like it. Not even after the siege of Ulrioch, when the breach had been choked with Union dead, when Gurkish prisoners had been murdered by the score, when the temple had been burned with hundreds of citizens inside. Corpses sagged and lolled and sprawled, some charred with fire, some bent in attitudes of final prayer, some spread out heedless, heads smashed by rocks flung from above. Some had clothes ripped and rooted through. *Where they tore at their own shirts to check their wounds, hoping they were not fatal. All of them disappointed.*

Flies buzzed in legions around the bodies. Birds of a hundred species hopped and flapped and pecked at the unexpected feast. Even here, high up in the blasting wind, it was starting to reek. *The stuff of nightmares. Of my nightmares for the next few months, I shouldn't wonder. If I last that long.*

Glokta felt his eye twitching, and he blew out a deep breath, stretched his neck from side to side. *Well. We must fight on. It is a little late now for second thoughts.* He peered gingerly over the parapet to take a look down at the ditch, his free hand grasping tight at the pitted stone to keep his balance.

Not good. 'They have nearly filled the channel down below us, and over near the gates.'

'True,' said Cosca cheerfully. 'They drag up their boxes of rocks and try to tip them in. We can only kill them so fast.'

'That channel is our best defence.'

'True again. It was a good idea. But nothing lasts forever.'

'Without it there is nothing to stop the Gurkish mounting ladders, rolling up rams, mining under our walls even. It might be necessary to organise a sortie of some kind, dig it back out.'

Cosca rolled his dark eyes sideways. 'Lowered from the wall by ropes, slaving in the darkness, not two hundred strides from the Gurkish positions? Was that what you had in mind?'

'Something like that.'

'Then I wish you luck with it.'

Glokta snorted. 'I would go, of course.' He tapped his leg with his cane. 'But I'm afraid my days of heroics are far behind me.'

'Lucky for you.'

‘Hardly. We should build a barricade behind the gates. That is our weakest point. A half circle, I would guess, some hundred strides across, would make an effective killing ground. If they manage to break through we might still contain them there, long enough to push them back.’ *Might* . . .

‘Ah, pushing them back.’ Cosca scratched at the rash on his neck. ‘I’m sure the volunteers will be falling over each other for that duty when the time comes. Still, I’ll see it done.’

‘You have to admire them.’ General Vissbruck strode up to the parapet, his hands clasped tightly behind his impeccably pressed uniform. *I’m surprised he finds the time for presentation, with things as they are. Still, we all cling to what we can.* He shook his head as he peered down at the corpses. ‘Some courage, to come at us like this, over and over, against defences so strong and so well manned. I’ve rarely seen men so willing to give their lives.’

‘They have that most strange and dangerous of qualities,’ said Cosca. ‘They think they’re in the right.’

Vissbruck stared sternly out from under his brows. ‘It is we who are in the right.’

‘If you like.’ The mercenary grinned sideways at Glokta. ‘But I think the rest of us long ago gave up on the idea that there’s any such thing. The plucky Gurkish come on with their barrows . . . and it’s my job to shoot them full of arrows!’ He barked out a sharp laugh.

‘I don’t think that’s amusing,’ snapped Vissbruck. ‘A fallen opponent should be treated with respect.’

‘Why?’

‘Because it could be any one of us rotting in the sun, and probably soon will be.’

Cosca only laughed the louder, and clapped Vissbruck on the arm. ‘Now you’re getting it! If I’ve learned one thing from twenty years of warfare, it’s that you have to look at the funny side!’

Glokta watched the Styrian chuckling at the battlefield. *Trying to decide when would be the best time to change sides? Trying to work out how good a fight to give the Gurkish before they pay better than I do? There’s more than rhymes in that scabby head, but for the moment we cannot do without him.* He glanced at General Vissbruck, who had moved further down the

walkway to sulk on his own. *Our plump friend has neither the brains nor the bravery to hold this city for longer than a week.*

He felt a hand on his shoulder, and turned back to Cosca. 'What?' he snapped.

'Uh,' muttered the mercenary, pointing up into the blue sky. Glokta followed his finger. There was a black spot up there, not far above them, but moving upwards. *What is that? A bird?* It had peaked now, and was coming down. Realisation dawned suddenly. *A stone. A stone from a catapult.*

It grew larger as it fell, tumbling over and over, seeming to move with ridiculous slowness, as if sinking through water, its total silence adding to the sense of unreality. Glokta watched it, open-mouthed. They all did. An air of terrible expectancy settled on the walls. It was impossible to tell exactly where the stone was going to fall. Men began to scatter this way and that along the walkway, clattering, scuffling, gasping and squealing, tossing away weapons.

'Fuck,' whispered Severard, throwing himself face down on the stones.

Glokta stayed where he was, his eyes locked on that one dark spot in the bright sky. *Is it coming for me? Several tons of rock, about to splatter my remains across the city? What a ludicrously random way to die.* He felt his mouth twitch up in a faint smile.

There was a deafening crash as a section of parapet was ripped apart nearby, sending out a cloud of dust and flinging chunks of stone into the air. Splinters whizzed around them. A soldier not ten strides away was neatly decapitated by a flying block. His headless body swayed for a moment on its feet before its knees buckled and it toppled backwards off the wall.

The missile crashed down somewhere in the Lower City, smashing through the shacks, bouncing and rolling, flinging shattered timbers up like matchsticks, leaving a trail of destruction in its wake. Glokta blinked and swallowed. His ears were still ringing, but he could hear someone shouting. A strange voice. A Styrian accent. Cosca.

'That the best you can do, you fuckers? I'm still here!'

'The Gurkish are bombarding us!' Vissbruck was squealing pointlessly, squatting down behind the parapet with his hands clasped over his head, a layer of light dust across the shoulders of his uniform. 'Solid shot from their catapults!'

‘You don’t say,’ muttered Glokta. There was another mighty crash as a second rock struck the walls further down and burst apart in a shower of fragments, hurling stones the size of skulls into the water below. The very walkway beneath Glokta’s feet seemed to tremble with the force of it.

‘They’re coming again!’ Cosca was roaring at the very top of his voice. ‘Man the walls! To the walls!’

Men began to hurry past: natives, mercenaries, Union soldiers, all side by side, cranking their flatbows, handing out bolts, shouting and calling to one another in a confusion of different languages. Cosca moved among them slapping backs, shaking his fist, snarling and laughing with not the slightest sign of fear. *A most inspiring leader, for a half-mad drunkard.*

‘Fuck this!’ hissed Severard in Glokta’s ear. ‘I’m no damn soldier!’

‘Neither am I, any more, but I can still enjoy a show.’ He limped up to the parapet and peered out. This time he saw the catapult’s great arm fly up in the distant haze. The distance was poorly judged this time, and it sailed high overhead. Glokta winced at a twinge in his neck as he followed it with his eyes. It crashed down not far short of the Upper City’s walls with a deep boom, throwing chunks of stone far into the slums.

A great horn sounded behind the Gurkish lines: a throbbing, rumbling blast. Drums followed behind, thumping together like monstrous footsteps. ‘Here they come!’ roared Cosca. ‘Ready with your bows!’ Glokta heard the order echoing across the walls, and a moment later the battlements on the towers bristled with loaded flatbows, the bright points of the bolts glinting in the harsh sun.

The great wicker shields that marked the Gurkish lines began slowly, steadily, to move forwards, edging across the blighted no-man’s-land towards them. *And behind, no doubt, Gurkish soldiers crawl like ants.* Glokta’s hand clutched the stone of the parapet painfully tight as he watched them come on, his heart beating almost as loud as the Gurkish drums. *Fear, or excitement? Is there a difference? When was the last time I felt such a bittersweet thrill? Speaking before the Open Council? Leading a charge of the King’s cavalry? Fighting in the Contest before the roaring crowds?*

The screens were coming steadily closer, still in an even row across the peninsula. *Now a hundred strides, now ninety, now eighty*. He looked

sideways at Cosca, still grinning like a madman. *When will he give the order? Sixty, fifty . . .*

'Now!' roared the Styrian. 'Fire!' There was a mighty rattling along the walls as the flatbows were loosed in one great volley, peppering the screens, the ground around them, the corpses, and any Gurkish unlucky enough to be have left some part of their body visible. Men knelt behind the parapet and began to reload, fumbling with bolts, cranking handles, sweating and straining. The drum beats had grown faster, more urgent, the screens passed heedless over the scattered bodies. *Not much fun for the men behind, staring down at the corpses beneath their feet, wondering how long before they join them.*

'Oil!' shouted Cosca.

A bottle with a burning wick was flung spinning from a tower on the left. It smashed against one of the wicker screens and lines of fire shot hungrily out across the surface, turning it brown, then black. It began to wobble, to bend, then gradually started to tip over. A soldier ran out howling from behind it, his arm wreathed in bright flames.

The burning screen fell to the ground, exposing a column of Gurkish troops, some pushing barrows full of boulders, others carrying long ladders, others with bows, armour, weapons. They yelled their war-cries, charging forward with their shields raised, shooting arrows up at the battlements, zig-zagging back and forth between the corpses. Men pitched on their faces, riddled with flatbow bolts. Men howled and clutched at wounds. Men crawled, and gurgled, and swore. They pleaded and bellowed defiance. They ran for the rear and were shot in the back.

Up on the walls bows twanged and clanked. More bottles of oil were lit and hurled down. Some men roared and hissed and spat curses, some cowered behind the parapet as arrows zipped up from below, clattering from stone or shooting overhead, occasionally thudding into flesh. Cosca had one foot up on the battlements, utterly careless, leaning out dangerously far and brandishing a notched sword, bellowing something that Glokta could not hear. Everyone was screaming and shouting, attackers and defenders both. *Battle. Chaos. I remember now. How could I ever have enjoyed this?*

Another of the screens was blazing, filling the air with reeking black smoke. Gurkish soldiers spilled out from behind it like bees from a broken hive, milling around on the far side of the ditch, trying to find a spot to foot

their ladder. Defenders further down the walls began to hurl chunks of masonry down at them. Another rock from a catapult crashed down far short and ripped a long hole through a Gurkish column, sending bodies and parts of bodies flying.

A soldier was dragged past with an arrow in his eye. 'Is it bad?' he was wailing, 'is it bad?' A moment later a man just beside Glokta squawked as a shaft hit him in the chest. He was spun half round, his flatbow went off and the bolt thudded into his neighbour's neck, right up to the feathers. The two of them fell together right at Glokta's feet, leaking blood across the walkway.

Down at the foot of the walls, a bottle of oil burst apart in the midst of a crowd of Gurkish soldiers, just as they were trying to raise their ladder. A faint tang of cooking meat joined the stinks of rot and wood smoke. Men burned, scrambling and screaming, charging around madly or flinging themselves into the flooded ditch in full armour. *Death by burning or death by drowning. Some choice.*

'You seen enough yet?' Severard's voice hissed in his ear.

'Yes.' More than enough. He left Cosca shouting himself hoarse in Styrian and pushed breathlessly through the press of mercenaries towards the steps. He followed a stretcher down, wincing at every painful step, trying to keep up while a steady stream of men shoved past the other way. *Never thought that I'd be glad to be going down a set of steps again.* His happiness did not last long, however. By the time he reached the bottom his left leg was twitching with the all-too-familiar mixture of agony and numbness.

'Damn it!' he hissed to himself, hopping back against the wall. 'There are casualties more mobile than I am!' He watched the wounded hobbling past, bandaged and bloody.

'This isn't right,' hissed Severard. 'We've done our bit. We found the traitors. What the hell are we still doing here?'

'Fighting for the King's cause beneath you, is it?'

'Dying for it is.'

Glokta snorted. 'You think there's anyone in this whole fucking city enjoying themselves?' He thought he heard the faint sound of Cosca screaming insults floating down over the clamour of the fighting. 'Apart from that crazy Styrian of course. Keep an eye on him, eh, Severard? He betrayed Eider, he'll betray us, especially if things look bleak.'

The Practical stared at him, and for once there was no trace of a smile round his eyes. ‘Do things look bleak?’

‘You were up there.’ Glokta grimaced as he stretched his leg out. ‘They’ve looked better.’

The long, dim hall had once been a temple. When the Gurkish assaults had begun the lightly wounded had been brought here, to be tended to by priests and women. It was an easy place to bring them: down in the Lower City, close to the walls. This part of the slums was mostly empty of civilians now, in any case. *The risks of raging fire and plummeting boulders can quickly render a neighbourhood unpopular.* As the fighting continued the lightly wounded had gone back to the walls, leaving the more serious casualties behind. Those with severed limbs, with deep cuts, with terrible burns, with arrows in the body, lay scattered round the dim arcades on their bloody stretchers. Day by day their numbers had mounted until they choked every part of the floor. The walking wounded were dealt with outside, now. This place was reserved for the ruined, for the maimed. *For the dying.*

Every man had his own special language of agony. Some screamed and howled without end. Some cried out for help, for mercy, for water, for their mothers. Some coughed and gurgled and spat blood. Some wheezed and rattled out their last breaths. *Only the dead are entirely silent.* And there were a lot of them. From time to time you would see them being dragged out, limbs lolling, ready to be wrapped in cheap shrouds and heaped up behind the back wall.

All day, Glokta knew, grim teams of men were busy digging graves for the natives. *According to their firmly-held beliefs. Great pits in the ruins of the slums, good for a dozen corpses at a time.* All night, the same men were busy burning the Union dead. *According to our lack of belief in anything. Up on the bluffs, where the oily smoke will be carried out over the bay. We can only hope it will blow right into the faces of the Gurkish on the other side. One last insult, from us, to them.*

Glokta shuffled slowly through the hall, echoing with the sounds of pain, wiping the sweat from his forehead, peering down at the casualties. Dark-skinned Dagoskans, Styrian mercenaries, pale-skinned Union men, all mixed up together. *People of all nations, all colours, all types, united against the Gurkish, and now dying together, side by side, all equal. My*

heart would be warmed. If I still had one. He was vaguely aware of Practical Frost, lurking in the darkness by the wall nearby, eyes moving carefully over the room. *My watchful shadow, here to make sure that no one rewards my efforts on the Arch Lector's behalf with a fatal head wound of my own.*

A small section at the back of the temple had been curtained off for surgery. *Or as close as they can get here. Hack and slash with saw and knife, legs off at the knee, arms at the shoulder.* The loudest screams in the whole place came from behind those dirty curtains. Desperate, slobbering wails. *Hardly any less brutal than what's happening on the other side of the land walls.* Glokta could see Kahdia working through a gap, his white robe spattered, smeared, turned grubby brown with blood. He was squinting down at some glistening meat while he cut away at it with a blade. *The stump of a leg, perhaps?* The screams bubbled to a stop.

'He's dead,' said the Haddish simply, tossing his knife down on the table and wiping his bloody hands on a rag. 'Bring in the next one.' He lifted the curtain and pushed his way through. Then he saw Glokta. 'Ah! The author of our woes! Have you come to feed your guilt, Superior?'

'No. I came to see if I have any.'

'And do you?'

A good question. Do I? He looked down at a young man, lying on dirty straw by the wall, wedged in between two others. His face was waxy pale, eyes glassy, lips moving rapidly as he mumbled some meaningless nonsense to himself. His leg was off just above the knee, the stump bound with a bloody dressing, a belt buckled tight round the thigh. *His chances of survival? Slim to none. A last few hours in agony and squalor, listening to the groans of his fellows. A young life, snuffed out long before his time, and blah, blah, blah.* Glokta raised his eyebrows. He felt nothing but a mild distaste, no more than he might have had the dying man been a heap of rubbish. 'No,' he said.

Kahdia looked down at his own bloody hands. 'Then God has truly blessed you,' he muttered. 'Not everyone has your stomach.'

'I don't know. Your people have been fighting well.'

'Dying well, you mean.'

Glokta's laughter hacked at the heavy air. 'Come now. There's no such thing as dying well.' He glanced round at the endless wounded. 'I'd have

thought that you of all people would have learned that by now.'

Kahdia did not laugh. 'How much of this do you think we can stand?'

'Losing heart, eh, Haddish? As with so many things in life, heroic last stands are a great deal more appealing in concept than in reality.' *The dashing young Colonel Glokta could have told us that, dragged away from the bridge with the remains of his leg barely attached, his notions of how the world works radically altered.*

'Your concern is touching, Superior, but I'm used to disappointments. Believe me, I will live with this one. The question remains. How long can we hold out?'

'If the sea lanes stay open and we can be supplied by ship, if the Gurkish cannot find a way round the land walls, if we can stick together and keep our heads, we could hold out here for weeks.'

'Hold out for what?'

Glokta paused. *For what indeed?* 'Perhaps the Gurkish will lose heart.'

'Hah!' snorted Kahdia. 'The Gurkish have no hearts! They did not subdue all Kanta with half measures. No. The Emperor has spoken, and will not be denied.'

'Then we must hope that the war will be quickly settled in the North, and that Union forces will come to our aid.' *An utterly futile hope. It will be months before matters are settled in Angland. Even when they are, the army will be in no state to fight. We are on our own.*

'And when might we expect such help?'

When the stars go out? When the sky falls in? When I run a mile with a smile on my face? 'If I had all the answers I'd hardly have joined the Inquisition!' snapped Glokta. 'Perhaps you should pray for divine help. A mighty wave to wash the Gurkish away would suit nicely. Who was it told me that miracles happen?'

Kahdia nodded slowly. 'Perhaps we should both pray. I fear there is more chance of aid from my god than your masters.' Another stretcher was carried past, a squealing Styrian stretched out on it with an arrow in his stomach. 'I must go.' Kahdia swept away and the curtain dropped back behind him.

Glokta frowned at it. *And so the doubts begin. The Gurkish slowly tighten their grip on the city. Our doom draws nearer, and every man sees it. A strange thing, death. Far away, you can laugh at it, but as it comes closer it*

looks worse and worse. Close enough to touch, and no one laughs. Dagoska is full of fear, and the doubts can only grow. Sooner or later someone will try to betray the city to the Gurkish, if only to save their lives, or the lives of those they love. They might well begin by disposing of the troublesome Superior who set this madness in motion . . .

He felt a sudden touch on his shoulder and he caught his breath and spun round. His leg buckled and he stumbled back against a pillar, almost treading on a gasping native with bandages across his face. Vitari was standing behind him, frowning. 'Damn it!' Glokta bit on his lip with his remaining teeth against a searing spasm in his leg. 'Didn't anyone ever teach you not to sneak up on people?'

'They taught me the opposite. I need to talk to you.'

'Then talk. Just don't touch me again.'

She eyed the wounded. 'Not here. Alone.'

'Oh, come now. What can you have to say to me that you can't say in front of a room full of dying heroes?'

'You'll find out when we get outside.'

A chain around the throat, nice and tight, courtesy of his Eminence? Or merely some chat about the weather? Glokta felt himself smiling. *I can hardly wait to find out.* He held one hand up to Frost and the albino faded back into the shadows, then he limped after Vitari, threading their way through the groaning casualties and out through the door at the back, into the open air. The sharp smell of sweat swapped for the sharp smell of burning, and something else . . .

Long, lozenge shapes were stacked up shoulder high against the wall of the temple, swathed in rough grey cloth, some of it spotted and stained with brown blood. A whole heap of them. Corpses, waiting patiently to be buried. *This morning's harvest. What a wonderfully macabre spot for a pleasant little chat. I could hardly have picked a better.*

'So, how are you enjoying the siege? It's a bit noisy for my taste, but your friend Cosca seems to like it—'

'Where's Eider?'

'What?' snapped Glokta, stalling for time while he thought about how to answer. I *hardly expected her to find out about that so soon.*

'Eider. You remember? Dressed like an expensive whore? Adornment to the city's ruling council? Tried to betray us to the Gurkish? Her cell's

empty. Why?'

'Oh, her. She's at sea.' *True.* 'With fifty strides of good chain round her.' *False.* 'She's adorning the bottom of the bay now, since you ask.'

Vitari's orange brows drew in with suspicion. 'Why wasn't I told?'

'I've got better things to do than keep you informed. We've a war to lose, or hadn't you noticed?' Glokta turned away but her hand shot out in front of him and slapped on to the wall, her long arm barring his path.

'Keeping me informed means keeping Sult informed. If we start telling him different stories—'

'Where have you been the last few weeks?' He chuckled as he gestured at the pile of shrouded shapes beside the wall. 'It's a funny thing. The closer the Gurkish get to breaking through our walls and murdering every living thing in Dagoska, the less I seem to care about his fucking Eminence! Tell him what you please. You're boring me.' He made to push past her arm but found it did not move.

'What if I were to tell him what you please?' she whispered.

Glokta frowned. *Now that isn't boring. Sult's favourite Practical, sent here to make sure I tread the righteous path, offering deals? A trick? A trap?* Their faces were no more than a foot apart, and he stared hard into her eyes, trying to guess what she was thinking. *Is there just the slightest trace of desperation there? Could the motive be nothing more than simple self-preservation? When you lose the instinct yourself, it's hard to remember how powerful it is for everyone else.* He felt himself starting to smile. Yes, I see it now. 'You thought you'd be recalled once the traitors had been found, didn't you? You thought Sult would arrange a nice little boat home! But now there are no boats for anyone, and you're worried your kindly uncle's forgotten all about you! That you've been tossed to the Gurkish with the rest of the damn dogmeat!'

Vitari's eyes narrowed. 'Let me tell you a secret. I didn't choose to be here any more than you did, but I learned a long time ago that when Sult tells you to do a thing you'd better look like you did it. All I care about is getting out of here alive.' She moved even closer. 'Can we help each other?'

Can we indeed? I wonder. 'Alright then. I daresay I can squeeze one extra friend into the social whirl that is my life. I'll see what I can do for you.'

'You'll see what you can do?'

‘That’s the best you’ll get. The fact is I’m not much good at helping people. Out of practice, you see.’ He leered his toothless grin in her face, lifted her slack arm out of the way with his cane, then hobbled past the heap of bodies and back towards the temple door.

‘What shall I tell Sult about Eider?’

‘Tell him the truth,’ Glokta called over his shoulder. ‘Tell him she’s dead.’

Tell him we all are.

So This is Pain

‘Where am I?’ asked Jezal, only his jaw would not move. The cartwheels squealed as they turned, everything blinding bright and blurry, sound and light digging into his aching skull.

He tried to swallow, but could not. He tried to raise his head. Pain stabbed through his neck and his stomach heaved.

‘Help!’ he squealed, but nothing came out beyond a bubbling croak. What had happened? Painful sky above, painful boards underneath. He was lying in a cart, head on a scratchy sack, bouncing and jolting.

There had been a fight, he remembered that. A fight among the stones. Someone had called out. A crunch and blinding light, then nothing but pain. Even trying to think was painful. He lifted his arm to feel his face, but found that he couldn’t. He tried to shift his legs, to push himself up, but he couldn’t do that either. He worked his mouth, grunting, moaning.

His tongue was unfamiliar, three times its usual size, like a bloody lump of ham that had been shoved between his jaws, filling his mouth so he could hardly breathe. The right side of his face was a mask of agony. With every lurch of the cart his jaws rattled together, sending white-hot stabs of pain from his teeth into his eyes, his neck, the very roots of his hair. There were bandages over his mouth, he had to breathe through the left side, but even the air moving in his throat was painful.

Panic started to claw at him. Every part of his body was screaming. One arm was bound tight across his chest but he clutched weakly at the side of the cart with the other, trying to do something, anything, his eyes bulging, heart hammering, breath snorting in his nose.

‘Gugh!’ he growled, ‘gurrr!’ And the more he tried to speak, the more the pain grew, and grew, until it seemed his face would split, until it seemed his skull would fly apart—

‘Easy.’ A scarred face swam into view above. Ninefingers. Jezal grabbed at him, wildly, and the Northman caught his hand in his own big paw and squeezed it tight. ‘Easy, now, and listen to me. It hurts, yes. Seems like more than you can take, but it isn’t. You think you’re going to die, but you

won't. Listen to me, because I've been there, and I know. Each minute. Each hour. Each day, it gets better.'

He felt Ninefingers' other hand on his shoulder, pushing him gently back down into the cart. 'All you got to do is lie there, and it gets better. You understand? You got the light duty, you lucky bastard.'

Jezal let his limbs go heavy. All he had to do was lie there. He squeezed the big hand and the hand squeezed back. The pain seemed less. Awful still, but within his control. His breath slowed. His eyes closed.

The wind cut over the cold plain, plucking at the short grass, tugging at Jezal's tattered coat, at his greasy hair, at his dirty bandages, but he ignored it. What could he do about the wind? What could he do about anything?

He sat, his back against the wheel of the cart, and stared down wide-eyed at his leg. A broken length of spear shaft had been strapped to either side, wrapped round and round with strips of torn-up cloth, held firmly and painfully straight. His arm was no better, sandwiched between two slats from a shield and bound tightly across his chest, the white hand dangling, fingers numb and useless as sausages.

Pitiful, improvised efforts at medicine that Jezal could never see working. They might almost have seemed amusing, had he not been the unfortunate patient. He would surely never recover. He was broken, shattered, ruined. Would he be now a cripple of the kind he avoided on the street corners of Adua? War-wounded, ragged and dirty, shoving their stumps in the faces of passers-by, holding their crabbing palms out for coppers, uncomfortable reminders that there was a dark side to soldiering that one would rather not think about?

Would he be now a cripple like . . . and a horrible coldness crept over him . . . like Sand dan Glokta? He tried to shift his leg and groaned at the pain. Would he walk for the rest of his life with a stick? A shambling horror, shunned and avoided? A salutary lesson, pointed at and whispered of? There goes Jezal dan Luthar! He used to be a promising man, a handsome man, he won a Contest and the crowd cheered for him! Who would believe it? What a waste, what a shame, here he comes, let's move on . . .

And that was before he even thought about what his face might look like. He tried to move his tongue and the stab of agony made him grimace, but he could tell there was a terribly unfamiliar geography to the inside of his

mouth. It felt slanted, twisted, nothing fitted together as it used to. There was a gap in his teeth that felt a mile wide. His lips tingled unpleasantly under the bandages. Torn, battered, ripped open. He was a monster.

A shadow fell across Jezal's face and he squinted up into the sun. Ninefingers stood over him, a water-skin hanging from one big fist. 'Water,' he grunted. Jezal shook his head but the Northman squatted down, pulled the stopper from the skin and held it out regardless. 'Got to drink. Keep it clean.'

Jezal snatched the skin bad-temperedly from him, lifted it gingerly to the better side of his mouth and tried to tilt it. It hung bloated and baggy. He struggled for a moment, before realising there was no way of drinking with only one good hand. He fell back, eyes closed, snorting through his nose. He almost ground his teeth with frustration, but quickly thought better of it.

'Here.' He felt a hand slide behind his neck and firmly lift his head.

'Gugh!' he grunted furiously, with half a mind to struggle, but in the end he allowed his body to sag, and submitted to the ignominy of being handled like a baby. What was the point, after all, in pretending he was anything other than utterly helpless? Sour, lukewarm water seeped into his mouth, and he tried to force it down. It was like swallowing broken glass. He coughed and spat the rest out. Or he tried to spit and found the pain far too great. He had to lean forward and let it dribble from his face, most of it running down his neck and into the filthy collar of his shirt. He sat back heavily with a moan and pushed the skin away with his good hand.

Ninefingers shrugged. 'Alright, but you'll have to try again later. Got to keep drinking. You remember what happened?' Jezal shook his head.

'There was a fight. Me and sunshine there,' and he nodded over at Ferro, who scowled back, 'handled most of 'em, but it seems three got around us. You dealt with two, and you did well with that, but you missed one, and he hit you in the mouth with a mace.' He gestured at Jezal's bandaged face. 'Hit you hard, and you're familiar with the outcome. Then you fell, and I'm guessing he hit you when you were down, which is how you got the arm and the leg broke. Could have been a lot worse. If I was you I'd be thanking the dead that Quai was there.'

Jezal blinked over at the apprentice. What did he have to do with anything? But Ninefingers was already answering his question.

‘Came up and knocked him on the head with a pan. Well, I say knocked. Smashed his skull to mush, didn’t you?’ He grinned over at the apprentice, who sat staring out across the plain. ‘He hits hard for a thin man, our boy, eh? Shame about that pan, though.’

Quai shrugged as though he stove a man’s head in most mornings. Jezal supposed he should be thanking the sickly fool for saving his life, but he didn’t feel so very saved. Instead he tried to form the sounds as clearly as he could without hurting himself, making little more than a whisper. ‘Ow bad ith it?’

‘I’ve had worse.’ Small comfort indeed. ‘You’ll get through alright. You’re young. Arm and leg’ll mend quick.’ Meaning, Jezal inferred, that his face would not. ‘Always tough taking a wound, and never tougher than the first. I cried like a baby at every one of these,’ and Ninefingers waved a hand at his battered face. ‘Most everyone cries, and that’s a fact. If it’s any help.’

It was not. ‘Ow bad?’

Ninefingers scratched at the thick stubble on the side of his face. ‘Your jaw’s broke, you lost some teeth, you got your mouth ripped, but we stitched you up pretty good.’ Jezal swallowed, hardly able to think. His worst fears seemed to be confirmed. ‘It’s a hard wound you got there, and a nasty place to get it. In your mouth so you can’t eat, can’t drink, can’t hardly talk without pain. Can’t kiss either of course, though that shouldn’t be a problem out here, eh?’ The Northman grinned but Jezal was in no mood to join him. ‘A bad wound, alright. A naming wound they’d call it, where I come from.’

‘A wha?’ muttered Jezal, immediately regretting it as pain licked at his jaw.

‘A naming wound, you know,’ and Ninefingers waggled the stump of his finger. ‘A wound you could get named after. They’d probably call you Brokejaw, or Bentface or Lackteeth or something. ’ He smiled again, but Jezal had left his sense of humour on the hill among the stones, along with his broken teeth. He could feel tears stinging at his eyes. He wanted to cry, but that made his mouth stretch, the stitches tug at his bloated lips under the bandages.

Ninefingers made a further effort. ‘You got to look at the bright side. It ain’t likely to kill you now. If the rot was going to get into it, I reckon it

would've already.' Jezal gawped, horrified, eyes going wider and wider as the implications of that last utterance sank in. His jaw would surely have dropped, had it not been shattered and bound tightly to his face. Wasn't likely to kill him? The possibility of the wound going bad had never even occurred. Rot? In his *mouth?*

'I'm not helping, am I?' muttered Logen.

Jezal covered his eyes with his one good hand and tried to weep without hurting himself, silent sobs making his shoulders shake.

They had stopped on the shore of a wide lake. Choppy grey water under a dark sky, heavy with bruises. Brooding water, brooding sky, all seeming full of secrets, full of threats. Sullen waves slapped at the cold shingle. Sullen birds croaked to one another above the water. Sullen pain pulsed through every corner of Jezal's body, and would not stop.

Ferro squatted down in front of him, frowning, as always, cutting the bandages away while Bayaz stood behind her, looking down. The First of the Magi had woken from his torpor, it seemed. He had given no explanation of what had caused it, or why he had so suddenly recovered, but he still looked ill. Older than ever, and a lot bonier, his eyes sunken, his skin looking somehow thin, pale, almost transparent. But Jezal had no sympathy to spare, especially not for the architect of this disaster.

'Where are we?' he muttered, through the twinges. It was less painful to talk than it had been, but he still had to speak quietly, carefully, the words thick and stumbling like some village halfwit's.

Bayaz nodded over his shoulder towards the great expanse of water. 'This is the first of the three lakes. We are well on the way to Aulcus. More than half of our journey is behind us, I would say.'

Jezal swallowed. Halfway was hardly the greatest reassurance he could have asked for. 'How long was—'

'I can't work with you flapping your lips, fool,' hissed Ferro. 'Do I leave you like this, or do you shut up?'

Jezal shut up. She peeled the dressing carefully from his face, peered down at the brown blood on the cloth, sniffed it, wrinkled her nose and tossed it away, then stared angrily at his mouth for a moment. He swallowed, watching her dark face for any sign of what she might be thinking. He would have given his teeth for a mirror at that moment, if he

had still had a full set. ‘How bad is it?’ he muttered at her, tasting blood on his tongue.

She scowled up at him. ‘You’ve confused me with someone who cares.’

A sob coughed up from his throat. Tears stung at his eyes, he had to look away and blink to stop himself crying. He was a pitiable specimen, alright. A brave son of the Union, a bold officer of the King’s Own, a winner of the Contest, no less, and he could scarcely keep from weeping.

‘Hold this,’ snapped Ferro’s voice.

‘Uh,’ he whispered, trying to press the sobs down into his chest and stop them cracking his voice. He held one end of the fresh bandage against his face while she wrapped it round his head and under his jaw, round and round, holding his mouth near shut.

‘You’ll live.’

‘Is that supposed to be a comfort?’ he mumbled.

She shrugged as she turned away. ‘There are plenty who don’t.’

Jezal almost envied them as he watched her stalk off through the waving grass. How he wished Ardee was here. He remembered the last sight of her, looking up at him in the soft rain with that crooked smile. She would never have left him like this, helpless and in pain. She would have spoken soft words, and touched his face, and looked at him with her dark eyes, and kissed him gently, and . . . sentimental shit. Probably she had found some other idiot to tease, and confuse, and make miserable, and had never paid him so much as a second thought. He tortured himself with the thought of her laughing at some other man’s jokes, smiling into some other man’s face, kissing some other man’s mouth. She would never want him now, that was sure. No one would want him. He felt his lip trembling again, his eyes tingling.

‘All the great heroes of old, you know – the great kings, the great generals – they all faced adversity from time to time.’ Jezal looked up. He had almost forgotten that Bayaz was there. ‘Suffering is what gives a man strength, my boy, just as the steel most hammered turns out the hardest.’

The old man winced as he squatted down beside Jezal. ‘Anyone can face ease and success with confidence. It is the way we face trouble and misfortune that defines us. Self-pity goes with selfishness, and there is nothing more to be deplored in a leader than that. Selfishness belongs to children, and to halfwits. A great leader puts others before himself. You

would be surprised how acting so makes it easier to bear one's own troubles. In order to act like a king, one need only treat everyone else like one.' And he placed a hand on Jezal's shoulder. Perhaps it was supposed to be a fatherly and reassuring touch, but he could feel it trembling through his shirt. Bayaz let it rest there for a moment as though he had not the strength to move it, then pushed himself slowly up, stretched his legs, and shuffled off.

Jezal stared vacantly after him. A few weeks ago he would have been left fuming silently by such a lecture. Now he sat limp and absorbed it meekly. He hardly knew who he was any more. It was difficult to maintain any sense of superiority in the face of his utter dependence on other people. And people of whom, until recently, he had held such a very low opinion. He was no longer under any illusions. Without Ferro's savage doctoring, and Ninefingers' clumsy nursing, he would most likely have been dead.

The Northman was walking over, boots crunching in the shingle. Time to go back in the cart. Time for more squeaking and jolting. Time for more pain. Jezal gave a long, ragged, self-pitying sigh, but stopped himself halfway through. Self-pity was for children and halfwits.

'Alright, you know the drill.' Jezal leaned forward and Ninefingers hooked his arm behind his back, the other under his knees, lifted him up over the side of the cart without even breathing hard and dumped him unceremoniously among the supplies. Jezal caught his big, dirty, three-fingered hand as he was moving away, and the Northman turned to look at him, one heavy brow lifted. Jezal swallowed. 'Thank you,' he muttered.

'What, for this?'

'For everything.'

Ninefingers looked at him for a long moment, then shrugged. 'Nothing to it. You treat folk the way you'd want to be treated, and you can't go far wrong. That's what my father told me. Forgot that advice, for a long time, and I done things I can never make up for.' He gave a long sigh. 'Still, it doesn't hurt to try. My experience? You get what you give, in the end.'

Jezal blinked at Ninefingers' broad back as he walked over to his horse. You treat folk the way you'd want to be treated. Could Jezal honestly say that he had ever done that much? He thought about it as the cart set off, axles shrieking, carelessly at first, and then with deepening worry.

He had bullied his juniors, pandered to his seniors. He had often screwed money from friends who could not afford it, had taken advantage of girls, then brushed them off. He had never once thanked his friend West for any of his help, and would happily have bedded his sister behind his back if she had let him. He realised, with increasing horror, that he could scarcely think of a single selfless thing that he had ever done.

He shifted uncomfortably against the sacks of fodder in the cart. You get what you give, in the long run, and manners cost nothing. From now on, he would think of others first. He would treat everyone as if they were his equal. But later, of course. There would be plenty of time to be a better man when he could eat again. He touched one hand to the bandages on his face, scratched absently at them then had to stop himself. Bayaz was riding just behind the cart, looking out across the water.

'You saw it?' Jezal muttered at him.

'Saw what?'

'This.' He jabbed a finger at his face.

'Ah, that. Yes, I saw it.'

'How bad is it?'

Bayaz cocked his head on one side. 'Do you know? All in all, I believe I like it.'

'You like it?'

'Not now, perhaps, but the stitches will come out, the swelling will go down, the bruises will fade, the scabs will heal and drop away. I would guess your jaw will never quite regain its shape, and your teeth, of course, will not grow back, but what you lose in boyish charm you will gain, I have no doubt, in a certain danger, a flair, a rugged mystery. People respect a man who has seen action, and your appearance will be very far from ruined. I daresay girls could still be persuaded to swoon for you, if you were to do anything worth swooning over.' He nodded thoughtfully. 'Yes. All in all, I think it will serve.'

'Serve?' muttered Jezal, one hand pressed against his bandages. 'Serve what?'

But Bayaz' mind had wandered off. 'Harod the Great had a scar, you know, across his cheek, and it never did him any harm. You don't see it on the statues, of course, but people respected him the more for it, in life. Truly a great man, Harod. He had a shining reputation for being fair and

trustworthy, and indeed he often was. But he knew how not to be, when the situation demanded it.' The Magus chuckled to himself. 'Did I tell you of the time he invited his two greatest enemies to negotiate with him? He had them feuding one with the other before the day was out, and later they destroyed each other's armies in battle, leaving him to claim victory over both without striking a blow. He knew, you see, that Ardlic had a beautiful wife . . .'

Jezal lay back in the cart. Bayaz had, in fact, told him that story before, but there seemed no purpose in saying so. He was actually enjoying hearing it for a second time, and it was hardly as though there was anything better for him to do. There was something calming in the repetitive droning of the old man's deep voice, especially now the sun was breaking through the clouds. His mouth was barely even hurting, if he kept it still.

So Jezal lay back against a sack of straw, head turned to the side, rocking gently with the movement of the cart, and watched the land slide by. Watched the wind in the grass. Watched the sun on the water.

One Step at a Time

West gritted his teeth as he dragged himself up the freezing slope. His fingers were numb, and weak, and trembling from clawing at the chill earth, the icy tree roots, the freezing snow for handholds. His lips were cracked, his nose was endlessly running, the rims of his nostrils were horribly sore. The very air cut into his throat and nipped at his lungs, smoked back out in tickling wheezes. He wondered if giving his coat to Ladisla had been the worst decision of his life. He decided it probably had been. Except for saving the selfish bastard in the first place, of course.

Even when he had been training for the Contest, five hours a day, he had never imagined that he could be so tired. Next to Threetrees, Lord Marshal Varuz seemed an almost laughably soft taskmaster. West was shaken awake before dawn every morning and scarcely allowed to rest until after the last light faded. The Northmen were machines, every one of them. Men carved from wood who never got tired, who felt no pain. Every one of West's muscles ached from their merciless pace. He was covered in bruises and scratches from a hundred falls and scrambles. His feet were raw and blistered in his wet boots. Then there was the familiar pulsing in the head, throbbing away to the rhythm of his laboured heartbeat, mingling unpleasantly with the burning of the wound on his scalp.

The cold, the pain, and the fatigue were bad enough, but still worse was the overwhelming sense of shame, and guilt, and failure that crushed him down with every step. He had been sent with Ladisla to make sure there were no disasters. The result had been a disaster on a scale almost incomprehensible. An entire division massacred. How many children without fathers? How many wives without husbands? How many parents without sons? If only he could have done more, he told himself for the thousandth time, bunching his bloodless hands into fists. If only he could have convinced the Prince to stay behind the river, all those men might not be dead. So many dead. He hardly knew whether to pity or envy them.

'One step at a time,' he muttered to himself as he clambered up the slope. That was the only way to look at it. If you clenched your teeth hard enough,

and took enough strides, you could get anywhere. One painful, weary, freezing, guilty step at a time. What else could you do?

No sooner had they finally made it to the top of the hill than Prince Ladisla flung himself down against the roots of a tree, as he did at least once an hour. ‘Colonel West, please!’ He gasped for air, breath steaming round his puffy face. He had two lines of glistening snot on his pale top lip, just like a toddler. ‘I can go no further! Tell them . . . tell them to stop, for pity’s sake!’

West cursed under his breath. The Northmen were annoyed enough as it was, and making less and less effort to disguise the fact, but, like it or not, Ladisla was still his commander. Not to mention the heir to the throne. West could hardly order him to get up. ‘Threetrees!’ he wheezed.

The old warrior frowned over his shoulder. ‘You better not be asking me to stop, lad.’

‘We have to.’

‘By the dead! Again? You Southerners got no bones in you at all! No wonder Bethod gave you such a kicking. If you bastards don’t learn to march he’ll be giving you another, I can tell you that!’

‘Please. Just for a moment.’

Threetrees glared down at the sprawling Prince and shook his head with disgust. ‘Alright, then. You can sit a minute, if that’ll get you moving the quicker, but don’t get used to it, you hear? We’ve not covered half the ground we need to today, if we’re to keep ahead of Bethod.’ And he stalked off to shout at the Dogman.

West sank down onto his haunches, working his numb toes, cupping his icy hands and blowing into them. He wanted to sprawl out like Ladisla, but he knew from harsh experience that if he stopped moving, starting up again would be all the more painful. Pike and his daughter stood over them, scarcely even too far out of breath. It was harsh proof, if any were really needed, that working metal in a penal colony was better preparation for slogging across brutal country than a life of uninterrupted ease.

Ladisla seemed to guess what he was thinking. ‘You’ve no idea how hard this is for me!’ he blurted.

‘No, of course!’ snapped West, his patience worn down to a stub. ‘You’ve got the extra weight of my coat to carry!’

The Prince blinked, then looked down at the wet ground, his jaw muscles working silently. ‘You’re right. I’m sorry. I realise I owe you my life, of course. Not used to this sort of thing, you see. Not used to it at all.’ He plucked at the frayed and filthy lapels of the coat and gave a sorry chuckle. ‘My mother always told me that a man should be well presented under all circumstances. I wonder what she’d make of this.’ West noticed he didn’t offer to give it back, though.

Ladisla hunched his shoulders. ‘I suppose I must shoulder a portion of the blame for this whole business.’ A portion? West would have liked to serve him a portion of his boot. ‘I should have listened to you, Colonel. I knew it all along. Caution is the best policy in war, eh? That’s always been my motto. Let that fool Smund talk me into rashness. He always was an idiot!’

‘Lord Smund gave his life,’ muttered West.

‘Shame he didn’t give it a day earlier, we might not be in this fix!’ The Prince’s lip quivered slightly. ‘What do you think they’ll say about this back home, eh, West? What do you think they’ll say about me now?’

‘I’ve no idea, your Highness.’ It could hardly be any worse than what they said already. West tried to squash his anger and put himself in Ladisla’s position. He was so utterly unprepared for the hardship of this march, so completely without resources, so entirely dependent on others for everything. A man who had never had to make a decision more important than which hat to wear, who now had to come to terms with his responsibility for thousands of deaths. Small wonder he had no idea how to go about it.

‘If only they hadn’t run.’ Ladisla clenched his fist and thumped petulantly at a tree root. ‘Why didn’t they stand and fight, the cowardly bastards? Why didn’t they fight?’

West closed his eyes, did his best to ignore the cold, and the hunger, and the pain, and to push away the fury in his chest. This was always the way of it. Just when Ladisla was finally starting to arouse some sympathy, he would let fall some loathsome utterance which brought West’s distaste for the man flooding back. ‘I couldn’t possibly say, your Highness,’ he managed to squeeze through his gritted teeth.

‘Right,’ grumbled Threetrees, ‘that’s your lot! On your feet again, and no excuses!’

‘Not up again already is it, Colonel?’

‘I’m afraid so.’

The Prince sighed and dragged himself wincing to his feet. ‘I’ve no notion of how they can keep this up, West.’

‘One stride at a time, your Highness.’

‘Of course,’ muttered Ladisla, starting to stumble off through the trees after the two convicts. ‘One stride at a time.’

West worked his aching ankles for a moment and then bent down to follow, when he felt a shadow fall across him. He looked up to see that Black Dow had stepped into his path, blocking the way with one heavy shoulder, his snarling face no more than a foot away. He nodded towards the Prince’s slow moving back. ‘You want me to kill him?’ he growled in Northern.

‘If you touch any one of them!’ West had spat out the words before he had any idea of how to finish. ‘I’ll . . .’

‘Yes?’

‘I’ll kill you.’ What else could he say? He felt like a child making ludicrous threats in a schoolyard. An extremely cold and dangerous schoolyard, and to a boy twice his size.

But Dow only grinned. ‘That’s a big temper you got on you for a skinny man. A lot of killing we’re talking about, all of a sudden. You sure you got the bones for it?’

West tried to look as big as he could, which wasn’t easy standing down a slope and hunched over with exhaustion. You have to show no fear, if you’re to calm a dangerous situation, however much you might be feeling. ‘Why don’t you try me?’ His voice sounded pitifully weak, even in his own ear.

‘I might do that.’

‘Let me know when it’s time. I’d hate to miss it.’

‘Oh, don’t worry about that,’ whispered Dow, turning his head and spitting on the ground. ‘You’ll know it’s time when you wake up with your throat cut.’ And he sauntered off up the muddy slope, slow enough to show he wasn’t scared. West wished that he could have said the same. His heart was pounding as he pushed on between the trees after the others. He trudged doggedly past Ladisla and caught up to Cathil, falling into step beside her.

‘You alright?’ he asked.

‘I’ve been worse.’ She looked him up and down. ‘How about you?’

West suddenly realised what a state he must look. He had an old sack with holes cut in it for his arms pulled over his filthy uniform, his belt buckled tight over the top with the heavy sword pushed through it and knocking against his leg. There was an itchy growth of half beard across his rattling jaw, and he guessed that his face must have been a mixture of angry pink and corpse grey. He wedged his hands under his armpits and gave a sad grin. ‘Cold.’

‘You look it. Should have kept your coat, maybe.’

He had to nod at that. He peered through the branches of the pines at Dow’s back and cleared his throat. ‘None of them have been . . . bothering you, have they?’

‘Bothering me?’

‘Well, you know,’ he said awkwardly, ‘a woman in amongst all these men, they’re not used to it. The way that man Dow stares at you. I don’t—’

‘That’s very noble of you, Colonel, but I wouldn’t worry about them. I doubt they’ll do anything more than stare, and I’ve dealt with worse than that.’

‘Worse than him?’

‘First camp I was in, the commandant took a liking to me. Still had the glow of a good free life on my skin, I suppose. He starved me to get what he wanted. Five days with no food.’

West winced. ‘And that was long enough to make him give up?’

‘They don’t give up. Five days was all I could stand. You do what you have to.’

‘You mean . . .’

‘What you have to.’ She shrugged. ‘I’m not proud, but I’m not ashamed either. Pride and shame, neither one will feed you. The only thing I regret is those five days of hunger, five days when I could have eaten well. You do what you have to. I don’t care who you are. Once you start starving . . .’ She shrugged again.

‘What about your father?’

‘Pike?’ She looked up at the burnt-faced convict ahead of them. ‘He’s a good man, but he’s no relative of mine. I’ve no idea what became of my real family. Split up all over Angland probably, if they’re still alive.’

‘So he’s—’

‘Sometimes, if you pretend you’re family, people act differently. We’ve helped each other out. If it wasn’t for Pike, I suppose I’d still be hammering metal in the camp.’

‘Instead of which you’re enjoying this wonderful outing.’

‘Huh. You make do with what you’re given.’ She put her head down and quickened her pace, stalking off through the trees.

West watched her go. She had some bones to her, the Northmen would have said. Ladisla could have learned a thing or two from her tight-lipped determination. West looked over his shoulder at the Prince, stumbling daintily through the mud with a petulant frown on his face. He blew out a smoky sigh. It seemed that it was far too late for Ladisla to learn anything.

A miserable meal of a chunk of old bread and a cup of cold stew. Threetrees wouldn’t let them have a fire, for all of Ladisla’s begging. Too much risk of being seen. So they sat and spoke quietly in the gathering gloom, a little way from the Northmen. Talking was good, if only to keep one’s mind from the cold, and the aches, and the discomfort. If only to stop one’s teeth from chattering.

‘You said you fought in Kanta, eh, Pike? In the war?’

‘That’s right. I was a Sergeant there.’ Pike nodded slowly, his eyes glittering in the pink mess of his face. ‘Hard to believe we were always too hot, eh?’

West gave a sad gurgle. The closest thing to a laugh that he could manage. ‘Which was your unit?’

‘I was in the first regiment of the King’s Own cavalry, under Colonel Glokta.’

‘But, that was my regiment!’

‘I know.’

‘I don’t remember you.’

Pike’s burns shifted in a way that West thought might have been a smile. ‘I looked different, back then. I remember you, though. Lieutenant West. The men liked you. Good man to go to with a problem.’

West swallowed. He wasn’t much for fixing problems now. Only for making them. ‘So how did you end up in the camp?’

Pike and Cathil exchanged glances. ‘In general, among the convicts, you don’t ask.’

‘Oh.’ West looked down, rubbed his hands together. ‘I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to offend you.’

‘No offence.’ Pike sniffed, and rubbed at the side of his melted nose. ‘I made some mistakes. Let’s leave it at that. You got a family waiting for you?’

West winced, folded his arms tight across his chest. ‘I have a sister, back home in Adua. She’s . . . complicated.’ He thought it best to end there. ‘You?’

‘I had a wife. When I was sent here, she chose to stay behind. I used to hate her for it, but you know what? I can’t say I wouldn’t have done the same.’

Ladisla emerged from the trees, wiping his hands on the hem of West’s coat. ‘That’s better! Must’ve been that damn meat this morning.’ He sat down between West and Cathil and she scowled as if someone had dropped a shovelful of shit next to her. It was safe to say the two of them were not getting on. ‘What were we speaking of?’

West winced. ‘Pike was just mentioning his wife—’

‘Oh? You know, of course, that I am engaged to be married, to the Princess Terez, daughter of Grand Duke Orso of Talins. She is a famous beauty . . .’ Ladisla trailed off, frowning round at the shadowy trees, as if even he was dimly aware of how bizarre talk of such matters seemed in the wilds of Angland. ‘Though I am beginning to suspect that she is less than entirely delighted with the match.’

‘One can’t imagine why,’ murmured Cathil, at least the tenth jibe of the evening.

‘I am the heir to the throne!’ snapped the Prince, ‘and will one day be your king! It would not hurt anyone for you to treat me with a measure of respect!’

She laughed in his face. ‘I’ve no country and no king, and certainly no respect for you.’

Ladisla gasped with indignation. ‘I will not be spoken to like—’

Black Dow loomed up over them from nowhere. ‘Shut his fucking mouth!’ he snarled in Northern, stabbing at the air with one thick finger. ‘Bethod might have ears anywhere! Stop his tongue flapping or it’s coming out!’ and he melted away into the shadows.

‘He would like us to be quiet, your Highness,’ translated West in a whisper.

The Prince swallowed. ‘So I gather.’ He and Cathil hunched their shoulders and glared at each other in silence.

West lay on his back on the hard ground, the canvas creaking just above his face, watching the snow fall gently down beyond the black lumps of his boots. Cathil was pressed up against him on one side, the Dogman on the other. The rest of the band were all around, squeezed in tight together under a great smelly blanket. All except for Dow, who was out there taking watch. Cold like this was an amazing thing for making people familiar with each other.

There was a rumbling snore coming from the far end of the group. Threetrees or Tul, probably. The Dogman tended to twitch a lot in his sleep, jolting and stretching and twittering meaningless sounds. Ladisla’s breath wheezed out on the right, chesty sounding and weak. All sleeping, more or less, as soon as they put their heads down.

But West could not sleep. He was too busy thinking about all the hardships, and the defeats, and the terrible dangers they were in. And not only them. Marshal Burr might be out there in the forests of Angland somewhere, hurrying south to the rescue, not knowing that he was falling into a trap. Not knowing that Bethod was expecting him.

The situation was dire but, against all reason, West’s heart felt light. The fact was, out here, things were simple. There were no daily battles to be fought, no prejudices to overcome, no need to think more than an hour ahead. He felt free for the first time in months.

He winced and stretched his aching legs, felt Cathil shift in her sleep beside him, her head falling against his shoulder, her cheek pressing into his dirty uniform. He could feel the warmth of her breath on his face, the warmth of her body through their clothes. A pleasant warmth. The effect was only slightly spoiled by the stink of sweat and wet earth, and the Dogman squeaking and muttering in his other ear. West closed his eyes, the faintest grin on his face. Perhaps things could still be put right. Perhaps he still had the chance to be a hero. If he could just get Ladisla back alive to Lord Marshal Burr.

The Rest is Wasted Breath

Ferro rode, and watched the land. Still they followed the dark water, still the wind blew cold through her clothes, still the looming sky was heavy with chaos, and yet the country was changing. Where it had been flat as a table, now it was full of rises and sudden, hidden troughs. Land that men could hide in, and she did not like that thought. Not that she was fearful, for Ferro Maljinn feared no man. But she had to look and listen all the more carefully, for signs that anyone had passed, for signs that anyone was waiting.

That was simple good sense.

The grass had changed as well. She had grown used to it all around, tall and waving in the wind, but here it was short, and dry, and withered pale like straw. It was getting shorter, too, as they went further. Today there were bald patches scattered round. Bare earth, where nothing grew. Empty earth, like the dust of the Badlands.

Dead earth.

And dead for no reason that she could see. She frowned out across the crinkled plain, out towards far distant hills, a faint and ragged line above the horizon. Nothing moved in all that vast space. Nothing but them and the impatient clouds. And one bird, hovering high, high up, almost still on the air, long feathers on its dark wing tips fluttering.

'First bird I seen in two days,' grunted Ninefingers, peering up at it suspiciously.

'Huh,' she grunted. 'The birds have more sense than us. What are we doing here?'

'Got nowhere better to be.'

Ferro had better places to be. Anywhere there were Gurkish to kill. 'Speak for yourself.'

'What? You got a crowd of friends back in the Badlands, all asking after you? Where did Ferro get to? The laughs all dried up since she went away.' And he snorted as if he had said something funny.

Ferro did not see what. 'We can't all be as well-loved as you, pink.' She gave a snort of her own. 'I'm sure they will have a feast ready for you when

you get back to the North.'

'Oh, there'll be a feast alright. Just as soon as they've hung me.'

She thought about that, for a minute, looking sideways at him from the corners of her eyes. Looking without turning her head, so if he glanced over she could flick her eyes away and pretend she never was looking at all. She had to admit, now that she was getting used to him, the big pink was not so bad. They had fought together, more than once, and he had always done his share. They had agreed to bury each other, if need be, and she trusted him to do it. Strange-looking, strange-sounding, but she had yet to hear him say he would do a thing, and see him not do it, which made him one of the better men she had known. Best not to tell him that, of course, or give away the slightest sign that she thought it.

That would be when he let her down.

'You got no one, then?' she asked.

'No one but enemies.'

'Why aren't you fighting them?'

'Fighting? It's got me everything I have.' And he held his big empty hands up to show her. 'Nothing but an evil reputation and an awful lot of men with a burning need to kill me. Fighting? Hah! The better you are at it, the worse off it leaves you. I've settled some scores, and that can feel grand, but the feeling don't last long. Vengeance won't keep you warm nights, and that's a fact. Overrated. Won't do on its own. You need something else.'

Ferro shook her head. 'You expect too much out of life, pink.'

He grinned. 'And here was me thinking you expect too little.'

'Expect nothing and you won't be disappointed.'

'Expect nothing and you'll get nothing.'

Ferro scowled at him. That was the thing about talk. Somehow it always took her where she did not want to go. Lack of practice, maybe. She jerked her reins, and nudged her horse off with her heels, away from Ninefingers and the others, out to the side, on her own.

Silence, then. Silence was dull, but it was honest.

She frowned across at Luthar, sitting up in the cart, and he grinned back like an idiot, as wide as he could with bandages over half his face. He seemed different somehow, and she did not like it. Last time she had changed his dressings he had thanked her, and that seemed odd. Ferro did not like thanks. They usually hid something. It niggled at her to have done

something that deserved a thanking. Helping others led to friendships. Friendships led to disappointment, at best.

At worst, betrayal.

Luthar was saying something to Ninefingers now, talking up to him from down in the cart. The Northman tipped back his head and roared with stupid laughter, making his horse startle and nearly dump him to the ground. Bayaz swayed contentedly in his saddle, happy creases round the corners of his eyes as he watched Ninefingers fumble with his reins. Ferro scowled off across the plain.

She had much preferred it when no one had liked each other. That was comfortable, and familiar. That she understood. Trust, and comradeship, and good humour, these things were so far in the past for her that they were almost unknown.

And who likes the unknown?

Ferro had seen a lot of dead men. She had made more than her share. She had buried a good few with her own hands. Death was her trade and her pastime. But she had never seen near so many corpses all at once. The sickly grass was scattered with them. She slid down from her saddle and walked among the bodies. There was nothing to tell who fought who, or one side from the other.

The dead all look alike.

Especially once they have been picked over – their armour, and their weapons, and half their clothes taken. They lay heaped thick and tangled in one spot, in the long shadow of a broken pillar. An ancient-looking thing, split and shattered, crumbling stone sprouting with withered grass and spotted with lichen. A big black bird sat on top of it, wings folded, peering at Ferro with beady, unblinking eyes as she came close.

The corpse of a huge man was lying half-propped against the battered stone below, a broken staff still gripped in his lifeless hand, dark blood and dark dirt crusted under the nails. Most likely the staff had held a flag, Ferro thought. Soldiers seemed to care a great deal for flags. She had never understood that. You could not kill a man with one. You could not protect yourself with one. And yet men would die for flags.

‘Foolishness,’ she muttered, frowning up at the big bird on the pillar.

‘A massacre,’ said Ninefingers.

Bayaz grunted and rubbed his chin. ‘But of who, by whom?’

Ferro could see Luthar’s swollen face peering wide-eyed and worried over the side of the cart. Quai was just in front of him on the driver’s seat, the reins dangling loose in his hands, his face expressionless as he looked down at the corpses.

Ferro turned over one of the bodies and sniffed at it. Pale skin, dark lips, no smell yet. ‘It did not happen long ago. Two days, maybe?’

‘But no flies?’ Ninefingers frowned at the bodies. A few birds were perched on them, watching. ‘Just birds. And they’re not eating. Strange.’

‘Not really, friend!’ Ferro jerked her head up. A man was striding quickly towards them across the battlefield, a tall pink in a ragged coat, a gnarled length of wood in one hand. He had an unkempt head of greasy hair, a long, matted beard. His eyes bulged bright and wild in a face carved with deep lines. Ferro stared at him, not sure how he could have come so close without her noticing.

The birds rose up from the bodies at the sound of his voice, but they did not scatter from him. They flew towards him, some settling on his shoulders, some flapping about his head and round him in wide circles. Ferro reached for her bow, snatching at an arrow, but Bayaz held out his arm. ‘No.’

‘Do you see this?’ The tall pink pointed at the broken pillar, and the bird flapped from it and across onto his outstretched finger. ‘A hundred-mile column! One hundred miles to Aulcus!’ He dropped his arm and the bird hopped onto his shoulder, next to the others, and sat there, still and silent. ‘You stand on the very borders of the dead land! No animals come here that are not made to come!’

‘How now, brother?’ called Bayaz, and Ferro shoved her arrow unhappily away. Another Magus. She might have guessed. Whenever you put two of these old fools together there were sure to be a lot of lips flapping, a lot of words made.

And that meant a lot of lies.

‘The Great Bayaz!’ shouted the new arrival as he came closer. ‘The First of the Magi! I heard tell you were coming from the birds of the air, the fish of the water, the beasts of the earth, and now I see with my own eyes, and yet still I scarcely believe. Can it be? That those blessed feet should touch this bloody ground?’

He planted his staff on the earth, and as he did the big black bird scrambled from his shoulder and grasped the tip with its claws, flapping its wings until it was settled. Ferro took a cautious step back, putting one hand on her knife. She did not intend to be shat on by one of those things.

'Zacharus,' said Bayaz, swinging down stiffly from his saddle, although it seemed to Ferro he said the name with little joy. 'You look in good health, brother.'

'I look tired. I look tired, and dirty, and mad, for that is what I am. You are difficult to find, Bayaz. I have been searching all across the plain and back.'

'We have been keeping out of sight. Khalul's allies are seeking for us also.' Bayaz' eyes twitched over the carnage. 'Is this your work?'

'That of my charge, young Goltus. He is fierce as a lion, I tell you, and makes as fine an Emperor as the great men of old! He has captured his greatest rival, his brother Scario, and has shown him mercy.' Zacharus sniffed. 'Not my advice, but the young will have their way. These were the last of Scario's men. Those who would not surrender.' He flapped a careless hand at the corpses, and the birds on his shoulders flapped with him.

'Mercy only goes so far,' observed Bayaz.

'They would not run into the dead land, so here they made their stand, and here they died, in the shadow of the hundred-mile columns. Goltus took the standard of the Third Legion from them. The very standard that Stolicus himself rode into battle under. A relic of the Old Time! Just as you and I are, brother.'

Bayaz did not seem impressed. 'A piece of old cloth. It did these fellows precious little good. Carrying a stretch of moth-food does not make a man Stolicus.'

'Perhaps not. The thing is much faded, truth be told. Its jewels were all torn out and sold long ago to buy weapons.'

'Jewels are a luxury in these days, but everyone needs weapons. Where is your young Emperor now?'

'Already on his way back eastwards with no time even to burn the dead. He is heading for Darmium, to lay siege to the city and hang this madman Cabrian from the walls. Then perhaps we can have peace.'

Bayaz gave a joyless snort. 'Do you even remember what it feels like, to have peace?'

‘You might be surprised at what I remember.’ And Zacharus’ bulging eyes stared down at Bayaz. ‘But how are matters in the wider world? How is Yulwei?’

‘Watching, as always.’

‘And what of our other brother, the shame of our family, the great Prophet Khalul?’

Bayaz’ face grew hard. ‘He grows in strength. He begins to move. He senses his moment has come.’

‘And you mean to stop him, of course?’

‘What else should I do?’

‘Hmmm. Khalul was in the South, when last I heard, yet you journey westward. Have you lost your way, brother? There is nothing out here but the ruins of the past.’

‘There is power in the past.’

‘Power? Hah! You never change. Strange company, you ride with, Bayaz. Young Malacus Quai I know, of course. How goes it, teller of tales?’ he called out to the apprentice. ‘How goes it, talker? How does my brother treat you?’

Quai stayed hunched on his cart. ‘Well enough.’

‘Well enough? That’s all? You have learned to stay silent, then, at least. How did you teach him that, Bayaz? That I never could make him learn.’

Bayaz frowned up at Quai. ‘I hardly had to.’

‘So. What did Juvens say? The best lessons one teaches oneself. ’ Zacharus turned his bulging eyes on Ferro, and the eyes of his birds turned with him, all as one. ‘This is a strange one you have here.’

‘She has the blood.’

‘You still need one who can speak with the spirits.’

‘He can.’ Bayaz nodded his head at Ninefingers. The big pink had been fiddling with his saddle but now he looked up, bewildered.

‘Him?’ Zacharus frowned. Much anger, Ferro thought, but some sadness, and some fear. The birds on his shoulders, and his head, and the tip of his staff, stood tall and spread their wings, and flapped and squawked. ‘Listen to me, brother, before it is too late. Give up this folly. I will stand with you against Khalul. I will stand with you and Yulwei. The three of us, together, as it was in the Old Time, as it was against the Maker. The Magi united. I will help you.’

There was a long silence, and hard lines spread out across Bayaz' face. 'You will help me? If only you had offered your help long ago, after the Maker fell, when I begged you for it. Then we might have torn up Khalul's madness before it put down roots. Now the whole South swarms with Eaters, making the world their playground, treating the solemn word of our master with open scorn! The three of us will not be enough, I think. What then? Will you lure Cawneil from her books? Will you find Leru, under whatever stone she has crawled beneath in all the wide Circle of the World? Will you bring Karnault back from across the wide ocean, or Anselmi and Brokentooth from the land of the dead? The Magi united, is it?' And Bayaz' lip curled into a sneer. 'That time is done, brother. That ship sailed, long ago, never to return, and we were not on it!'

'I see!' hissed Zacharus, red-streaked eyes bulging wider than ever. 'And if you find what you seek, what then? Do you truly suppose that you can control it? Do you dare to imagine that you can do what Glustrod, and Kanedias, and Juvens himself could not?'

'I am the wiser for their mistakes.'

'I hardly think so! You would punish one crime with a worse!'

Bayaz' thin lips and hollow cheeks turned sharper still. No sadness, no fear, but much anger of his own. 'This war was not of my making, *brother!* Did I break the Second Law? Did I make slaves of half the South for the sake of my vanity?'

'No, but we each had our part in it, and you more than most.

Strange, how I remember things that you leave out. How you squabbled with Khalul. How Juvens determined to separate you. How you sought out the Maker, persuaded him to share his secrets.' Zacharus laughed, a harsh cackle, and his birds croaked and squawked along with him. 'I daresay he never intended to share his daughter with you, eh, Bayaz? The Maker's daughter? Tolomei? Is there room in your memory for her?'

Bayaz' eyes glittered cold. 'Perhaps the blame is mine,' he whispered. 'The solution shall be mine also—'

'Do you think Euz spoke the First Law on a whim? Do you think Juvens put this thing at the edge of the World because it was *safe*? It is . . . it is evil!'

'Evil?' Bayaz snorted his contempt. 'A word for children. A word the ignorant use for those who disagree with them. I thought we grew out of

such notions long centuries ago.'

'But the risks—'

'I am resolved.' And Bayaz' voice was iron, and well sharpened. 'I have thought for long years upon it. You have said your piece, Zacharus, but you have offered me no other choices. Try and stop me, if you must. Otherwise, stand aside.'

'Then nothing has changed.' The old man turned to look at Ferro, his creased face twitching, and the dark eyes of his birds looked with him. 'And what of you, devil-blood? Do you know what he would have you touch? Do you understand what he would have you carry? Do you have an inkling of the dangers?' A small bird hopped from his shoulder and started twittering round and round Ferro's head in circles. 'You would be better to run, and never to stop running! You all would!'

Ferro's lip curled. She slapped the bird out of the air, and it clattered to the ground, hopping and tweeting away between the corpses. The others squawked and hissed and clucked their anger, but she ignored them. 'You do not know me, old fool pink with a dirty beard. Do not pretend to understand me, or to know what I know, or what I have been offered. Why should I prefer the word of one old liar over another? Take your birds and keep your nose to your own business, then we will have no quarrel. The rest is wasted breath.'

Zacharus and his birds blinked. He frowned, opened his mouth, then shut it silently again as Ferro swung herself up into her saddle and jerked her horse round towards the west. She heard the sounds of the others following, hooves thumping, Quai cracking the reins of the cart, then Bayaz' voice. 'Listen to the birds of the air, the fish of the water, the beasts of the earth. Soon you will hear that Khalul has been finished, his Eaters turned to dust, the mistakes of the past buried, as they should have been, long ago.'

'I hope so, but I fear the news will be worse.' Ferro looked over her shoulder, and saw the two old men exchanging one more stare. 'The mistakes of the past are not so easily buried. I earnestly hope that you fail.'

'Look around you, old friend.' And the First of the Magi smiled as he clambered up into his saddle. 'None of your hopes ever come to anything.'

And so they rode away from the corpses in silence, past the broken hundred-mile column and into the dead land. Towards the ruins of the past. Towards Aulcus.

Under a darkening sky.

A Matter of Time

To Arch Lector Sult, head of his Majesty's Inquisition.
Your Eminence,
Six weeks now, we have held the Gurkish back. Each morning they brave our murderous fire to tip earth and stone into our ditch, each night we lower men from the walls to try and dig it out. In spite of all our efforts, they have finally succeeded in filling the channel in two places. Daily, now, scaling parties rush forward from the Gurkish lines and set their ladders, sometimes making it onto the walls themselves, only to be bloodily repulsed. Meanwhile the bombardment by catapults continues, and several sections of the walls are dangerously weakened. They have been shored up, but it might not be long before the Gurkish have a practicable breach. Barricades have been raised on the inside to contain them should they make it through into the Lower City. Our defences are tested to the limit, but no man entertains a thought of surrender. We will fight on.
As always, your Eminence, I serve and obey.
Sand dan Glokta
Superior of Dagoska.

Glokta held his breath, licking at his gums as he watched the dust clouds settling across the roofs of the slums through his eye-glass. The last crashes and clatters of falling stones faded, and Dagoska, for that one moment, was strangely silent. *The world holds its breath.*

Then the distant screaming reached him on his balcony, thrust out from the wall of the Citadel, high above the city. A screaming he remembered well from battlefields both old and new. *And hardly happy memories. The Gurkish war cry. The enemy are coming.* Now, he knew, they were charging across the open ground before the walls, as they had done so many times these past weeks. *But this time they have a breach.*

He watched the tiny shapes of soldiers moving on the dust-coated walls and towers to either side of the gap. He moved his eye-glass down to take in the wide half-circle of barricades, the triple ranks of men squatting behind them, waiting for the Gurkish to come. Glokta frowned and worked his

numb left foot inside his boot. *A meagre-seeming defence, indeed. But all we have.*

Now Gurkish soldiers began to pour through the yawning breach like black ants swarming from a nest; a crowd of jostling men, twinkling steel, waving banners, emerging from the clouds of brown dust, scrambling down the great heap of fallen masonry and straight into a furious hail of flatbow bolts. *First through the breach. An unenviable position.* The front ranks were mown down as they came on, tiny shapes falling and tumbling down the hill of rubble behind the walls. Many fell, but there were always more, pressing in over the bodies of their comrades, struggling forward over the mass of broken stones and shattered timbers, and into the city.

Now another cry floated up, and Glokta saw the defenders charge from behind their barricades. Union soldiers, mercenaries, Dagoskans, all hurled themselves towards the breach. At this distance it all seemed to move with absurd slowness. *A stream of oil and a stream of water dribbling towards one another.* They met, and it became impossible to tell one side from the other. A flowing mass, punctuated by glittering metal, rippling and surging like the sea, a colourful flag or two hanging limp above.

The cries and screams hung over the city, echoing, shifting with the breeze. The far off swell of pain and fury, the clatter and din of combat. Sometimes it sounded like a distant storm, incomprehensible. Sometimes a single cry or word would float to Glokta's ear with surprising clarity. It reminded him of the sound of the crowd at the Contest. *Except the blades are not blunted now. Both sides are in deadly earnest. How many already dead this morning, I wonder?* He turned to General Vissbruck, sweating beside him in his immaculate uniform.

'Have you ever fought in a melée like that, General? A straight fight, toe to toe, at push of pike, as they say?'

Vissbruck did not pause for a moment from squinting eagerly through his own eye-glass. 'No. I have not.'

'I wouldn't recommend it. I have only done it once and I am not keen to repeat the experience.' He shifted the handle of his cane in his sweaty palm. *Not that that's terribly likely now, of course.* 'I fought on horseback often enough. Charged small bodies of infantry, broke and pursued them. A noble business, cutting men down as they run, I earned all kinds of praise for it. I soon discovered a battle on foot is a different matter. The crush is so tight

you can hardly take a breath, let alone perform acts of heroism. The heroes are the ones lucky enough to live through it.' He snorted with joyless laughter. 'I remember being pushed up against a Gurkish officer, as close to each other as lovers, neither one of us able to strike, or do anything but snarl at each other. Spear-points digging everywhere, at random. Men pushed onto the weapons of their own side, or crushed underfoot. More killed by mishap than design.' *The whole business is one giant mishap.*

'An ugly affair,' muttered Vissbruck, 'but it has to be done.'

'So it does. So it does.' Glokta could see a Gurkish standard waving around above the boiling throng, silk flapping, tattered and stained. Stones flung from the broken walls above began to crash down amongst them. Men pressed in helpless, shoulder to shoulder, unable to move. A great vat of boiling water was upended into their midst from high above. The Gurkish had lost all semblance of order as they came through the breach, and now the formless mass of men began to waver. The defenders pressed in on them from all sides, relentless, shoving with pike and shield, hacking with sword and axe, trampling the fallen under their boots.

'We're driving them back!' came Vissbruck's voice.

'Yes,' muttered Glokta, peering through his eye-glass at the desperate fighting. 'So it would seem.' *And my joy is limitless.*

The Gurkish assault had been surrounded and men were falling fast, stumbling back up the hill of rubble towards the breach. Gradually the survivors were driven out and down into the no-man's-land behind, flatbows on the walls firing into the mass of men as they fled, spreading panic and murder. The vague sound of the defenders cheering filtered up to them on the walls of the citadel.

One more assault defeated. Scores of Gurkish killed, but there are always more. If they break through the barricades, and into the Lower City, we are finished. They can keep coming as often as they like. We need only lose once, and the game is done.

'It would seem the day is ours. This one, at least.' Glokta limped to the corner of the balcony and peered southwards through his eye-glass, down into the bay and the Southern Sea beyond. There was nothing but calm water, glittering bright to the flat horizon. 'And still no sign of any Gurkish ships.'

Vissbruck cleared his throat. ‘With the greatest of respect . . .’ *Meaning none, I suppose*. ‘The Gurkish have never been sailors. Is there any reason to suppose that they have ships now?’

Only that an old black wizard appeared in my chambers in the dead of night, and told me to watch out for some. ‘Simply because we fail to see a thing, it does not mean it is not there. The Emperor has us on the rack as it is. Perhaps he keeps his fleet in reserve, waiting for a better time, refusing to show his whole hand until he needs to.’

‘But with ships, he could blockade us, starve us out, get around our defences! He need not have squandered all those soldiers—’

‘If the Emperor of Gurkhul has one thing in abundance, General, it is more soldiers. They have made a workable breach.’ Glokta scanned along the walls until he came to the other weak spot. He could see the great cracks in the masonry on the inside, shored up with heavy beams, with heaped-up rubble, but still bowing inwards, more each day. ‘And they will soon have another. They have filled the ditch in four places. Meanwhile our numbers dwindle, our morale falters. They don’t need ships.’

‘But we have them.’ Glokta was surprised to find the General had stepped up close beside him and was speaking softly and urgently, looking earnestly into his eyes. *Like a man proposing marriage. Or treason. I wonder which we have here? ‘There is still* time,’ muttered Vissbruck, his eyes swivelling nervously towards the door and back. ‘We control the bay. As long as we still hold the Lower City we hold the wharves. We can pull out the Union forces. The civilians at least. There are still some wives and children of officers left in the Citadel, a scattering of merchants and craftsmen who settled in the Upper City and are reluctant to leave. It could be done swiftly.’

Glokta frowned. *True, perhaps, but the Arch Lector’s orders were otherwise. The civilians can make their own arrangements, if they so desire. The Union troops will not be going anywhere. Except onto their funeral pyres, of course.* But Vissbruck took his silence for encouragement. ‘If you were to give me the word it could be done this very evening, and all away before—’

‘And what will become of us all, General, when we step down onto Union soil? A tearful reunion with our masters in the Agriont? Some of us would soon be crying, I do not doubt. Or should we take the ships and sail to far-

off Suljuk, do you suppose, to live long lives of ease and plenty?' Glokta slowly shook his head. 'It is a charming fantasy, but that's all it is. Our orders are to hold the city. There can be no surrender. No backing down. No sailing home.'

'No sailing home,' echoed Vissbruck sourly. 'Meanwhile the Gurkish press in closer every day, our losses mount, and the lowest beggar in the city can see that we cannot hold the land walls for much longer. My men are close to mutiny, and the mercenaries are considerably less dependable. What would you have me tell them? That the Closed Council's orders do not include retreat?'

'Tell them that reinforcements will be here any day.'

'I've been telling them that for weeks!'

'Then a few more days should make no difference.'

Vissbruck blinked. 'And might I ask when reinforcements will arrive?'

'Any.' Glokta narrowed his eyes. 'Day. Until then we hold.'

'But why?' Vissbruck's voice had gone high as a girl's. 'What for? The task is impossible! The waste! Why, damn it?'

Why. Always why. I grow bored of asking it. 'If you think I know the Arch Lector's mind you're an even bigger idiot than I supposed.' Glokta sucked slowly at his gums, thinking. 'You are right about one thing, however. The land walls may fall at any moment. We must prepare to withdraw into the Upper City.'

'But . . . if we abandon the Lower City we abandon the docks! There can be no supplies brought in! No reinforcements, even if they do arrive! What of your fine speech to me, Superior? The walls of the Upper City are too long and too weak? If the land walls fall the city is doomed? We must defeat them there or not at all, you told me! If the docks are lost . . . there can be no escape!' *My dear, plump, pudding of a General, do you not see it? Escape has never been an option.*

Glokta grinned, showing Vissbruck the empty holes in his teeth. 'If one plan fails, we must try another. The situation, as you have so cleverly pointed out, is desperate. Believe me, I would prefer it if the Emperor simply gave up and went home, but I hardly think we can count on that, do you? Send word to Cosca and Kahdia, all civilians should be moved out of the Lower City tonight. We may need to pull back at a moment's notice.' *At least I won't have to limp so far to reach the front lines.*

‘The Upper City will scarcely hold so many! They will be lining the streets!’ *Better than lining a grave pit.* ‘They will be sleeping in the squares and the hallways!’ *Preferable to sleeping in the ground.* ‘There are thousands of them down there!’

‘Then the sooner you start the better.’

Glokta half ducked back as he stepped through the doorway. The heat beyond was almost unbearable, the reek of sweat and burnt flesh tickled unpleasantly at his throat.

He wiped his eyes, already running with tears, on the back of his trembling hand and squinted into the darkness. The three Practicals took shape in the gloom. They were gathered round, masked faces lit from underneath by the angry orange of the brazier, all hard bright bone and hard dark shadow. *Devils, in hell.*

Vitari’s shirt was soaked right through and stuck to her shoulders, furious creases cut into her face. Severard was stripped to the waist, gasping breath muffled through his mask, lank hair flapping with sweat. Frost was as wet as if he had stood out in the rain, fat drops running down his pale skin, jaw muscles locked and bulging. The only one in the room who showed no sign of discomfort was Shickel. The girl had an ecstatic smile across her face as Vitari ground the sizzling iron into her chest. *Just as if it were the happiest moment of her life.*

Glokta swallowed as he watched, remembering being shown the brand himself. Remembering pleading, begging, blubbering for mercy. Remembering the feeling of the metal pressed into his skin. *So searing hot it feels almost cold.* The mindless din of his own screams. The stink of his own flesh burning. He could smell it now. *First you suffer it yourself, then you inflict it on others, then you order it done. Such is the pattern of life.* He shrugged his aching shoulders and hobbled forwards into the room. ‘Progress?’ he croaked.

Severard straightened up, grunting and arching his back, wiped his forehead and flicked sweat onto the slimy floor. ‘I don’t know about her, but I’m more than halfway to breaking.’

‘We’re getting nowhere!’ snapped Vitari, tossing the black iron back in the brazier and sending up a shower of sparks. ‘We tried blades, we tried

hammers, we tried water, we tried fire. She won't say a word. Fucking bitch is made of stone.'

'Softer than stone,' hissed Severard, 'but she's nothing like us.' He took a knife from the table, the blade briefly flashing orange in the darkness, leaned forward and carved a long gash into Shickel's thin forearm. Her face barely even twitched while he did it. The wound hung open, glistening angry red. Severard dug his finger into it and twisted it round. Shickel showed not the slightest sign of being in pain. He pulled his finger out and held it up, rubbed the tip against his thumb. 'Not even wet. It's like cutting into a week-old corpse.'

Glokta felt his leg trembling, and he winced and slid into the spare seat. 'Plainly, this is not normal.'

'Unnerthatement,' grunted Frost.

'But she's not healing the way she was.' None of the cuts in her skin were closing. *All hanging open, dead and dry as meat in a butcher's shop.* Nor were the burns fading. *Charred black stripes across her skin, like meat fresh from the grill.*

'Just sits there, watching,' said Severard, 'and not a word.'

Glokta frowned. *Can this really be what I had in mind when I joined the Inquisition? The torture of young girls?* He wiped the wet from under his stinging eyes. *But then, this is both much more and much less than a girl.* He remembered the hands clutching at him, the three Practicals straining to pull her back. *Much more and much less than human. We must not make the same mistakes we made with the First of the Magi.*

'We must keep an open mind,' he murmured.

'Do you know what my father would say to that?' The voice croaked out, deep and grinding raw, like an old man's, oddly wrong from that young, smooth face.

Glokta felt his left eye twitching, the sweat trickling under his coat. 'Your father?'

Shickel smiled at him, eyes glinting in the darkness. It almost seemed as if the cuts in her flesh smiled with her. 'My father. The Prophet. Great Khalul. He would say that an open mind is like to an open wound. Vulnerable to poison. Liable to fester. Apt to give its owner only pain.'

'Now you want to talk?'

'Now I choose to.'

‘Why?’

‘Why not? Now that you know it is my choice, and not yours. Ask your questions, cripple. You should take your chances to learn when you can. God knows you could do with them. A man lost in the desert—’

‘I know the rest.’ Glokta paused. *So many questions, but what to ask one such as this?* ‘You are an Eater?’

‘We have other names for ourselves, but yes.’ She inclined her head gently, her eyes never leaving his. ‘The priests made me eat my mother first. When they found me. It was that or die, and the need to live was so very great, before. I wept afterwards, but that was long ago and there are no tears left in me. I disgust myself, of course. Sometimes I need to kill, sometimes I wish to die. I deserve to. Of that I have no doubts. My only certainty.’

I should have known better than to expect straight answers. One almost feels nostalgic for the Mercers. Their crimes, at least, I could understand. Still, any answers are better than none. ‘Why do you eat?’

‘Because the bird eats the worm. Because the spider eats the fly. Because Khalul desires it and we are the Prophet’s children. Juvens was betrayed, and Khalul swore vengeance, but he stood alone against many. So he made his great sacrifice, and broke the Second Law, and the righteous joined with him, more and more with the passing years. Some joined him willingly. Some not. But none have denied him. My siblings are many, now, and each of us must make our sacrifice.’

Glokta gestured at the brazier. ‘You feel no pain?’

‘I do not, but plentiful remorse.’

‘Strange. It’s the other way around for me.’

‘You, I think, are the lucky one.’

He snorted. ‘Easy to say until you find you can’t piss without wanting to scream.’

‘I hardly remember what pain feels like, now. All that was long ago. The gifts are different for each of us. Strength, and speed, and endurance beyond the limits of the human. Some of us can take forms, or trick the eye, or even use the Art, the way that Juvens taught his apprentices. The gifts are different for each of us, but the curse is the same.’ She stared at Glokta, head cocked over to one side.

Let me guess. ‘You can’t stop eating.’

‘Not ever. And that is why the Gurkish appetite for slaves is never-ending. There is no resisting the Prophet. I know. Great Father Khalul.’ And her eyes rolled up reverently towards the ceiling. ‘Arch Priest of the Temple of Sarkant. Holiest of all whose feet touch the earth. Humbler of the proud, righter of wrongs, teller of truths. Light shines from him as it shines from the stars. When he speaks it is with the voice of God. When he—’

‘No doubt he shits golden turds as well. You believe all that rubbish?’

‘What does it matter what I believe? I don’t make the choices. When your master gives you a task, you do your best at it. Even if the task is a dark one.’

That much I can understand. ‘Some of us are only suited to dark tasks. Once you’ve chosen your master—’

Shickel croaked dry laughter across the table. ‘Few indeed are those who get a choice. We do as we are told. We stand or fall beside those who were born near to us, who look as we do, who speak the same words, and all the while we know as little of the reasons why as does the dust we return to.’ Her head sagged sideways and a gash in her shoulder opened up as wide as a mouth. ‘Do you think I like what I have become? Do you think I do not dream of being as others are? But once the change has come, you can never go back. Do you understand?’

Oh, yes. Few better. ‘Why were you sent here?’

‘The work of the righteous is never-ending. I came to see Dagoska returned to the fold. To see its people worship God according to the Prophet’s teachings. To see my brothers and sisters fed.’

‘It seems you failed.’

‘Others will follow. There is no resisting the Prophet. You are doomed.’

That much I know. Let us try another tack. ‘What do you know . . . about Bayaz.’

‘Ah, Bayaz. He was the Prophet’s brother. He is the start of this, and will be the end.’ Her voice dropped to a whisper. ‘Liar and traitor. He killed his master. He murdered Juvens.’

Glokta frowned. ‘That is not the way I heard the story.’

‘Everyone has their own way of telling every story, broken man. Have you not learned that yet?’ Her lip curled. ‘You have no understanding of the war you fight in, of the weapons and the casualties, of the victories and the defeats, every day. You do not guess at the sides, or the causes, or the

reasons. The battlefields are everywhere. I pity you. You are a dog, trying to understand the argument of scholars, and hearing nothing but barking. The righteous are coming. Khalul will sweep the earth clean of lies and build a new order. Juvens will be avenged. It is foretold. It is ordained. It is promised.'

'I doubt you'll see it.'

She grinned at him. 'I doubt you will either. My father would rather have taken this city without a fight, but if he must fight for it then he will, and with no mercy, and with the fury of God behind him. That is the first step on the path he has chosen. On the path he has chosen for all of us.'

'What step comes next?'

'Do you think my masters tell me their plans? Do yours? I am a worm. I am nothing. And yet I am more than you are.'

'What comes next?' hissed Glokta. Nothing but silence.

'Answer him!' hissed Vitari. Frost hauled an iron from the brazier, the tip glowing orange, and ground it into Shickel's bare shoulder. Foul-smelling steam hissed up, fat spat and sizzled, but the girl said nothing. Her lazy eyes watched her own flesh burn, without emotion. *There will be no answers here. Only more questions. Always more questions.*

'I've had enough,' snarled Glokta as he seized hold of his cane and struggled up, squirming in a painful and futile effort to make his shirt come unstuck from his back.

Vitari gestured at Shickel, her gleaming eyes still fixed on Glokta under their drooping lids, a faint smile still clinging to her lips. 'What should we do with this?'

An expendable agent of an uncaring master, sent unwilling to a faraway place, to fight, and kill, for reasons she hardly understands. Sound familiar? Glokta grimaced as he turned his aching back on the stinking chamber.

'Burn it,' he said.

Glokta stood on his balcony in the sharp evening, frowning down towards the Lower City.

It was windy up here on the rock, a cold wind off the dark sea, whipping at Glokta's face, at his fingers on the dry parapet, slapping the tails of his coat against his legs. *The closest thing we'll get to winter in this cursed*

crucible. The flames of the torches by the door flapped and flickered in their iron cages, two lights in the gathering darkness. There were more lights out there, many more. Lamps burned on the rigging of the Union ships in the harbour, their reflections flashing and breaking in the water below. Lights glowed in the windows of the dark palaces under the citadel, in the tops of the lofty spires of the Great Temple. Down in the slums, thousands of torches burned. Rivers of tiny points of light, flowing out of the buildings, onto the roads, towards the gates of the Upper City. *Refugees leaving their homes, such as they are. Heading for safety, such as it is. How long can we keep them safe, I wonder, once the land walls fall?* He knew the answer already. *Not long.*

'Superior!'

'Why, Master Cosca. I'm so glad you could join me.'

'Of course! There's nothing like a stroll in the evening air after a skirmish.' The mercenary strutted over. Even in the gloom, Glokta could see the difference in him. He walked with a spring in his step, a glint in his eye, his hair neatly brushed, his moustache waxed stiff. *An inch or two taller and a good ten years younger, all of a sudden.* He pranced to the parapet, closed his eyes and sucked a deep breath through his sharp nose.

'You look remarkably well for someone who has just fought in a battle.'

The Styrian grinned at him. 'I wasn't so much in the battle as just behind it. I've always felt the very front is a poor place to fight from. No one can hear you with all the clatter. That, and the chances of being killed there are really very high.'

'Doubtless. How did it go for us?'

'The Gurkish are still outside, so I'd say, as far as battles go, it went well. I doubt the dead would agree with me, but who cares a shit for their opinion?' He scratched happily at his neck. 'We did well today. But tomorrow, and the day after, who can say? Still no chance of reinforcement?' Glokta shook his head and the Styrian took in a sharp breath. 'It's all the same to me, of course, but you may want to consider a withdrawal while we still hold the bay.'

Everyone would like to withdraw. Even me. Glokta snorted. 'The Closed Council hold my leash, and they say no. The King's honour will not permit it, they inform me, and apparently his honour is more valuable than our lives.'

Cosca raised his brows. ‘Honour, eh? What the hell is that anyway? Every man thinks it’s something different. You can’t drink it. You can’t fuck it. The more of it you have the less good it does you, and if you’ve got none at all you don’t miss it.’ He shook his head. ‘But some men think it’s the best thing in the world.’

‘Uh,’ muttered Glokta, licking at his empty gums. *Honour is worth less than one’s legs, or one’s teeth. A lesson I paid dearly for.* He peered towards the shadowy outline of the land walls, studded with burning bonfires. The vague sounds of fighting could still be heard, the odd flaming arrow soared high into the air and fell in the ruined slums. *Even now, the bloody business continues.* He took a deep breath. ‘What are our chances of holding out for another week?’

‘Another week?’ Cosca pursed his lips. ‘Reasonable.’

‘Two weeks?’

‘Two?’ Cosca clicked his tongue. ‘Less good.’

‘Which would make a month a hopeless cause.’

‘Hopeless would be the word.’

‘You seem almost to revel in the situation.’

‘Me? I’ve made a speciality from hopeless causes.’ He grinned at Glokta. ‘These days, they’re the only ones that will have me.’

I know the feeling. ‘Hold the land walls as long as you can, then pull back. The walls of the Upper City must be our next line of defence.’

Cosca’s grin could just be seen shining in the darkness. ‘Hold as long as we can, and then pull back! I can hardly wait!’

‘And perhaps we should prepare some surprises for our Gurkish guests when they finally make it past the walls. You know,’ and Glokta waved his hand absently, ‘tripwires and hidden pits, spikes daubed with excrement and so on. You’ve some experience in that type of warfare, I daresay.’

‘I am experienced in all types of warfare.’ Cosca snapped his heels together and gave an elaborate salute. ‘Spikes and excrement! There’s honour for you.’

This is war. The only honour is in winning. ‘Talking of honour, you’d best let our friend General Vissbruck know where your surprises are. It would be a shame if he were to impale himself by accident.’

‘Of course, Superior. A dreadful shame.’

Glokta felt his hand bunching into a fist on the parapet. ‘We must make the Gurkish pay for every stride of ground.’ *We must make them pay for my ruined leg.* ‘For every inch of dirt.’ *For my missing teeth.* ‘For every meagre shack, and crumbling hut, and worthless stretch of dust.’ *For my weeping eye, and my twisted back, and my repulsive shadow of a life.* He licked at his empty gums. ‘Make them pay.’

‘Excellent! The only good Gurkish are the dead ones!’ The mercenary spun and marched through the door into the Citadel, his spurs jingling, leaving Glokta alone on the flat roof.

One week? Yes. Two weeks? Perhaps. Any longer? Hopeless. There may have been no ships, but that old riddler Yulwei was still right. And so was Eider. There never was any chance. For all our efforts, for all our sacrifices, Dagoska must surely fall. It is only a matter of time, now.

He stared out across the darkened city. It was hard to separate the land from the sea in the blackness, the lights on the boats from the lights in the buildings, the torches on the rigging from the torches in the slums. All was a confusion of points of light, flowing around each other, disembodied in the void. There was only one certainty in all of it.

We’re finished. Not tonight, but soon. We are surrounded, and the net will only draw tighter. It is a matter of time.

Scars

One by one, Ferro took out the stitches – slitting the thread neatly with the shining point of her knife, working them gently out of Luthar's skin, dark fingertips moving quick and sure, yellow eyes narrowed with concentration. Logen watched her work, shaking his head slowly at the skill of it. He'd seen it done often, but never so well. Luthar barely even looked in pain, and he always looked in pain lately.

'Do we need another bandage on it?'

'No. We let it breathe.' The last stitch slid out, and Ferro tossed the bloody bits of thread away and rocked back on her knees to look at the results.

'That's good,' said Logen, voice hushed. He'd never guessed that it could come out half so well. Luthar's jaw looked slightly bent in the firelight, like he was biting down on one side. There was a ragged notch out of his lip, and a forked scar torn from it down to the point of his chin, pink dots on either side where the stitches had been, the skin around it stretched and twisted. Nothing more, but for some swelling that'd soon go down. 'That's some damn good stitching. I never saw any better. Where d'you learn healing?'

'A man called Aruf taught me.'

'Well he taught you well. Rare skill to have. Happy chance for us that he did it.'

'I had to fuck him first.'

'Ah.' That did shine a bit of a different light on it.

Ferro shrugged. 'I didn't mind. He was a good man, more or less, and he taught me how to kill, into the bargain. I've fucked a lot of worse men for a lot less.' She frowned at Luthar's jaw, pressing it with her thumbs, testing the flesh round the wound. 'A lot less.'

'Right,' muttered Logen. He exchanged a worried glance with Luthar. This conversation hadn't gone at all the way he'd imagined. Maybe he should've expected that with Ferro. He spent half the time trying to prise a word out of her, then when she did give him something, he didn't have a clue where to go with it.

'It's set,' she grunted, after probing Luthar's face for a moment in silence.

‘Thank you.’ He grabbed hold of her hand as she moved back. ‘Truly. I don’t know what I’d have—’

She grimaced as if he’d slapped her and snatched her fingers away. ‘Fine! But if you get your face smashed again you can stitch it yourself.’ And she got up and stalked off, sat down in the shifting shadows in the corner of the ruin, as far away from the others as she could get without going outside. She seemed to like thanks even less than she liked any other kind of talk, but Luthar was too pleased to finally have the dressings off to worry much about it.

‘How does it look?’ he asked, peering down cross-eyed at his own chin, wincing and prodding at it with one finger.

‘It’s good,’ said Logen. ‘You’re lucky. You might not be quite so pretty as you were, but you’re still a damn sight better-looking than me.’

‘Of course,’ he said, licking at the notch in his lip, half-smiling. ‘It isn’t as though they cut my head right off.’

Logen grinned as he knelt down beside the pot and gave it a stir. He was getting on alright with Luthar now. It was a harsh lesson, but a broken face had done that boy a power of good. It had taught him some respect, and a lot quicker than any amount of talk. It had taught him to be realistic, and that had to be a good thing. Small gestures and time. Rarely failed to win folk over. Then he caught sight of Ferro, frowning at him from the shadows, and he felt his grin sag. Some folk take longer than others, and a few never really get there. Black Dow had been like that. Made to walk alone, Logen’s father would have said.

He looked back to the pot, but there wasn’t much encouragement in it. Just porridge with some shreds of bacon and some chopped-up roots. There was nothing to hunt out here. Dead land meant what it said. The grass on the plain had dwindled to brown tufts and grey dust. He looked round the ruined shell of the house they’d pitched camp in. Firelight flickered on broken stone, crumbled render, ancient splintered wood. No ferns rooted in the cracks, no saplings in the earth floor, not even a shred of moss between the stones. Seemed to Logen as if no one but them had trodden there in centuries. Maybe they hadn’t.

Quiet too. Not much wind tonight. Only the soft crackling of the fire, and Bayaz’ voice mumbling away, lecturing his apprentice about something or other. Logen was good and glad the First of the Magi was awake again,

even if he did look older and seem grimmer than ever. At least now Logen didn't have to decide what to do. That had never worked out too well for anyone concerned.

'A clear night at last!' sang Brother Longfoot as he ducked under the lintel, pointing upwards with huge smugness. 'A perfect sky for Navigation! The stars shine clearly for the first time in ten days and, I do declare, we are not a stride out from our chosen course! Not a foot! I have not led us wrong, my friends. No! That would not have been my way at all! Forty miles to Aulcus, as I reckon it, just as I told you!' No congratulations were forthcoming. Bayaz and Quai were deep in their ill-tempered muttering. Luthar was holding up the blade of his short sword and trying to find an angle where he could see his reflection. Ferro was frowning in her corner. Longfoot sighed and squatted down beside the fire. 'Porridge again?' he muttered, peering into the pot and wrinkling up his nose.

'Afraid so.'

'Ah, well. The tribulations of the road, eh, my friend? There would be no glory in travel without the hardship.'

'Uh,' said Logen. He could have managed with a lot less glory if it meant a decent dinner. He prodded unhappily at the bubbling mush with a spoon.

Longfoot leaned over to mutter under his breath. 'It would seem our illustrious employer is having some further troubles with his apprentice.' Bayaz' lecture was growing steadily louder and more bad-tempered.

'. . . being handy with a pan is all very well, but the practice of magic is still your first vocation. There has been a distinct change in your attitude of late. A certain watchfulness and disobedience. I am beginning to suspect that you may prove a disappointing pupil.'

'And were you always a fine pupil?' There was a trace of a mocking smile on Quai's face. 'Was your own master never disappointed?'

'He was, and the consequences were dire. We all make mistakes. It is a master's place to try to stop his students making the same ones.'

'Then perhaps you should tell me the history of your mistakes. I might learn to be a better student.'

Master and apprentice glared at each other over the fire. Logen did not like the look of Bayaz' frown. He had seen such looks before on the First of the Magi, and the outcome had never been good. He couldn't understand why Quai had shifted from abject obedience to sullen opposition in the

space of a few weeks, but it wasn't making anyone's life easier. Logen pretended to be fascinated by the porridge, half-expecting to be suddenly deafened by the roar of searing flame. But when sound came it was only Bayaz' voice, and speaking softly.

'Very well, Master Quai, there is some sense in your request, for once. Let us talk of my mistakes. An expansive subject indeed. Where to start?'

'At the beginning?' ventured his apprentice. 'Where else should a man ever start?'

The Magus gave a sour grunt. 'Huh. Long ago, then, in the Old Time.' He paused for a moment and stared into the flames, the light shifting over his hollow face. 'I was Juvens' first apprentice. But soon after starting my education, my master took a second. A boy from the South. His name was Khalul.' Ferro looked up suddenly, frowning from the shadows. 'From the beginning, the two of us could never agree. We both were far too proud, and jealous of each other's talents, and envious of any mark of favour the other earned from our master. Our rivalry persisted, even as the years passed and Juvens took more apprentices, twelve in all. In the beginning, it drove us to be better pupils: more diligent, more devoted. But after the horror of the war with Glustrod, many things were changed.'

Logen gathered up the bowls and started spooning steaming slop out into them, making sure to keep one ear on Bayaz' talk. 'Our rivalry became a feud, and our feud became a hatred. We fought, with words, then with hands, then with magic. Perhaps, left to ourselves, we would have killed each other. Perhaps the world would be a happier place if we had, but Juvens interposed. He sent me to the far north, and Khalul to the south, to two of the great libraries he had built long years before. He sent us there to study, separately and alone, until our tempers cooled. He thought the high mountains, and the wide sea, and the whole breadth of the Circle of the World would put an end to our feud, but he misjudged us. Rather we each raged in our exile, and blamed the other for it, and plotted our petty revenges.'

Logen shared out the food, such as it was, while Bayaz glared at Quai from under his heavy brows. 'If I had only had the good sense to listen to my master then, but I was young, and head-strong, and full of pride. I burned to make myself more powerful than Khalul. I decided, fool that I was, that if Juvens would not teach me . . . I had to find another master.'

‘Slop again, eh, pink?’ grunted Ferro as she pulled her bowl from Logen’s hand.

‘No need to thank me.’ He tossed her a spoon and she snatched it out of the air. Logen handed the First of the Magi his bowl. ‘Another master? What other master could you find?’

‘Only one,’ murmured Bayaz. ‘Kanedias. The Master Maker.’ He turned his spoon over and over thoughtfully in his hand. ‘I went to his House, and I knelt before him, and I begged to learn at his feet. He refused me, of course, as he refused everyone . . . at first. But I was stubborn, and in time he relented, and agreed to teach me.’

‘And so you lived in the House of the Maker,’ murmured Quai. Logen shivered as he hunched down over his own bowl. His one brief visit to the place still gave him nightmares.

‘I did,’ said Bayaz, ‘and I learned its ways. My skill in High Art made me useful to my new master. But Kanedias was far more jealous of his secrets than ever Juvens had been, and he worked me as hard as a slave at his forges, and taught me only such scraps as I needed to serve him. I grew bitter, and when the Maker left to seek out materials for his works, my curiosity, and my ambition, and my thirst for knowledge, drove me to stray into parts of his House where he had forbidden me to tread. And there I found his best-guarded secret.’ He paused.

‘What was it?’ prompted Longfoot, spoon frozen halfway to his mouth.

‘His daughter.’

‘Tolomei,’ whispered Quai, in a hiss barely audible.

Bayaz nodded, and one corner of his mouth curled upwards, as though he remembered something good. ‘She was unlike any other. She had never left the Maker’s House, had never spoken to anyone besides her father. She helped him with certain tasks, I learned. She handled . . . certain materials . . . that only the Maker’s own blood could touch. That, I believe, is why he fathered her in the first place. She was beautiful beyond compare. ’ Bayaz’ face twitched, and he looked down at the ground with a sour smile. ‘Or so she seems to me, in memory.’

‘That was good,’ said Luthar, licking his fingers and setting down his empty bowl. He’d become a great deal less picky with his food lately. Logen reckoned a few weeks of not being able to chew was sure to do that to a man. ‘There any more?’ he asked hopefully.

‘Take mine,’ hissed Quai, thrusting his bowl at Luthar. His face was deathly cold, his eyes two points of light in the shadows as he glared across at his master. ‘Go on.’

Bayaz looked up. ‘Tolomei fascinated me, and I her. It seems strange to say, but I was young then, and full of fire, and still had as fine a head of hair as Captain Luthar.’ He ran one hissing palm over his bald scalp, then shrugged his shoulders. ‘We fell in love.’ He looked at each of them in turn, as though daring them to laugh, but Logen was too busy sucking salty porridge from his teeth, and no one else so much as smiled.

‘She told me of the tasks her father gave her, and I began, dimly, to understand. He had gathered from far and wide some fragments of material from the world below, left over from the time when demons still walked our earth. He was trying to tap the power of these splinters, to incorporate them into his machines. He was tampering with those forces forbidden by the First Law, and had already had some success.’ Logen shifted uncomfortably. He remembered the thing he had seen in the Maker’s House, lying in the wet on a block of white stone, strange and fascinating. The Divider, Bayaz had called it. Two edges – one here, one on the Other Side. He had no appetite now, and he shoved his bowl down by the fire, half-finished.

‘I was horrified,’ continued Bayaz. ‘I had seen the ruin that Glustrod had brought upon the world, and I resolved to go to Juvens and tell him everything. But I feared to leave Tolomei behind, and she would not leave all she knew. So I delayed, and Kanedias returned unexpected, and found us together. His fury was . . .’ and Bayaz winced as though the memory alone was painful ‘. . . impossible to describe. His House shook with it, rang with it, burned with it. I was lucky to escape with my life, and fled to seek sanctuary with my old master.’

Ferro snorted. ‘He was the forgiving type, then?’

‘Fortunately for me. Juvens would not turn me away, despite my betrayal. Especially once I told him of his brother’s attempts to break the First Law. The Maker came in great wrath, demanding justice for the violation of his daughter, the theft of his secrets. Juvens refused. He demanded to know what experiments Kanedias had been undertaking. The brothers fought, and I fled. The sky was lit with the fury of their battle. I returned to find my master dead, his brother gone. I swore vengeance. I gathered the Magi from

across the world, and we made war on the Maker. All of us. Except for Khalul.'

'Why not him?' growled Ferro.

'He said that I could not be trusted. That my folly had caused the war.'

'All too true, surely?' muttered Quai.

'Perhaps, in part. But he made far worse accusations also. He and his cursed apprentice, Mamun. Lies,' he hissed at the fire. 'All lies, and the rest of the Magi were not deceived. So Khalul left the order, and returned to the South, and sought for power elsewhere. And he found it. By doing as Glustrod had done, and damning himself. By breaking the Second Law, and eating the flesh of men. Only eleven of us went to fight Kanedias, and only nine of us returned.'

Bayaz took a long breath, and gave a long sigh. 'So, Master Quai. There is the story of my mistakes, laid bare. You could say they were the cause of my master's death, of the schism in the order of Magi. You could say that is why we are now heading westwards, into the ruins of the past. You could say that is why Captain Luthar has suffered a broken jaw.'

'The seeds of the past bear fruit in the present,' muttered Logen to himself.

'So they do,' said Bayaz, 'so they do. And sour fruit indeed. Will you learn from my mistakes, Master Quai, as I have, and pay some attention to your master?'

'Of course,' said the apprentice, though Logen wondered if there was a hint of irony in his voice. 'I will obey in all things.'

'You would be wise to. If I had obeyed Juvens, perhaps I would not have this.' Bayaz undid the top two buttons of his shirt and pulled his collar to one side. The firelight flickered on a faded scar, from the base of the old man's neck down towards his shoulder. 'The Maker himself gave it to me. Another inch and it would have been my death.' He rubbed sourly at it. 'All those years ago, and it still aches, from time to time. The pain it has given me over the slow years . . . so you see, Master Luthar, although you bear a mark, it could be worse.'

Longfoot cleared his throat. 'That is quite an injury, of course, but I believe I can do better.' He took hold of his dirty trouser leg and pulled it right up to his groin, turning his sinewy thigh towards the firelight. There

was an ugly mass of puckered grey scar flesh almost all the way round his leg. Even Logen had to admit to being impressed.

'What the hell did that?' asked Luthar, looking slightly queasy.

Longfoot smiled. 'Many years ago, when I was yet a young man, I was shipwrecked in a storm off the coast of Suljuk. Nine times, in all, God has seen fit to dump me into his cold ocean in bad weather. Luckily, I have always been truly blessed as a swimmer. Unluckily, on this occasion, some manner of great fish took me for its next meal.'

'A fish?' muttered Ferro.

'Indeed. A most huge and aggressive fish, with a jaw wide as a doorway and teeth like knives. Fortunately, a sharp blow on the nose,' and he chopped at the air with his hand, 'caused it to release me, and a fortuitous current washed me up on shore. I was doubly blessed to find a sympathetic lady among the natives, who allowed me to recuperate in her abode, for the people of Suljuk are generally most suspicious of outsiders.' He sighed happily. 'That is how I came to learn their language. A highly spiritual people. God has favoured me. Truly.' There was a silence.

'I bet you can do better.' Luthar was grinning across at Logen.

'I got bitten by a mean sheep once, but it didn't leave much of a mark.'

'What about the finger?'

'This?' He stared at the familiar stub, waggling it back and forward. 'What about it?'

'How did you lose it?'

Logen frowned. He wasn't sure he liked the way this conversation was going. Hearing about Bayaz' mistakes was one thing, but he wasn't that keen to delve into his own. The dead knew, he'd made some bad ones. Still, they were all looking now. He had to say something. 'I lost it in a battle. Outside a place called Carleon. I was young back then, and full of fire myself. It was my stupid fashion to go charging into the thick of the fighting. That time, when I came out, the finger was gone.'

'Heat of the moment, eh?' asked Bayaz.

'Something like that.' He frowned and rubbed gently at the stump. 'Strange thing. For a long time after it was gone, I could still feel it, itching, right in the tip. Drove me mad. How can you scratch a finger that's not there?'

'Did it hurt?' asked Luthar.

‘Like a bastard, to begin with, but not half as much as some others I’ve had.’

‘Like what?’

That needed some thinking about. Logen scratched at his face and turned over all the hours, and days, and weeks he’d spent injured, and bloody, and screaming. Limping around or trying to cut his meat with his hands all bandaged up. ‘I got a good sword cut across my face one time,’ he said, feeling the notch Tul Duru had made in his ear, ‘bled like anything. Nearly got my eye poked out with an arrow,’ rubbing at the crescent scar under his brow. ‘Took hours to dig out all the splinters. Then I had a bloody great rock dropped on me at the siege of Uffrith. First day, as well.’ He rubbed the back of his head and felt the lumpy ridges, under his hair. ‘Broke my skull, and my shoulder too.’

‘Nasty,’ said Bayaz.

‘My own fault. That’s what you get when you try and tear a city wall down with your bare hands.’ Luthar stared at him, and he shrugged. ‘Didn’t work. Like I said, I was hot-headed in my youth.’

‘I’m only surprised you didn’t try and chew through it.’

‘Most likely that would’ve been my next move. Just as well they dropped a rock on me. At least I’ve still got my teeth. Spent two months squealing on my back while they laid siege to the city. I only just healed in time for the fight with Threetrees, when I got the whole lot broken again, and more besides.’ Logen winced at the memory, curling up the fingers of his right hand and straightening them out, remembering the pain of it, all smashed up. ‘Now that really did hurt. Not as much as this, though,’ and he dug his hand under his belt and pulled his shirt up. They all peered across the fire to see what he was pointing at. A small scar, really, just under his bottom rib, in the hollow beside his stomach.

‘Doesn’t look like much,’ said Luthar.

Logen shuffled round to show them his back. ‘There’s the rest of it,’ he said, jerking his thumb at what he knew was a much bigger mark beside his backbone. There was a long silence while they took that in.

‘Right through?’ murmured Longfoot.

‘Right through, with a spear. In a duel, with a man called Harding Grim. Damn lucky to live, and that’s a fact.’

‘If it was in a duel,’ murmured Bayaz, ‘how did you come out alive?’

Logen licked his lips. His mouth tasted bitter. ‘I beat him.’

‘With a spear through you?’

‘I didn’t know about it until afterwards.’

Longfoot and Luthar frowned at each other. ‘That would seem a difficult detail to overlook,’ said the Navigator.

‘You’d think so.’ Logen hesitated, trying to think of a good way to put it, but there was no good way. ‘There are times . . . well . . . I don’t really know what I’m doing.’

A long pause. ‘How do you mean?’ asked Bayaz, and Logen winced. All the fragile trust he’d built over the last few weeks was in danger of crumbling round his ears, but he didn’t see any choice. He’d never been much of a liar.

‘When I was fourteen, I think, I argued with a friend. Can’t even remember what about. I remember being angry. I remember he hit me. Then I was looking at my hands.’ And he looked down at them now, pale in the darkness. ‘I’d strangled him. Good and dead. I didn’t remember doing it, but there was only me there, and I had his blood under my nails. I dragged him up some rocks, and I threw him off onto his head, and I said he fell out of a tree and died, and everyone believed me. His mother cried, and so on, but what could I do? That was the first time it happened.’

Logen felt the eyes of the group all fixed on him. ‘Few years later I nearly killed my father. Stabbed him while we were eating. Don’t know why. Don’t know why at all. He healed, luckily.’

He felt Longfoot easing nervously away, and he hardly blamed him. ‘That was when the Shanka started coming more often. So my father sent me south, over the mountains, to look for help. So I found Bethod, and he offered me help if I’d fight for him. I was happy to do it, fool that I was, but the fighting went on, and on. The things I did in those wars . . . the things they told me I did.’ He took a long breath. ‘Well. I’d killed friends. You should have seen what I did to enemies. To begin with I enjoyed it. I loved to sit at the top of the fire, to look at men and see their fear, to have no man dare to meet my eye, but it got worse. And worse. There came one winter that I didn’t know who I was, or what I was doing most of the time. Sometimes I’d see it happening, but I couldn’t change it. No one knew who I’d kill next. They were all shitting themselves, even Bethod, and no one more scared of me than I was.’

They all sat for a while in gaping silence. The ruined building had been seeming like some kind of comfort after all that dead and empty space on the plain, but it didn't any more. The empty windows yawned like wounds. The empty doorways gaped like graves. The silence dragged on, and on, and then Longfoot cleared his throat. 'So, for the sake of argument, do you think it's possible that, perhaps without intending to, you might kill one of us?'

'It's more likely I'd kill all of you than one.'

Bayaz was frowning. 'Forgive me if I feel less than entirely reassured.'

'I wish at least that you had mentioned this earlier!' snapped Longfoot. 'It is the type of information a travelling companion should share! I hardly think that—'

'Leave him be,' growled Ferro.

'But we need to know—'

'Shut your mouth, stargazing fool. You're all a long way from perfect.' She scowled over at Longfoot. 'Some of you make a lot of words and are nowhere near when the trouble starts.' She frowned at Luthar. 'Some of you are a lot less use than you think you are.' She glared at Bayaz. 'And some of you keep a lot of secrets, then fall asleep at bad times and leave the rest of us stranded in the middle of nowhere. So he's a killer. So fucking what? Suited you well enough when the killing needed doing.'

'I only wanted to—'

'Shut your mouth, I said.' Longfoot blinked for a moment, then did as he was told.

Logen stared across the fire at Ferro. The very last place he'd ever have hoped to get a good word. Out of all of them, only she'd seen it happen. Only she knew what he really meant. And still she'd spoken up for him. She saw him looking, and she scowled and shrank back into her corner, but that didn't change anything. He felt himself smile.

'What about you, then?' Bayaz was looking at Ferro as well, touching one finger to his lip as though thinking.

'What about me?'

'You say you don't like secrets. We have all spoken of our scars. I bored the group with my old stories, and the Bloody-Nine thrilled us with his.' The Magus tapped his bony face, full of hard shadows from the fire. 'How did you get yours?'

A pause. ‘I bet you made whoever gave you that suffer, eh?’ said Luthar, a trace of laughter in his voice.

Longfoot started to chuckle. ‘Oh indeed! I daresay he came to a sharp end! I dread to think of the—’

‘I did it,’ said Ferro.

Such laughter as there was sputtered and died, the smiles faded as they took that in. ‘Eh?’ said Logen.

‘What, pink, you fucking deaf? I did it to myself.’

‘Why?’

‘Hah!’ she barked, glaring at him across the fire. ‘You don’t know what it is, to be owned! When I was twelve years old I was sold to a man called Susman.’ And she spat on the ground and snarled something in her own tongue. Logen didn’t reckon it was a compliment. ‘He owned a place where girls were trained, then sold on at a profit.’

‘Trained to do what?’ asked Luthar.

‘What do you think, fool? To fuck.’

‘Ah,’ he squeaked, swallowing and looking at the ground again.

‘Two years I was there. Two years, before I stole a knife. I did not know then, how to kill. So I hurt my owner the best way I could. I cut myself, right to the bone. By the time they got the blade away from me I had cut my price down to a quarter.’ She grinned fiercely at the fire as if it had been her proudest day. ‘You should have heard him squeal, the bastard!’

Logen stared. Longfoot gaped. Even the First of the Magi looked shocked. ‘You scarred yourself?’

‘What of it?’ Silence again. The wind blew up and swirled around inside the ruin, hissing in the chinks between the stones and making the flames flicker and dance. No one had much left to say after that.

Furious

The snow drifted down, white specks swirling in the empty air beyond the cliff's edge, turning the green pines, the black rocks, the brown river below into grey ghosts. West could hardly believe that as a child he had looked forward to the coming of snow every year. That he had been delighted to wake up and see the world coated in white. That it could have held a mystery, and a wonder, and a joy. Now the sight of the flakes settling on Cathil's hair, on Ladisla's coat, on West's own filthy trouser leg, filled him with horror. More gripping cold, more chafing wet, more crushing effort to move. He rubbed his pale hands together, sniffed and frowned up at the sky, willing himself not to slide into misery.

'Have to make the best of things,' he whispered, the words croaking in his raw throat and smoking thick in the cold. 'Have to.' He thought of warm summer in the Agriont. Blossom blowing from the trees in the squares. Birds twittering on the shoulders of smiling statues. Sunlight pouring through leafy branches in the park. It did not help. He sniffed back runny snot, tried yet again to worm his hands up into his uniform sleeves, but they were never quite long enough. He gripped the frayed hems with his pale fingers. Would he ever be warm again?

He felt Pike's hand on his shoulder. 'Something's up,' murmured the convict. He pointed at the Northmen, squatting in a group, muttering urgently to each other.

West stared wearily over at them. He had only just got nearly comfortable and it was difficult to take an interest in anything beyond his own pain. He slowly unfolded his aching legs, heard his cold knees click as he got up, shook himself, tried to slap the tiredness out of his body. He started shuffling towards the Northmen, bent over like an old man, arms wrapped round himself for warmth. Before he got there the meeting had already broken up. Another decision made without any need for his opinion.

Threetrees strode towards him, utterly unaffected by the falling snow. 'The Dogman's spotted some of Bethod's scouts,' he grunted, pointing through the trees. 'Just down the rise there, right in by the stream, near

those falls. Lucky he caught them. They could just as easily have caught us, and we'd most likely all be dead by now.'

'How many?'

'A dozen, he thinks. Getting round 'em could be risky.'

West frowned, rocking his weight from one foot back to the other, trying to keep the blood moving. 'Surely fighting them would be riskier still?'

'Maybe, maybe not. If we can get the jump on 'em, our chances ain't bad. They've got food, weapons,' he looked West up and down, 'and clothes. All kinds o' gear that we could use. We're just past the knuckle o' winter now. We keep heading north, it ain't going to get any warmer. It's decided. We're fighting. A dozen's long odds, so we'll need every man. Your mate Pike there looks like he can swing an axe without worrying too much on the results. You'd best get him ready an' all.' He nodded at Ladisla, hunched up on the ground. 'The girl should stay out but—'

'Not the Prince. It's too dangerous.'

Threetrees narrowed his eyes. 'You're damn right it's dangerous. That's why every man should share the risk.'

West leaned in close, doing his best to sound persuasive with his cracked lips as tough and thick as a pair of overcooked sausages. 'He'd only make the risk greater for everyone. We both know it.' The Prince peered back at them suspiciously, trying to guess what they were talking about. 'He'd be about as much use in a fight as a sack over your head.'

The old Northman snorted. 'Most likely you're right there.' He took a deep breath and frowned, taking some time to think about it. 'Alright. It ain't usual, but alright. He stays, him and the girl. The rest of us fight, and that means you too.'

West nodded. Each man has to do his part, how ever little he might relish the prospect. 'Fair enough. The rest of us fight.' And he stumbled back over to tell the others.

Back home in the bright gardens of the Agriont, Crown Prince Ladisla would never have been recognised. The dandies, the courtiers, the hangers-on who usually clung to his every word would most likely have stepped over him, holding their noses. The coat West had given him was coming apart at the seams, worn through at the elbows, crusted with mud. Beneath it, his spotless white uniform had gradually darkened to the colour of filth. A few tatters of gold braid still hung from it, like a glorious bouquet of

flowers rotted down to the greasy stalks. His hair was a tangled thatch, he had developed a patchy growth of ginger beard, and a rash of hair between his brows implied that in happier days he had spent a great deal of time plucking them. The only man within a hundred miles in a sorrier condition was probably West himself.

'What's to do?' mumbled the Prince as West dropped down beside him.

'There are some of Bethod's scouts down near the river, your Highness. We have to fight.'

The Prince nodded. 'I will need a weapon of some—'

'I must ask you to stay behind.'

'Colonel West, I feel that I should be—'

'You would be a great asset, your Highness, but I am afraid it is quite out of the question. You are the heir to the throne. We cannot afford to put you in harm's way.'

Ladisla did his best to look disappointed, but West could almost taste his relief. 'Very well, if you're sure.'

'Absolutely.' West looked at Cathil. 'The two of you should stay here. We'll be back soon. With luck.' He almost winced at the last part. Luck had been decidedly thin on the ground lately. 'Keep out of sight, and keep quiet.'

She grinned back at him. 'Don't worry. I'll make sure he doesn't hurt himself.'

Ladisla glowered sideways, fists clenched with impotent anger. It seemed he was getting no better at dealing with her constant jibes. No doubt being flattered and obeyed your entire life was poor preparation for being made a fool of in awful conditions. West wondered for a moment if he was making a mistake leaving them alone, but it was hardly as though he had any choice. They were well out of the way up here. They should be safe. A lot safer than him, anyway.

They squatted down on their haunches. A ring of scarred and dirty faces, hard expressions, ragged hair. Threetrees, his craggy features creased with deep lines. Black Dow with his missing ear and his savage grin. Tul Duru, his heavy brows drawn in. Grim, looking as careless as a stone. The Dogman, bright eyes narrowed, breath steaming from his sharp nose. Pike, with a deep frown across those few parts of his burned face that were

capable of movement. Six of the hardest-looking men in the world, and West.

He swallowed. Every man has to do his part.

Threetrees was scratching a crude map in the hard soil with a stick. ‘Alright, lads, they’re tucked in down here near the river, a dozen, maybe more. Here’s how we’ll get it done. Grim, up on the left, Dogman on the right, usual drill.’

‘Done, chief,’ said the Dogman. Grim nodded.

‘Me, Tul, and Pike’ll come at ’em from this side, hand to hand. Hope to surprise ’em. Don’t shoot any of us, eh, lads?’

The Dogman grinned. ‘If you keep well clear of the arrows, you’ll be fine.’

‘I’ll keep that in mind. Dow and West, you’ll get across the river and wait by the falls there. Come up behind them.’ The stick scratched a hard groove into the earth, and West felt the lump of worry swelling in his throat. ‘Noise of the water should keep you out of notice. Go when you see me chuck a stone over into the pool, you hear me? The stone coming over. That’s the signal.’

‘Course it is, chief,’ grunted Dow.

West suddenly realised that Threetrees was glaring right at him. ‘You hearing this, boy?’

‘Er, yes, of course,’ he muttered, tongue clumsy with cold and growing fear. ‘When the stone comes over, we go . . . chief.’

‘Alright. And the lot of you keep your eyes open. There could be others near. Bethod’s got scouts all over the country. Anyone still guessing at what to do?’ They all shook their heads. ‘Good. Then don’t go blaming me if you get yourself killed.’

Threetrees stood up and the others followed him. They made their last few preparations, loosening blades in sheaths, pulling at bowstrings, tightening buckles. There wasn’t much for West to prepare. A heavy, stolen sword pushed through a weathered belt, and that was it. He felt an utter fool in amongst this company. He wondered how many people they had killed between them. He would not have been surprised if it had been a whole town full, with enough left over for an outlying village or two. Even Pike looked more than ready to commit careless murder. West had to remind himself that he had not the slightest idea why the man had been convicted to

a penal colony in the first place. Looking at him now, running a thoughtful thumb down the edge of his heavy axe, eyes hard in that dead, burned face, it was not difficult to imagine.

West stared at his hands. They were trembling, and not just from the cold. He grabbed one with the other and squeezed them tight. He looked up to see the Dogman grinning at him. 'Got to have fear to have courage,' he said, then turned and followed Threetrees and the others into the trees.

Black Dow's harsh voice hacked at West from behind. 'You're with me, killer. Try and keep up.' He spat on the frozen ground then turned and set off towards the river. West took one last look back towards the others. Cathil nodded to him, once, and he nodded back, then he turned and followed Dow, ducking through the trees in silence, all coated with glittering, dripping ice, while the hissing of the waterfall grew louder and louder in his ears.

Threetrees' plan was starting to seem rather short on details. 'Once we get across the stream, and we get the signal, what do we do?'

'Kill,' grunted Dow over his shoulder.

That answer, useless though it was, sent a sudden stab of panic through West's guts. 'Should I go left or right?'

'Whichever you like, long as you stay out of my way.'

'Where will you be going?'

'Wherever the killing is.'

West wished he had never spoken as he stepped gingerly out onto the bank. He could see the falls just upstream, a wall of dark rock and rushing white water between the black tree trunks, throwing freezing mist and noise into the air.

The river here was no more than four strides across but the water flooded past, quick and dark, frothing round the wet stones at its edges. Dow held his sword and axe up high, waded out steadily, up to his waist in the middle, then crept up onto the far bank, pressing himself dripping against the rocks. He looked round, frowned to see West so far behind, jerked his hand angrily for him to follow.

West fumbled out his own sword and lifted it up, held a deep breath and stepped into the stream. The water flooded into his boot and round his calf. It felt as if his leg had been suddenly clamped in ice. He took a step forward and his other leg vanished up to the thigh. His eyes bulged, his breath came

in snorts, but there could be no turning back. He took one more step. His boot slipped on the mossy stones on the bed of the stream and he slid helplessly in up to his armpits. He would have screamed if the freezing water had not hammered the air out of his lungs. He floundered forward, half-stumbling, half-swimming, teeth gritted with panic, sloshed up onto the far bank, breath hissing in shallow, desperate gasps. He staggered up and leaned against the stones behind Dow, his skin numb and prickling.

The Northman smirked at him. 'You look cold, boy.'

'I'm fine,' spluttered West through chattering teeth. He had never been so cold in his life. 'I'll do my puh . . . puh . . . part.'

'You'll do your what? I'll not have you fighting cold boy, you'll get us both killed.'

'Don't worry about—' Dow's open hand slapped him hard across the face. The shock of it was almost worse than the pain. West gawped, dropping his blade in the mud, one hand jerking up instinctively to his stinging cheek. 'What the—'

'Use it!' hissed the Northman at him. 'It belongs to you!'

West was just opening his mouth when Dow's other hand smacked into it and sent him staggering against the rocks, blood dribbling from his lip and onto the wet earth, his head singing.

'It's yours. Own it!'

'You fucking . . .' The rest was nothing more than a mindless growl as West's hands closed round Dow's neck, squeezing, clawing, snarling like an animal, teeth bared and mindless. The blood surged round his body, the hunger, and the pain, and the frustration of the endless freezing march spilling out of him all at once.

But Black Dow was twice as strong as West, however angry he was. 'Use it!' he growled as he peeled West's hands away and crushed him back against the rocks. 'You hot yet?'

Something flashed overhead and splashed into the water beside them. Dow gave him a parting shove then sprang away, charging up the bank with a roar. West struggled after him, clawing the heavy sword up out of the mud and lifting it high, the blood pulsing in his head, howling meaningless sounds at the top of his lungs.

The muddy ground sped by underneath him. He crashed through bushes and rotten wood into the open. He saw Dow hack a gawping Northman

down with his axe. Dark blood leapt into the air, black spots against the tangle of branches and white sky. Trees and rocks and shaggy men jolted and wobbled, his own breath roaring in his ears like a storm. Someone loomed up and he swung the sword at them, felt it bite. Blood spattered into West's face and he reeled, and spat, and blinked, slid onto his side and scrambled up. His head was full of wailing and crying, clashing metal and cracking bone.

Chop. Hack. Snarl.

Someone staggered near him, clutching at an arrow in his chest. West's sword split his skull open down to his mouth. The corpse jerked, twisting the blade from his hand. He stumbled in the dirt, half fell, lashed out at a passing body with his fist. Something crashed into him and flung him back against a tree, knocking the air from his lungs in a breathy wheeze. Someone had him fast around the chest, pinning his arms, trying to crush the life out of him.

West craned forward, and sank his teeth into the man's lip, felt them meet in the middle. He screamed and punched but West hardly felt the blows. He spat out the flap of flesh and butted him in the face. The man squirmed and yelped, blood leaking out of his torn mouth. West clamped his teeth round his nose, growling like a mad dog.

Bite. Bite. Bite.

His mouth filled with blood. He could hear screaming in his ears, but all that mattered was to squeeze his jaws together, tighter and tighter. He twisted his head away and the man reeled back, clutching at his face. An arrow came out of nowhere and thudded into his ribs, he fell to his knees. West dived on him, grabbed hold of his tangled hair with clutching hands and smashed his face into the ground, again and again.

'It's done.'

West's hands jerked back, grasping claws full of blood and ripped-out hair. He struggled up, gasping, eyes bulging.

Everything was still. The world had stopped reeling. Spots of snow filtered gently down into the clearing, settling across the wet earth, the scattered gear, the stretched-out bodies, and the men still standing. Tul was not far away, staring at him. Threetrees was behind, sword in hand. Pike's pink slab of a face had something close to a wince on it, one bloody fist squeezed round his arm. They were all looking. All looking at him. Dow

raised his hand, pointing at West. He tipped his head back and started to laugh. ‘You bit him! You bit his fucking nose off! I knew you were a mad bastard!’

West stared at them. The thumping in his head was starting to subside. ‘What?’ he muttered. There was blood all over him. He wiped his mouth. Salty. He looked at the nearest corpse, face down on the earth. Blood was trickling from underneath its head, running down the slope and pooling around West’s boot. He remembered . . . something. A sudden cramp in his guts bent him over, spitting pink onto the ground, empty stomach heaving.

‘Furious!’ shouted Dow. ‘That’s what y’are!’

Grim had already stepped out of the bushes, bow over his shoulder, and was squatting down, dragging a bloody fur from one of the corpses. ‘Good coat,’ he muttered to himself.

West watched them all pick over the campsite, bent over and sick and utterly spent. He listened to Dow laughing. ‘Furious!’ cackled his harsh voice. ‘That’s what I’ll call you!’

‘They got arrows over here.’ The Dogman pulled something out of one of the packs on the ground, and grinned. ‘And cheese. Bit dusty.’ He picked some mould off the wedge of yellow with his dirty fingers, bit into it, and grinned. ‘Still good though.’

‘Lots o’ good stuff,’ nodded Threetrees, starting to smile himself. ‘And we’re all still going, more or less. Good day’s work, lads.’ He slapped Tul on the back. ‘We’d best head on north quick before these lot are missed. Let’s get what there is fast and pick up those other two.’

West’s mind was only just starting to move again. ‘The others!’

‘Alright,’ said Threetrees, ‘you and Dow check on them . . . Furious.’ He turned away with half a smile.

West lurched off through the trees the way he’d come, slipping and sliding in his haste, blood pulsing again. ‘Protect the Prince,’ he muttered to himself. He waded across the stream almost without noticing the cold, struggled onto the far bank and back uphill, hurrying towards the cliff where they had left the others.

He heard a woman’s scream, quickly cut off, a man’s voice growling. Horror crept through every part of his body. Bethod’s men had found them. It might already be too late. He urged his burning legs on up the slope, stumbling and sliding in the mud. Had to protect the Prince. The air burned

in his throat but he forced himself on, fingers clutching at the tree trunks, scrabbling at the loose twigs and needles on the frosty ground.

He burst out into the open space beside the cliff, breathing hard, the bloody sword gripped tight in his fist.

Two figures struggled on the ground. Cathil was underneath, wriggling on her back, kicking and clawing at someone on top of her. The man had managed to drag her trousers down below her knees and now he was fiddling with his own belt while he struggled to hold his other hand across her mouth. West took a step forward, raising the sword high, and the man's head snapped round. West blinked. The would-be rapist was none other than Crown Prince Ladisla himself.

When he saw West he stumbled up and took a step back. He had a slightly sheepish expression, almost a grin, like a schoolboy caught stealing a pie from the kitchen. 'Sorry,' he said, 'I thought you'd be longer.'

West stared at him, hardly able to understand what was happening. 'Longer?'

'You fucking bastard!' screamed Cathil, scrambling back and dragging her trousers up. 'I'll fucking kill you!'

Ladisla touched his lip. 'She bit me! Look!' He held his bloody finger tips out as though they were proof of an outrage perpetrated against him. West found himself moving forwards. The Prince must have seen something in his face, because he took a step away, holding up one hand while he held up his trousers with the other. 'Now hold on, West, just—'

There was no towering rage. No temporary blindness, no limbs moving by themselves, not the slightest trace of a headache. There was no anger at all. West had never in his life felt so calm, so sober, so sure of himself. He chose to do it.

His right arm jerked out and his open palm thumped against Ladisla's chest. The Crown Prince gave a gentle gasp as he stumbled sharply backwards. His left foot twisted in the mud. He put down his right foot, but there was no ground behind him. His brows went up, his mouth and eyes opened with silent shock. The heir to the throne of the Union fell away from West, his hands clutching vainly, turning slowly to his side in the air . . . and he was gone.

There was a short, breathy cry, a thumping sound, and another, a long clattering of stones.

Then silence.

West stood there, blinking.

He turned to look at Cathil.

She was frozen, a couple of strides away, eyes gawping wide open.

'You . . . you . . .'

'I know.' It hardly sounded like his voice. He edged to the very brink of the cliff, and peered over. Ladisla's corpse lay drooped face down over the rocks far below, West's ragged coat spread out behind him, trousers round his ankles, one knee bent back the wrong way, a ring of dark blood spreading out across the stones around his broken head. Never had anyone looked more dead.

West swallowed. He had done that. Him. He had killed the heir to the throne. He had murdered him in cold blood. He was a criminal. He was a traitor. He was a monster.

And he almost wanted to laugh. The sunny Agriont, where loyalty and deference were given without question, where commoners did what their betters told them, where the killing of other people was simply not the done thing, all this was very far away. Monster he might be, but, out here in the frozen wilderness of Angland, the rules were different. Monsters were in the majority.

He felt a hand clap him heavily on the shoulder. He looked up to see Black Dow's earless head beside him, peering down. The Northman whistled softly through pursed lips. 'Well, that's the end of that, I reckon. You know what, Furious?' And he grinned sideways at West. 'I'm getting to like you, boy.'

To the Last Man

To Sand dan Glokta,
Superior of Dagoska, and for his eyes alone.
It is clear that, in spite of your efforts, Dagoska cannot remain in Union hands for much longer. I therefore order you to leave immediately and present yourself to me. The docks may have been lost, but you should have no trouble slipping away by night in a small boat. A ship will be waiting for you down the coast.
You will confer overall command on General Vissbruck, as the only Union member of Dagoska's ruling council left alive in the city. It need hardly be said that the orders of the Closed Council to the defenders of Dagoska remain the same.
To fight to the last man.
Sult
Arch Lector of his Majesty's Inquisition.

General Vissbruck slowly lowered the letter, his jaws locked tight together. 'Are we to understand then, Superior, that you are leaving us?' His voice was cracking slightly. *With panic? With fear? With anger? Who could blame him, for any one of them?*

The room was much the same as it had been the first day Glokta arrived in the city. The superb mosaics, the masterful carvings, the polished table, all shining in the early morning sun streaming through the tall windows. *The ruling council itself, however, is sadly reduced.* Vissbruck, his jowls bulging over the stiff collar of his embroidered jacket, and Haddish Kahdia, slumped tiredly in his chair, were all that remained. Nicomo Cosca stood apart, leaning against the wall near the window and picking his fingernails.

Glokta took a deep breath. 'The Arch Lector wants me to . . . explain myself.'

Vissbruck gave a squeaky chuckle. 'For some reason, the image of rats fleeing a burning house springs to mind.' *An apt metaphor. If the rats are fleeing the flames to fling themselves into a mincing machine.*

'Come now, General.' Cosca let his head roll back against the wall, a faint smile on his lips. 'The Superior didn't have to come to us with this. He

could have stolen away in the night, and no one any the wiser. That's what I'd have done.'

'Allow me to have scant regard for what you might have done,' sneered Vissbruck. 'Our situation is critical. The land walls are lost, and with them all chance of holding out for long. The slums swarm with Gurkish soldiers. Every night we make sallies from the gates of the Upper City. We burn a ram. We kill some sentries while they sleep. But every day they bring up more equipment. Soon, perhaps, they will have cleared space down among the hovels and assembled their great catapults. Shortly thereafter, one imagines, the Upper City will come under sustained fire from incendiaries!' He stabbed an arm at the window. 'They might even reach the Citadel from there! This very room may sport a boulder the size of a woodshed as a centrepiece!'

'I am well aware of our position,' snapped Glokta. *The stench of panic the last few days has grown strong enough almost for the dead to smell it.* 'But the Arch Lector's orders are most specific. To fight to the last man. No surrender.'

Vissbruck's shoulders slumped. 'Surrender would do no good in any case.' He got up, made a half-hearted attempt to straighten his uniform, then slowly pushed his chair under the table. Glokta almost pitied him at that moment. *Probably he is deserving of pity, but I wasted all I had on Carlot dan Eider, who hardly deserved it at all.*

'Allow me to offer you one piece of advice, from a man who's seen the inside of a Gurkish prison. If the city should fall, I strongly recommend that you take your own life rather than be captured.'

General Vissbruck's eyes widened for a moment, then he looked down at the beautiful mosaic floor, and swallowed. When he lifted his face Glokta was surprised to see a bitter smile. 'This is hardly what I had in mind when I joined the army.'

Glokta tapped his ruined leg with his cane, and gave a twisted grin of his own. 'I could say the same. What did Stolicus write? "The recruiting sergeant sells dreams but delivers nightmares?"

'That would seem appropriate to the case.'

'If it's any comfort, I doubt that my fate will be even as pleasant as yours.'

‘A small one.’ And Vissbruck snapped his well-polished heels together and stood to vibrating attention. He remained like that for a moment, frozen, then turned without a word for the door, soles clicking loud against the floor and dying away in the corridor outside.

Glokta looked over at Kahdia. ‘Regardless of what I said to the General, I would urge you to surrender the city at the earliest opportunity.’

Kahdia’s tired eyes slid up. ‘After all this? Now?’

Especially now. ‘Perhaps the Emperor will choose to be merciful. In any case, I can see little advantage for you in fighting on. As things stand, there is still something to bargain with. You might be able to get some kind of terms.’

‘And that is the comfort you offer? The Emperor’s mercy?’

‘That’s all I have. What did you tell me about a man lost in the desert?’

Kahdia nodded slowly. ‘Whatever the outcome, I would like to thank you.’

Thank me, you fool? ‘For what? Destroying your city and leaving you to the Emperor’s mercy?’

‘For treating us with some measure of respect.’

Glokta snorted. ‘Respect? I thought I simply told you whatever you wanted to hear, in order to get what I needed.’

‘Perhaps so. But thanks cost nothing. God go with you.’

‘God will not follow where I am going,’ Glokta muttered, as Kahdia shuffled slowly from the room.

Cosca grinned down his long nose. ‘Back to Adua, eh, Superior?’

‘Back, as you say, to Adua.’ *Back to the House of Questions. Back to Arch Lector Sult.* The thought was hardly a happy one.

‘Perhaps I’ll see you there.’

‘You think so?’ *More likely you’ll be butchered along with all the rest when the city falls. Then you’ll miss your opportunity to see me hanged.*

‘If I’ve learned one thing, it’s that there’s always a chance.’ Cosca grinned as he pushed himself away from the wall and strutted towards the door, one hand rested jauntily on the pommel of his sword. ‘I hate to lose a good employer.’

‘I’d hate to be lost. But prepare yourself for the possibility of disappointment. Life is full of them.’ *And the manner of its ending is often the greatest one of all.*

‘Well then. If one of us should be disappointed.’ And Cosca bowed in the doorway with a theatrical flourish, the flaking gilt on his once magnificent breastplate glinting in a shaft of morning sunlight. ‘It has been an honour.’

Glokta sat on the bed, tonguing at his empty gums and rubbing his throbbing leg. He looked around his quarters. *Or Davoust’s quarters. That’s where an old wizard terrified me in the middle of the night. That’s where I watched the city burn. That’s where I was nearly eaten by a fourteen-year-old girl. Ah, the happy memories . . .*

He grimaced as he pushed himself up and limped over to the one box he had brought with him. *And this is where I signed a receipt for one million marks, advanced by the banking house of Valint and Balk.* He slid the flat leather case that Mauthis had given him out of his coat pocket. *Half a million marks in polished stones, barely touched.* He felt again the tugging temptation to open it, to dig his hand inside and feel that cool, hard, clicking distillation of wealth between his fingers. He resisted with an effort, bent down with a greater one, pushed some of the folded clothes aside with one hand and dug the case down under them with the other. Black, *black and black. I really should get a more varied wardrobe—*

‘Going without saying goodbye?’

Glokta jerked violently up from his stoop and nearly vomited at a searing spasm through his back. He reached out with one arm and slammed the box lid down just in time to flop onto it before his leg buckled. Vitari was standing in the doorway, frowning over at him.

‘Damn it!’ he hissed, blowing spit through the gaps in his teeth with every heaving breath, left leg numb as wood, right leg cramping up with agony.

She padded into the room, narrowed eyes sliding left and right. *Checking that there’s no one else here. A private interview, then.* His heart was starting to beat fast as she slowly shut the door, and not just from the spasms in his leg. The key rattled in the lock. *Just the two of us. How terribly exciting.*

She paced silently across the carpet, her long black shadow stretching out towards him. ‘I thought we had a deal,’ hissed out from behind her mask.

‘So did I,’ snapped Glokta, struggling to find a more dignified position. ‘Then I got a little note from Sult. He wants me back, and I think we can all guess why.’

‘Not because of anything I told him.’

‘So you say.’

Her eyes narrowed further, her feet padded closer. ‘We had a deal. I kept my end.’

‘Good for you! You can console yourself with that thought when I’m floating face down in the docks in Adua and you’re stuck here, waiting for the Gurkish to break down the—oof!’

And she was on him, her weight grinding his twisted back into the box, squeezing the air from him in a ragged wheeze. There was a bright flash of metal and the rattle of a chain, her fingers slid round his neck.

‘You crippled worm! I should cut your fucking throat right now!’ Her knee jabbed painfully into his stomach, cold metal tickled gently at the skin on his neck, her blue eyes glared into his, flickering back and forth, glistening hard as the stones in the box under his back. *My death could be moments away. Easily.* He remembered watching her choke the life out of Eider. *With as little care as I might squash an ant, and I, poor cripple, just as helpless as one.* Perhaps he should have been gibbering with fear, but all he could think was: *when was the last time I had a woman on top of me?*

He snorted with laughter. ‘Don’t you know me at all?’ he blubbered, half chuckling, half sobbing, eyes watering with a sickening mixture of pain and amusement. ‘Superior Glokta, pleased to meet you! I don’t care a good shit what you do, and you know it. Threats? You’ll have to do a sight better than that, you ginger whore!’

Her eyes bulged with fury. Her shoulder came forwards, her elbow went back, ready to apply the greatest possible pressure. *Enough to cut my neck through to my twisted spine, I don’t doubt.*

Glokta felt his lips curl back in a sickly grin, wet with spit. *Now.*

He heard Vitari’s breath snorting behind her mask. *Do it.*

He felt the blade press against his neck, a chill touch, so sharp that he could hardly feel it. *I’m ready.*

Then she let out a long hiss, lifted the blade high and rammed it into the wood beside his head. She stood up and turned away from him. Glokta closed his eyes and breathed for a moment. *Still alive.* There was an odd feeling in his throat. *Relief, or disappointment? Hard to tell the difference.*

‘Please.’ It was said so softly that he thought he might have imagined it. Vitari was standing with her back to him, head bent over, fists clenched and

trembling.

'What?'

'Please.' *She did say it. And it hurts her to do it, you can tell.*

'Please, eh? You think there's any place here for please? Why the hell should I save you, really? You came here to spy for Sult. You've done nothing but get in my way ever since you got here! It's hard to think of anyone I trust less, and I don't trust anyone!'

She turned back to face him, reached behind her head, took hold of the straps of her mask, and pulled it off. There was a sharp tan line underneath: brown round her eyes, her forehead, her neck, white round her mouth with a pink mark across the bridge of her nose. Her face was far softer, much younger, more ordinary than he had expected. She no longer looked fearsome. She looked scared and desperate. Glokta felt suddenly, ludicrously awkward, as though he had blundered into a room and caught someone naked. He almost had to look away as she kneeled down level with him.

'Please.' Her eyes looked moist, dewy, her lip trembling as if she was on the very point of weeping. *A glimpse at the secret hopes beneath the vicious shell? Or just a good act?* Glokta felt his eyelid fluttering. 'It's not for myself,' she almost whispered. 'Please. I'm begging you.'

He rubbed his hand thoughtfully across his neck. When he took it away there was blood on his fingertip. The faintest brown smear. *A nick. A graze. Just a hair's breadth further, and I'd be pumping blood all over the lovely carpet right now. Only a hair's breadth. Lives turn on such chances. Why should I save her?*

But he knew why. *Because I don't save many.*

He turned painfully round on the box so his back was to her and sat there, kneading at the dead flesh of his left leg. He took a deep breath. 'Alright,' he snapped.

'You won't regret it.'

'I regret it already. Damn but I'm a fool for crying women! And you can carry your own damn luggage!' He looked round, raising a finger, but Vitari already had the mask back on. Her eyes were dry, and narrow, and fierce. *They look like eyes that couldn't shed a tear in a hundred years.*

'Don't worry.' She jerked on the chain round her wrist and the cross-shaped blade sprang from the lid of the box and slapped into her waiting

palm. ‘I travel light.’

Glokta watched the flames reflected in the calm surface of the bay. Shifting fragments, red, yellow, sparkling white in the black water. Frost pulled at the oars, smoothly, evenly, his pale face half lit by the flickering fires in the city, expressionless. Severard sat behind him, hunched over, glowering out across the water. Vitari was beyond, in the prow, her head no more than a spiky outline. The blades dipped into the sea and feathered the water with barely a sound. It hardly seemed that the boat moved. Rather the dark outline of the peninsula slipped slowly away from them, into the darkness.

What have I done? Consigned a city full of people to death or slavery, for what? For the King’s honour? A drooling halfwit who can scarcely control his bowels, let alone a country. For my pride? Hah. I threw it all away long ago, along with my teeth. For Sult’s approval? My reward is like to be a rope collar and a long drop.

He could just see the darker outline of the rock against the dark night sky, the craggy form of the citadel perched on top of it. Perhaps even the slender shapes of the spires of the Great Temple. All moving off into the past.

What could I have done differently? I could have thrown in my lot with Eider and the rest. Given the city away to the Gurkish without a fight. Would that have changed anything? Glokta licked sourly at his empty gums. The Emperor would have set about his purges just the same. Sult would have sent for me, just as he has done. Little differences, hardly worth commenting on. What did Shickel say? Few indeed are those who get a choice.

A chill breeze blew and Glokta pulled his coat tight around him, folded his arms across his chest, winced as he worked his numb foot back and forward in his boot, trying to make the blood flow. The city was nothing but a dusting of pinprick lights, far away.

It is just as Eider said – all so the Arch Lector and his like can point at a map and say this dot or that is ours. His mouth twitched into a smile. And after all the efforts, all the sacrifices, all the scheming, and plotting, and killing, we could not even hold the city. All that pain, for what?

There was no reply, of course. Only the calm waves lapping against the side of the boat, the soft creaking of the rowlocks, the soothing slap, slap of the oars on the water. He wanted to feel disgust at himself. Guilt at what he

had done. Pity for all those left behind to Gurkish mercy. *The way other men might. The way I might have, long ago.* But it was hard to feel much of anything beyond the overwhelming tiredness and the endless, nagging ache up his leg, through his back, into his neck. He winced as he sagged back on his wooden seat, searching, as always, for a less painful position. *There is no need to punish myself, after all.*

Punishment will come soon enough.

Jewel of Cities

At least he could ride now. The splints had come off that morning, and Jezal's sore leg knocked painfully against his horse's flank as it moved. His hand was numb and clumsy on the reins, his arm weak and aching without the dressing. His teeth still throbbed dully with every thump of the hooves on the ruined road. But at least he was out of the cart, and that was something. Small things seemed to make him very happy these days.

The others rode in a sombre, silent group, grim as mourners at a funeral, and Jezal hardly blamed them. It was a sombre sort of place. A plain of dirt. Of fissures of bare rock. Of sand and stone, empty of life. The sky was a still white nothing, heavy as pale lead, promising rain but never quite delivering. They rode clustered round the cart as though huddling for warmth, the only warm things in a hundred miles of cold desert, the only moving things in a place frozen in time, the only living things in a dead country.

The road was wide, but the stones were cracked and buckled. In places whole stretches of it had crumbled away, in others flows of mud had covered it entirely. The dead stumps of trees jutted from the bare earth to either side. Bayaz must have seen him looking at them.

'An avenue of proud oaks lined this road for twenty miles from the city gates. In summer their leaves shimmered and shook in the wind over the plain. Juvens planted them with his own hands, in the Old Time, when the Empire was young, long before even I was born.'

The mutilated stumps were grey and dry, splintered edges still showing the marks of saws. 'They look as if they were cut down months ago.'

'Many long years, my boy. When Glustrod seized the city, he had them all felled to feed his furnaces.'

'Then why have they not rotted?'

'Even rot is a kind of life. There is no life here.'

Jezal swallowed and hunched his shoulders, watching the chunks of long dead wood file slowly past like rows of tomb-stones. 'I don't like this,' he muttered under his breath.

‘You think I do?’ Bayaz frowned grimly over at him. ‘You think any of us do? Men must sometimes do what they do not like if they are to be remembered. It is through struggle, not ease, that fame and honour are won. It is through conflict, not peace, that wealth and power are gained. Do such things no longer interest you?’

‘Yes,’ muttered Jezal, ‘I suppose . . .’ But he was far from sure. He looked out across the sea of dead dirt. There was precious little sign of honour out here, let alone wealth, and it was hard to see where fame would come from. He was already well known to the only five people within a hundred miles. Besides, he was starting to wonder if a long, poor life in utter obscurity would really be such a terrible thing.

Perhaps, when he got home, he would ask Ardee to marry him. He amused himself by imagining her smile when he suggested it. No doubt she would make him squirm, waiting for an answer. No doubt she would keep him dangling. No doubt she would say yes. What, after all, was the worst that could happen? Would his father be angry? Would they be forced to live on his officer’s pay? Would his shallow friends and his idiot brothers chuckle at his back to see him so reduced in the world? He almost laughed to think that those had seemed weighty reasons.

A life of hard work with the woman he loved beside him? A rented house in an unfashionable part of town, with cheap furniture but a cosy fire? No fame, no power, no wealth, but a warm bed with Ardee in it, waiting for him . . . That hardly seemed like such a terrible fate now that he had looked death in the face, when he was living on a bowl of porridge a day and feeling grateful to get it, when he was sleeping alone out in the wind and the rain.

His grin grew wider, and the feeling of the sore skin stretching across his jaw was almost pleasant. That did not seem like such a bad life at all.

The great walls thrust up sheer, scabbed with broken battlements, blistered with shattered towers, scarred with black cracks and slick with wet. A cliff of dark stone, curving away out of sight into the grey drizzle, the bare earth in front of it pooled with brown water and scattered with toppled blocks as big as coffins.

‘Aulcus,’ growled Bayaz, jaw set hard. ‘Jewel of cities.’

‘I don’t see it sparkling,’ grunted Ferro.

Neither did Logen. The slimy road slunk up to a crumbling archway, gaping open, full of shadows, the doors themselves long gone. He had an awful feeling as he looked at that dark gate. A sick feeling. Like the one he had when he looked into the open door of the Maker's House. As if he was looking into a grave, and possibly his own. All he could think about was turning round and never coming back. His horse nickered softly and took a step away, its breath smoking in the misty rain. The hundreds of long and dangerous miles back to the sea seemed suddenly an easier journey than the few strides to that gate.

'Are you sure about this?' he murmured to Bayaz.

'Am I sure? No, of course not! I brought us weary leagues across the barren plain on a whim! I spent years planning the journey, and gathered this little group from all across the Circle of the World for no reason beyond my own amusement! No harm will be done if we simply toddle back to Calcis. Am I sure?' He shook his head as he urged his horse towards the yawning gateway.

Logen shrugged his shoulders. 'Only asking.' The arch gaped wider, and wider, then swallowed them whole. The sound of the horses' hooves echoed down the long tunnel, clattering around them in the darkness. The weight of stone all around pressed in close and seemed to make it hard to take a breath. Logen put his head down, frowning towards the circle of light at the far end as it grew steadily bigger. He glanced sideways and caught Luthar's eye, licking his lips nervously in the gloom, wet hair plastered to his face.

And then they came out into the open.

'My, my,' breathed Longfoot. 'My, my, my . . .'

Colossal buildings rose up on either side of a vast square. The ghosts of tall pillars and high roofs, of towering columns and great walls, all made for giants, loomed from the haze of rain. Logen gawped. They all did, a tiny huddled group in that outsize space, like scared sheep in a bare valley, waiting for the wolves to come.

Rain hissed on stone high overhead, falling water splattered on the slick cobbles, trickled down the crumbling walls, gurgled in the cracks in the road. The thudding of hooves fell muffled. The cartwheels gently croaked and groaned. No other noise. No bustle, no din, no chatter of crowds. No birds calling, no dogs barking, no clatter of trade and commerce. Nothing lived. Nothing moved. There were only the great black buildings, stretching

far away into the rain, and the ripped clouds crawling across the dark sky above.

They rode slowly past the ruins of some fallen temple, a tangled mass of dripping blocks and slabs, sections of its monstrous columns scattered on their sides across the broken paving, fragments from its roof thrown wide, still lying where they fell. Luthar's wet face, apart from the pink stain across his chin, was chalky white as he gazed up at the soaring wreckage to either side. 'Bloody hell,' he muttered.

'It is indeed,' murmured Longfoot under his breath, 'a most impressive sight.'

'The palaces of the wealthy dead,' said Bayaz. 'The temples where they prayed to angry gods. The markets where they bought and sold goods, and animals, and people. Where they bought and sold each other. The theatres, and the baths, and the brothels where they indulged their passions, before Glustrod came.' He pointed across the square and down the valley of dripping stone beyond. 'This is the Caline Way. The greatest road of the city, and where the greatest citizens had their dwellings. It runs straight through, more or less, from the northern gate to the southern. Now listen to me,' he said, turning in his creaking saddle. 'Three miles south of the city there is a high hill, with a temple on its summit. The Saturline Rock, they called it in the Old Time. If we should become separated, that is where we will meet.'

'Why would we be separated?' asked Luthar, his eyes wide.

'The earth in the city is . . . unquiet, and prone to tremble. The buildings are ancient, and unstable. I hope that we will pass through without incident but . . . it would be rash to rely on hope alone. If anything should happen, head south. Toward the Saturline Rock. Until then, stay close together.'

That hardly needed saying. Logen looked over at Ferro as they set off into the city, her black hair spiky, her dark face dewy with wet, frowning up suspiciously at the towering buildings to either side. 'If anything should happen,' he whispered to her, 'help me out, eh?'

She looked at him for a moment, then nodded. 'If I can, pink.'

'Good enough.'

The only thing worse than a city full of people is a city with no people at all.

Ferro rode with her bow in one hand, the reins in the other, staring to both sides, peering down the alleys, into the gaping windows and doorways, straining to see round the crumbling corners and over the broken walls. She did not know what she was looking for.

But she would be ready.

They all felt as she did, she could see it. She watched the fibres of jaw muscle tensing and relaxing, tensing and relaxing, over and over, on the side of Ninefingers' head as he frowned off into the ruins, his hand never far from the grip of his sword, scored cold metal shining with beads of moisture.

Luthar jumped at every noise – at the crack of a stone under the cartwheels, at the splatter of falling water into a pool, at the snort of one of the horses, his head jerking this way and that, the tip of his tongue licking endlessly at the slot in his lip.

Quai sat on the cart, bent over with his wet hair flapping round his gaunt face, pale lips pressed together into a hard line. Ferro watched him snap the reins, saw he was gripping them so tightly that the tendons stood out stark from the backs of his thin hands. Longfoot stared about him at the endless ruins, eyes and mouth hanging slightly open, rivulets of water occasionally streaking through the stubble on his knobbly skull. For once he had nothing to say – the one small advantage of this place abandoned by God.

Bayaz was trying to look confident, but Ferro knew better. She watched his hand tremble when he took it from the reins to rub the water from his thick brows. She watched his mouth work when they stopped at junctions, watched him squinting into the rain, trying to reckon the right course. She saw his worry and his doubt written in his every movement. He knew as well as she did. This place was not safe.

Click-clank.

It came faint through the rain, like the sound of a hammer on a distant anvil. The sound of weapons being made ready. She stood up in her stirrups, straining to listen.

'Do you hear that?' she snapped at Ninefingers.

He paused, squinting off at nothing, listening. Click-clank. He nodded slowly. 'I hear it.' He slid his sword out from its sheath.

'What?' Luthar stared around wild-eyed, fumbling for his own weapons.

'There's nothing out there,' grumbled Bayaz.

She jabbed her palm at them to stop, slid down from her saddle and crept up to the corner of the next building, nocking an arrow to her bow, back sliding across the rough surface of the huge stone blocks. Clank-click. She could feel Ninefingers following, moving carefully, a reassuring presence behind her.

She slid round the corner onto one knee, peering across an empty square, pocked with pools and strewn with rubble. There was a high tower at the far corner, leaning over to one side, wide windows hanging open at its summit under a tarnished dome. Something was moving in there, slowly. Something dark, rocking back and forth. She almost smiled to have something she could point an arrow at.

It was a good feeling, having an enemy.

Then she heard hooves and Bayaz rode past, out into the ruined square. 'Ssss!' she hissed at him, but he ignored her.

'You can put your weapons away,' he called over his shoulder. 'It's nothing but an old bell, clicking in the wind. The city was full of them. You should have heard them pealing out, when an Emperor was born, or crowned, or married, or welcomed back from a victorious campaign.' He started to raise his arms, voice growing louder. 'The air split with their joyous ringing, and birds rose up from every square and street and roof and filled the sky!' He was shouting now, bellowing it out. 'And the people lined the streets! And they leaned from their windows! And they showered the beloved with flower petals! And cheered until their voices were hoarse!' He started to laugh, and he let his arms fall, and high above him the broken bell clicked and clanked in the wind. 'Long ago. Come on.'

Quai snapped the reins and the cart trundled off after the Magus. Ninefingers shrugged at her and sheathed his sword. Ferro stayed a moment, staring up suspiciously at the stark outline of that leaning tower, dark clouds flowing past above it.

Click-clank.

Then she followed the others.

The statues swam up out of the angry rain, one pair of frozen giants at a time, their faces all worn down by the long years until every one was the featureless same. Water trickled over smooth marble, dripped from long beards, from armoured skirts, from arms outstretched in threat or blessing,

amputated long ago at the wrist, or the elbow, or the shoulder. Some were worked with bronze: huge helmets, swords, sceptres, crowns of leaves, all turned chalky green leaving dirty streaks down the gleaming stone. The statues swam up out of the angry rain, and one pair of giants at a time they vanished into the rain behind, consigned to the mists of history.

'Emperors,' said Bayaz. 'Hundreds of years of them.'

Jezal watched the rulers of antiquity file menacingly past, looming over the broken road, his neck aching from looking up, the rain tickling at his face. The sculptures were twice the height or more of the ones in the Agriont, but there was similarity enough to cause a sudden wave of homesickness.

'Just like to the Kingsway, in Adua.'

'Huh,' grunted Bayaz. 'Where do you think I got the idea?'

Jezal was just absorbing that bizarre comment when he noticed that the statues they were approaching now were the last pair, one tilted over at a worrying angle.

'Hold up the cart!' called Bayaz, raising one wet palm and nudging his horse forward.

Not only were there no more Emperors before them, there was no road at all. A dizzy drop yawned out of the earth, a mighty crack in the fabric of the city. Squinting across, Jezal could just see the far side, a cliff of broken rock and crumbled mud. Beyond were the faint wraiths of walls and pillars, the outline of the wide avenue, melting out of sight and back as the rain swept through the empty air between.

Longfoot cleared his throat. 'I take it we will not be carrying on this way.'

Ever so carefully Jezal leaned from his saddle and peered down. Far below dark water moved, foaming and churning, washing at the tortured ground beneath the foundations of the city, and out of this subterranean sea stuck broken walls, and shattered towers, and the cracked open shells of monstrous buildings. At the top of one tottering column a statue still stood, some hero long dead. His hand must once have been raised in triumph. Now it stuck up in desperation, as if he was pleading for someone to drag him from his watery hell.

Jezal sat back, feeling suddenly dizzy. 'We will not be carrying on this way,' he managed to croak.

Bayaz frowned grimly down at the grinding water. ‘Then we must find another, and quickly. The city is full of these cracks. We have miles to go even on a straight course, and a bridge to cross.’

Longfoot frowned. ‘Providing it still stands.’

‘It still stands! Kanedias built to last.’ The First of the Magi peered up into the rain. The sky was already bruising, a dark weight hanging above their heads. ‘We cannot afford to linger. We will not make it through the city before dark as it is.’

Jezal looked up at the Magus, horrified. ‘We’ll be here overnight? ’

‘Clearly,’ snapped Bayaz, turning his horse away from the brink.

The ruins crowded in tighter around them as they left the Caline Way behind and struck out into the thick of the city. Jezal gazed up at the threatening shadows, looming from the murk. The only thing he could imagine worse than being trapped in this place by day was being kept there in the darkness. He would have preferred to spend the night in hell. But what would have been the difference?

The river surged below them through a man-made canyon – tall embankments of smooth, wet stone. The mighty Aos, imprisoned in that narrow space, foamed with infinite, mindless fury, chewing at the polished rock and spitting angry spray high into the air. Ferro could not imagine how anything could have lasted for long above that deluge, but Bayaz had been right.

The Maker’s bridge still stood.

‘In all my wide travels, in every city and nation under the bountiful sun, I have never seen such a wonder.’ Longfoot slowly shook his shaven head. ‘How can a bridge be made from metal?’

But metal it was. Dark, smooth, lustreless, gleaming with drops of water. It soared across the dizzy space in one simple arch, impossibly delicate, a spider’s web of thin rods criss-crossing the hollow air beneath it, a wide road of slotted metal plates stretching out perfectly level across the top, inviting them to cross. Every edge was sharp, every curve precise, every surface clean. It stood pristine in the midst of all that slow decay. ‘As if it was finished yesterday,’ muttered Quai.

‘And yet it is perhaps the oldest thing in the city.’ Bayaz nodded towards the ruins behind them. ‘All the achievements of Juvens are laid waste.

Fallen, broken, forgotten, almost as though they had never been. But the works of the Master Maker are undiminished. They shine the brighter, if anything, for they shine in a darkened world.' He snorted, and mist blew from his nostrils. 'Who knows? Perhaps they will still stand whole and unmarked at the end of time, long after all of us are in our graves.'

Luthar peered nervously down towards the thundering water, no doubt wondering if his grave might be there. 'You're sure it will carry us?'

'In the Old Time it carried thousands of people a day. Tens of thousands. Horses and carts and citizens and slaves in an endless procession, flowing both ways, day and night. It will carry us.' Ferro watched as the hooves of Bayaz' horse clanged out onto the metal.

'This Maker was plainly a man of . . . quite remarkable talents,' murmured the Navigator, urging his horse after.

Quai snapped his reins. 'He was indeed. All lost to the world.'

Ninefingers went next, then Luthar reluctantly followed. Ferro stayed where she was, sitting in the pattering rain, frowning at the bridge, at the cart, at the four horses and their riders. She did not like this. The river, the bridge, the city, none of it. It had been feeling more and more like a trap with every step, and now she felt sure of it. She should never have listened to Yulwei. She should never have left the South. She had no business here, out in this freezing, wet, deserted wasteland with this gang of godless pinks.

'I am not going over that,' she said.

Bayaz turned to look at her. 'Do you plan to fly across, then? Or simply stay on that side?'

She sat back and crossed her hands before her on the saddle-bow. 'Perhaps I will.'

'It might be better to discuss such matters once we have made it through the city,' murmured Brother Longfoot, looking nervously back into the empty streets.

'He's right,' said Luthar. 'This place has an evil air—'

'Shit on its air,' growled Ferro, 'and shit on you. Why should I cross? What is it exactly, that is so useful to me about that side of a river? You have promised me vengeance, old pink, and given me nothing but lies, and rain, and bad food. Why should I take another stride with you? Tell me that!'

Bayaz frowned. ‘My brother Yulwei helped you in the desert. You would have been killed if not for him. You gave him your word—’

‘Word? Hah! A word is an easy chain to break, old man.’ And she jerked her wrists apart in front of her. ‘There. I am free of it. I did not promise to make a slave of myself!’

The Magus gave vent to a long sigh, slumping wearily forward in his saddle. ‘As if life were not hard enough without your contributions. Why is it, Ferro, that you would rather make things difficult than easy?’

‘Perhaps God had some purpose in mind when he made me so, but I do not know it. What is the Seed?’

Straight to the root of the matter. The old pink’s eye seemed to give a sudden twitch as she said the word. ‘Seed?’ muttered Luthar, baffled.

Bayaz frowned at the puzzled faces of the others. ‘It might be better not to know.’

‘Not good enough. If you fall asleep for a week again, I want to know what we are doing, and why.’

‘I am well recovered now,’ snapped Bayaz, but Ferro knew it for a lie. Every part of him seemed shrunken, older and weaker than it had been. He might have been awake, and talking, but he was far from recovered. It would take more than bland assurances to fool her. ‘It will not happen again, you can depend on—’

‘I will ask you one more time, and hope at last for a simple answer. What is the Seed?’

Bayaz looked at her for a long moment, and she looked back. ‘Very well. We will sit in the rain and discuss the nature of things.’ And he nudged his horse back off the bridge until it was no more than a stride away. ‘The Seed is one name for that thing that Glustrod dug for in the deep earth. It is that thing he used to do all this.’

‘This?’ grunted Ninefingers.

‘All this.’ And the First of the Magi swept his arm towards the wreckage that surrounded them. ‘The Seed made a ruin of the greatest city in the world, and blighted the land about it from now until eternity.’

‘It is a weapon, then?’ murmured Ferro.

‘It is a stone,’ said Quai suddenly, hunched on his cart, looking at no one. ‘A rock from the world below. Left behind, buried, when Euz cast the devils from our world. It is the Other Side made flesh. The very stuff of magic.’

‘It is indeed,’ whispered Bayaz. ‘My congratulations, Master Quai. One subject at least of which you are not entirely ignorant. Well? Answers enough for you, Ferro?’

‘A rock did all this?’ Ninefingers did not look happy. ‘What in hell do we want with it?’

‘I think some among us can guess.’ Bayaz was looking at Ferro, right in the eye, and smiling a sickly grin, as if he knew exactly what she thought. Perhaps he did.

It was no secret.

Stories of devils, and digging, and old wet ruins, none of that mattered to Ferro. She was busy imagining the Empire of Gurkhul made a dead land. Its people vanished. Its Emperor forgotten. Its cities brought to dust. Its power a faded memory. Her mind churned with thoughts of death and vengeance. Then she smiled.

‘Good,’ she said. ‘But why do you need me?’

‘Who says I do need you that badly?’

She snorted at him. ‘I doubt you would have suffered me this long if you didn’t.’

‘True enough.’

‘Then why?’

‘Because the Seed cannot be touched. It is painful even to look upon. We came into the shattered city with the Emperor’s army, after the fall of Glustrod, searching for survivors. We found none. Only horrors, and ruins, and bodies. Too many of those to count. Thousands upon thousands we buried, in pits for a hundred each, all through the city. It was long work, and while we were about it a company of soldiers found something strange in the ruins. Their Captain wrapped it in his cloak and brought it to Juvens. By dusk he had withered and died, and his company were not spared. Their hair fell out, their bodies shrivelled. Within a week all hundred men were corpses. But Juvens himself was unharmed.’ He nodded at the cart. ‘That is why Kanedias made the box, and that is why we have it with us now. To protect us. None of us are safe. Except for you.’

‘Why me?’

‘Did you never wonder why you are not as others are? Why you see no colours? Why you feel no pain? You are what Juvens was, and Kanedias.

You are what Glustrod was. You are what Euz himself was, if it comes to that.'

'Devil-blood,' murmured Quai. 'Blessed and cursed.'

Ferro glowered at him. 'What do you mean?'

'You are descended from demons.' And one corner of the apprentice's mouth curled up in a knowing smile. 'Far back into the Old Time and beyond, perhaps, but still, you are not entirely human. You are a relic. A last weak trace of the blood of the Other Side.'

Ferro opened her mouth to snarl an insult back at him but Bayaz cut her off.

'There can be no denying it, Ferro. I would not have brought you if there were any doubt. But you should not seek to deny it. You should embrace it. It is a rare gift. You can touch the Seed. Perhaps only you in all the wide Circle of the World. Only you can touch it, and only you can carry it to war.' He leaned close and whispered to her. 'But only I can make it burn. Hot enough to turn all Gurkhul to a desert. Hot enough to make bitter ashes of Khalul and all his servants. Hot enough to make such vengeance that even you will have your fill of it, and more. Are you coming now?' And he clicked his tongue, pulling his horse away and back onto the bridge.

Ferro frowned at the old pink's back as she rode after him, chewing hard at her lip. When she licked it, she tasted blood. Blood, but no pain. She did not like to believe anything the Magus said, but there was no denying that she was not as others were. She remembered she had bitten Aruf once, and he had told her that she must have had a snake for a mother. Why not a demon? She watched the water thundering by far below, through the slots in the metal, frowning, and thinking on vengeance.

'Don't hardly matter whose blood you've got.' Ninefingers was riding beside her. Riding badly, as usual, and looking across, voice gentle. 'Man makes his own choices, my father used to tell me. Reckon that goes for women just as much.'

Ferro did not answer. She dragged on her reins and let the others pull ahead. Woman, or demon, or snake, it made no difference. Her concern was hurting the Gurkish. Her hatred was strong, and deep-rooted, warm and familiar. Her oldest friend.

She could trust nothing else.

Ferro was the last one off the bridge. She took a look back over her shoulder as they moved off into the crumbling city, towards the ruins they had come from, half hidden on the far bank by the grey shroud of drizzle.

'Ssss!' She jerked on her reins, glaring over the surging water, eyes flicking over the hundreds of empty windows, the hundreds of empty doorways, the hundreds of cracks and gaps and spaces in the crumbling walls.

'What did you see?' came Ninefingers' worried voice.

'Something.' But she saw nothing now. Along the crumbling embankment the endless shells of buildings squatted, empty and lifeless.

'There is nothing left alive in this place,' said Bayaz. 'Night will find us soon, and I for one could do with a roof to keep the rain off my old bones tonight. Your eyes are playing tricks.'

Ferro scowled. Her eyes played no tricks, devil's eyes or no. There was something out there, in the city. She felt it.

Watching them.

Luck

‘Up you get, Luthar.’ Jezal’s eyes fluttered open. It was so bright that he ‘could hardly make out where he was, and he grunted and blinked, shading his eyes with one hand. Someone had been shaking his shoulder. Ninefingers.

‘We need to be on our way.’

Jezal sat up. Sunlight was streaming into the narrow chamber, straight into his face, specks of dust floating in the glare. ‘Where is everyone?’ he croaked, tongue thick and lazy with sleep.

The Northman jerked his shaggy head towards the tall window. Squinting, Jezal could just see Brother Longfoot standing there, looking out, hands clasped behind him. ‘Our Navigator’s taking in the view. Rest of the crew are out front, seeing to the horses, reckoning the route. Thought you might use a few minutes more under the blanket.’

‘Thanks.’ He could have used a few hours more yet. Jezal worked his sour mouth, licking at the aching holes in his teeth, the sore crease in his lip, checking how painful they were this morning. Every day the swelling was a little less. He was almost getting used to it.

‘Here.’ Jezal looked up to see Ninefingers tossing him a biscuit. He tried to catch it but his bad hand was still clumsy and it dropped in the dirt. The Northman shrugged. ‘Bit of dust won’t do you any harm.’

‘Daresay it won’t, at that.’ Jezal picked it up, brushed it off with the back of his hand and took a dry bite from it, making sure to use the good side of his mouth. He threw his blanket back, rolled over and pushed himself stiffly from the ground.

Logen watched him take a few trial steps, arms spread out wide for balance, biscuit clutched in one hand. ‘How’s the leg?’

‘It’s been worse.’ It had been better too. He walked with a fool of a limp, sore leg held straight. The knee and the ankle hurt every time he put his weight on it, but he could walk, and every morning it was improving. When he made it to the rough stone wall he closed his eyes and took a deep breath, half wanting to laugh, half wanting to cry with relief at the simple joy of being able to stand on his own feet again.

‘From now on I will be grateful for every moment that I can walk.’

Ninefingers grinned. ‘That feeling lasts a day or two, then you’ll be moaning about the food again.’

‘I will not,’ said Jezal firmly.

‘Alright. A week then.’ He walked towards the window at the far end of the room, casting a stretched-out shadow across the dusty floor. ‘In the meantime, you should have a look at this.’

‘At what?’ Jezal hopped up beside Brother Longfoot, leaned against the pitted column at the side of the window, breathing hard and shaking out his aching leg. Then he looked up, and his mouth fell open.

They must have been high up. At the top of the steep slope of a hill perhaps, looking out over the city. The just-risen sun hung level with Jezal’s eyes, watery yellow through the morning haze. The sky was clear and pale above it, a few shreds of white cloud stretched out almost still.

Even in ruins, hundreds of years after its fall, the vista of Aulcus was breathtaking.

Broken roofs stretched away into the far distance, crumbling walls brightly lit or sunk in long shadows. Stately domes, teetering towers, leaping arches and proud columns thrust up above the jumble. He could make out the gaps left by wide squares, by broad avenues, the yawning space cut by the river, curving gently through the forest of stone on his right, light glittering on the shifting water. In every direction, as far as Jezal could see, wet stone glowed in the morning sun.

‘And this is why I love to travel,’ breathed Longfoot. ‘At one stroke, in one moment, this whole journey has been made worthwhile. Has there ever been such another sight? How many men living can have gazed upon it? The three of us stand at a window upon history, at a gate into the long forgotten past. No longer will I dream of fair Talins, glittering on the sea in the red morning, or Ul-Nahb, glowing beneath the azure bowl of the heavens in the bright midday, or Ospria, proud upon her mountain slopes, lights shining like the stars in the soft evening. From this day forth, my heart will forever belong to Aulcus. Truly, the jewel of cities. Sublime beyond words in death, dare one even dream of how she must have looked in life? Who could not be struck with wonder at the magnificence of this sight? Who could not be struck with awe at the—’

‘A load of old buildings,’ growled Ferro, right behind him. ‘And it is past time we were out of them. Get your gear stowed.’ And she turned and stalked off towards the entrance.

Jezal frowned back over his shoulder at the gleaming sweep of dark ruins, stretching away into the distant haze. There was no denying that it was magnificent, and yet it was frightening as well. The splendid buildings of Adua, the mighty walls and towers of the Agriont: all that Jezal had thought of as magnificent seemed mean and feeble copies. He felt like a tiny, ignorant boy, from a small and barbaric country, in a petty, insignificant time. He was glad to turn away, and to leave the jewel of cities in the past where it belonged. He would not be dreaming of Aulcus.

Nightmares, maybe.

It must have been late morning when they came upon the only square in the city that was still crowded. A giant space, and thronging from one side to the other. A motionless, silent crowd. A crowd carved from stone.

Statues of every attitude, size, and material. There was black basalt and white marble, green alabaster and red porphyry, grey granite and a hundred other stones of which Jezal could not guess the names. The variety was strange enough, but it was the one thing they all had in common which he found truly worrying. Not one of them had a face.

Colossal features had been picked away leaving formless messes of pock-marked rock. Small ones had been hacked out leaving empty craters of rough stone. Ugly messages in some script that Jezal did not recognise had been chiselled across marble chests, down arms, round necks, into foreheads. It seemed that everything in Aulcus had been done on an epic scale, and the vandalism was no exception.

There was a path cleared through the middle of this sinister wreckage, wide enough for the cart to pass. So Jezal rode out, at the front of the group, through a forest of faceless shapes, crowded in on either side like the throng at a procession of state.

‘What happened here?’ he murmured.

Bayaz frowned up at a head that might easily have been ten strides high, its lips still pressed into a powerful frown, its eyes and nose all chopped away, harsh writing cut deep into its cheek. ‘When Glustrod seized the city, he gave his cursed army one day to make free with its people. To satisfy

their fury, and quench their lust for plunder, rape and murder. As though they could ever be satisfied.' Ninefingers coughed and shifted uncomfortably in his saddle. 'Then they were ordered to tear down all the statues of Juvens in the city. From every roof, from every hall, from every frieze and temple. There were many likenesses of my master in Aulcus, for the city was his design. But Glustrod was nothing if not thorough. He sought them all out, and had them gathered here, and defaced them all, and stamped into them terrible curses.'

'Not a happy family.' Jezal had never seen eye to eye with his own brothers, but this seemed to him a little excessive. He ducked away from the outstretched fingers of a giant hand, standing upright on its severed wrist, a ragged symbol chiselled savagely out of the palm.

'What does it say?'

Bayaz frowned. 'Believe me, it is better you do not know.'

A colossal building, even by the standards of this giant's graveyard, towered over the army of sculptures at one side. Its steps were high as a city wall, the columns of its façade as thick as towers, its monstrous pediment encrusted with faded carvings. Bayaz reined his horse up before it and stared up. Jezal stopped behind him, glancing nervously at the others.

'Let's keep on.' Ninefingers scratched at his face and stared round anxiously. 'Let's leave this place as quickly as we can, and never come back.'

Bayaz chuckled. 'The Bloody-Nine, scared of shadows? I'd never have believed it.'

'Every shadow's cast by something,' growled the Northman, but the First of the Magi was not to be put off.

'We have time enough to stop,' he said as he struggled from the saddle. 'We are close to the edge of the city, now. An hour at the most and we are out and on our way. You might find this interesting, Captain Luthar. As would anyone else who would care to join me.'

Ninefingers cursed under his breath in his own tongue. 'Alright, then. I'd rather walk than wait.'

'You have quite piqued my curiosity,' said Brother Longfoot as he jumped down next to them. 'I must confess that the city does not seem so daunting in the light as it did in the rain of yesterday. Indeed, it is hard now to see why it has such a black reputation. Nowhere in all the Circle of the World

can there be such a collection of fascinating relics, and I am a curious man, and unashamed to admit it. Yes indeed, I have always been a—'

'We know what you are,' hissed Ferro. 'I'll wait here.'

'Please yourself.' Bayaz dragged his staff from his saddle. 'As always. You and Master Quai can no doubt each delight the other with comical tales while we are gone. I am almost sorry to miss the banter.' Ferro and the apprentice frowned at each other as the rest of them made their way between the ruined statues and up the wide steps, Jezal limping and wincing on his bad leg. They passed through a doorway as big as a house and into a cool, dim, silent space.

It reminded Jezal of the Lords' Round in Adua, but even bigger. A cavernous, circular chamber, like a great bowl with stepped seating up the sides, carved from stone of many colours, whole sections of it smashed and ruined. The bottom was choked with rubble, no doubt the remnants of a collapsed roof.

'Ah. The great dome fallen.' The Magus squinted up through the ragged space into the bright sky beyond. 'A fitting metaphor.' He sighed, shuffling slowly round the curving aisle between the marble shelves. Jezal frowned up at that vast weight of overhanging stone, wondering what might happen if a chunk of it should fall and hit him on the head. He doubted Ferro would be stitching that up. He had not the slightest idea why Bayaz wanted him here, but then he could have said that for the whole journey, and indeed he often had. So he took a deep breath and limped out after the Magus, Ninefingers just behind, the noises of their movement echoing around in the great space.

Longfoot picked his way among the broken steps and peered up at the fallen ceiling with a show of great interest. 'What was this place?' he called out, voice bouncing from the curved walls. 'Some manner of theatre?'

'In a sense,' replied Bayaz. 'This was the great chamber of the Imperial Senate. Here the Emperor sat in state, to hear debates between the wisest citizens of Aulcus. Here decisions were made that have set the course of history.' He clambered up a step and shuffled further, pointed excitedly to the floor, voice shrill with excitement.

'It was on this precise spot, as I remember it, that Calica stood to address the senate, urging caution in the Empire's eastern expansion. It was down there that Juvens replied to him, arguing boldness, and carried the day. I

watched them, spellbound. Twenty years old, and breathless with excitement. I still recall their arguments, in every detail. Words, my friends. There can be a greater power in words than in all the steel within the Circle of the World.'

'A blade in your ear still hurts more than a word in it, though,' whispered Logen. Jezal spluttered with laughter, but Bayaz did not seem to notice. He was too busy hurrying from one stone bench to another.

'Here Scarpius gave his exhortation on the dangers of decadence, on the true meaning of citizenship. The senate sat, entranced. His voice rang out like . . . like . . .' Bayaz plucked at the air with his hand, as though hoping to find the right word there. 'Bah. What does it matter now? There are no certainties left in the world. That was the age of great men, doing what was right.' He frowned down at the broken rubble choking the floor of the colossal room. 'This is the age of little men, doing what they must. Little men, with little dreams, walking in giant footsteps. Still, you can see it was a grand building once!'

'Er, yes . . .' ventured Jezal, limping away from the others to peer at some friezes carved into the wall at the very back of the seating. Half-naked warriors, awkwardly posed, pushing at each other with spears. All grand, no doubt, but there was an unpleasant smell to the place. Like rot, like damp, like sweating animals. The odour of a badly cleaned stables. He peered into the shadows, wrinkling his nose. 'What is that smell?'

Ninefingers sniffed the air, and his face fell in an instant. A picture of wide-eyed horror. 'By the . . .' He ripped his sword out, taking a step forward. Jezal turned, fumbling for the grips of his steels, a sudden fear pressing on his chest . . .

He took it at first for some manner of beggar: a dark shape, swathed in rags, squatting on all fours in the darkness only a few paces away. Then he saw the hands; twisted and claw-like on the pitted stone. Then he saw the grey face, if you could call it a face; a chunk of hairless brow, a lumpen jaw bursting with outsize teeth, a flat snout like a pig's, tiny black eyes glinting with fury as it glared back at him. Something between a man and an animal, and more hideous by far than either. Jezal's jaw dropped open, and he stood gawping. It scarcely seemed worth telling Ninefingers that he now believed him.

It was clear there were such things as Shanka in the world.

‘Get it!’ roared the Northman, scrambling up the steps of the great chamber, drawn sword in hand. ‘Kill it!’

Jezal shambled uncertainly towards the thing, but his leg was still halfway to useless and the creature was quick as a fox, turning and skittering across the cold stone towards a crack in the curving wall and wriggling through like a cat through a fence before he had got more than a few lurching steps.

‘It’s gone!’

Bayaz was already shuffling towards the entrance, the tapping of his staff on the marble echoing above them. ‘We see that, Master Luthar. We all very clearly see that!’

‘There’ll be more,’ hissed Logen, ‘there’re always more! We have to go!’

It had been bad luck, Jezal thought as he lurched back towards the entrance, stumbling down the broken steps and wincing at the pain in his knee. Bad luck that Bayaz had decided to stop, right here and now. Bad luck that Jezal’s leg had been broken and he couldn’t run after that repulsive thing. Bad luck that they had come to Aulcus, instead of being able to cross the river miles downstream.

‘How did they get here?’ Logen was shouting at Bayaz.

‘I can only guess,’ grunted the Magus, wincing and breathing hard. ‘After the Maker’s death we hunted them. We drove them into the dark corners of the world.’

‘There are few corners darker than this one.’ Longfoot hurried past them for the entrance and down the steps, two at a time, and Jezal hopped after him.

‘What is it?’ called Ferro, pulling her bow off her shoulder.

‘Flatheads!’ roared Ninefingers.

She gazed at him blankly and the Northman flapped his free hand at her. ‘Just fucking ride!’

Bad luck. That Jezal had beaten Bremer dan Gorst and been chosen by Bayaz for this mad journey. Bad luck that he had ever held a fencing steel. Bad luck that his father had wanted him to join the army instead of doing nothing with his life like his two brothers. Strange how that had always seemed like good luck at the time. Sometimes it was hard to tell the difference.

Jezal stumbled up to his horse, grabbed the saddle-bow and dragged himself clumsily up. Longfoot and Ninefingers were already in their

saddles. Bayaz was just shoving his staff back into its place with trembling hands. Somewhere in the city behind them, a bell began to clang.

'Oh dear,' said Longfoot, peering wide-eyed through the multitude of statues. 'Oh dear.'

'Bad luck,' whispered Jezal.

Ferro was staring at him. 'What?'

'Nothing.' Jezal gritted his teeth, and gave his horse the spurs.

There was no such thing as luck. Luck was a word idiots used to explain the consequences of their own rashness, and selfishness, and stupidity. More often than not bad luck meant bad plans.

And here was the proof.

She had warned Bayaz that there was something in the city besides her and five pink fools. She had warned him, but no one had listened. People only believe what they want to. Idiots, anyway.

She watched the others, while she rode. Quai, on the seat of the jolting cart, eyes narrowed and fixed ahead. Luthar, with his lips curled back from his teeth, pressed into the saddle in the crouch of a practised rider. Bayaz, jaw clenched tight, face pale and drawn, clinging on grimly. Longfoot, looking often over his shoulder, eyes wide with fear and alarm. Ninefingers, jolting in his saddle, breathing hard, spending more time looking at his reins than at the road. Five idiots, and her.

She heard a growl and saw a creature squatting on a low roof. It was like nothing she had seen before – a bent-over ape, twisted and long-limbed. Apes do not throw spears, however. Her eyes followed it as it arced downwards. It thudded into the side of the cart and stuck there, wobbling, then they were past and clattering on down the rutted street.

That one might have missed, but there were more creatures in the ruins ahead. Ferro could see them moving in the shadowy buildings. Scuttling along the roofs, lurking in the crumbling windows, the gaping doorways. She was tempted to try a shaft at one of them, but what would have been the point? There were a lot of them out there. Hundreds, it felt like. What good would killing one of them do, when they were soon left behind? A waste of an arrow.

A rock crashed down suddenly beside her and she felt a fragment from it whiz past and nick the back of her hand. It left a bead of dark blood on her

skin. Ferro frowned and put her head down, keeping herself low to the bouncing back of her horse. There was no such thing as luck.

But there was no point being a bigger target.

Logen thought he'd left the Shanka far behind, but after the first shock of seeing one, it came as no surprise. He should've known by now. Only friends get left behind. Enemies are always at your heels.

The bells were all around them, echoing out of the ruins. Logen's skull was full of their clashing, stabbing through the cracking hooves and the shrieking wheels and the rushing air. Clanging, far away, near at hand, ahead and behind. The buildings rushed by, grey shapes full of danger.

He saw something flash by and bounce spinning from the stones. A spear. He heard another twitter behind, then saw one clatter across the road in front. He swallowed, narrowing his eyes against the wind in his face, and tried not to imagine a spear thudding into his back. It wasn't too difficult. Just holding on was taking all his concentration.

Ferro had turned in her saddle to shout something at him over her shoulder, but her words were lost in the noise. He shook his head at her and she stabbed her arm furiously at the road ahead. Now he saw it. A crevasse opened in the road before them, rushing up at a gallop. Logen's mouth gaped just as wide and he gave a breathless squeak of horror.

He dragged on the reins, and his horse's hooves slipped and skittered on the old stones, turning sharply to the right. The saddle lurched and Logen clung on, cobbles flying by underneath in a grey blur, the edge of the great chasm rushing past no more than a few strides away on his left, cracks from it cutting out into the crumbling road. He could feel the others nearby, could hear voices shouting, but he couldn't hear their words. He was too busy rolling and bouncing painfully in the saddle, willing himself to stay on, all the while whispering.

'Still alive, still alive, still alive . . .'

A temple loomed up towards them, straddling the road, its towering pillars still intact, a monstrous triangular weight of stone still standing on top. The cart crashed between two of the columns and Logen's horse found its way between two others, dipping suddenly into shadow and back out, all of them surging into a wide hall, open to the sky. The crack had swallowed the wall to the left, and if there had ever been a roof it had vanished long ago. Logen

rode on, breathless, eyes fixed on a wide archway straight ahead, a square of brightness in the dark stone, bouncing and jolting with the movement of his horse. That was safety, Logen told himself. If they could get through there they were away. If they could only get through there . . .

He didn't see the spear coming, but if he had there would've been nothing he could've done. It was lucky, in a way, that it missed his leg. It thudded deep into horseflesh just in front of it. That was less lucky. He heard the horse snort as its legs buckled, as he came free of the saddle, mouth dropping open and no sound coming out, the floor of the hall flashing up to meet him. Hard stone crunched into his chest and snatched his wind away. His jaw smacked against the ground and his head flooded with blinding light. He bounced once, then flopped over and over, the world spinning crazily around him, full of strange sound and blinding sky. He slid to a stop on his side.

He lay in a daze, groaning softly, his head reeling, his ears ringing, not knowing where he was or even who. Then the world came suddenly back together.

He jerked his head up. The chasm was no more than a spear's length from him, he could hear the water rushing far away in its bottom. He rolled over, away from his horse, trickles of dark blood working their way along the grooves in the stones underneath it. He saw Ferro, down on one knee, pulling arrows from her quiver and shooting them towards the pillars they had ridden between a few moments before.

There were Shanka there, a lot of them.

'Shit,' grunted Logen, scrambling back, the heels of his boots scraping at the dusty stones.

'Come on!' shouted Luthar, sliding down from his saddle, half hopping across the dusty floor. 'Come on!'

A Flathead charged towards them, shrieking, a great axe in its hand. It leaped up suddenly and turned over in the air, one of Ferro's arrows stuck through its face, but there were others. There were a lot more, creeping around the pillars, spears ready to throw.

'Too many!' shouted Bayaz. The old man frowned up at the great columns, the huge weight of stone above them, the muscles of his jaw clenching tight. The air around him began to shimmer.

‘Shit.’ Logen stumbled like a drunkard across to Ferro, his balance all gone, the hall tipping back and forward around him, the sound of his own heart pounding in his ears. He heard a sharp bang and a crack shot up one of the pillars, a cloud of dust flying out from it. There was a grinding rumble as the stone above began to shift. A couple of the Shanka looked up as fragments rained down on them, pointing and gibbering.

Logen grabbed tight hold of Ferro’s wrist. ‘Fuck!’ she hissed, fumbling an arrow as he half fell and dragged her over, scrambled up and started to pull her after him. A spear zipped past them and clattered across the stones, tumbled off over the edge of the crack into empty space. He could hear the Shanka moving, grunting and growling to each other, starting to swarm between the pillars and into the hall.

‘Come on!’ shouted Luthar again, taking a couple of limping steps forward and beckoning wildly.

Logen saw Bayaz standing, his lips curled back and his eyes bulging from his skull, the air around him rippling and twisting, the dust on the ground lifting slowly and curling up around his boots. There was an almighty crack and Logen looked over his shoulder to see a great lump of carved stone plummet down from above. It hit the ground with a crash that made the floor shake, crushing an unlucky Shanka to flat nothing before it could even scream, a jagged sword clattering across the ground and a long spatter of dark blood the only signs that it had ever existed. But more were coming, he could see the black shapes of them through the flying dust, charging forward, weapons held high.

One of the pillars split in half. It buckled, moving with ludicrous slowness, pieces of it flying forward into the hall. The vast mass of stone above began to crack apart, tumbling downwards in chunks as big as houses. Logen turned and flung himself on his face and dragged Ferro down with him, grovelling on the ground, squeezing his eyes shut, throwing his hands over his head.

There was a giant crashing, tearing, splitting such as Logen had never heard in all his life. A roaring and groaning of tortured earth as though the world was falling in. Perhaps it was. The ground bucked and trembled underneath him. There was another deafening crash, a long clattering and scraping, a gentle clicking, then something close to quiet.

Logen unclenched his aching jaw and opened his eyes. The air was full of stinging dust, but it felt as if he was lying on some kind of slope. He coughed and tried to move. There was a sharp grinding sound beneath his chest and the stone underneath him began to shift, the slope getting steeper. He gasped and pressed himself back flat against it, clinging to it with his fingertips. He still had his hand clenched round Ferro's arm, and he felt her fingers squeeze tight into his wrist. He turned his head slowly to look around him, and froze.

The pillars were gone. The hall was gone. The floor was gone. The vast crack had swallowed them all up, and now yawned underneath him. Angry water slapped and hissed at the shattered ruins far below. Logen gaped, hardly able to believe his eyes. He was lying sideways on a huge slab of stone, until a moment ago part of the floor of the hall, now teetering at an angle on the very edge of a plunging cliff.

Ferro's dark fingers were clamped round his wrist, her ripped sleeve gathered up round her elbow, sinews standing out stark from her brown forearm with the effort. Beyond that he could see her shoulder, beyond that her rigid face. The rest of her was invisible – dangling over the edge of the slab and into the yawning air.

'Ssss,' she hissed, yellow eyes wide, fingers scrabbling desperately for a hand hold on the smooth slope. A chunk of stone cracked suddenly from the ragged edge and Logen heard it fall, pinging and bouncing from the ruptured earth.

'Shit,' he whispered, hardly daring even to breathe. What the hell were the chances of this? Say one thing for Logen Ninefingers, say that he has poor luck.

He crawled his free hand up the pitted stone until he found a shallow ridge to cling to. He lifted himself inch by inch towards the edge of the block above. He flexed his arm and started to drag at Ferro's wrist.

There was a horrifying scraping and the stone underneath him jolted and tipped slowly upwards. He whimpered and pressed himself back against it, willing it to stop. There was a sickening jolt and some dust filtered down into his face. Stone squealed as the block swung ever so slowly back the other way. He lay there, gasping. No way up, no way down.

'Ssss!' Ferro's eyes flicked to their hands, gripped tight round each other's wrists. She jerked her head up towards the edge of the block, then down

towards the gaping crack behind.

'Have to be realistic,' she whispered. Her fingers uncurled, letting him go.

Logen remembered hanging from a building, far above a circle of yellow grass. He remembered sliding back, whispering for help. He remembered Ferro's hand closing round his, pulling him up. He slowly shook his head, and gripped her wrist tighter than ever.

She rolled her yellow eyes at him. 'Stupid fucking pink!'

Jezal coughed, turned over, and spat out dust. He blinked around him. Something was different. It seemed much brighter than it had been, and the edge of the crack was much nearer. Not far away at all, in fact.

'Uh,' he breathed, words failing him. Half the building had collapsed. The rear wall was still standing, and one of the pillars at the far end, broken off halfway up. All the rest was gone, vanished into the yawning chasm. He staggered up, wincing as his weight went onto his bad leg. He saw Bayaz lying propped against the wall nearby.

The Magus' withered face was streaked with sweat, bright eyes glittering in black circles, bones of his face poking through stretched skin. He looked like nothing so much as a week-old corpse. It was a surprise to see him move at all, but Jezal watched him raise one palsied hand to point towards the crack. 'Get them,' he croaked.

The others.

'Over here!' Ninefingers' voice came strangled-sounding from beyond the edge of the crevasse. So he was alive, at least. One great slab was sticking up at an angle and Jezal shuffled gingerly towards it, worried that the floor might suddenly give way beneath him. He peered over into the chasm.

The Northman was lying spread out on his front, left hand up near the top edge of the tilting block, right fist near the bottom clutched tight round Ferro's wrist. Her body was out of sight, her scarred face just visible. They both looked equally horrified. Several tons of stone, rocking, ever so gently, balanced on the finest of margins. It was plain that it might easily slide into the abyss at any moment.

'Do something . . .' whispered Ferro, not even daring to raise her voice. Jezal noticed that she did not suggest any specifics, however.

He licked at the slot in his lip. Perhaps if he were to put his weight on this end it would tilt back level and they could simply crawl off? Could it

possibly be so straightforward? He reached out carefully, thumbs rubbing nervously against fingertips, all suddenly weak and sweaty-feeling. He laid his hand gently on the ragged edge while Ninefingers and Ferro stared, holding their breath.

He applied the very slightest pressure, and the slab began to swing smoothly downwards. He put a little more weight on it. There was a loud grating sound and the whole block gave a horrifying lurch.

'Don't fucking push it!' screamed Ninefingers, clinging to the smooth rock with his fingernails.

'What then?' squealed Jezal.

'Get something!'

'Get anything!' hissed Ferro.

Jezal stared around wildly, saw no source of help. Of Longfoot and Quai there was no sign. Either they were dead somewhere at the bottom of the chasm, or they had made a timely bid for freedom. Neither one would have much surprised him. If anyone was going to be saved, Jezal would have to do it by himself.

He dragged his coat off, started to twist it round to make a kind of rope. He weighed it in his hand, shaking his head. Surely this would never work, but what were the choices? He stretched it out, then swung one end over. It slapped against the stone a few inches short of Logen's clutching fingers, sending up a puff of grit.

'Alright, alright, try again!'

Jezal lifted the coat up high, leaning out over the slab as far as he dared, and swung it down again. The arm flopped out just far enough for Logen to seize hold of.

'Yes!' He wound it round his wrist, the material dragging out tight over the edge of the slab.

'Yes! Now pull it!'

Jezal gritted his teeth and hauled, his boots slipping in the dust, his sore arm and his sore leg aching with the effort. The coat came towards him, slowly, slowly, sliding over the stone, inch by torturous inch.

'Yes!' grunted Ninefingers working his shoulders up the slab.

'Pull it!' growled Ferro, wriggling her hips up over the edge and onto the slope.

Jezal hauled for all he was worth, eyes squeezed almost shut, breath hissing between his teeth. A spear clattered down beside him and he looked up to see a score or more Flatheads gathered on the far side of the great crack, waving their misshapen arms. He swallowed and looked away from them. He could not allow himself to think of the danger. All that mattered was to pull. To pull and pull and not let go, however much it hurt. And it was working. Slowly, slowly, they were coming up. Jezal dan Luthar, the hero at last. He would finally have earned his place on this cursed expedition.

There was a sharp ripping sound. 'Shit,' squeaked Logen. 'Shit!' The sleeve was coming slowly away from the body of the coat, the stitches stretching, ripping, coming undone. Jezal whimpered with horror, his hands burning. Should he pull or not? Another stitch pinged open. How hard to pull? One more stitch went.

'What do I do?' he squealed.

'Pull, you fucker!'

Jezal dragged at the coat as hard as he could, muscles burning. Ferro was up on the stone, scrabbling at the smooth surface with her nails. Logen's clutching hand was almost at the edge, almost there, his three fingers stretching, stretching out for it. Jezal hauled again—

And he stumbled backwards, holding nothing but a limp rag. The slab shuddered, and groaned, and tipped up. There was a squawk, and Logen slid away, the ripped-off sleeve flapping useless in his hand. There were no screams. Just a clatter of tumbling stones, then nothing. They both were gone, over the edge. The great slab rocked slowly back and lay there, flat and empty, at the edge of the crack. Jezal stood and stared, his mouth open, the sleeveless coat still dangling from his throbbing hand.

'No,' he whispered. That was not how it happened in the stories.

Beneath the Ruins

‘You alive, pink?’ Logen groaned as he shifted his weight, felt a lurch of horror as stones moved underneath him. Then he realised he was lying in a heap of rubble, the corner of a slab digging hard into a sore spot in his back. He saw a stone wall, blurry, a hard line across it between light and shadow. He blinked, wincing, pain creeping up his arm as he tried to rub the dust out of his eyes.

Ferro was kneeling just beside him, her dark face streaked with blood from a cut on her forehead, her black hair full of brown dust. Behind her a wide vaulted chamber stretched into the shadows. The ceiling was broken away above her head, a ragged line with the pale blue sky beyond it. Logen turned his head painfully, baffled. No more than a stride from him the stone slabs he was lying on were sheared off, jutting out into the empty air. A long way away he could see the far side of the crack, a cliff of crumbling rock and earth, the outlines of half-fallen buildings jutting from the top.

He began to understand. They were underneath the floor of the temple. When the crack opened up it must have torn this place open, leaving just enough of a ledge for them to fall onto. Them and a lot of broken rock. They couldn’t have fallen far. He almost felt himself grinning. He was still alive.

‘What ab—’

Ferro’s hand slapped down hard over his mouth, her nose not a foot from his. ‘Ssss,’ she hissed softly, yellow eyes rolling upward, one long finger pointing towards the vaulted ceiling.

Logen felt his skin go prickling cold. He heard them now. Shanka. Scuffling and clattering, gibbering and squeaking to each other, up above their heads. He nodded, and slowly Ferro lifted her dirty hand away from his face.

He eased himself up out of the rubble, slow and stiff, trying to stay as quiet as possible, wincing all the while at the effort, dust running off his coat as he came up to his feet He tested his limbs, waiting for the searing pain that would tell him he had broken his shoulder, or his leg, or his skull.

His coat was ripped and his elbow was skinned and throbbing, streaks of blood all down his forearm to his fingertips. When he put his fingers to his aching head he felt blood there, and underneath his jaw, where he cracked it on the ground. His mouth was salty with it. Must have bitten his tongue, yet again. It was a wonder the damn thing was still attached. One knee was painful, his neck was stiff, his ribs were a mass of bruises, but everything still moved. If he forced it to.

There was something wrapped round his hand. The torn sleeve of Luthar's coat. He shook it off and let it drop in the rubble beside him. No use now. Not much use then. Ferro was at the far end of the hall, peering into an archway. Logen shambled up beside her, doing his grimacing best to keep silent.

'What about the others?' he whispered. Ferro shrugged her shoulders. 'Maybe they got away?' he tried, hopefully. Ferro gave him a long, slow look, one black eyebrow raised, and Logen winced and squeezed his aching arm. She was right. The two of them were alive, for now. That was about as much luck as they could hope for, and it might be a while before they got any more.

'This way,' whispered Ferro, pointing into the darkness.

Logen peered into that black opening and his heart sank. He hated being underground. All that weight of stone and earth, pressing above, ready to fall. And they had no torch. Inky black, with hardly air to breathe, no notion of how far to go, or in what direction. He peered up nervously towards the vaulted stones above his head, and swallowed. Tunnels were places for Shanka or for the dead. Logen was neither one, and he didn't much fancy meeting either down there. 'You sure?'

'What, scared of the dark?'

'I'd rather be able to see, if I had the choice.'

'You see any choices?' sneered Ferro at him. 'You can stay here, if you want. Maybe another pack of idiots will come wandering through in a hundred years. You'll fit right in!'

Logen nodded, sucking sourly at his bloody gums. It seemed like a long time since the two of them had last been in a fix like this one, sliding across the dizzy rooftops of the Agriont, hunted by men in black masks. It seemed a long, hard time, but nothing much had changed. For all their riding together, and eating together, and facing death together, Ferro was still as

bitter, and as angry, and as sore a pain in his arse as she had been when they first set out. He tried to be patient, really he did, but it was getting to be tiring.

'Do you have to?' he muttered, looking her right in one yellow eye.

'Have to what?'

'Be a cunt. Do you have to?'

She frowned at him for a moment, opened her mouth, paused, then shrugged her shoulders. 'You should have let me fall.'

'Eh?' He'd been expecting some furious insult from her. Some stabbing at him with a finger, certainly, and possibly with a blade. That had sounded almost like regret. But if it had been, it didn't last long.

'You should have let me fall, then I'd be on my own down here without you to get in my way!'

Logen snorted with disgust. There was no helping some people. 'Let go of you? Don't worry! Next time I will!'

'Good!' spat Ferro, stalking off into the tunnel, shadows quickly swallowing her. Logen felt a sudden stab of panic at the idea of being left alone.

'Wait!' he hissed, and hurried after.

The passageway sloped downwards, Ferro's feet padding noiseless, Logen's scraping in the dust, the last shreds of light gleaming on wet stone. He kept the fingertips of his left hand trailing along the wall, trying not to groan with each step at the pain in his bruised ribs, and his torn elbow, and his bloody jaw.

It grew darker, and darker yet. The walls and the floor became nothing but hints, then nothing at all. Ferro's dirty shirt was a grey ghost, hovering in the dead air before him. A few weak-kneed steps further and it was gone. He waved his hand in front of his face. Not so much as a trace. Just inky, fizzing blackness.

He was buried. Buried in the darkness, alone. 'Ferro, wait!'

'What?' He blundered into her in the dark, felt something shove him in the chest and nearly fell over backwards, staggering against the damp wall. 'What the hell—'

'I can't see anything!' he hissed, hearing his own voice full of panic. 'I can't . . . where are you?' He flailed at the air with his open hands, all sense

of direction gone, his heart pounding, his stomach sick and heaving. What if she'd left him down there, the evil bitch? What if—

'Here.' He felt her hand catch hold of his and close round it, cool and reassuring. He heard her voice not far from his ear. 'You think you can follow me without falling on your face, fool?'

'I . . . I think so.'

'Just try to keep quiet!' And he felt her move off, pulling him impatiently after her.

If only the old crew could've seen him now. Logen Ninefingers, the most feared man in the North, piss-wet frightened of the dark, clinging tight to the hand of a woman who hated him, like a child clinging to his mother's tit. He might almost have laughed out loud. But he was scared the Shanka would hear.

Ninefingers' big paw felt hot, clammy with fear. An unpleasant sensation, his sticky skin pressed tight against hers. Sickening, almost, but Ferro made herself hold on. She could hear his breathing, quick and snatched in the tight space, his clumsy footsteps stumbling after her.

It felt like only yesterday that the two of them were last in a fix like this one, hurtling down the lanes of the Agriont, sneaking through its darkened buildings, chased all the way. It felt like yesterday, but everything had changed.

Back then, he had seemed nothing but a threat. One more pink that she would have to keep her eye on. Ugly and strange, stupid and dangerous. Back then, he might easily have been the last man in the world she would have trusted. Now he might easily have been the only one. He had not let her fall, even though she had told him to. He had chosen to fall with her rather than let her go. Out there on the plain, he had said he would stick if she did.

Now he had proved it.

She looked over her shoulder, saw his pale face gawping in the dark, eyes wide but unseeing, free hand stretched out and feeling for the walls. She should have thanked him, maybe, for not letting her fall, but that would have been as good as admitting she needed the help. Help was for the weak, and the weak die, or are made slaves. Never hope for help and you can

never be disappointed when it does not come. And Ferro had been disappointed often.

So instead of thanking him she dragged at his hand and nearly made him fall.

A glimmer of cold light was starting to creep back into the tunnel, the slightest glow at the edges of the rough stone blocks. ‘Can you see now?’ she hissed over her shoulder.

‘Yes.’ She could hear the relief in his voice.

‘Then you can let go,’ she snapped, snatching her hand away and wiping it on the front of her shirt. She pressed on through the half-light, working her fingers and frowning down at them. It was an odd feeling.

Now that his hand was gone she almost missed it.

The light was growing brighter now, leaking into the passage from a narrow archway up ahead. She crept towards it, padding on the balls of her feet and peered round the corner. A great cavern opened out below them, its walls partly of smooth carved blocks, partly of natural stone, soaring up and bulging out in strange, melted formations, its ceiling lost in shadows. A shaft of light came down from high above, casting a long patch of brightness on the dusty stone floor. Three Shanka were gathered there in a clump, muttering and scratching over something on the floor, and all around them, piled in great heaps, as high as a man and higher to the very walls of the cave, were thousands, upon thousands, upon thousands, of bones.

‘Shit,’ breathed Logen, from just behind her. A skull grinned up at them from the corner of the arch. Human bones, without a doubt.

‘They eat the dead,’ she whispered.

‘They what? But—’

‘Nothing rots.’ Bayaz had said the city was full of graves. Countless corpses, flung in pits for a hundred each. And there they must have lain down the long years, tangled up together in a cold embrace.

Until the Shanka came and dragged them out.

‘We’ll have to get around them,’ whispered Ninefingers.

Ferro stared into the shadows, looking for a route into the cavern. There was no way to climb down that hill of bones without making noise. She shrugged her bow off her shoulder.

‘You sure?’ asked Ninefingers, touching her on the elbow.

She nudged him back. ‘Give me some room, pink.’ She would have to work quickly. She wiped the blood out of her eyebrow. She slid three arrows out of her quiver and between the fingers of her right hand, where she could get at them fast. She took a fourth in her left and levelled her bow, drawing back the string, aiming at the furthest Flathead. When the arrow struck it through the body she was already aiming at the second. It took the shaft in the shoulder and fell down with a strange squawk just as the last one was turning. Her arrow caught it clean through its neck before it got all the way round and it pitched on its face. Ferro nocked the last arrow, waiting. The second Flathead tried to scramble up, but it had not got half a stride before she nailed it through the back and sent it sprawling.

She lowered the bow, frowning towards the Shanka. None of them moved.

‘Shit,’ breathed Logen. ‘Bayaz is right. You are a devil.’

‘Was right,’ grunted Ferro. The chances were good that those creatures had him by now, and it was abundantly clear that they ate men. Luthar, and Longfoot, and Quai as well, she guessed. A shame.

But not a big one.

She shouldered her bow and crept cautiously into the cavern, keeping low, her boot crunching down in the hill of bones. She wobbled out further, arms spread wide for balance, half-walking, half-wading, up to her knees in places, bones cracking and scraping around her legs. She made it down onto the cavern floor and knelt there, staring round and licking her lips.

Nothing moved. The three Shanka lay still, dark blood pooling on the stone underneath their bodies.

‘Gah!’ Ninefingers tumbled down the slope, clattering splinters flying up around him, rolling over and over. He crashed down on his face in the midst of a rattling slide of bones and scrambled up. ‘Shit! Ugh!’ He shook half a dusty rib-cage off his arm and flung it away.

‘Quiet, fool!’ hissed Ferro, dragging him down beside her, staring across the cavern towards a rough archway in the far wall, expecting hordes of those things to come pouring in at any moment, keen to add their bones to the rest. But nothing came. She gave him a dark look but he was too busy nursing his bruises, so she left him be and crept over to the three corpses.

They had been gathered round a leg. A woman’s leg, Ferro guessed, from the lack of hair on it. A stub of bone poked out of dry, withered flesh round

the severed thigh. One of them had been going at it with a knife and it still lay nearby, the bright blade shining in the shaft of light from high above. Ninefingers stooped and picked it up.

'You can never have too many knives.'

'No? What if you fall in a river and can't swim for all that iron?'

He looked puzzled for a moment, then he shrugged and put it carefully back down on the ground. 'Fair point.'

She slipped her own blade out from her belt. 'One knife will do well enough. If you know where to stick it.' She dug the blade into one of the Flatheads' backs and started to cut out her arrow. 'What are these things anyway?' She worked the shaft out, intact, and rolled the Flathead over with her boot. It stared up at her, piggy black eyes unseeing under a low, flat forehead, lips curled back from a wide maw full of bloody teeth. 'They're even uglier than you, pink.'

'Very good. They're Shanka. Flatheads. Kanedias made them.'

'Made them?' The next arrow snapped off as she tried to twist it out.

'So Bayaz said. As a weapon, to use in a war.'

'I thought he died.'

'Seems his weapons lived on.'

The one she shot through the neck had fallen on the shaft and broken it near the head. Useless, now. 'How does a man make one of these things?'

'You think I've got the answers? They'd come across the sea, every summer, when the ice melted, and there'd always be work fighting 'em. Lots of work.' She hacked out the last shaft, bloody but sound. 'When I was young they started coming more and more often. My father sent me south, over the mountains, to get help with the fighting of 'em . . .' He trailed off. 'Well. That's a long story. The High Valleys are swarming with Flatheads now.'

'It hardly matters,' she grunted, standing up and sliding the two good arrows carefully back into her quiver, 'as long as they die.'

'Oh, they die. Trouble is there's always more to kill.' He was frowning down at the three dead things, frowning down hard with a cold look in his eye. 'There's nothing left now, north of the mountains. Nothing and no one.'

Ferro did not much care about that. 'We need to move.'

‘All back to the mud,’ he growled, as though she had not spoken, his frown growing harder all the time.

She stepped up in front of his face. ‘You hear me? We need to move, I said.’

‘Eh?’ He blinked at her for a moment, then he scowled. The muscles round his jaw tightened rigid under his skin, the scars stretching and shifting, face tipped forward, eyes lost in hard shadow from the light overhead. ‘Alright. We move.’

Ferro frowned at him as a trickle of blood crept down from his hair and across the greasy, stubbly side of his face. He no longer looked like anyone she would trust.

‘Not planning to go strange on me, are you, pink? I need you to stay cold.’

‘I am cold,’ he whispered.

Logen was hot. His skin prickled under his dirty clothes. He felt strange, dizzy, his head full of the stink of Shanka. He could hardly breathe for their smell. The hallway seemed to move under his feet, shifting before his eyes. He winced and hunched over, sweat running down his face, dripping onto the tipping stone below.

Ferro whispered something at him, but he couldn’t make sense of the words – they echoed from the walls and round his face, but wouldn’t go in. He nodded and flapped one hand at her, struggled on behind. The hallway was growing hotter and hotter, the blurry stone had taken on an orange glow. He blundered into Ferro’s back and nearly fell, crawled forwards on his sore knees, gasping hard.

There was a huge cavern beyond. Four slender columns rose up in the centre, up and up into the shifting darkness far above. Beneath them fires burned. Many fires, printing white images into Logen’s stinging eyes. Coals crackled and cracked and spat out smoke. Sparks came up in stinging showers, steam came up in hissing gouts. Globs of melted iron dripped from crucibles, spattering the ground with glowing embers. Molten metal ran through channels in the floor, striking lines of red and yellow and searing white into the black stone.

The yawning space was full of Shanka, ragged shapes moving through the boiling darkness. They worked at the fires, and the bellows, and the

crucibles like men, a score of them, or more. There was a furious din. Hammers clanged, anvils rang, metal clattered, Flatheads squawked and shrieked to each other. Racks stood against the distant walls, dark racks stacked with bright weapons, steel glittering in all the colours of fire and fury.

Logen blinked and stared, head pounding, arm throbbing, the heat pressing onto his face, wondering if he could believe his eyes. Perhaps they had walked into the forge of hell. Perhaps Glustrod had opened a gate beneath the city after all. A gate to the Other Side, and they had passed through it without ever guessing.

He was breathing fast, in ragged gasps, and couldn't make them slow, and every breath he took was full of the sting of smoke and the stink of Shanka. His eyes were bulging, his throat was burning, he could not swallow. He wasn't sure when he had drawn the Maker's sword, but now the orange light flashed and flickered on the bare dark metal, his right hand bunched into a fist around the grip, painful tight. He couldn't make the fingers open. He stared at them, glowing orange and black, pulsing as if they were on fire, veins and tendons starting from the taut skin, knuckles pale with furious pressure.

Not his hand.

'We'll have to go back,' Ferro was saying, pulling at his arm, 'find another way.'

'No.' The voice was harsh as a hammer falling, rough as a whetstone turning, sharp as a drawn blade in his throat.

Not his voice.

'Get behind me,' he managed to whisper, grabbing hold of Ferro's shoulder and dragging himself past her.

There could be no going back now . . .

. . . and he could smell them. He tipped his head up and sucked in hot air through his nose. His head was full of the reek of them and that was good. Hatred was a powerful weapon, in the right hands. The Bloody-Nine hated everything. But his oldest-buried, and his deepest-rooted, and his hottest-burning hatred, that was for the Shanka.

He slid into the cavern, a shadow between the fires, the noise of angry steel echoing around him. A beautiful and familiar song. He swam in it,

revelled in it, drank it in. He felt the heavy blade in his hand, power flowing from the cold metal into his hot flesh, from his hot flesh into the cold metal, building and swelling and growing in waves with his surging breath.

The Flatheads had not seen him yet. They were working. Busy with their meaningless tasks. They could not have expected vengeance to find them where they lived, and breathed, and toiled, but they would learn.

The Bloody-Nine loomed up behind one, lifting the Maker's sword high. He smiled as he watched the long shadow stretch out across the bald skull – a promise, soon to be fulfilled. The long blade whispered its secret and the Shanka split apart, clean down the middle like a flower opening, blood spraying out warm and comforting, spattering the anvil, and the stone floor, and the Bloody-Nine's face with wet little gifts.

Another saw him now and he came for it, faster and angrier than the boiling steam. It lifted an arm, lurching backwards. Not nearly far enough. The Maker's sword sheared through its elbow, the severed forearm spinning over and over in the air. Before it hit the ground the Bloody-Nine had struck the Shanka's head off on the backswing. Blood sizzled on molten iron, glowed orange on the dull metal of the blade, on the pale skin of his hand, on the harsh stone under his feet, and he beckoned to the others.

'Come,' he whispered. They all were welcome.

They scattered for the racks, seizing their spiked swords, and their sharp axes, and the Bloody-Nine laughed to watch them. Armed or not, their death was a thing already decided. It was written into the cavern in lines of fire and lines of shadow. Now he would write it in lines of blood. They were animals, and less than animals. Their weapons stabbed and cut at him, but the Bloody-Nine was made of fire and darkness and he drifted and slithered between their crude blows, around their fumbling spears, under and over their worthless screams and their useless fury.

Easier to stab the flickering flame. Easier to cut the shifting shadows. Their weakness was an insult to his strength.

'Die!' he roared, and the blade made circles, savage and beautiful, the letter on the metal burning red and leaving bright trails behind. And where the circles passed everything would be made right. The Shanka would scream and gibber, and the pieces of them would scatter, and they would be sliced and divided as neatly as meat on the butcher's block, as dough on the

baker's block, as the corn stubble left by the farmer's scythe, all according to a perfect design.

The Bloody-Nine showed his teeth, and smiled to be free, and to see the good work done so well. He saw the flash of a blade and jerked away, felt it leave him a lingering kiss across his side. He knocked a barbed sword from a Flathead's hand, seized it by the scruff of the neck and forced its face down into the channel where the molten steel flowed, furious yellow, and its head hissed and bubbled, shooting out stinking steam.

'Burn!' laughed the Bloody-Nine, and the ruined corpses, and their gaping wounds, and their fallen weapons, and the boiling bright iron laughed with him.

Only the Shanka did not laugh. They knew their hour was come.

The Bloody-Nine watched one jump, springing over an anvil, a club raised to crush his skull. Before he could slash it from the air an arrow slipped into its open mouth and snatched it backwards, dead as mud. The Bloody-Nine frowned. He saw other arrows now, among the corpses. Someone else was spoiling his good work. He would make them pay, later, but something was coming at him from between the four columns.

It was cased all in bright armour sealed with heavy rivets, a round helmet clamped over the top half of its skull, eyes glinting beyond a thin slot. It grunted and snorted, sounds loud as a bull, iron-booted feet thudding on the stone as it thundered forwards, a massive axe in its iron-gloved fists. A giant among Shanka. Or some new thing, made from iron and flesh, down here in the darkness.

Its axe curved in a shining arc and the Bloody-Nine rolled away from it, the heavy blade crashing into the ground and sending out a shower of fragments. It roared at him again, maw opening wide under its slotted visor, a cloud of spit hissing from its hanging mouth. The Bloody-Nine faded back, shifting and dancing with the shifting shadows and the dancing flames.

He fell away, and away, and he let the blows miss him on one side and the other, miss him above his head and beneath his feet. Let them clang into the metal and the stone around him and fill the air with a fury of dust and splinters. He fell back, until the creature began to tire under all that weight of iron.

The Bloody-Nine saw it stumble, and he felt the touch of his moment upon him, and he surged forward, raising the sword above his head, opening his mouth and making a scream that pressed on his arm, and his hand, and the blade and the very walls of the cavern. The great Shanka brought the shaft of its axe up in both fists to block the blow. Good bright steel, born in these hot fires, hard and strong and tough as the Flatheads could forge it.

But the work of the Master Maker would not be denied. The dull blade cleaved through the shaft with a sound like a child screaming and scored a gash a hand deep through the Shanka's heavy armour from its neck down to its groin. Blood splattered out onto the bright metal, onto the dark stone. The Bloody-Nine laughed and dug his fist into the wound, ripping out a handful of the Shanka's guts as it toppled away and crashed onto its back, the neatly severed halves of its axe clattering from its twitching claws.

He smiled upon the others. They lurked there, three of them, weapons in hand, but they would not come on. They lurked in the shadows, but the darkness was no friend to them. It belonged to him, and him alone. The Bloody-Nine took a step forward, and one more, sword hanging from one hand, a length of bloody gut from the other, winding slowly from the slaughtered Flathead's corpse. The creatures shuffled back before him, squeaking and clicking to each other, and the Bloody-Nine laughed in their faces.

The Shanka might be ever so full of mad fury, but even they had to fear him. Everything did. Even the dead, who felt no pain. Even the cold stone, which did not dream. Even the molten iron feared the Bloody-Nine. Even the darkness.

He roared and sprang forward, flinging his handful of entrails away. The point of his sword raked across a Shanka's chest and spun it round, squealing. A moment later and the blade thudded into its shoulder and split it to its breastbone.

The last two turned to run, scrambling across the stone, but fight or run, where was the difference? Another arrow slid into the back of one before it got three strides and it sprawled on its face. The Bloody-Nine darted out and his fingers closed round the ankle of the last, tight as a vice, dragging it towards him, its claws scrabbling at the soot-caked stone.

His fist was the hammer, the floor was the anvil, and the Shanka's head was the metal to be worked. One blow and its nose split open, broken teeth

falling. Two and he smashed its cheek-bone in. Three and its jaw burst apart under his knuckles. His fist was made of stone, of steel, of adamant. It was heavy as a falling mountain and blow after blow it crushed the Shanka's thick skull to formless mush.

'Flat . . . head,' hissed the Bloody-Nine, and he laughed, hauling up the ruined body and flinging it away, turning in the air, to crash down into the broken racks. He reeled around, weaving across the chamber, the Maker's sword dangling from his hand, the point striking sparks from the stone as it clattered after him. He glared into the darkness, turning and shifting, but only the fires moved, and the shadows moving around them. The chamber was empty.

'No!' he snarled. 'Where are you?' His legs were weak, they would hardly hold him up any longer. 'Where are you, you fuckers . . .' He stumbled and fell on one knee on the hot stone, gasping in air. There had to be more work. The Bloody-Nine could never do enough. But his strength was fickle, and now it was flowing out of him.

He saw something move, blinked at it. A streak of darkness, sliding slow and quiet between the pulsing fires and the tipping bodies. Not a Shanka. Some other kind of enemy. More subtle and more dangerous. Sooty dark skin in the shade, soft steps padding around the smears of blood his work had left. She had a bow in her hard hands, string pulled back halfway and the bright head of the arrow glinting sharp. Her yellow eyes shone like melted metal, like hot gold, mocking him. 'You safe, pink?' Her voice boomed and whispered in his ringing skull. 'I don't want to kill you, but I will.'

Threats? 'Cunt bitch,' he hissed at her, but his lips were stupid clumsy and nothing came out but a long dribble of spit. He wobbled forward, leaning on the sword, straining to get up, fury burning in him hotter than ever. She would learn. The Bloody-Nine would give her such a lesson that she would never need another. He would cut her in pieces, and grind the pieces under his heels. If he could just get up . . .

He swayed, blinking, breath rasping in and out, slow, slow. The flames dimmed and guttered, the shadows lengthened, blurred, swallowed him up and pushed him down.

One more, just one more. Always one more . . .

But his time was up . . .

. . . Logen coughed, and trembled, shivering weak. His hands took shape in the murk, curled into fists on the dirty stone, bloody as a careless slaughterman's. He guessed what must have happened, and he groaned and felt tears stinging his eyes. Ferro's scarred face loomed at him out of the hot darkness. So he hadn't killed her, at least.

'You hurt?'

He couldn't answer. He didn't know. It felt like there might be a cut on his side, but there was so much blood it was hard to tell. He tried to stand, lurched against an anvil and nearly put his hand in a glowing furnace. He blinked and spat, knees trembling. Searing fires swam before his eyes. There were corpses everywhere, sprawled out shapes on the sooty ground. He looked around, dull-witted, for something to wipe his hands on, but everything was spattered with gore. His stomach heaved, and he stumbled on wobbly legs between the forges towards an archway in the far wall, one bloody hand clamped to his mouth.

He leaned there, against the warm stone, dribbling sour blood and spit onto the ground, pain licking at his side, at his face, at his torn knuckles. But if he'd been hoping for pity, he'd chosen the wrong companion.

'Let's go,' snapped Ferro. 'Come on, pink, up.'

He couldn't have said how long he shambled through the darkness, gasping after Ferro's heels, the sound of his own breath echoing in his skull. They crept through the guts of the earth. Through ancient halls filled with dust and shadows, stone walls riddled with cracks. Through archways into winding tunnels, ceilings of mud propped with rickety beams.

Once they came to a junction and Ferro pressed him back into the darkness by the wall, both of them holding their breath as ragged shapes scraped and shuffled down a hallway that crossed theirs. On and on – corridor, cavern, burrow. He could only follow, dragging after her until he knew he would fall on his face at any moment from simple tiredness. Until he was sure that he would never see daylight again . . .

'Wait,' hissed Ferro, putting her hand against his chest to stop him and nearly pushing him over his legs were so weak. A sluggish stream joined the hallway, slow-moving water flapping and rippling in the shadows. Ferro knelt down beside it, peering into the dark tunnel it flowed out of.

'If it joins the river downstream, it must come from outside the city.'

Logen was not so sure. ‘What if it . . . comes up from . . . underground?’

‘Then we find another way. Or we drown.’ Ferro shouldered her bow and slid in, up to her chest, her thin lips pressed tight together. Logen watched her wade out, arms held up above the dark water. Did she never tire? He was so sore and weary he wanted only to lie down and never get up. For a moment he considered doing it. Then Ferro turned and saw him squatting on the bank. ‘Come on, pink!’ she hissed at him.

Logen sighed. There was never any changing her mind. He heaved one reluctant, trembling leg into the cold water. ‘Right behind you,’ he muttered. ‘Right behind.’

No Good for Each Other

Ferro waded on against the current, up to her waist in fastflowing water, teeth gritted against the gripping cold, Ninefingers sloshing and gasping behind her. She could just see an archway up ahead, faint light from beyond glinting on the water. It was blocked with iron bars, but as she forced her way close she could see they were rusted through, thin and flaking. She pressed herself up against them. Beyond she could see the stream flowing down towards her between banks of rock and bare mud. Above was the evening sky, stars just starting to show themselves.

Freedom.

Ferro fumbled at the old iron, air hissing between her teeth, fingers slow and weak from the cold. Ninefingers came up beside her and planted his hands next to hers – four hands in a row, two dark and two pale, clamped tight and straining. They were pressed against each other in the narrow space and she heard him grunting with effort, heard the rushing of her own breath, felt the ancient metal beginning to bend, squealing softly.

Far enough for her to slither between.

She pushed her bow, and quiver, and sword through first, holding them up in one hand. She hooked her head between the bars, turning sideways, sucking in her stomach and holding her breath, wriggling her shoulders, then her chest, then her hips through the narrow gap, feeling the rough metal scraping at her skin through her wet clothes.

She dragged herself onto the other side, tossing her weapons onto the bank. She braced her shoulders in the archway and planted her boots against the next bar, every muscle straining while Ninefingers dragged on it from the other side. It gave all of a sudden, snapping in half and showering flakes of rust into the stream, dumping her on her back, over her head in the freezing water.

Ninefingers started to haul himself through, face twisted with effort. Ferro floundered up, gasping with the cold, grabbed him under the arms and started pulling, felt his hands grip round her back. She grunted and wrestled and finally dragged him out. They flopped together onto the muddy bank and lay there, side by side. Ferro stared up at the crumbling walls of the

ruined city rising sheer above her in the grey dusk, breathing hard and listening to Ninefingers do the same. She had not expected to get out of that place alive.

But they were not away quite yet.

She rolled and clambered up, dripping wet and trying to stop herself shivering. She wondered if she had ever been so cold in her whole life.

'That's it,' she heard Ninefingers muttering. 'By the fucking dead, that's it. I'm done. I'm not moving another stride.'

Ferro shook her head. 'We need to make some distance while we still have light.' She snatched up her weapons from the dirt.

'You call this light? Are you fucking crazy, woman?'

'You know I am. Let's go, pink.' And she poked him in the ribs with her wet boot.

'Alright, damn it! Alright!' He stumbled reluctantly up, swaying, and she turned, started to walk up the bank through the twilight, away from the walls.

'What did I do?' She turned and looked at him, standing there, wet hair dripping round his face. 'What did I do, back there?'

'You got us through.'

'I meant—'

'You got us through. That's all.' And she slogged off up the bank. After a moment she heard Ninefingers following.

It was so dark, and Logen was so tired, that he barely even saw the ruin until they were almost inside it. It must have been a mill, he reckoned. It was built out right next to the stream, though he guessed the wheel had been missing for a few hundred years or more.

'We'll stop here,' hissed Ferro, ducking through the crumbling doorway. Logen was too tired to do anything but nod and shamble after her. Thin moonlight washed down into the empty shell, picking out the edges of stones, the shapes of old windows, the hard-packed dirt of the ground. He stumbled to the nearest wall and sagged against it, sliding slowly down until his arse hit the mud.

'Still alive,' he mouthed silently, and grinned to himself. A hundred cuts and scrapes and bruises clamoured for attention, but he was still alive. He

sat motionless – damp and aching and utterly spent, let his eyes close, and enjoyed the feeling of not having to move.

He frowned. There was a strange sound in the darkness, over the trickling of the stream. A tapping, clicking sound. It took him a moment to realise what it was. Ferro's teeth. He dragged his coat off, wincing as he pulled it over his torn elbow, and held it out to her in the dark.

'What's this?'

'A coat.'

'I see it's a coat. What for?'

Damn it but she was stubborn. Logen almost laughed out loud. 'I may not have your eyes, but I can still hear your teeth rattling.' He held the coat out again. 'Wish I had more to offer you, but this is all I've got. You need it more 'n me, and there it is. No shame in that. Take it.'

There was a pause, then he felt it pulled out of his hand, heard her wrapping it round herself. 'Thanks,' she grunted.

He raised his eyebrows, wondering if he could have heard that right. Seemed there was a first time for everything. 'Alright. And to you.'

'Uh?'

'For the help. Under the city, and on the hill with the stones, and up on the roofs, and all the rest.' He thought about it for a moment. 'That's a lot of help. More than I deserve, most likely, but, well, I'm still good and grateful for it.' He waited for her to say something, but nothing came. Only the sound of the stream gurgling under the walls of the building, the sound of the wind hissing through the empty windows, the sound of his own rough breathing. 'You're alright,' he said. 'That's all I'm saying. Whatever you try to make out, you're alright.'

More silence. He could see her outline in the moonlight, sitting near the wall, his coat wrapped round her shoulders, damp hair sticking spiky from her head, perhaps the slightest gleam of a yellow eye, watching him. He cursed to himself under his breath. He was no good at talking, never had been. Probably none of that meant anything to her. Still, at least he'd tried.

'You want to fuck?'

He looked up, mouth hanging open, not sure if he could've heard right. 'Eh?'

'What, pink, you gone deaf on me?'

'Have I what?'

‘Alright! Forget it!’ She turned away from him, pulling the coat angrily round her hunched shoulders.

‘Hold on, though.’ He was starting to catch up. ‘I mean . . . I just wasn’t expecting you to ask is all. I’m not saying no . . . I reckon . . . if you’re asking.’ He swallowed, his mouth dry. ‘Are you asking?’

He saw her head turn back towards him. ‘You’re not saying no, or you’re saying yes?’

‘Well, er . . .’ He puffed his cheeks out in the dark, tried to make his head work. He’d never thought to be asked that question again in all his days, and least of all by her. Now it had been asked, he was scared to answer. He couldn’t deny it was somewhat of a daunting prospect, but it was better to do it, than to live in fear of it. A lot better. ‘Yes, then. I think. I mean, of course I am. Why wouldn’t I? I’m saying yes.’

‘Uh.’ He saw the outline of her face frowning down at the ground, thin lips pressed angrily together, like she’d been hoping for a different answer and wasn’t quite sure what to do with the one he’d given. He wasn’t either, if it came to that. ‘How do you want to get it done?’ Matter of fact, as if it was a job they had to get through, like cutting a tree down or digging a hole.

‘Er . . . well, you’ll have to get a bit closer, I reckon. I mean, I hope my cock ain’t that disappointing, but it won’t reach you over there.’ He half smiled, then cursed to himself when she didn’t. He knew she wasn’t much for jokes.

‘Right then.’ She came at him so quick and businesslike he half backed off, and that made her falter.

‘Sorry,’ he said. ‘Haven’t done this in a while.’

‘No.’ She squatted down next to him, lifted her arm, paused as if she was wondering what to do with it. ‘Nor me.’ He felt her fingertips on the back of his hand – gentle, cautious. It almost tickled, her touch was so light. Her thumb rubbed at the stump of his middle finger, and he watched her do it, grey shapes moving in the shadows, awkward as a pair who’d never touched another person in their lives. Strange feeling, having a woman so close to him. Brought back all kind of memories.

Logen reached up slowly, feeling like he was about to put his hand in the fire, and touched Ferro’s face. It didn’t burn. Her skin was smooth and cool, just like anyone’s would have been. He pushed his hand into her hair, felt it tickling the webs between his fingers. He found the scar on her forehead

with the very tip of his thumb, traced the line of it down her cheek to the corner of her mouth, tugging at her lip, his skin brushing rough against hers.

There was a strange set to her face, he could tell it even in the dark. It was one he wasn't used to seeing on her, but there was no mistaking it. He could feel the muscles tense under her skin, see the moonlight on the cords standing from her scrawny neck. She was scared. She could laugh while she kicked a man in the face, smile at cuts and punches, treat an arrow through her flesh like it was nothing, but it seemed a gentle touch could put the fear in her. Would've seemed pretty strange to Logen, if he hadn't been so damn frightened himself. Frightened and excited all at once.

They started pulling at each other's clothes together, as if someone had given the signal for the charge and they were keen to get it over with. He struggled with the buttons on her shirt in the darkness, hands trembling, chewing at his lip, as clumsy as if he'd had gauntlets on. She had his open before he'd even done one of hers.

'Shit!' he hissed. She slapped his hands away and undid the buttons herself, pulled her shirt off and dropped it beside her. He couldn't see much in the moonlight, only the gleaming of her eyes, the dark outline of her bony shoulders and her bony waist, splashes of faint light between her ribs and the curve underneath one tit, a bit of rough skin round a nipple, maybe.

He felt her pull his belt open, felt her cool fingers sliding into his trousers, felt her—

'Ah! Shit! You don't have to lift me up by it!'

'Alright . . .'

'Ah.'

'Better?'

'Ah.' He dragged at her belt and fumbled it open, dug his hand down inside. Hardly subtle, maybe, but then he'd never been known for subtlety. His fingertips made it more or less into hair before he got his wrist stuck tight. It wouldn't go any further, for all his straining.

'Shit,' he muttered, heard Ferro suck her teeth, felt her shift and grab her trousers with her free hand, dragging them down over her arse. That was better. He slid his hand up her bare thigh. Good thing he still had one middle finger. They have their uses.

They stayed like that for a while, the pair of them kneeling in the dirt, nothing much moving apart from their two hands working back and

forward, up and down, in and out, starting slow and gentle and getting quicker, silent except for Ferro's breath hissing through her teeth, Logen's rasping in his throat, the quiet suck and squelch of damp skin moving.

She pushed herself up against him, wriggling out of her trousers, shoving him back up against the wall. He cleared his throat, suddenly hoarse. 'Should I—'

'Ssss.' She got up on one foot and one knee, squatting over him with her legs wide open, spat in one cupped hand and took hold of his cock with it. She muttered something, shifting her weight, easing herself down onto him, grunting softly. 'Urrrr.'

'Ah.' He reached out and pulled her closer, one hand squeezing at the back of her thigh, feeling the muscles bunch and shift as she moved, the other tangled tight in her greasy hair, dragging her head down against his face. His trousers were screwed up tight round his ankles. He tried to kick them off and only got them tangled worse than ever, but he was damned if he was going to ask her to stop just for that.

'Urrrr,' she whispered at him, mouth open, lips sliding warm and soft against his cheek, breath hot and sour in his mouth, her skin rubbing against his, and sticking to it, and peeling away again.

'Ah,' he grunted back at her, and she rocked her hips against him, back and forward, back and forward, back and forward.

'Urrrr.' One of her hands was clamped round his jaw, her thumb in his mouth, the other was between her legs, sliding up and down, he could feel her wet fingers curling round his fruits, more than a bit painful, more than a bit pleasant.

'Ah.'

'Urrrr.'

'Ah.'

'Urrrr.'

'Ah—'

'What?'

'Er . . .'

'You're joking!'

'Well . . .'

'I was just getting started!'

'I did say it'd been a long time—'

‘Must’ve been years!’ She slid off his wilting cock, wiped herself with one hand and smeared it angrily on the wall, dropped down on her side with her back to him, grabbed his coat and dragged it over her.

So that was an embarrassment, and no mistake.

Logen cursed silently to himself. All that time waiting and he hadn’t been able to keep the milk in the bucket. He scratched his face sadly, picked at his scabby chin. Say one thing for Logen Ninefingers, say he’s a lover.

He looked sideways at Ferro, at her faint outline in the darkness. Spiky hair, long neck stretched out, sharp shoulder, long arm pressed down against her side. Even with the coat over her he could see the rise of her hip, he could guess her shape underneath. He looked at her skin, knowing what it felt like – smooth, and sleek, and cool. He could hear her breathing. Soft, slow, warm breathing . . .

Hold on.

There was something stirring down below again, now. Sore, but definitely stiffening. The one advantage of having a long time without – the bucket fills up again quick. Logen licked his lips. It would be a shame to let the chance pass, just for a lack of nerve. He slid down beside her, shuffled up close, and cleared his throat.

‘What?’ Her voice was sharp, but not quite sharp enough to warn him off.

‘Well, you know, give me a minute, and maybe . . .’ He lifted the coat up and ran his hand up her side, skin hissing quietly against skin, nice and slow, so she had plenty of time to shove him off. It wouldn’t have surprised him any if she’d turned over and kneed him in the fruits. But she didn’t.

She shifted back against him, her bare arse pressing into his stomach, lifting one knee up. ‘Why should I be giving you another chance?’

‘I don’t know . . .’ he muttered, starting to grin. He slid his hand gently over her chest, across her belly, down between her legs. ‘Same reason you gave me the first one?’

Ferro woke with a sudden jolt, not knowing where she was, only that she was trapped. She snarled and thrashed and flailed out with her elbow, fought her way free and scrambled away, teeth gritted, fists clenched to fight. But there were no enemies. Only bare dirt and bleak rock in the pale grey morning.

That and the big pink.

Ninefingers stumbled up, grunting and spitting, staring wildly around. When he saw no Flatheads poised to kill him he turned slowly to look at Ferro, eyes blinking bleary with sleep. ‘Ah . . .’ He winced and touched his fingertips to his bloody mouth. They glared at each other for a moment, both stark naked and silent in the cold shell of the ruined mill, the coat they had been lying under crumpled on the damp earth between them.

And that was when Ferro realised that she had made three serious mistakes.

She had let herself fall asleep, and nothing good ever happened when she did that. Then she had elbowed Ninefingers in the face. And what was much, much worse, so stupid she almost grimaced to think of it: she had fucked him the night before. Staring at him now in the harsh light of day, hair plastered against one side of his scarred and bloody face, a great smear of dirt down his pale side where he had been lying in the mud, she was not sure why. For some reason, cold and tired in the dark, she had wanted to touch someone, and be warm for just a moment, and she had let herself think – who would be worse off for it?

Madness.

They both were worse off, that was clear enough. Where things had been simple, now they were sure to be complicated. Where they had been getting an understanding, now there would be only confusion. She was confused already, and he was starting to look hurt, and angry, and what was the surprise? No one enjoys an elbow in the face while they sleep. She opened her mouth to say sorry, and it was then she realised. She did not even know the word. All she could do was say it in Kantic, but she was so angry with herself she growled it at him like an insult.

He certainly took it as one. His eyes narrowed and he snapped something at her in his own tongue, snatched his trousers up and shoved one leg in, muttering angrily under his breath.

‘Fucking pink,’ she hissed back, fists bunched with a surge of fury. She snatched up her torn shirt and turned her back on him. She must have left it in a wet patch. The ragged cloth stuck tight to her crawling skin like a layer of cold mud as she yanked it on.

Damn shirt. Damn pink.

She ground her teeth with frustration as she dragged her belt closed. Damn belt. If only she could have kept it closed. It was always the same.

Nothing was easy with people, but she could always count on herself to make things more difficult than they had to be. She paused for a moment, with her head down, then she half turned towards him.

She was about to try and explain that she had not meant to smash his mouth, but that nothing good ever happened when she slept. She was about to try and tell him that she had made a mistake, that she had only wanted to be warm. She was about to ask him to wait.

But he was already stomping out of the broken doorway with the rest of his clothes clutched in one hand.

'Fuck him then,' she hissed as she sat down to pull her boots on.

But then that was the whole problem.

*

Jezal sat on the broken steps of the temple, picking sadly at the frayed stitches on the torn-off shoulder of his coat, and staring out across the limitless expanse of mud towards the ruins of Aulcus. Looking for nothing.

Bayaz lay propped up in the back of the cart, face bony and corpse-pale with veins bulging round his sunken eyes, a hard frown chiselled into his colourless lips. 'How long do we wait?' asked Jezal, once again.

'As long as it takes,' snapped the Magus, without even looking at him. 'We need them.'

Jezal saw Brother Longfoot, standing higher up on the steps with his arms folded, give him a worried glance. 'You are, of course, my employer, and it is scarcely my place to disagree—'

'Don't then,' growled Bayaz.

'But Ninefingers and the woman Maljinn,' persisted the Navigator, 'are most decidedly dead. Master Luthar quite specifically saw them slide into a chasm. A chasm of very great depth. My grief is immeasurable, and I am a patient man, few more, it is one among my many admirable qualities but . . . well . . . were we to wait until the end of time, I fear that it would make no —'

'As long . . .' snarled the First of the Magi, 'as it takes.'

Jezal took a deep breath and frowned into the wind, looking down from the hill towards the city, eyes scanning over the expanse of flat nothing,

pocked with tiny creases where streams ran, the grey stripe of a ruined road creeping out towards them from the far-off walls, between the streaky outlines of ruined buildings: inns, farms, villages, all long fallen.

'They're down there,' came Quai's emotionless voice.

Jezal stood up, weight on his good leg, shading his hand and staring at where the apprentice was pointing. He saw them suddenly, two tiny brown figures in a brown wasteland, down near the base of the rock.

'What did I tell you?' croaked Bayaz.

Longfoot shook his head in amazement. 'How in God's name could they have survived?'

'They're a resourceful pair, alright.' Jezal was already starting to grin. A month before he could not have dreamed that he would ever be glad to see Logen again, let alone Ferro, but here he was, smiling from ear to ear almost to see them still alive. Somehow, a bond was formed out here in the wilderness, facing death and adversity together. A bond that strengthened quickly, regardless of all the great differences between them. A bond that left his old friendships weak, and pale, and passionless by comparison.

Jezal watched the figures come closer, trudging along the crumbling track that led up through the steep rocks to the temple, a great deal of space between the two of them, almost as if they were walking separately. Closer still, and they began to look like two prisoners that had escaped from hell. Their clothes were ripped, and torn, and utterly filthy, their dirty faces were hard as a pair of stones. Ferro had a scabbed-over gash across her forehead. Logen's jaw was a mass of grazes, the skin round his eyes stained with dark bruising.

Jezal took a hopping step towards them. 'What happened? How did—'

'Nothing happened,' barked Ferro.

'Nothing at all,' growled Ninefingers, and the two of them scowled angrily at each other. Plainly, they had both gone through some awful ordeal that neither one wished to discuss. Ferro stalked straight to the cart without the slightest greeting and started rooting through the back. Logen stood, hands on his hips, frowning grimly after her.

'So . . .' mumbled Jezal, not quite sure what to say, 'are you alright?'

Logen's eyes swivelled to his. 'Oh, I'm grand,' he said, with heavy irony. 'Never better. How the hell did you get that cart out of there?'

The apprentice shrugged. 'The horses pulled it out.'

‘Master Quai has a gift for understatement,’ chuckled Longfoot nervously. ‘It was a most exhilarating ride to the city’s South Gate—’

‘Fight your way out, did you?’

‘Well, not I, of course, fighting is not my—’

‘Didn’t think so.’ Logen leaned over and spat sourly onto the mud.

‘We should at least consider being grateful,’ croaked Bayaz, the air sighing and crackling in his throat as he breathed in. ‘There is much to be grateful for, after all. We are all still alive.’

‘You sure?’ snapped Ferro. ‘You don’t look it.’ Jezal found himself in silent agreement there. The Magus could not have looked worse if he had actually died in Aulcus. Died, and already begun to decompose.

She ripped off her rag of a shirt and flung it savagely on the ground, sinews shifting across her scrawny back. ‘Fuck are you looking at?’ she snarled at Jezal.

‘Nothing,’ he muttered, staring down at the dirt. When he dared to look up she was buttoning a fresh one up the front. Well, not entirely fresh. He had been wearing it himself a few days ago.

‘That’s one of mine . . .’ Ferro looked up at him with a glare so murderous that Jezal found himself taking a hesitant step back. ‘But you’re welcome to it . . . of course . . .’

‘Ssss,’ she hissed, jamming the hem violently down behind her belt, frowning all the while as if she was stabbing a man to death. Probably him. All in all, it was hardly the tearful reunion that Jezal might have hoped for, even if he did now feel somewhat like crying.

‘I hope I never see this place again,’ he muttered wistfully.

‘I’m with you there,’ said Logen. ‘Not quite so empty as we thought, eh? Do you think you could dream up a different way back?’

Bayaz frowned. ‘That would seem prudent. We will return to Calcis down the river. There are woods on this side of the water, further downstream. A few sturdy tree trunks lashed together, and the Aos will carry us straight to the sea.’

‘Or to a watery grave.’ Jezal remembered with some clarity the surging water in the canyon of the great river.

‘My hope is better. In any case, there are still long miles to cover westward before we think about the return journey.’

Longfoot nodded. ‘Indeed there are, including a pass through a most forbidding range of mountains.’

‘Lovely,’ said Logen. ‘I can hardly wait.’

‘Nor I. Unfortunately, not all the horses survived.’ The Navigator raised his eyebrows. ‘We have two to pull the cart, two to ride . . . that leaves us two short.’

‘I hate those fucking things anyway.’ Logen strode to the cart and clambered up opposite Bayaz in the back.

There was a long pause as they all considered the situation. Two horses, three riders. Never a happy position. Longfoot was the first to speak. ‘I will need, of course, to scout forward as we come close to the mountains. Scouting, alas, is an essential part of any successful journey. One for which, unfortunately, I will require one of the horses . . .’

‘I should probably ride,’ murmured Jezal, shifting painfully, ‘what with my leg . . .’

Ferro looked at the cart, and Jezal saw her eyes meet Logen’s for a brief and intensely hostile moment.

‘I’ll walk,’ she barked.

The Hero's Welcome

It was raining as Superior Glokta hobbled back into Adua. A mean, thin, ugly sort of rain on a hard wind off the sea, that rendered the treacherous wood of the gangplank, the squealing timbers of the wharf, the slick stones of the quay, all slippery as liars. He licked at his sore gums, rubbed at his sore thigh, swept his grimace up and down the grey shoreline. A pair of surly-looking guardsmen were leaning against a rotten warehouse ten paces away. Further on a party of dockers were involved in a bitter dispute over a heap of crates. A shivering beggar nearby took a couple of paces towards Glokta, thought better of it, and slunk away.

No crowds of cheering commoners? No carpet of flower petals? No archway of drawn swords? No bevy of swooning maidens? It was hardly too great a surprise. There had been none the last time he returned from the South. Crowds rarely cheer too loudly for the defeated, no matter how hard they fought, how great their sacrifices, how long the odds. Maidens might wet themselves over cheap and worthless victories, but they don't so much as blush for 'I did my best'. Nor will the Arch Lector, I fear.

A particularly vicious wave slapped at the sea wall and threw a cloud of sullen spray all over Glokta's back. He stumbled forward, cold water dripping from his cold hands, slipped and almost fell, tottered gasping across the quay and clung to the slimy wall of a crumbling shed at the far side. He looked up and saw the two guards staring at him.

'Is there something?' he snarled, and they turned their backs, muttering and pulling up their collars against the weather. Glokta fumbled his coat tight around him, felt the tails snatching at his wet legs. *A few months in the sun and you feel as though you'll never be cold again. How soon we forget.* He frowned up and down the empty wharves. How soon we all forget.

'Ome ageh.' Frost looked pleased as he stepped off the gangplank with Glokta's box under his arm.

'You don't much like hot weather, do you?'

The Practical shook his heavy head, half-grinning into the winter drizzle, white hair spiky with wet. Severard followed behind him, squinting up at

the grey clouds. He paused for a moment at the end of the plank, then he stepped off onto the stones of the quay.

'Good to be back,' he said.

I only wish I could share your enthusiasm, but I cannot relax quite yet. 'His Eminence has sent for me, and judging by the way we left things in Dagoska, I think it more than likely that the meeting will . . . not go well.' *A spectacular understatement.* 'You had better stay out of sight for a couple of days.'

'Out of sight? I don't plan to see outside of a whorehouse for a week.'

'Very wise. And Severard. In case we don't see each other again. Good luck.'

The Practical's eyes glinted. 'Always.' Glokta watched him stroll off through the rain towards the seedier parts of town. *Just another day for Practical Severard. Never thinking more than an hour ahead. What a gift.*

'Damn your miserable country and damn its bloody weather,' Vitari grumbled in her sing-song accent. 'I have to go and speak to Sult.'

'Why so do I!' cried Glokta with exaggerated glee. 'What a charming coincidence!' He offered her his bent elbow. 'We can make a couple, and visit his Eminence together!'

She stared back at him. 'Alright.'

But the pair of you will have to wait another hour for my head. 'There's just one call I need to make first.'

The tip of his stick cracked against the door. No answer. *Damn it.* Glokta's back was hurting like hell and he needed to sit down. He rapped again with his cane, harder this time. The hinges creaked, the door swung open a crack. *Unlocked*. He frowned, pushed it all the way. The door frame was split inside, the lock shattered. *Broken open.* He limped across the threshold, into the hall. Empty and frosty cold. Not a stick of furniture anywhere. *Almost as if she moved out. But why?* Glokta's eyelid gave a twitch. He had scarcely once thought about Ardee his whole time in the South. *Other matters seemed so much more pressing. My one friend gave me this one task. If anything has happened to her . . .*

Glokta pointed to the stairs, and Vitari nodded and crept up them silently, bending and sliding a glinting knife out from her boot. He pointed down the hall and Frost padded off deeper into the house, pressed up into the shadows

by the wall. The living room door stood ajar, and Glokta shuffled to it and pushed it open.

Ardee was sitting in the window with her back to him: white dress, dark hair, just as he remembered her. He saw her head move slightly as the door's hinges creaked. *Alive, then.* But the room was strangely altered. Aside from the one chair she sat in, it was entirely empty. Bare whitewashed walls, bare wooden boards, windows without curtains.

'There's nothing fucking left!' she barked, voice cracked and throaty.

Clearly. Glokta frowned, and stepped through the door into the room.

'Nothing left, I said!' She stood up, still with her back to him. 'Or did you decide you'd take the chair after all?' She spun round, grabbing hold of the back, lifted it over her head and flung it at him with a shriek. It crashed into the wall beside the door, sending fragments of wood and plaster flying. One leg whizzed past Glokta's face and clattered into the corner, the rest tumbled to the floor in a mass of dust and splintered sticks.

'Most kind,' murmured Glokta, 'but I prefer to stand.'

'You!' He could see her eyes wide with surprise through her tangled hair. There was a gauntness and a paleness to her face that he did not remember. Her dress was rumpled, and far too thin for the chilly room. She tried to smooth it with shivering hands, plucked ineffectually at her greasy hair. She gave a snort of laughter. 'I'm afraid I'm not really prepared for visitors.'

Glokta heard Frost thumping down the hall, saw him looming up at the doorway, fists clenched. He held up a finger. 'It's alright. Wait outside.' The albino faded back into the shadows, and Glokta hobbled across the creaking boards into the empty sitting room. 'What happened?'

Ardee's mouth twisted. 'It seems my father was not nearly so well off as everyone imagined. He had debts. Soon after my brother left for Angland, they came to collect.'

'Who came?'

'A man called Fallow. He took all the money I had, but it wasn't enough. They took the plate, my mother's jewels, such as they were. They gave me six weeks to find the rest. I let my maid go. I sold everything I could, but they wanted more. Then they came again. Three days ago. They took everything. Fallow said I was lucky he was leaving me the dress I was wearing.'

'I see.'

She took a deep, shuddering breath. ‘Since then, I have been sitting here, and thinking on how a friendless young woman can come by some money.’ She fixed him with her eye. ‘I have thought of only one way. I daresay, if I had the courage, I would have done it already.’

Glokta sucked at his gums. ‘Lucky for us both that you’re a coward, then.’ He shrugged one shoulder out of his coat, then had to wriggle and flail to get his arm out. Once he finally did, he had to fumble his cane across into his other hand so he could finally throw it off. *Damn it. I can’t even make a generous gesture gracefully*. Finally he held it out to her, tottering slightly on his weak leg.

‘You sure you don’t need it more than me?’

‘Take it. At least then I won’t have to get the bloody thing back on.’

That brought half a smile from her. ‘Thank you,’ she muttered as she pulled it round her shoulders. ‘I tried to find you, but I didn’t know . . . where you were . . .’

‘I am sorry for that, but I am here now. You need not worry about anything. You will have to come and stay with me tonight. My quarters are not spacious, but we’ll find a way.’ *There will be plenty of room once I am face down in the docks, after all.*

‘What about after that?’

‘After that you will come here. Tomorrow this house will be just as it was.’

She stared at him. ‘How?’

‘Oh, I will see to it. First of all we get you in the warm.’ *Superior Glokta, friend to the friendless.*

She closed her eyes as he spoke, and he heard breath snorting fast through her nose. She swayed slightly, as if she hardly had the strength to stand any longer. *Strange how, as long as the hardship lasts, we can stand it. As soon as the crisis is over, the strength all leeches away in an instant.* Glokta reached out, almost touched her shoulder to steady her, but at the last moment her eyes flickered open, and she straightened up again, and he pulled his hand away.

Superior Glokta, rescuer of young women in distress. He guided her into the hallway and towards the broken front door. ‘If you could give me one moment with my Practicals.’

‘Of course.’ Ardee looked up at him, big, dark eyes rimmed with worried pink. ‘And thank you. Whatever they say, you’re a good man.’

Glokta had to stifle a sudden urge to giggle. *A good man? I doubt that Salem Rews would agree. Or Gofred Hornlach, or Magister Kault, or Korsten dan Vurms, General Vissbruck, Ambassador Islik, Inquisitor Harker, or any of a hundred others scattered through the penal colonies of Angland or squatting in Dagoska, waiting to die. And yet Ardee West thinks me a good man.* A strange feeling, and not an unpleasant one. *It feels almost like being human again. What a shame that it comes so late in the day.*

He beckoned to Frost as Ardee shuffled out in his black coat. ‘I have a task for you, my old friend. One last task.’ Glokta slapped his hand down on the albino’s heavy shoulder and squeezed it. ‘Do you know a moneylender called Fallow?’

Frost nodded slowly.

‘Find him and hurt him. Bring him here and make him understand who he has offended. Everything must be restored, better than it was, tell him that. Give him one day. One day, and then you find him, wherever he is, and you start cutting. You hear me? Do me that one favour.’

Frost nodded again, his pink eyes glinting in the dim hallway.

‘Sult will be expecting us,’ murmured Vitari, peering down at them from the stairs, arms crossed, gloved hands hanging limp over the rail.

‘Of course he will.’ Glokta winced as he hobbled to the open door. *And we wouldn’t want to keep his Eminence waiting.*

Click, tap, pain, that was the rhythm of Glokta’s walking. The confident click of his right heel, the tap of his cane on the echoing tiles of the hallway, then the long scrape of his left foot with the familiar pain in the knee, arse and back. Click, tap, pain.

He had walked from the docks to Ardee’s house, to the Agriont, to the House of Questions, and all the way up here. *Limped. On my own. Without help.* Now every step was agony. He grimaced with each movement. He grunted and sweated and cursed. *But I’m damned if I’m slowing down.*

‘You don’t like to make things easy, do you?’ muttered Vitari.

‘Why should they be?’ he snapped. ‘You can console yourself with the thought that this conversation will most likely be our last.’

‘Then why even come? Why not run?’

Glokta snorted. ‘In case you hadn’t noticed, I am an exceptionally poor runner. That and I’m curious.’ *Curious to know why his Eminence didn’t leave me there to rot along with all the rest.*

‘Your curiosity might be the death of you.’

‘If the Arch Lector wants me dead, limping the other way will do me little good. I’d rather take it standing up.’ He winced at a sudden spasm through his leg. ‘Or maybe sitting down. Either way, face to face, with my eyes open.’

‘Your choice, I suppose.’

‘That’s right.’ *My last one.*

They came into Sult’s ante-room. He had to admit to being somewhat surprised to have come this far. He had been expecting every black-masked Practical they had passed in the building to seize hold of him. He had been expecting every black-clothed Inquisitor to point and scream for his immediate arrest. *And yet here I am again.* The heavy desk, the heavy chairs, the two towering Practicals flanking the heavy doors, were all the same.

‘I am—’

‘Superior Glokta, of course.’ The Arch Lector’s secretary bowed his head respectfully. ‘You may go in at once. His Eminence is expecting you.’ Light spilled out of the Arch Lector’s office and into the narrow chamber.

‘I’ll wait here.’ Vitari slid into one of the chairs and swung her damp boots up on an other.

‘Don’t bother waiting too long.’ *My last words, perhaps?* Glokta cursed inwardly as he shuffled towards the doorway. *I really should have thought of something more memorable.* He paused for just a moment at the threshold, took a deep breath, and hobbled through.

The same airy, round room. The same dark furniture, the same dark pictures on the bright walls, the same great window with the same view of the University, and the House of the Maker beyond. *No assassins loitering under the table, no axemen waiting behind the door.* Only Sult himself, sitting at his desk with a pen in hand, the nib scratching calmly and evenly across some papers spread out before him.

‘Superior Glokta!’ Sult started up and swept gracefully across the polished floor towards him, white coat flapping. ‘I’m so glad you are safely returned!’ The Arch Lector gave every impression of being pleased to see

him, and Glokta frowned. He had been prepared for almost anything but this.

Sult held out his hand, the stone on his ring of office flashing purple sparks. Glokta grimaced as he bent slowly to kiss it. ‘I serve and obey, your Eminence.’ He straightened up with an effort. *No knife in the back of the neck?* But Sult was already flowing across to the cabinet, grinning broadly.

‘Sit, please sit! You need not wait to be asked!’

Since when? Glokta grunted his way into one of the chairs, taking only the briefest moment to check for poisoned spikes on the seat. The Arch Lector, meanwhile, had plucked open the cabinet and was rummaging inside. *Will he pull out a loaded flatbow, and shoot me through the throat?* But all that emerged were two glasses. ‘It would seem congratulations are in order,’ he threw over his shoulder.

Glokta blinked. ‘What?’

‘Congratulations. Excellent work.’ Sult grinned down at him as he slid the glasses gracefully onto the round table, eased the stopper, clinking, from the decanter. *What to say? What to say?*

‘Your Eminence . . . Dagoska . . . I must be candid. It was on the point of falling when I left. Very soon now, the city will be overrun—’

‘Of course it will.’ Sult dismissed it all with a wave of his white-gloved hand. ‘There was never the slightest chance of holding it. The best I was hoping for was that you’d make the Gurkish pay! And how you did that, eh, Glokta? How you did that!’

‘Then . . . you are . . . pleased?’ He hardly dared say the word.

‘I am delighted! If I had written the tale myself, it could not have worked out better! The incompetence of the Lord Governor, the treachery of his son, it all showed how little the regular authorities can be relied upon in a crisis. Eider’s treason exposed the duplicity of the merchants, their dubious connections, their rotten morality! The Spicers have been dissolved alongside the Mercers: their trade rights are in our hands. The pair of them, consigned to the latrine of history and the power of the merchants broken! Only his Majesty’s Inquisition remained staunch in the face of the Union’s most implacable enemy. You should have seen Marovia’s face when I presented the confessions to the Open Council!’ Sult filled Glokta’s glass all the way to the top.

‘Most kind, your Eminence,’ he muttered as he took a sip from it. *Excellent wine, as always.*

‘And then he got up in the Closed Council, before the King himself, mark you, and declared to everyone that you wouldn’t last a week once the Gurkish attacked!’ The Arch Lector spluttered with laughter. ‘I wish you could have been there. I’m confident he’ll do better than that, I said. Confident he’ll do better.’ *A ringing endorsement indeed.*

Sult slapped the table with his white-gloved palm. ‘Two months, Glokta! Two months! With every day that passed he looked more of a fool, and I looked more of a hero . . . we, that is,’ he corrected himself, ‘we looked like heroes, and all I had to do was smile! You could almost see them, each day, shuffling their chairs away from Marovia and down towards me! Last week they voted extra powers to the Inquisition. Nine votes to three. Nine to three! Next week we’ll go further! How the hell did you manage it?’ And he gazed at Glokta expectantly.

I sold myself to the bank that funded the Mercers, then used the proceeds to bribe the world’s least reliable mercenary. Then I murdered a defenceless emissary under flag of parley and tortured a serving girl until her body was mincemeat. Oh, and I let the biggest traitor of the lot go free. It was, without doubt, a heroic business. How did I manage it? ‘Rising early,’ he murmured.

Sult’s eye flickered, and Glokta caught it. *A trace of annoyance, perhaps? A trace of mistrust?* But it was quickly extinguished. ‘Rising early. Of course.’ He raised his glass. ‘The second greatest virtue. It comes just behind ruthlessness. I like your style, Glokta, I’ve always said so.’

Have you indeed? But Glokta humbly inclined his head.

‘Practical Vitari’s despatches were filled with admiration. I particularly enjoyed the way you dealt with the Gurkish emissary. That must have wiped the smile from the Emperor’s face, if only for a moment, the arrogant swine.’ *So she kept her end of the bargain, then? Interesting.* ‘Yes, things proceed smoothly. Except for the damn peasants making a nuisance of themselves, and Angland of course. Shame about Ladisla.’

‘About Ladisla?’ asked Glokta, baffled.

Sult looked sour. ‘You didn’t hear? Another of High Justice Marovia’s brilliant notions. He had it in mind to lift the Crown Prince’s popularity by giving him a command in the North. Something out of the way, where he’d

be in no danger and we could heap him with glory. It wasn't a bad scheme, really, except that out of the way became in the way, and he commanded himself straight into his grave.'

'His army with him?'

'A few thousand of them, but mostly that rubbish the nobles sent as levies. Nothing of much significance. Ostenhorm is still in our hands, and it wasn't my idea so, all in all, no harm done. Between you and me it's probably for the best, Ladisla was insufferable. I had to dig him out of more than one scandal. Never could keep his trousers closed, the damn halfwit. Raynault seems to be a different kind of a man. Sober, sensible. Do as he's bloody told. Better all round. Providing he doesn't go and get himself killed, of course, we'd be in a pickle then.' Sult took another swig from his glass and worked it round his mouth with some satisfaction.

Glokta cleared his throat. *While he is in a good mood* . . . 'There was one issue I wished to discuss with you, your Eminence. The Gurkish agent we found within the city. She was . . .' *How to describe this without sounding like a madman*?

But Sult was ahead of him once again. 'I know. An Eater.' *You know? Even about this?* The Arch Lector sat back and shook his head. 'An occult abomination. A tale straight from a story book. Eating the flesh of men. Apparently it is a practice well established down in the barbaric South. But don't concern yourself about it. I am already taking advice.'

'Who gives advice about such things as these?'

The Arch Lector only flashed his silky smile. 'You must be tired. The weather over there can be so very draining. All that heat and dust, even in the winter. Take a rest. You deserve it. I'll send for you if anything comes up.' And Sult took up his pen and looked back to his papers, leaving Glokta with nothing to do but shuffle for the door, a look of profound puzzlement on his face.

'You almost look like you're still alive,' muttered Vitari as he hobbled out into the anteroom.

True. Or about as close as I come to it. 'Sult was . . . pleased.' He still could hardly believe it. The very words sounded strange together.

'He damn well should be, after the talking-up I gave you.'

'Huh.' Glokta frowned. 'It seems I owe you an apology.'

'Keep it. It isn't worth shit to me. Just trust me next time.'

‘A fair demand,’ he conceded, glancing sideways at her. *But you have to be joking.*

The chamber was filled with fine furniture. *Almost overfilled.* Richly upholstered chairs, an antique table, a polished cabinet, all lavish for the small sitting-room. A huge old painting of the Lords of the Union paying homage to Harod the Great entirely filled one wall. A thick Kantic carpet had been rolled out across the boards, almost too big for the floor. A healthy fire crackled in the grate between two antique vases, and the room was homely, and pleasant, and warm. *What a difference a day can make, with the right encouragement.*

‘Good,’ said Glokta as he looked round. ‘Very good.’

‘Of course,’ muttered Fallow, head bowed respectfully, hat halfway to being crushed in his hands. ‘Of course, Superior, I have done everything possible. Most of the furniture I had . . . I had sold already, and so I replaced with better, the best I could find. The rest of the house is just the same. I hope that . . . I hope that it’s adequate?’

‘I hope so too. Is it adequate?’

Ardee was scowling at Fallow. ‘It will serve.’

‘Excellent,’ said the moneylender nervously, glancing briefly at Frost and then down at his boots. ‘Excellent! Please accept my very deepest apologies! I had no idea, of course, absolutely no idea, Superior, that you were involved in any way. Of course, I would never . . . I am so very sorry.’

‘It really isn’t me you should be apologising to, is it?’

‘No, no, of course.’ He turned slowly to Ardee. ‘My lady, please accept my deepest apologies.’

Ardee glared at him, lip curled, and said nothing.

‘Perhaps if you were to beg,’ suggested Glokta. ‘On your knees. That might do it.’

Fallow dropped to his knees without hesitation. He wrung his hands ‘My lady, please—’

‘Lower,’ said Glokta.

‘Of course,’ he muttered as he fell to all fours. ‘I do apologise, my lady. Most humbly. If you could only find it in your heart, I beg you—’ He reached out gingerly to touch the hem of her dress and she jerked back, then swung her foot and kicked him savagely in the face.

‘Gah!’ squawked the moneylender, rolling onto his side, dark blood bubbling out of his nose and all over the new carpet. Glokta felt his brows go up. *That was unexpected.*

‘That’s for you, fucker!’ The next kick caught him in the mouth and his head snapped back, spots of blood spattering onto the far wall. Ardee’s shoe thudded into his gut and folded him up tight.

‘You,’ she snarled, ‘you . . .’ She kicked him again and again and Fallow shuddered and grunted and sighed, curling up in a ball. Frost moved away from the wall a step, and Glokta held up his finger.

‘That’s alright,’ he murmured, ‘I think she has it covered.’

The kicks began to slow. Glokta could hear Ardee gasping for air. Her heel dug into Fallow’s ribs, her toe cracked into his nose again. *If she ever gets bored, she might have a bright future as a Practical.* She worked her mouth, leaned over and spat onto the side of his face. She kicked him again, weakly, then stumbled back against the cabinet and leaned on the polished wood, bent over and breathing hard.

‘Happy?’ asked Glokta.

She stared up at him through her tangled hair. ‘Not really.’

‘Will kicking him some more make you happier?’

Her brows wrinkled as she looked down at Fallow, wheezing on his side on the carpet. She took a step forward and booted him hard in the chest one more time, rocked away, wiping some snot from under her nose. She pushed her hair out of her face. ‘I’m done.’

‘Fine. Get out,’ hissed Glokta. ‘Out, worm!’

‘Of course,’ Fallow drooled through his bloody lips, crawling for the door, Frost looming over him the whole way. ‘Of course! Thank you! Thank you all so much!’ The front door banged shut.

Ardee sat down heavily in one of the chairs, elbows resting on her knees, forehead resting on her palms. Glokta could see her hands trembling slightly. *It can really be very tiring, hurting someone. I should know. Especially if you aren’t used to it.* ‘I wouldn’t feel too badly,’ he said. ‘I’m sure he deserved it.’

She looked up, and her eyes were hard. ‘I don’t. He deserves worse.’

That was unexpected too. ‘Do you want him to have worse?’

She swallowed, slowly sat back. ‘No.’

‘Up to you.’ *But it’s nice to have the option.* ‘You may want to change your clothes.’

She looked down. ‘Oh.’ Spots of Fallow’s blood were spattered as far as her knees. ‘I don’t have anything—’

‘There’s a room full of new ones, upstairs. I made sure of it. I’ll arrange for some dependable servants as well.’

‘I don’t need them.’

‘Yes, you do. I won’t hear of you here alone.’

She shrugged her shoulders hopelessly. ‘I have nothing to pay them with.’

‘Don’t worry. I’ll take care of it.’ *All compliments of the hugely generous Valint and Balk, after all.* ‘Don’t worry about anything. I made a promise to your brother, and I mean to see it through. I’m very sorry that things came this far. I had a great deal to take care of . . . in the South. Have you heard from him, by the way?’

Ardee looked up sharply, her mouth slightly open. ‘You don’t know?’

‘Know what?’

She swallowed, and stared down at the floor. ‘Collem was with Prince Ladisla, at this battle that everyone is talking of. Some prisoners were taken, have been ransomed – he wasn’t among them. They presume . . .’ She paused for a moment, staring at the blood on her dress. ‘They presume he was killed.’

‘Killed?’ Glokta’s eyelid fluttered. His knees felt suddenly weak. He took a lurching step back and sank into a chair. His own hands were trembling now, and he clasped them together. *Deaths. They happen every day. I caused thousands of them not long ago, with hardly a thought. I looked at heaps of corpses and shrugged. What makes this one so hard to take?* And yet it was.

‘Killed?’ he whispered.

She nodded slowly, and put her face in her hands.

Cold Comfort

West peered out of the bushes, through the drifting flakes of snow, down the slope toward the Union picket. The sentries were sat in a rough circle, hunched round a steaming pan over a miserable tongue of fire on the far side of the stream. They wore thick coats, breath smoking, weapons almost forgotten in the snow around them. West knew how they felt. Bethod might come this week, he might come next week, but the cold they had to fight every minute of every day.

'Right then,' whispered Threetrees. 'You'd best go down there on your own. They might not like the looks of me and the rest of the boys, all rushing down on 'em from the trees.'

The Dogman grinned. 'Might shoot one of us.'

'And that'd be some kind o' shame,' hissed Dow, 'after we come so far.'

'Give us the shout when they're good and ready for a crew of Northmen to come wandering out the woods, eh?'

'I will,' said West. He dragged the heavy sword out of his belt and handed it to Threetrees. 'You'd better hold on to this for me.'

'Good luck,' said the Dogman.

'Good luck,' said Dow, lips curling back into his savage grin. 'Furious.'

West walked out slowly from the trees and down the gentle slope towards the stream, his stolen boots crunching in the snow, his hands held up above his head, to show he was unarmed. Even so, he could hardly have blamed the sentries if they shot him on sight. No one could have looked more like a dangerous savage than he did now, he knew. The last tatters of his uniform were hidden beneath a bundle of furs and torn scraps, tied around his body with twine, a stained coat stolen from a dead Northman over the top. He had a few weeks' growth of scraggy beard across his scabby face, his eyes were sore and watering, sunken with hunger and exhaustion. He looked like a desperate man, and what was more, he knew, he was one. A killer. The man who murdered Crown Prince Ladisla. The very worst of traitors.

One of the sentries looked up and saw him, started clumsily from his place, knocking the pan hissing into the fire, snatching his spear out of the snow. 'Stop!' he shouted, in slurred Northern. The others jumped up after

him, grabbing at their weapons, one fumbling at the string on his flatbow with mittened fingers.

West stopped, flecks of snow settling gently on his tangled hair and across his shoulders. ‘Don’t worry,’ he shouted back in common. ‘I’m on your side.’

They stared at him for a moment. ‘We’ll see!’ shouted one. ‘Come on across the water, but do it slow!’

He crunched on down the slope and sloshed out into the stream, gritted his teeth as the freezing water soaked him up to his thighs. He struggled up the far bank and the four sentries shuffled into a nervous half circle around him, weapons raised.

‘Watch him!’

‘It could be a trick!’

‘It’s no trick,’ said West slowly, keeping his eyes on the various hovering blades and trying to stay calm. It was vitally important to stay calm. ‘I’m one of you.’

‘Where the hell have you come from?’

‘I was with Prince Ladisla’s division.’

‘With Ladisla? You walked up here?’

West nodded. ‘I walked.’ The bodies of the sentries started to relax, the spear-points started to waver and drift upwards. They were on the point of believing him. After all, he spoke the common tongue like a native, and certainly looked as if he had slogged a hundred leagues across country. ‘What’s your name, then?’ asked the one with the flatbow.

‘Colonel West,’ he muttered, voice cracking. He felt like a liar even though it was true. He was a different man from the one who set out for Angland.

The sentries exchanged worried glances. ‘I thought he was dead,’ mumbled the one with the spear.

‘Not quite, lad,’ said West. ‘Not quite.’

Lord Marshal Burr was poring over a table covered in crumpled maps as West pushed through the flap into his tent. It seemed in the lamplight that the pressures of command had taken their toll on him. He looked older, paler, weaker, his hair and beard wild and straggling. He had lost weight

and his creased uniform hung loose, but he started up with all his old vigour.

'Colonel West, as I live and breathe! I never thought to see you again!' He seized West's hand and squeezed it hard. 'I'm glad you made it. Damn glad! I've missed your cool head around here, I don't mind telling you.' He stared searchingly into West's eyes. 'You look tired, though, my friend.'

There was no denying it. West had never been the prettiest fellow in the Agriont, that he knew, but he had always prided himself on having an honest, friendly, pleasant look. He had scarcely recognised the face in the mirror once he had taken his first bath in weeks, dragged on a borrowed uniform, and finally shaved. Everything was changed, sharpened, leached of colour. The prominent cheekbones had grown craggy, the thinning hair and brows were full of iron grey, the jaw was lean and wolf-like. Angry lines were cut deep into the skin down the pale cheeks, across the narrow bridge of the sharp nose, out from the corners of the eyes. The eyes were worst of all. Narrow. Hungry. Icy grey, as though the bitter cold had eaten into his skull and still lurked there, even in the warmth. He had tried to think of old times, to smile and laugh, and use the expressions he had used to use, but it all looked foolish on that stone wall of a face. A hard man had glared back at him from the glass, and would not go away.

'It was a difficult journey, sir.'

Burr nodded. 'Of course it was, of course. A bastard of a journey and the wrong time of year for it. A good thing I sent those Northmen with you, eh, as it turned out?'

'A very good thing, sir. A most courageous and resourceful group. They saved my life, more than once.' He glanced sideways at Pike, loitering behind him in the shadows at a respectful distance. 'All our lives.'

Burr peered over at the convict's melted face. 'And who is this?'

'This is Pike, sir, a Sergeant with the Stariksa levies, cut off from his company in the battle.' The lies spilled out of West's mouth with a surprising ease. 'He and a girl, I believe a cook's daughter who was with the baggage, joined us on the way north. He has been a great help, sir, a good man in a tight spot. Wouldn't have made it without him.'

'Excellent!' said Burr, walking over to the convict and seizing his hand. 'Well done. Your regiment is gone, Pike. Not many survivors, I'm sorry to say. Damn few survivors, but I can always use trustworthy men here at my

headquarters. Especially ones who are good in a tight spot.' He gave a long sigh. 'I have few enough of 'em to hand. I hope that you'll agree to stay with us.'

The convict swallowed. 'Of course, Lord Marshal, it would be an honour.'

'What about Prince Ladisla?' murmured Burr.

West took a deep breath and looked down at the ground. 'Prince Ladisla . . .' He trailed off and slowly shook his head. 'Horsemen surprised us, and overran the headquarters. It happened so fast . . . I looked for him afterwards, but . . .'

'I see. Well. There it is. He should never have been in command, but what could I do? I'm only in charge of the damn army!' He laid a fatherly hand on West's shoulder. 'Don't blame yourself. I know you did everything you could.'

West dared not look up. He wondered what Burr would have said had he known what really happened, out there in the cold wilderness. 'Have there been any other survivors?'

'A handful. No more than a handful, and a sorry one at that.' Burr burped, grimaced and rubbed at his gut. 'I must apologise. Damn indigestion simply will not go away. Food up here and all . . . ugh.' He burped again.

'Forgive me, sir, but what is our situation?'

'Right to business, eh, West? I always liked that about you. Right to business. Well, I'll be honest. When I received your letter we planned to head back south to cover Ostenhorm, but the weather has been dire and we've scarcely been able to move. The Northmen seem to be everywhere! Bethod may have had the bulk of his army near the Cumnur but he left enough up here to make things damned difficult for us. We've had constant raids against our lines of supply, more than one pointless and bloody skirmish, and a chaotic night-time action which almost caused full-scale panic in Kroy's division.'

Poulder and Kroy. Unpleasant memories began to crowd back into West's mind, and the simple physical discomforts of the journey north began to seem rather appealing. 'How are the Generals?'

Burr glared up from under his heavy eyebrows. 'Could you believe me if I said they were worse than ever? You can scarcely put the two in the same room without them starting to bicker. I have to have briefings with each on alternate days, so as to avoid fisticuffs in my headquarters. A ludicrous state

of affairs!' He gripped his hands behind him as he strode grimly round the tent. 'But the damage they're doing pales compared to the damn cold. There are men down with frostbite, with fever, with scurvy, the sick tents are brimming. For every man the enemy have killed we've lost twenty to the winter, and those still walking have got precious little stomach left for a fight. As for scouting, hah! Don't get me started!' He slapped angrily at the maps on the table. 'Charts of the land up here are all works of imagination. Useless, and we've barely any skilled scouts at all. Mist every day, and snow, and we can't see from one side of the camp to the other! Honestly, West, we've not the slightest idea where Bethod's main body is right now —'

'He's to the south, sir, perhaps two days' march behind us.'

Burr's brows went up. 'He is?'

'He is. Threetrees and his Northmen kept them under close watch as we moved, and even arranged a few unpleasant surprises for some of their outriders.'

'Like the one that they gave us, eh, West? Rope across the road and all that?' He chuckled to himself. 'Two days' march behind, you say? This is useful information. This is damn useful!' Burr winced and put one hand on his gut as he moved back to his table, picking up a ruler and starting to measure out distances. 'Two days' march. That would put him somewhere here. You're sure?'

'I'm sure, Lord Marshal.'

'If he's heading for Dunbrec, he'll pass near General Poulder's position. It might be that we can bring him to battle before he gets round us, perhaps even give him a surprise he won't forget. Well done, West, well done!' He tossed his ruler down. 'Now you should get some rest.'

'I'd rather get straight back into it, sir—'

'I know, and I could use you, but take a day or two in any case, the world won't end. You've come through quite an ordeal.'

West swallowed. He did feel terribly tired all of a sudden. 'Of course. I should write a letter . . . to my sister.' It was strange saying it. He had not thought about her for weeks. 'I should let her know that I'm . . . alive.'

'Good idea. I'll send for you, Colonel, when I need you.' And Burr turned away and hunched back over his charts.

‘I won’t forget that,’ whispered Pike in West’s ear as he lurched back through the flap into the cold.

‘It’s nothing. They won’t miss either one of you at that camp. It’s Sergeant Pike again, is all. You can put your mistakes behind you.’

‘I won’t forget it. I’m your man, now, Colonel, whatever happens. Your man!’ West nodded as he made off, frowning, through the snow. War killed a lot of men, it seemed. But it gave a few a second chance.

West paused on the threshold. He could hear voices inside, chuckling. Old, familiar voices. They should have made him feel safe, warm, welcomed, but they did not. They worried him. Scared him, even. They, surely, would know. They would point and scream. ‘Murderer! Traitor! Villain!’ He turned back towards the cold. Snow was settling gently over the camp. The closest tents were black on the white ground, the ones behind grey. Further back they were soft ghosts, then only dim suggestions through the flurry of tiny flakes. No one moved. All was quiet. He took a deep breath and pushed through the flap.

The three officers were sat around a flimsy folding table inside, pushed close up to a glowing stove. Jalenhorm’s beard had grown to shovel-like proportions. Kaspa had a red scarf wrapped round his head. Brint was swaddled in a dark greatcoat, dealing cards out to the other two.

‘Close that flap damn it, it’s freezing out—’ Jalenhorm’s jaw dropped. ‘No! It can’t be! Colonel West!’

Brint leaped up as though he had been bitten on the arse. ‘Shit!’

‘I told you!’ shouted Kaspa, flinging down his cards and grinning madly. ‘I told you he’d be back!’

They surrounded him, clapping his back, squeezing his hands, pulling him into the tent. No manacles, no drawn swords, no accusations of treason. Jalenhorm conducted him to the best chair, meaning the one furthest from imminent collapse, while Kaspa breathed into a glass and wiped it clean with his finger and Brint pulled the cork from the bottle with a gentle thwop.

‘When did you get here?’

‘How did you get here?’

‘Were you with Ladisla?’

‘Were you at the battle?’

‘Hold on,’ said Jalenhorm, ‘give him a minute!’

West waved him down. ‘I got here this morning, and would have come to you at once apart from a crucial meeting with a bath and a razor, and then one with Marshal Burr. I was with Ladisla, at the battle, and I got here by walking across country, with the help of five Northmen, a girl, and a man with no face.’ He took the glass and gulped down the contents in one go, winced and sucked his teeth as the spirit burned its way down into his stomach, already starting to feel glad that he decided to come in. ‘Don’t be shy,’ he said as he held the empty glass out.

‘Walking across country,’ whispered Brint, shaking his head as he poured, ‘with five Northmen. A girl, you say?’

‘That’s right.’ West frowned, wondering what Cathil was doing right now. Wondering whether she needed help . . . foolishness, she could look after herself. ‘You made it with my letter, then, Lieutenant?’ he asked Jalenhorm.

‘Some cold and nervous nights on the road,’ grinned the big man, ‘but I did.’

‘Except that it’s Captain now,’ said Kaspa, sitting back on his stool.

‘Is it indeed?’

Jalenhorm shrugged modestly. ‘Thanks to you, really. The Lord Marshal put me on his staff when I got back.’

‘Though *Captain* Jalenhorm still finds time to spend with us little people, bless him.’ Brint licked his fingertips and started dealing four hands.

‘I’ve no stake, I’m afraid,’ muttered West.

Kaspa grinned. ‘Don’t worry, Colonel, we don’t play for money any more. Without Luthar to make poor men of us all, it hardly seemed worth it.’

‘He never turned up?’

‘They just came and pulled him off the boat. Hoff sent for him. We’ve heard nothing since.’

‘Friends in high places,’ said Brint sourly. ‘Probably swanning about in Adua on some easy detail, making free with the women while the rest of us are freezing our arses off.’

‘Though let’s be honest,’ threw in Jalenhorm, ‘he made free enough with the women even when we were there.’

West frowned. That was all too unfortunately true.

Kaspa scraped his hand up off the table. ‘So anyway, we’re just playing for honour.’

‘Though you’ll not find much of that here,’ quipped Brint. The other two burst out laughing and Kaspa dribbled booze into his beard. West raised his eyebrows. Clearly they were drunk, and the sooner he joined them the better. He swilled down the next glass and reached for the bottle.

‘Well, I’ll tell you one thing,’ Jalenhorm was saying, sorting his cards with fumbling fingers, ‘I’m glad as all hell that I won’t have to tell your sister anything for you. I’ve scarcely slept in weeks for thinking through how I’d go about it, and I still haven’t got a thought in my head.’

‘You’ve never yet had a thought in your head,’ said Brint, and the other two chortled away again. Even West managed a smile this time, but it didn’t last long.

‘How was the battle?’ asked Jalenhorm.

West stared at his glass for a long moment. ‘It was bad. The Northmen set a trap for Ladisla and he fell right into it, squandered his cavalry. Then a mist came up, all of a sudden, and you couldn’t see the hand before your face. Their horse were on us before we knew what was happening. I took a knock on the head, I think. Next I remember I was in the mud on my back and there was a Northman bearing down on me. With this.’ He slid the heavy sword out of his belt and laid it down on the table.

The three officers stared at it, spellbound. ‘Bloody hell,’ muttered Kaspa.

Brint’s eyes were wide. ‘How did you get the better of him?’

‘I didn’t. This girl I was telling you about . . .’

‘Yes?’

‘She smashed his brains out with a hammer. Saved my life.’

‘Bloody hell,’ muttered Kaspa.

‘Phew,’ Brint sat back heavily in his chair. ‘Sounds like quite a woman!’

West was frowning, staring down at the glass in his hand. ‘You could say that.’ He remembered the feeling of Cathil sleeping beside him, her breath against his cheek. Quite a woman. ‘You really could say that.’ He drained his glass and stood up, stuck the Northman’s sword back through his belt.

‘You’re going?’ asked Brint.

‘There’s something I need to take care of.’

Jalenhorm stood up with him. ‘I should thank you, Colonel. For sending me off with the letter. It sounds like you were right. There was nothing I could have done.’

‘No.’ West took a deep breath, and blew it out. ‘There was nothing anyone could have done.’

The night was still, and crisp, and cold, and West’s boots slipped and squelched in the half-frozen mud. Fires burned here and there and men clustered round them in the darkness, swaddled in all the clothes they possessed, breath smoking, pinched faces lit in flickering yellow. One fire burned brighter than the others, up on a slope above the camp, and West made for that now, feet weaving from the drink. He saw two dark figures sitting near it, taking shape as he came closer.

Black Dow was having a pipe, chagga smoke curling out from his fierce grin, an open bottle wedged between his crossed legs, several empty ones scattered in the snow nearby. Somewhere away to the right, off in the darkness, West could hear someone singing in Northern. A huge, deep voice, and singing very badly. ‘He cut him to the booooones. No. To the boooones. To the . . . wait on.’

‘You alright?’ asked West, holding his gloved hands out to the crackling flames.

Threetrees grinned happily up at him, wobbling slightly back and forward. West wondered if it was the first time he had seen the old warrior smile. He jerked a thumb down the hill. ‘Tul’s having a piss. And singing. I’m drunk as fucking shit.’ He fell slowly backwards and crunched down into the snow, arms and legs spread out wide. ‘And I been smoking. I’m soaked. I’m wet as the fucking Crinna. Where are we, Dow?’

Dow squinted across the fire, mouth wide open, like he was looking at something far away. ‘Middle o’ fucking nowhere,’ he said, waving the pipe around. He started cackling, grabbed hold of Threetrees’ boot and shook it. ‘Where else would we be? You want this, Furious?’ He thrust the pipe up at West.

‘Alright.’ He sucked on the stem, felt the smoke biting in his lungs. He coughed brown steam out into the frosty air, and sucked again.

‘Give me that,’ said Threetrees, sitting up and snatching the pipe off him.

Tul’s great rumbling voice came floating up out of the darkness, horribly out of tune. ‘He swung his axe like . . . what is it? He swung his axe like . . . shit. No. Hold on . . .’

‘Do you know where Cathil is?’ asked West.

Dow leered up at him. ‘Oh, she’s around.’ He waved his hand toward a cluster of tents higher up the slope. ‘Up that way, I reckon.’

‘Around,’ echoed Threetrees, chuckling softly. ‘Around.’

‘He was . . . the Bloody . . . Niiiiine!’ came gurgling from the trees.

West followed footprints off up the slope, towards the tents. The smoke was already having an effect on him. His head felt light, his feet moved easily. His nose didn’t feel cold any more, just pleasantly tingling. He heard a woman’s voice, laughing softly. He grinned, took a few more crunching steps through the snow towards the tents. Warm light spilled out from one, through a narrow gap in the cloth. The laughter grew louder.

‘Uh . . . uh . . . uh . . .’

West frowned. That didn’t sound like laughter. He came closer, doing his best to be quiet. Another sound wandered into his fuzzy mind. An intermittent growling, like some kind of animal. He edged closer still, bending down to peer through the gap, hardly daring even to breathe.

‘Uh . . . uh . . . uh . . .’

He saw a woman’s bare back, squirming up and down. A thin back, he could see the sinews bunching as she moved, the knobbles of her backbone shifting under her skin. Closer still, and he could see her hair, shaggy brown and messy. Cathil. A pair of sinewy legs stuck out from under her towards West, one foot almost close enough for him to touch, its thick toes wriggling.

‘Uh . . . uh . . . uh . . .’

A hand slid up under her armpit, another round behind one knee. There was a low growl and the lovers, if you could call them that, rolled smoothly over so she was underneath. West’s mouth dropped open. He could see the side of the man’s head, and he stared at it. There was no mistaking the sharp, stubbly jaw line. The Dogman. His arse was sticking up towards West, moving in and out. Cathil’s hand clutched at one hairy buttock, squeezing at it in time to the movement.

‘Uh . . . Uh . . . Uh!’

West clamped one hand over his mouth, eyes bulging, half-horrified, half strangely aroused. He was caught hopelessly between wanting to watch, and wanting to run, and came down on the latter without thinking. He took a step back, his heel caught a tent peg and he went sprawling over with a stifled cry.

‘What the fuck?’ he heard from inside the tent. He scrambled up and turned away, started to flounder through the snow in the darkness as he heard the flap thrown back. ‘Which of you is it, you bastards?’ came Dogman’s voice from above, bellowing in Northern. ‘That you, Dow? I’ll fucking kill you!’

The High Places

‘The Broken Mountains,’ breathed Brother Longfoot, his voice hushed with awe. ‘Truly, a magnificent sight.’

‘I think I’d like it better if I didn’t have to climb ’em,’ grunted Logen.

Jezal by no means disagreed. The character of the land they rode through had been changing day by day, from softly sloping grassland, to gently rolling plains, to buckled hills spattered with bare rocks and sullen groups of stunted trees. Always in the distance had been the dim grey rumours of the mountain peaks, growing larger and more distinct with each morning until they seemed to pierce the brooding clouds themselves.

Now they sat in their very shadow. The long valley they had been following with its waving trees and winding stream ended at a maze of broken walls. Beyond it lay a steep rise into the rugged foothills, beyond them the first true outlier of the mountains rose, a stark outline of jagged rock, proud and magnificent, smeared at the distant top with white snow. A child’s vertiginous notion of what a mountain should be.

Bayaz swept the ruined foundations with his hard green eyes. ‘There was a strong fortress here. It marked the western limits of the Empire, before pioneers crossed the pass and settled the valleys on the far side.’ The place was nothing more now than a home for stinging weeds and scratching brambles. The Magus clambered from the cart and squatted down, stretching out his back and working his legs, grimacing all the while. He still looked old and ill, but a great deal of both flesh and colour had returned to his face since they left Aulcus behind. ‘Here ends my rest,’ he sighed. ‘This cart has served us well, and the beasts too, but the pass will be too steep for horses.’

Jezal saw the track now, switching back and forth as it climbed, a faint line through the piles of wild grass and steep rock, lost over a ridge high above. ‘It looks a long way.’

Bayaz snorted. ‘But the first ascent of many we will make today, and there will be many more beyond them. We will be a week at least in the mountains, my boy, if all goes well.’ Jezal hardly dared ask what might happen if things went badly. ‘We must travel light. We have a long, steep

road to follow. Water and all the food we have left. Warm clothes, for it will be bitter cold among the peaks.'

'The birth of spring is perhaps not the best time to cross a mountain range,' observed Longfoot under his breath.

Bayaz looked sharply sideways. 'Some would say the best time to cross an obstacle is when one finds oneself on the wrong side of it! Or do you suggest we wait for summer?' The Navigator chose, wisely in Jezal's opinion, not to reply. 'The pass is well-sheltered in the main, the weather should be far from our most pressing worry. We will need ropes, though. The road was good, in the Old Time, if narrow, but that was long ago. It might have been washed away in places, or tumbled into deep valleys, who knows? We may have some tough climbing ahead of us.'

'I can hardly wait,' muttered Jezal.

'Then there is this.' The Magus pulled one of the nearly empty fodder sacks open, pushed the hay out of the way with his bony hands. The box they had taken from the House of the Maker lay in its bottom, a block of darkness among the pale, dry grass.

'And who gets the joy of carrying that bastard?' Logen looked up from under his brows. 'How about we draw lots? No?' No one said anything. The Northman grunted as he hooked his hands under it and dragged it off the cart towards him, its edge squealing against the wood. 'Reckon it's me, then,' he said, thick veins standing out from his neck as he hauled the weighty thing onto a blanket.

Jezal did not at all enjoy looking at it. It reminded him too much of the suffocating hallways of the Maker's House. Of Bayaz' dark stories about magic, and demons, and the Other Side. Of the fact that there was a purpose to this journey that he did not understand, but definitely did not like the sound of. He was glad when Logen finally had it wrapped up in blankets and stowed in a pack. Out of sight, at least, if not entirely out of mind.

They all had plenty to carry. Jezal took his steels, of course, sheathed at his belt. The clothes he wore: the least stained, torn and reeking he possessed, his ripped and battered, one-armed coat over the top. He had a spare shirt in his pack, a coil of rope above it, and half their stock of food on top of that. He almost wished that were heavier: they were down to their last box of biscuits, half a sack of oatmeal and a packet of salted fish that disgusted everyone except Quai. He rolled up a pair of blankets and belted

them to the top of his pack, hung a full canteen at his waist, and was ready to go. As ready as he was going to get, anyway.

Quai unhitched the carthorses while Jezal stripped the saddles and harness from the other two. It seemed hardly fair, leaving them in the middle of nowhere after they had carried them all the way from Calcis. It felt like years ago to Jezal, thinking back. He was a different man now from the one who had set out from that city across the plain. He almost winced to remember his arrogance, and his ignorance, and his selfishness.

'Yah!' he shouted. His horse looked at him sadly without moving, then put its head down and began to nibble at the grass near his feet. He rubbed its back fondly. 'Well. I suppose they will find their way in time.'

'Or not,' grunted Ferro, drawing her sword.

'What are you—'

The curved blade chopped halfway through the neck of Jezal's horse, spattering warm, wet specks in his stricken face. Its front legs crumpled and it slid to the ground, toppled onto its side, blood gushing out into the grass.

Ferro grabbed hold of one of its hooves, hauled it towards her with one hand and started hacking the leg from the carcass with short, efficient blows while Jezal stared, his mouth open. She scowled up at him.

'I am not leaving all this meat for the birds. It will not keep long, but we will eat well enough tonight, at least. Get that sack.'

Logen flung one of the empty feed bags to her, and shrugged. 'You can't get attached to things, Jezal. Not out here in the wild.'

No one spoke as they began to climb. They all were bent over and concentrating on the crumbling track beneath their shuffling feet. The path rose and turned back, rose and turned back time after time and soon Jezal's legs were aching, his shoulders were sore, his face was damp with sweat. One step at a time. That was what West used to tell him, when he was flagging on the long runs round the Agriont. One step at a time, and he had been right. Left foot, right foot, and up they went.

After a spell of this repetitive effort he stopped and looked down. It was amazing, how high they had climbed in so short a time. He could see the foundations of the ruined fortress, grey outlines in the green turf at the foot of the pass. Beyond it the rutted track led back through the crumpled hills towards Aulcus. Jezal gave a sudden shudder and turned back towards the mountains. Better to leave all that behind him.

Logen slogged up the steep path, his worn boots scraping and crunching in the gravel and the dirt, the metal box in his pack a dead weight that dragged on his shoulders and seemed to get heavier with each step, that dug into his flesh like a bag of nails even though it was wrapped in blankets. But Logen was not so very bothered by it. He was too busy watching Ferro's arse move as she walked ahead of him, lean muscles squeezing with every step under the stained canvas of her trousers.

It was an odd thing. Before he'd fucked her he hadn't thought about her that way at all. He'd been too concerned with trying to stop her running off, or shooting him, or stabbing one of the others. So busy watching her scowl that he hadn't seen her face. So busy watching her hands that he'd never noticed the rest of her. Now he couldn't think about anything else.

Every movement of hers seemed fascinating. He'd catch himself watching her all the time. While they were on the move. While they were sitting down. While she was eating, or drinking, or talking, or spitting. While she was pulling her boots on in the morning or pulling them off at night. To make matters worse, his cock was halfway hard the whole time from watching her out of the corners of his eyes, and imagining her naked. It was getting to be quite an embarrassment.

'What are you looking at?' Logen stopped and gazed up into the sun. Ferro was frowning down at him. He stood and shifted the pack on his back, rubbing at his sore shoulders, wiping a sheen of sweat from his forehead. He could've thought up a lie, easily enough. He'd been watching the magnificent mountain peaks. He'd been watching where he put his feet. He'd been checking that her pack was on right. But what would've been the point? They both knew well enough what he'd been looking at, and the others had pushed on well out of earshot.

'I'm looking at your arse,' he said, shrugging his shoulders. 'Sorry, but it's a good one. No harm looking, is there?'

She opened her mouth angrily but he put his head down and trudged round her before she had the chance to speak, his thumbs hooked under the straps of his pack. When he'd got ten paces or so he looked over his shoulder. She was still standing there, hands on her hips, frowning up at him. He grinned back.

'What are you looking at?' he said.

They stopped for water in the cold fresh morning, on a ledge above a plunging valley. Through spreading trees heavy with red berries growing sideways from the bare rock, Jezal could see white water surging in its narrow bottom. Dizzying cliffs rose on the far side, sheets of grey stone not far from sheer, ending in towering crags high above, where dark birds flapped and crowed to each other, while swirls of white cloud turned in the pale sky beyond. A spectacular setting, if somewhat unsettling.

'Beautiful,' murmured Jezal, but taking care not to get too close to the edge.

Logen nodded. 'Reminds me of home. When I was a lad, I used to spend weeks at a time up in the High Places, testing myself against the mountains.' He took a swallow from the flask then handed it to Jezal, staring up through narrowed eyes at the dark peaks. 'They always win, though. This Empire's come and gone, and here they still are, looking down on it all. Here they'll still be, long after all of us have gone back to the mud. They looked down on my home.' He gave a long snort, then spat phlegm over the edge of the valley. 'Now they look down on nothing.'

Jezal took a swallow of water himself. 'Will you go back to the North, after this?'

'Maybe. I've some scores to settle. Some deep, hard scores.' The Northman shrugged his shoulders. 'But if I let 'em lie I daresay no one would be the worse off. I reckon they all think I'm dead, and no one's anything but relieved about it.'

'Nothing to go back to?'

Logen winced. 'Nothing but more blood. My family's long dead and rotted, and those friends I didn't turn on and kill myself, I got killed with my pride and my stupidity. So much for my achievements. But you've still got time, eh, Jezal? A good chance at a nice, peaceful life. What will you do?'

'Well . . . I've been thinking . . .' he cleared his throat, suddenly nervous, as though giving voice to his plans made them far closer to reality. 'There's a girl back home . . . well, a woman, I suppose. My friend's sister, in fact . . . her name is Ardee. I think that, perhaps, I love her . . .' It was strange, that he was discussing his innermost feelings with this man he had thought a savage. With this man who could understand nothing of the delicate rules of

life in the Union, of the sacrifice that Jezal was considering. But somehow it was easy to say. ‘I’ve been thinking . . . well . . . if she’ll have me, perhaps . . . we might marry.’

‘That sounds like a good plan.’ Logen grinned and nodded. ‘Marry her, and sow some seeds.’

Jezal raised his eyebrows. ‘I don’t know much about farming.’

The Northman spluttered with laughter. ‘Not those kind of seeds, boy!’ He clapped him on the arm. ‘One piece of advice, though, if you’ll take one from the likes of me, find something to do with your life that don’t involve killing.’ He bent and swung up his pack, shoved his arms through the straps. ‘Leave the fighting to those with less sense.’ And he turned and struggled up the track.

Jezal nodded slowly to himself. He touched one hand to the scar on his chin, his tongue finding the hole in his teeth. Logen was right. Fighting was not the life for him. He already had one scar too many.

*

It was a bright day. The first time Ferro had been warm in a long while and the sun felt good, hot and angry on her face, on her bare forearms, on the backs of her hands. The shadows of rock and branch were laid out sharp on the stony ground, the spray from the falling water that flowed beside the old track flashed as it fell through the air.

The others had fallen behind. Longfoot, taking his time, smiling up at anything and everything, blathering on about the majesty of the views. Quai hunched up and dogged under the weight of his pack. Bayaz wincing and sweating, puffing as though he might fall dead at any minute. Luthar moaning about his blisters to anyone who would listen, which was no one. So it was only her and Ninefingers, striding up ahead in stony silence.

Just the way she liked it.

She scrambled over a lip of crumbling rock and came upon a dark pool, lapping at a crescent of flat stones, water hissing and splattering down into it over piled up rocks bearded with wet moss. A pair of twisted trees spread their branches out above, thin, fresh-budded leaves shimmering and rustling

in the breeze. The sunlight sparkled, and insects skated and buzzed lazily on the rippling water.

A beautiful place, most likely, if you thought that way.

Ferro did not. ‘Fish in there,’ she murmured, licking her lips. A fish would be nice, stuck on a twig over a fire. The bits of horse they had carried with them were all gone, and she was hungry. She watched the vague shapes flicker under the shimmering water as she squatted down to fill up her canteen. Lots of fish. Ninefingers dumped his heavy pack and sat down on the rocks beside it, dragging his boots off. He rolled his trousers up above his knees. ‘What are you doing, pink?’

He grinned at her. ‘I’m going to tickle me some fish out of that pool.’

‘With your hands? You got clever enough fingers for that?’

‘I reckon you’d know.’ She frowned at him but he only smiled the wider, skin creasing up round the corners of his eyes. ‘Watch and learn, woman.’ And he paddled out, bent over, lips pressed tight together with concentration, feeling gently around in the water.

‘What’s he up to?’ Luthar dumped his pack down beside Ferro’s and wiped his glistening face with the back of his hand.

‘Fool thinks he can catch a fish.’

‘What, with his hands?’

‘Watch and learn, boy,’ muttered Ninefingers. ‘Aaaah . . .’ His face broke out into a smile. ‘And here she is.’ The muscles in his forearm shifted as he worked his fingers under the water. ‘Got it!’ And he snatched his hand up in a shower of spray. Something flashed in the bright sun and he tossed it onto the bank beside them leaving a trail of dark wet spots on the dry stones. A fish, flipping and jumping.

‘Hah hah!’ cried Longfoot, stepping up beside them. ‘Tricking fish out of the pool, is he? A most impressive and remarkable skill. I once met a man of the Thousand Isles who was reckoned the greatest fisherman in the Circle of the World. I do declare, he could sit upon the bank and sing, and the fish would jump into his lap. They would indeed!’ He frowned to find no one delighted by his tale, but now Bayaz was dragging himself over the lip, almost on hands and knees. His apprentice appeared behind him, face set hard.

The First of the Magi tottered down, leaning heavily on his staff, and fell back against a rock. ‘Perhaps . . . we should camp here.’ He gasped for

breath, sweat running down his gaunt face. ‘You would never guess I once ran through this pass. I made it in two days.’ He let his staff drop from his trembling fingers and it clattered down amongst the dry grey driftwood near the water’s edge. ‘Long ago . . .’

‘I’ve been thinking . . .’ muttered Luthar.

Bayaz’ tired eyes swivelled sideways, as though even turning his head might prove too much of an effort. ‘Thinking and walking? Pray do not strain yourself, Captain Luthar.’

‘Why the edge of the World?’

The Magus frowned. ‘Not for the exercise, I assure you. What we seek is there.’

‘Yes, but why is it there?’

‘Uh,’ grunted Ferro in agreement. A good question.

Bayaz took a long breath and puffed out his cheeks. ‘Never any rest, eh? After the destruction of Aulcus, the fall of Glustrod, the three remaining sons of Euz met. Juvens, Bedesh, and Kanedias. They discussed what should be done . . . with the Seed.’

‘Have that!’ shouted Ninefingers, pulling another fish from the water and flinging it onto the stones beside the first. Bayaz watched it, expressionless, as it squirmed and flopped, mouth and gills gulping desperately at the suffocating air.

‘Kanedias desired to study it. He claimed he could turn it to righteous purposes. Juvens feared the stone, but knew of no way to destroy it, so he gave it into his brother’s keeping. Over long years though, as the wounds of the Empire failed to heal, he came to regret his decision. He worried that Kanedias, hungry for power, might break the First Law as Glustrod had done. He demanded the stone be put beyond use. At first the Maker refused, and the trust between the brothers dwindled. I know this, for I was the one who carried the messages between them. Even then, I learned since, they were preparing the weapons that they would one day use against each other. Juvens begged, then pleaded, then threatened, and eventually Kanedias relented. So the three sons of Euz journeyed to Shabulyan.’

‘No place more remote in the whole Circle of the World,’ muttered Longfoot.

‘That is why it was chosen. They gave up the Seed to the spirit of the island, to keep safe until the end of time.’

‘They commanded the spirit never to release it,’ murmured Quai.

‘My apprentice shows his ignorance again,’ returned Bayaz, glaring from under his bushy brows. ‘Not never, Master Quai. Juvens was wise enough to know that he could not guess all outcomes. He realised that a desperate time might come, in some future age, when the power of . . . this thing might be needed. So Bedesh commanded the spirit to release it only to a man who carried Juvens’ staff.’

Longfoot frowned. ‘Then where is it?’

Bayaz pointed to the length of wood he used for a stick, lying on the ground beside him, rough and unadorned. ‘That’s it?’ muttered Luthar, sounding more than a little disappointed.

‘What did you expect, Captain?’ Bayaz grinned sideways at him. ‘Ten feet of polished gold, inlaid with runes of crystal, topped by a diamond the size of your head?’ The Magus snorted. ‘Even I have never seen a gem *that* big. A simple stick was good enough for my master. He needed nothing more. A length of wood does not by itself make a man wise, or noble, or powerful, any more than a length of steel does. Power comes from the flesh, my boy, and from the heart, and from the head. From the head most of all.’

‘I love this pool!’ cackled Ninefingers, tossing another fish out onto the rocks.

‘Juvens,’ murmured Longfoot softly, ‘and his brothers, powerful beyond guessing, between men and gods. Even they feared this thing. They went to such pains to put it beyond use. Should we not fear it, as they did?’

Bayaz stared at Ferro, his eyes glittering, and she stared back. Beads of sweat stood from his wrinkled skin, darkened the hairs of his beard, but his face was flat as a closed door. ‘Weapons are dangerous, to those who do not understand them. With Ferro Maljinn’s bow I might shoot myself in the foot, if I did not know how to use it. With Captain Luthar’s steel I might cut my ally, had I not the skill. The greater the weapon, the greater the danger. I have the proper respect for this thing, believe me, but to fight our enemies we need a powerful weapon indeed.’

Ferro frowned. She was yet to be convinced that her enemies and his were quite the same, but she would let it sleep, for now. She had come too far, and got too close, not to see this business through. She glanced over at Ninefingers and caught him staring at her. His eyes flicked away, back to the water. She frowned deeper. He was always looking at her lately. Staring,

and grinning, and making bad jokes. And now she found herself looking at him more often than there was any need for. Patterns of light flowed across his face, reflected from the rippling water. He looked up again, and their eyes met, and he grinned at her, just for an instant.

Ferro's frown grew deeper yet. She pulled her knife out, snatched up one of the fish and took its head off, slit it open and flicked its slimy guts out, plopping down into the water next to Ninefingers' leg. It had been a mistake to fuck him, of course, but things had not turned out so very badly after all.

'Hah!' Ninefingers sent up another glittering spray of water, then he stumbled, clutching at the air. 'Ah!' The fish flapped from his hands, a streak of flipping brightness, and the Northman crashed into the water on his face. He came up spitting and shaking his head, hair plastered to his skull. 'Bastard!'

'Every man has, somewhere in the world, an adversary cleverer than himself.' Bayaz stretched out his legs in front of him. 'Could it be, Master Ninefingers, that you have finally found yours?'

Jezal woke with a start. It was the middle of the night. It took him a dizzy moment to remember where he was, for he had been dreaming of home, of the Agriont, of sunny days and barmy evenings. Of Ardee, or someone like her, smiling lop-sided at him in his cosy living room. Now the stars were scattered bright and stark across the black sky, and the chill, sharp air of the High Places nipped at Jezal's lips, and his nostrils, and the tips of his ears.

He was back up in the Broken Mountains, half the width of the world from Adua, and he felt a pang of loss. At least his stomach was full. Fish and biscuit, the first proper meal he'd eaten since the horse ran out. There was still warmth from the fire on the side of his face and he turned towards it, grinning at the glowing embers and dragging his blankets up under his chin. Happiness was nothing more than a fresh fish and a fire still alight.

He frowned. The blankets beside him, where Logen had been sleeping, were moving around. At first he took it for the Northman turning in his sleep, but they carried on moving, and did not stop. A slow, regular shifting, accompanied, Jezal now realised, by a soft grunting sound. He had taken it at first for Bayaz' snoring, but now he saw otherwise. Straining into the darkness he made out Ninefingers' pale shoulder and arm, thick muscles

straining. Under his arm, squeezing hard at his side, there was a dark-skinned hand.

Jezal's mouth hung open. Logen and Ferro, and from the sound of it there could be no doubt that they were coupling! What was more, not a stride from his head! He stared, watching the blankets bucking and shifting in the dim light from the fire. When had they . . . Why were they . . . How had they . . . It was a damned imposition is what it was! His old distaste for them flooded back in a moment and his scarred lip curled. A pair of savages, rutting in full view! He had half a mind to get up and kick them as you might kick a pair of dogs who had, to the general embarrassment of all, unexpectedly taken to each other at a garden party.

'Shit,' whispered a voice. Jezal froze, wondering if one of them had seen him.

'Hold on.' There was a brief pause.

'Ah . . . ah, that's it.' The repetitive movement started up again, the blankets flapping back and forward, slowly to begin with, then faster. How could they possibly have expected him to sleep through this? He scowled and rolled away, pulling his own covers over his head, and lay there in the darkness, listening to Ninefingers' throaty grunting and Ferro's urgent hissing growing steadily louder. He squeezed his eyes shut, and felt a sting of tears underneath his lids.

Damn it but he was lonely.

Coming Over

The road curved down from the west, down the bare white valley between two long ridges, all covered in dark pines. It met the river at the ford, the Whiteflow running high with meltwater, fast flowing over the rocks and full of spit and froth – earning its name alright.

‘So that’s it then,’ muttered Tul, lying on his belly and peering through the bushes.

‘I reckon,’ said Dogman, ‘less there’s another giant fortress anywhere on the river.’

From up here on the ridge the Dogman could see its shape clear, towering great walls of sheer dark stones, perfectly six sided, twelve strides high at the least, a massive round tower at each corner, the grey slate roofs of buildings round a courtyard in the midst. Just outside that there was a smaller wall, six sides again, half as high but still high enough, studded with a dozen smaller towers. One side backed to the river, the other five had a wide moat dug round them, so the whole thing was made an island of sharp stone. One bridge out to it, and one bridge only, stretching to a gatehouse the size of a hill.

‘Shit on that,’ said Dow. ‘You ever seen walls the like of those? How the hell did Bethod get in there?’

Dogman shook his head. ‘Don’t hardly matter how. He won’t fit his whole army in it.’

‘He won’t want to,’ said Threetrees. ‘Not Bethod. That’s not his way. He’d rather be outside, where he can move, waiting for his chance to catch ’em off guard.’

‘Uh,’ grunted Grim, nodding.

‘Fucking Union!’ cursed Dow. ‘They’re never on guard! All that time we followed Bethod up from the south and they bloody let him past without a fight! Now he’s all walled up here, close to food and water, nice and happy, waiting for us!’

Threetrees clicked his tongue. ‘No point crying ’bout it now, is there? Bethod got round you once or twice before, as I recall.’

‘Huh. Bastard’s got one hell of a knack for turning up where he ain’t wanted.’

Dogman looked down at the fortress, and the river behind, and the long valley, and the high ground on the other side, covered with trees. ‘He’ll have men up on the ridge opposite, and down there in those woods round the moat too, I shouldn’t wonder.’

‘Well you got it all figured, don’t you?’ said Dow, looking sideways. ‘There’s just one thing we still need to know. She suck your cock yet?’

‘What?’ said the Dogman, caught not knowing what to say. Tul spluttered with laughter. Threetrees started chuckling to himself. Even Grim made a kind of sound, like breath, but louder.

‘Simple question ain’t it?’ asked Dow. ‘Has she, or has she not, sucked it?’

Dogman frowned and hunched his shoulders. ‘Shit on that.’

Tul could barely hold his giggling back. ‘She did what to it? She shit on it? You was right, Dow, they don’t do it the same down there in the Union!’ Now they were all laughing, apart from the Dogman of course.

‘Piss on the lot o’ you,’ he grunted. ‘Maybe you should suck each other’s. At least it might shut you up.’

Dow slapped him on the shoulder. ‘Don’t think so. You know how Tul is for talking with his mouth full!’ Tul clamped his hand over his face and blew snot out of his nose, he was laughing so hard. Dogman gave him a look but that was like hoping a look would stop a rock falling. It didn’t.

‘Alright now, best be quiet,’ muttered Threetrees, but still grinning. ‘Someone better take a closer look. See if we can work out where Bethod’s boys are all at before the Union come fumbling up that road like a pack o’ fools.’

Dogman felt his heart sinking. ‘One of us better? Which of you bastards is it going to be then?’

Black Dow grinned as he slapped him on the shoulder. ‘I reckon whoever got to stick his twig in the fire last night should be the one to face the cold this morning, eh, lads?’

Dogman crept down through the trees, bow in one hand with a shaft nocked to it but the string not pulled back, for fear of letting it go by accident and shooting himself in the leg or some foolishness. He’d seen that happen

before, and he'd no wish to be hopping back to the camp, trying to explain to the others how he got one of his own arrows through his foot. He'd never hear the end of it.

He knelt and peered through the trees, looked down at the ground – bare brown earth, and patches of white snow, and piles of wet pine needles, and . . . he stopped breathing. There was a footprint near him. Half in mud and half in snow. The snow was melting and falling, melting and falling off and on. A print wouldn't have lasted long today. That meant it was made recent. The Dogman sniffed the air. Not much to smell, but it was harder to smell anything in the cold – nose all pink and numb and full of cold snot. He crept the way the footprint was pointing, looking all round. He saw another, and another. Someone had come this way, no doubt, and not long ago.

'You're the Dogman, ain't you.'

He froze, heart thumping like big boots upstairs all of a sudden. He turned round, to look where the voice came from. There was a man sitting on a fallen tree ten strides away, lying back against a thick branch, hands clasped behind his head, stretched out like he was near asleep. He had long black hair hanging in his face, but one eye peered out at the Dogman, watchful. He sat forward, slowly.

'Now I'll leave these here,' he said, pointing at a heavy axe half-buried in the rotten trunk, and a round shield leaning near it. 'So you know I'm looking to talk, and I'll come on over. How's that sound to you?'

Dogman raised his bow and drew the string back. 'Come on over if you must, but if you try more 'n talk I'll put an arrow through your neck.'

'Fair enough.' Long Hair rocked himself forward and slithered off the trunk, leaving his weapons behind, and came on through the trees. He walked with his head stooped over but he was a tall bastard still, holding his hands up in the air, palms out. All peaceful looking, no doubt, but the Dogman wasn't taking no chances. Peaceful-looking and peaceful are two different things.

'Might I say,' said the man as he came closer, 'in the interests of working up some trust between us, that you never saw me. If I'd had a bow I could've shot you where you stood.' It was a fair point, but the Dogman didn't like it any.

'You got a bow?'

'No I don't, as it goes.'

‘There’s your mistake, then,’ he snapped. ‘You can stop there.’

‘I believe I will,’ he said, standing a few strides distant.

‘So I’m the Dogman, and you know it. Who might you be?’

‘You remember Rattleneck, aye?’

‘Of course, but you ain’t him.’

‘No. I’m his son.’

Dogman frowned, and drew his bowstring back a touch tighter. ‘You’d best make your next answer a damn good one. Ninefingers killed Rattleneck’s son.’

‘That’s true. I’m his other son.’

‘But he was hardly more ’n a boy . . .’ Dogman paused, counting the winters in his head. ‘Shit. It’s that long ago?’

‘That long ago.’

‘You’ve grown some.’

‘That’s what boys do.’

‘You got a name now?’

‘Shivers, they call me.’

‘How come?’

He grinned. ‘Because my enemies shiver with fear when they face me.’

‘That so?’

‘Not entirely.’ He sighed. ‘Might as well know now. First time I went out raiding, I got drunk and fell in the river having a piss. Current sucked my trousers off and dumped me half a mile downstream. I got back to the camp shivering worse than anyone had ever seen, fruits sucked right up into my belly and everything.’ He scratched at his face. ‘Bloody embarrassment all round. Made up for it in the fighting, though.’

‘Really?’

‘I got some blood on my fingers, over the years. Not compared to you, I daresay, but enough for men to follow me.’

‘That so? How many?’

‘Two score Carls, or thereabouts. They’re not far away, but don’t get nervous. Some o’ my father’s people, from way back, and a few newer. Good hands, each man.’

‘Well, that’s nice for you, to have a little crew. Been fighting for Bethod, have you?’

‘Man needs some kind o’ work. Don’t mean we wouldn’t take better. Can I put my hands down yet?’

‘No, I like ’em there. What you doing out here in the woods alone, anyhow?’

Shivers pursed his lips, thoughtful. ‘Don’t take me for a madman, but I heard a rumour you got Rudd Threetrees over here.’

‘That’s a fact.’

‘Is it now?’

‘And Tul Duru Thunderhead, and Harding Grim, and Black Dow an’ all.’

Shivers raised his brows, leaned back against a tree, hands still up, while Dogman watched him careful. ‘Well that’s some weighty company you got there, alright. There’s twice the blood on you five than on my two score. Those are some names and no mistake. The sort of names men might want to follow.’

‘You looking to follow?’

‘Might be that I am.’

‘And your Carls too?’

‘Them too.’

It was tempting, the Dogman had to admit. Two score Carls, and they’d know where Bethod was at, maybe something of what he’d got planned. That’d save him some skulking around in the cold woods, and he was getting good and tired of wet trees. But he was a long way off trusting this tall bastard yet. He’d take him back to the camp, and Threetrees could weigh up what to do. ‘Alright,’ he said, ‘we’ll see. Why don’t you step off up the hill there, and I’ll follow on a few paces behind.’

‘Alright,’ said Shivers, turning and trudging up the slope, hands still up in the air, ‘but watch what you do with that shaft, eh? I don’t want to get stuck for you not looking where you’re stepping.’

‘Don’t worry about me, big lad, the Dogman don’t miss no—gah!’

His foot caught on a root and he lurched a step and fumbled his string. The arrow shot past Shivers’ head and thudded wobbling into a tree just beyond. Dogman ended up on his knees in the dirt, looking up at him looming over, clutching an empty bow in one hand. ‘Piss,’ he muttered. If the man had wanted to, Dogman had no doubt he could have swung one of those big fists down and knocked his head off.

‘Lucky you missed me,’ said Shivers. ‘Can I put my hands down now?’

Dow started as soon as they walked into the camp, of course. ‘Who the hell’s this bastard?’ he snarled, striding straight up to Shivers and staring him out, bristling up to him with his axe clutched in his hand. It might have looked a touch comical, Dow being half a head shorter, but Shivers didn’t seem much amused. Nor should he have.

‘He’s—’ the Dogman started, but he didn’t get any further.

‘He’s a tall bastard, eh? I ain’t talking up to a bastard like him! Sit down, big lad!’ and he threw his arm out and shoved Shivers over on his arse.

The Dogman thought he took it well, considering. He grunted when he hit the dirt, of course, then he blinked, then he propped himself on his elbows, grinning up at them. ‘I reckon I’ll just stay down here. Don’t hold it against me though, eh? I didn’t choose to be tall, any more than you chose to be an arsehole.’

Dogman winced at that, expecting Shivers to get a boot in the fruits for his trouble, but Dow started to grin instead. ‘Chose to be an arsehole, I like that. I like him. Who is he?’

‘His name’s Shivers,’ said the Dogman. ‘He’s Rattleneck’s son.’

Dow frowned. ‘But didn’t Ninefingers—’

‘His other son.’

‘But he’d be no more ’n a—’

‘Work it out.’

Dow frowned, then shook his head. ‘Shit. That long, eh?’

‘He looks like Rattleneck,’ came Tul’s voice, his shadow falling across them.

‘Bloody hell!’ said Shivers. ‘I thought you didn’t like tall folk? It’s two of you standing on top of each other ain’t it?’

‘Just the one.’ Tul reached down and pulled him up by one arm like he was a child fell over. ‘Sorry ’bout that greeting, friend. Those visitors we get we usually end up killing.’

‘I’ll hope to be the exception,’ said Shivers, still gawping up at the Thunderhead. ‘So that must be Harding Grim.’

‘Uh,’ said Grim, scarcely looking up from checking his shafts.

‘And you’re Threetrees?’

‘That I am,’ said the old boy, hands on his hips.

‘Well,’ muttered Shivers, rubbing at the back of his head. ‘I feel like I’m in deep water now, and no mistake. Deep water. Tul Duru, and Black Dow, and . . . bloody hell. You’re Threetrees, eh?’

‘I’m him.’

‘Well then. Shit. My father always said you was the best man left in all the North. That if he ever had to pick a man to follow, you’d be the one. ’Til you lost to the Bloody-Nine, o’ course, but some things you can’t help. Rudd Threetrees, right before me now . . .’

‘Why’ve you come here, boy?’

Shivers seemed to have run out of words, so the Dogman spoke for him. ‘He says he’s got two score Carls following him, and they all want to come over.’

Threetrees looked Shivers in the eye for a while. ‘Is that a fact?’

Shivers nodded. ‘You knew my father. He thought the way you did, and I’m cut from his cloth. Serving Bethod sticks in my neck.’

‘Might be I think a man should pick his chief and stick to him.’

‘I always thought so,’ said Shivers, ‘but that blade cuts both ways, no? A chief should look out for his people too, shouldn’t he?’ Dogman nodded to himself. A fair point to his mind. ‘Bethod don’t care a shit for none of us no more, if he ever did. He don’t listen to no one now but that witch of his.’

‘Witch?’ said Tul.

‘Aye, this sorceress, this Caurib, or whatever. The witch. The one who makes the mist. Bethod’s dabbling with some dark company. And this war, there’s no purpose to it. Angland? Who wants it anyway, we got land aplenty. He’ll lead us all back to the mud. Long as there was no one else to follow we stuck with it, but when we heard Rudd Threetrees might still be alive, and with the Union, well . . .’

‘You decided to have a look, eh?’

‘We’ve had enough. Bethod’s got some strange boys along. These easterners, from out past the Crinna, bones and hides men, you know, hardly men at all. Got no code, no mercy, don’t hardly speak the same language we do. Fucking savages, the lot of ’em. Bethod’s got some down in the Union fortress there, and they got all the bodies hung up on the walls, all cut with the bloody cross, guts hanging out, rotting. It ain’t right. Then there’s Calder and Scale tossing out orders like they know shit from porridge, like they got some names o’ their own besides their father’s.’

‘Fucking Calder,’ growled Tul, shaking his head.

‘Fucking Scale,’ hissed Dow, spitting on the wet ground.

‘No bigger pair o’ bastards in all the north,’ said Shivers. ‘And now I hear tell that Bethod’s made a deal.’

‘What kind of a deal?’ asked Threetrees.

Shivers turned and spat over his shoulder. ‘A deal with the fucking Shanka, that’s what.’

Dogman stared. They all did. That was some evil kind of a rumour. ‘With the Flatheads? How?’

‘Who knows? Might be that witch found some way to talk to ’em. Times are changing, fast, and it ain’t right, any of it. There’s a lot of boys over there ain’t happy. That’s without getting started on that Feared.’

Dow frowned. ‘Feared? I never heard of him.’

‘Where you lot been? Under the ice?’

They all looked at each other. ‘Pretty much,’ said the Dogman. ‘Pretty much.’

Cheap at the Price

‘You have a visitor, sir,’ muttered Barnam. His face, for some reason, was pale as death. ‘Clearly,’ snapped Glokta. ‘That was them knocking at the door, I assume.’ He dropped his spoon into his barely touched bowl of soup and licked sourly at his gums. *A particularly disgusting excuse for a meal, this evening. I miss Shickel’s cooking, if not her attempts to kill me.* ‘Well, who is it, man?’

‘It’s . . . er . . . it’s . . .’

Arch Lector Sult ducked through the low doorway so as not to disturb his flawless white hair on the frame. *Ah. I see.* He swept the cramped dining room with a scowl, lip wrinkled as though he had stumbled into an open sewer. ‘Don’t get up,’ he spat at Glokta. *I wasn’t planning to.*

Barnam swallowed. ‘Can I get your Eminence any—’

‘Get out!’ sneered Sult, and the old servant nearly fell over in his haste to make it to the door. The Arch Lector watched him go with withering scorn. T*he good humour of our previous meeting seems a vaguely remembered dream.*

‘Damn peasants,’ he hissed as he slid in behind Glokta’s narrow dining table. ‘There’s been another uprising near Keln, and this bastard the Tanner was in the midst of it again. An unpopular eviction turned into a bloody riot. Lord Finster entirely misjudged the mood, got three of his guards killed and himself besieged in his manor by an angry mob, the halfwit. They couldn’t get in, fortunately, so they satisfied themselves with burning down half the village.’ He snorted. ‘Their own damn village! That’s what an idiot does when he gets angry. He destroys whatever’s nearest, even if it’s his own house! The Open Council are screaming for blood of course. Peasant blood, and lots of it. Now we have to get the Inquisition going down there, root out some ringleaders, or some fools who can be made to look like them. It should be Finster himself we’re hanging, the dolt, but that’s hardly an option.’

Glokta cleared his throat. ‘I will pack for Keln immediately.’ *Tickling the peasantry. Hardly my choice of task, but—*

‘No. I need you for something else. Dagoska has fallen.’

Glokta raised an eyebrow. *Not so great a surprise, though. Hardly enough of a shock, one would have thought, to squeeze such a figure as his Eminence into my narrow quarters.*

'It seems the Gurkish were let in by a prior arrangement. Treason, of course, but at a time like that . . . hardly surprising. The Union forces were massacred, such as they were, but many of the mercenaries were merely enslaved, and the natives, by and large, were spared.' *Gurkish mercy, who could have thought it? Miracles do happen, then.*

Sult flicked angrily at a speck of dust on one immaculate glove. 'I hear that, when the Gurkish had broken into the citadel, General Vissbruck killed himself rather than be captured.' *Well I never. I didn't think he had it in him.* 'He ordered his body burned, so as not to give the enemy any remains to defile, then he cut his own throat. A brave man. A courageous statement. He will be honoured in Open Council tomorrow.'

How wonderful for him. A horrible death with honour is far preferable to a long life in obscurity, of course. 'Of course,' said Glokta quietly. 'A brave man.'

'That is not all. An envoy has arrived on the very heels of this news. An envoy from the Emperor of Gurkhul.'

'An envoy?'

'Indeed. Apparently seeking . . . peace.' The Arch Lector said the word with a sneer of contempt.

'Peace?'

'This room seems rather small for an echo.'

'Of course, your Eminence, but—'

'Why not? They have what they want. They have Dagoska, and there is nowhere further for them to go.'

'No, Arch Lector.' *Except, perhaps, across the sea . . .*

'Peace. It sticks in the craw to give anything away, but Dagoska was never worth much to us. Cost us more than we made from it, if anything. Nothing more than a trophy for the King. I daresay we're better off without it, the worthless rock.'

Glokta bowed his head. 'Absolutely, your Eminence.' *Although it makes one wonder why we bothered fighting for it.*

'Unfortunately, the loss of the place leaves you with nothing to be Superior of.' The Arch Lector looked almost pleased. *So it's back to plain*

old Inquisitor, eh? I suppose I'll no longer be welcome at the best social gatherings— 'But I have decided to let you keep the title. As Superior of Adua.'

Glokta paused. *A considerable promotion, except that* . . . 'Surely, your Eminence, that is Superior Goyle's role.'

'It is. And will continue to be.'

'Then—'

'You will share the responsibilities. Goyle is the more experienced man, so he will be the senior partner, and continue running the department. For you I will find some tasks suited to your particular talents. I'm hoping that a little healthy competition will bring out the best in you both.'

More than likely it will end with one of us dead, and we can all guess who the favourite is. Sult gave a thin smile, as though he knew precisely what Glokta was thinking. 'Or perhaps it will simply demonstrate that one of you is *superior* to the other.' He barked a joyless laugh at his own joke, and Glokta gave a watery, toothless grin of his own.

'In the meantime, I need you to deal with this envoy. You seem to have a way of handling these Kantics, though you might avoid beheading this one, at least for the time being.' The Arch Lector allowed himself another minuscule smile. 'If he's after anything more than peace, I want you to sniff it out. If we can get anything more than peace from him, then of course, sniff that out too. It would do no harm if we could avoid looking like we got our backs whipped.'

He stood awkwardly and manoeuvred himself out from behind the table, all the while frowning as though the tightness of the room was an intentional affront to his dignity. 'And please, Glokta, find yourself some better quarters. A Superior of Adua, living like this? It's an embarrassment!'

Glokta humbly bowed his head, causing an unpleasant stinging right down to his tailbone. 'Of course, your Eminence.'

The Emperor's envoy was a thickset man with a heavy, black beard, a white skull-cap, and a white robe worked with golden thread. He rose and bowed humbly as Glokta hobbled over the threshold. *As earthy and humble-seeming as the last emissary I dealt with was airy and arrogant. A different kind of man, I suppose, for a different purpose.*

‘Ah. Superior Glokta, I should have guessed.’ His voice was deep and rich, his mastery of the common tongue predictably excellent. ‘Many people on our side of the sea were very disappointed when your corpse was not among those found in the citadel of Dagoska.’

‘I hope you will convey my sincere apologies to them.’

‘I will do so. My name is Tulkis, and I am a councillor to Uthman-ul-Dosht, the Emperor of Gurkhul.’ The envoy grinned, a crescent of strong white teeth in his black beard. ‘I hope I fare better at your hands than the last emissary my people sent to you.’

Glokta paused. *A sense of humour? Most unexpected.* ‘I suppose that would depend on the tone you take.’

‘Of course. Shabbed al Islik Burai always was . . . confrontational. That, and his loyalties were . . . mixed.’ Tulkis’ grin grew wider. ‘He was a passionate believer. A very religious man. A man closer perhaps to church, than to state? I honour God, of course.’ And he touched his fingertips to his forehead. ‘I honour the great and holy Prophet Khalul.’ He touched his head again. ‘But I serve . . .’ And his eyes slid up to Glokta’s. ‘I serve only the Emperor.’

Interesting. ‘I thought that in your nation, church and state spoke with one voice.’

‘It has often been so, but there are those among us who believe that priests should concern themselves with prayer, and leave the governing to the Emperor and his advisors.’

‘I see. And what might the Emperor wish to communicate to us?’

‘The difficulty of capturing Dagoska has shocked the people. The priests had convinced them that the campaign would be easy, for God was with us, our cause was righteous, and so forth. God is great, of course,’ and he looked up to the ceiling, ‘but he is no substitute for good planning. The Emperor desires peace.’

Glokta sat silent for a moment. ‘The great Uthman-ul-Dosht? The mighty? The merciless? Desires peace?’

The envoy took no offence. ‘I am sure you understand that a reputation for ruthlessness can be useful. A great ruler, especially one of as wide and various a country as Gurkhul, must first be feared. He would desire to be loved also, but that is a luxury. Fear is essential. Whatever you may have heard, Uthman is neither a man of peace, nor of war. He is a man of . . .

what would be your word? Necessity. He is a man of the right tool at the right time.'

'Very prudent,' muttered Glokta.

'Peace, now. Mercy. Compromise. These are the tools that suit his purposes, even if they do not suit the purposes of . . . others,' and he touched his fingers to his forehead. 'And so he sends me, to find out if they suit you also.'

'Well, well, well. The mighty Uthman-ul-Dosht comes with mercy, and offers peace. These are strange times we live in, eh, Tulkis? Have the Gurkish learned to love their enemies? Or simply fear them?'

'One need not love one's enemy, or even fear him, to desire peace. One need only love oneself.'

'Is that so?'

'It is. I lost two sons in the wars between our peoples. One at Ulrioch in the last war. He was a priest, and burned in the temple there. The other died not long ago, at the siege of Dagoska. He led the charge when the first breach was made.'

Glokta frowned and stretched out his neck. *A hail of flatbow bolts. Tiny figures, falling in the rubble.* 'That was a brave charge.'

'War is harshest on the brave.'

'True. I am sorry for your losses.' *Though I feel no sorrow, in particular.*

'I thank you for your heartfelt condolences. God has seen fit to bless me with three more sons, but the spaces left by those two children lost will never close. It is almost like losing your own flesh. That is why I feel I understand something of what you have lost, in these same wars. I am sorry for those losses also.'

'Most kind.'

'We are leaders. War is what happens when we fail. Or are pushed into failure by the rash and the foolish. Victory is better than defeat, but . . . not by much. Therefore, the Emperor offers peace, in the hope that this may be a permanent end to the hostilities between our great nations. We have no true interest in crossing the seas to make war, and you have no true interest in toeholds on the Kantic continent. So we offer peace.'

'And is that all your offer?'

'All?'

‘What will our people make of it, if we surrender Dagoska up to you, so dearly bought in the last war?’

‘Let us be realistic. Your entanglements in the North put you at a considerable disadvantage. Dagoska is lost, I would put it from your mind.’ Tulkis seemed to think about it for a moment. ‘However, I could arrange for a dozen chests to be delivered, as reparations from my Emperor to your King. Chests of fragrant ebony wood, worked with golden leaf, carried by bowing slaves, preceded by humble officials of the Emperor’s government.’

‘And what would these chests contain?’

‘Nothing.’ They stared at each other across the room. ‘Except pride. You could say they contained whatever you wished. A fortune in Gurkish gold, in Kantic jewels, in incense from beyond the desert. More than the value of Dagoska itself. Perhaps that would mollify your people.’

Glokta breathed in sharply, and let it out. ‘Peace. And empty boxes.’ His left leg had gone numb under the table and he grimaced as he moved it, hissed through his gums as he forced himself out of his chair. ‘I will convey your offer to my superiors.’

He was just turning away when Tulkis held out his hand. Glokta looked at it for a moment. *Well, where’s the harm?* He reached out and squeezed it.

‘I hope you will be able to persuade them,’ said the Gurkish envoy.

So do I.

To the Edge of the World

On the morning of their ninth day in the mountains, Logen saw the sea. He dragged himself to the top of yet another painful scramble, and there it was. The track dropped steeply away into a stretch of low, flat country, and beyond was the shining line on the horizon. He could almost smell it, a salty tang on the air with each breath. He would have grinned if it hadn't reminded him of home so much.

'The sea,' he whispered.

'The ocean,' said Bayaz.

'We have crossed the western continent from shore to shore,' said Longfoot, grinning all the way across his face. 'We are close now.'

By afternoon they were closer still. The trail had widened to a muddy lane between fields, split up with ragged hedges. Mostly brown squares of turned earth, but some green with fresh grass, or with the sprouts of vegetables, some waving tall with a grey, tasteless-looking winter crop. Logen had never known much about farming, but it was plain enough that someone had been working this ground, and recently.

'What kind of people live all the way out here?' murmured Luthar, looking suspiciously out across the ill-tended fields.

'Descendants of the pioneers of long ago. When the Empire collapsed, they were left out here alone. Alone they have flourished, after a fashion.'

'You hear that?' hissed Ferro, her eyes narrowed, already fishing an arrow from her quiver. Logen put his head up, listening. A thumping sound, echoing from some distance, then a voice, thin on the wind. He put his hand on the grip of his sword and crouched down. He crept to an unruly stretch of hedge and peered over, Ferro beside him.

Two men were struggling with a tree stump in the midst of a turned field, one chopping at it with an axe, the other watching, hands on hips. Logen swallowed, uneasy. These two hardly looked much of a threat, but looks could lie. It had been a long time since they met a living thing that hadn't tried to kill them.

'Calm now,' muttered Bayaz. 'There is no danger here.'

Ferro frowned across at him. 'You've told us that before.'

‘Kill no one until I tell you!’ hissed the Magus, then called out in a language Logen didn’t know, waving one arm over his head in a gesture of greeting. The two men jerked round, staring open-mouthed. Bayaz shouted again. The farmers looked at each other, then set down their tools and walked slowly over.

They stopped a few strides away. An ugly-looking pair, even to Logen’s eye – short, stocky, rough-featured, dressed in colourless work clothes, patched and stained. They stared nervously at the six strangers, and at their weapons in particular, as though they’d never seen such people or such things before.

Bayaz spoke to them warmly, smiling and waving his arms, pointing out towards the ocean. One nodded, answered, shrugged and pointed down the track. He stepped through a gap in the hedge, off the field and into the road. Or from soft mud to hard mud, at least. He beckoned at them to follow while his companion watched suspiciously from the other side of the bushes.

‘He will take us to Cawneil,’ said Bayaz.

‘To who?’ muttered Logen, but the Magus did not answer. He was already striding westward after the farmer.

Heavy dusk under a grim sky, and they trudged through an empty town after their sullen guide. A singularly ill-favoured fellow, Jezal rather thought, but then peasants were rarely beauties in his experience, and he supposed that they were much the same the world over. The streets were dusty and deserted, weedy and scattered with refuse. Many houses were derelict, furry with moss and tangled with creeper. Those few that did show signs of occupation were, in the main, in a slovenly condition.

‘It would seem the glory of the past is faded here also,’ said Longfoot with some disappointment, ‘if indeed there ever was any.’

Bayaz nodded. ‘Glory is in short supply these days.’

A wide square opened out from the neglected houses. Ornamental gardens had been planted round the edge by some forgotten gardener, but the lawns were threadbare, the flowerbeds turned to briar-patches, the trees no more than withered claws. Out of this slow decay rose a huge and striking building, or more accurately a jumble of buildings of various confused shapes and styles. Three tall, round, tapering towers sprouted from their

midst, joined at their bases but separating higher up. One was broken off before the summit, its roof long fallen in, leaving naked rafters exposed.

'A library . . .' whispered Logen under his breath.

It scarcely looked like one to Jezal. 'It is?'

'The Great Western Library,' said Bayaz, as they crossed the dilapidated square in the looming shadow of those three crumbling towers. 'Here I took my first hesitant steps along the path of Art. Here my master taught me the First Law. Taught it to me again and again until I could recite it flawlessly in every language known. This was a place of learning, and wonder, and great beauty.'

Longfoot sucked his teeth. 'Time has not been kind to the place.'

'Time is never kind.'

Their guide said a few short words and indicated a tall door covered in flaking green paint. Then he shuffled away, eyeing them all with the deepest suspicion.

'You simply cannot get the help,' observed the First of the Magi as he watched the farmer hurry off, then he raised his staff and struck the door three good knocks. There was a long silence.

'Library?' Jezal heard Ferro asking, evidently unfamiliar with the word.

'For books,' came Logen's voice.

'Books,' she snorted. 'Waste of fucking time.'

Vague sounds echoed from beyond the gate: someone approaching inside, accompanied by an irritated muttering. Now locks clicked and grated and the weathered door squealed open. A man of an advanced age and a pronounced stoop gazed at them in wonder, an unintelligible curse frozen on his lips, a lighted taper casting a faint glow over one side of his wrinkled face.

'I am Bayaz, the First of the Magi, and I have business with Cawneil.' The servant continued to gawp. Jezal half expected a string of drool to escape from his toothless mouth it was hanging open so wide. Plainly, they did not receive large numbers of visitors.

The one flickering taper was pitifully inadequate to light the lofty hall beyond. Weighty tables sagged under tottering piles of books. Shelves rose up high on every wall, lost in the fusty darkness overhead. Shadows shifted over leather-bound spines of every size and colour, on bundles of loose parchments, on scrolls rolled and carelessly stacked in leaning pyramids.

Light sparked and flashed on silver gilt, and gold ornamentation, and dull jewels set into tomes of daunting size. A long staircase, banister highly polished by the passage of countless hands, steps worn down in the centres by the passage of countless feet, curved gracefully down into the midst of this accumulation of ancient knowledge. Dust sat thickly on every surface. One particularly monstrous cobweb became stickily tangled in Jezal's hair as he passed over the threshold, and he flicked and wrestled at it, face wrinkled in distaste.

'The lady of the house,' wheezed the doorman in a strange accent, 'has already taken to her couch.'

'Then wake her,' snapped Bayaz. 'The hour grows dark and I am in haste. We have no time to—'

'Well. Well. Well.' A woman stood upon the steps. 'The hour grows dark indeed, when old lovers come calling at my door.' A deep voice, smooth as syrup. She sauntered down the stairs with exaggerated slowness, one set of long nails trailing on the curving banister. She seemed perhaps of middle age: tall, thin, graceful, a curtain of long black hair falling over half her face.

'Sister. We have urgent matters to discuss.'

'Ah, do we indeed?' The one eye that Jezal could see was large, dark and heavy-lidded, rimmed faintly with sore, tearful pink. Languorously, lazily, almost sleepily it flowed over the group. 'How atrociously tiresome.'

'I am weary, Cawneil, I need none of your games.'

'We all are weary, Bayaz. We all are terribly weary.' She gave a long, theatrical sigh as she finally glided to the foot of the steps and across the uneven floor towards them. 'There was a time when you were willing to play. You would play my games for days at a time, as I recall.'

'That was long ago. Things change.'

Her face twisted with a sudden and unsettling anger. 'Things rot, you mean! But still,' and her voice softened again to a deep whisper, 'we last remnants of the great order of Magi should at least try to remain civil. Come now, my brother, my friend, my sweet, there is no need for undue haste. The day grows late, and there is time for you all to wash away the dirt of the road, discard those stinking rags and dress for dinner. Then we can talk over food, as civilised persons are wont to do. I so rarely have guests to entertain.' She swept past Logen, looking him admiringly up and down.

‘And you have brought me such rugged guests.’ She lingered on Ferro with her eyes. ‘Such exotic guests.’ Now she reached up and let a long finger trail across Jezal’s cheek. ‘Such comely guests!’

Jezal stood, rigid with embarrassment, entirely at a loss as to how to respond to this liberty. At close quarters her black hair was grey at the roots, no doubt heavily dyed. Her smooth skin seemed wrinkled and a touch yellow, no doubt heavily powdered. Her white gown was dirty round the hem, had a noticeable stain on one sleeve. She seemed as old as Bayaz looked, or perhaps older yet.

She peered into the corner where Quai was standing, and frowned. ‘What manner of guest this is, I am not sure . . . but you are welcome all at the Great Western Library. Welcome all . . .’

Jezal blinked at the looking-glass, his razor hanging from one nerveless hand.

Only a few moments before he had been reflecting on the journey, now that it was finally approaching its end, and congratulating himself on how much he had learned. Tolerance and understanding, courage and self-sacrifice. How he had grown as a man. How much he had changed. Congratulations no longer seemed appropriate. The looking-glass might have been an antique, his reflection in it dark and distorted, but there could be no doubt that his face was a ruin.

The pleasing symmetry was gone forever. His perfect jaw was skewed round sharply to the left, heavier on one side than the other, his noble chin was twisted at a slovenly angle. The scar began on his top lip as no more than a faint line, but it split in two and gouged brutally into the bottom one, dragging it down and giving him the appearance of having a permanent and unsightly leer.

No effort on his part helped. Smiling made it far worse yet, exposing the ugly gaps in his teeth, more suited to a prize-fighter or a bandit than to an officer of the King’s Own. The one mercy was that he would very likely die on the return journey, and no one of his old acquaintance would ever see him so horribly disfigured. A meagre consolation indeed.

A single tear plopped down into the basin under his face.

Then he swallowed, and he took a shuddering breath, and he wiped his wet cheek with the back of his forearm. He set his jaw, in its strange new

configuration, and he gripped the razor tightly. The damage was done now, and there could be no going back. Perhaps he was an uglier man, but he was a better man too, and at least, as Logen would have said, he was still alive. He gave the razor a flourish and scraped the patchy, straggling hair from his cheeks, from before his ears, from his throat. On his lip, his chin, and around his mouth he left it be. The beard looked well on him, he rather thought, as he rubbed the razor dry. Or it went a meagre way towards hiding his disfigurement, at least.

He pulled on the clothes that had been left for him. A fusty-smelling shirt and breeches of an ancient and absurdly unfashionable design. He almost laughed at his ill-formed reflection when he was finally prepared for dinner. The carefree denizens of the Agriont would hardly have recognised him. He hardly recognised himself.

The evening repast was not all that Jezal might have hoped for at the table of an important historical figure. The silverware was tarnished in the extreme, the plate worn and cracked, the table itself slanted to the point that Jezal was constantly expecting the entire meal to slide off onto the dirty floor. Food was served by the shambling doorman, at no faster pace than he had answered the gate, each dish arriving colder and more congealed than the last. First came a sticky soup of surpassing tastelessness. Next was a piece of fish so overcooked it was little more than ashes, then most recently a slab of meat so undercooked as to be virtually still alive.

Bayaz and Cawneil ate in stony silence, staring at each other down the length of the table in a way which seemed calculated to make everyone uncomfortable. Quai did nothing more than pick at his food, his dark eyes flicking intently between the two elderly Magi. Longfoot stuck into every course with relish, smiling round at the company as though they were all enjoying themselves equally. Logen was holding his fork in his fist, frowning and stabbing clumsily at his plate as if it were a troublesome Shanka, the ballooning sleeves of his ill-fitting doublet trailing occasionally in his food. Jezal had little doubt that Ferro could have used the cutlery with great dexterity had she wished, but she chose instead to eat with her hands, staring aggressively at anyone who met her gaze as if daring them to tell her not to. She had on the same travel-stained clothes she had worn for the past week, and Jezal wondered for a moment if she had been provided with a dress to wear. He nearly choked on his dinner at the notion.

Neither the meal, nor the company, nor the surroundings were quite what Jezal would have chosen, but the fact was that they had largely run out of food a few days before. Rations in that space of time had included a handful of chalky roots dug from the mountainside by Logen, six tiny eggs stolen by Ferro from a high nest, and some berries of indescribable bitterness which Longfoot had plucked from a tree, apparently at random. Jezal would happily have eaten his plate. He frowned as he hacked at the gristly meat on it, wondering if the plate might indeed be a tastier option.

'Is the ship still seaworthy?' growled Bayaz. Everyone looked up. The first words to have been said in quite some time.

Cawneil's dark eye regarded him coldly. 'Do you mean that ship on which Juvens and his brothers sailed to Shabulyan?'

'What other?'

'Then no. It is not seaworthy. It is rotted to green mulch in its old dock. But do not fear. Another was built, and when that rotted also, another after it. The latest rocks on the tides, tethered to the shore, well-coated with weed and barnacle but kept always crewed and victualled. I have not forgotten my promise to our master. I marked well my obligations.'

Bayaz' brows drew angrily down. 'Meaning, I suppose, that I did not?'

'I did not say so. If you hear a reproach it is your own guilt that goads you, not my accusation. I take no sides, you know that. I never have.'

'You speak as though sloth were the greatest of virtues,' muttered the First of the Magi.

'Sometimes it is, if acting means taking part in your squabbles. You forget, Bayaz, that I have seen all this before, more than once, and a wearisome pattern it seems to me. History repeats itself. Brother fights brother. As Juvens fought Glustrod, as Kanedias fought Juvens, so Bayaz struggles with Khalul. Smaller men in a bigger world, but with no less hatred, and no more mercy. Will this sordid rivalry end even as well as the others? Or will it be worse?'

Bayaz snorted. 'Let us not pretend you care, or would drag yourself ten strides from your couch if you did.'

'I do not care. I freely admit it. I was never like you or Khalul, or even like Zacharus or Yulwei. I have no endless ambition, no bottomless arrogance.'

‘No, indeed, not you.’ Bayaz sucked disgustedly at his gums and tossed his fork clattering down onto his plate. ‘Only endless vanity and bottomless idleness.’

‘Mine are small vices and small virtues. To see the world recast according to my own great designs has never interested me. I have always been content with the world as it is, and so I am a dwarf among giants.’ Her heavy-lidded eyes swept slowly over her guests, one by one. ‘And yet dwarves crush no one underfoot. ’ Jezal coughed as her searching stare fell on him and gave careful attention to his rubbery meat. ‘Long is the list of those you have trodden over in pursuit of your ambitions, is it not, my love?’

Bayaz’ displeasure began to weigh on Jezal as heavily as a great stone. ‘You need not speak in riddles, sister,’ growled the old man. ‘I would have your meaning.’

‘Ah, I forgot. You are a straight talker, and cannot abide deception of any kind. You told me so just after you told me you would never leave me, and just before you left me to find another.’

‘That was not my choice. You wrong me, Cawneil.’

‘*I* wrong *you*?’ she hissed, and now her anger pressed hard at Jezal from the other side. ‘How, brother? Did you not leave? Did you not find another? Did you not steal from the Maker, first his secrets, then his daughter?’ Jezal squirmed and hunched his shoulders, feeling as squeezed as a nut in a vice. ‘Tolomei, do you remember her?’

Bayaz’ frown grew frostier yet. ‘I have made my mistakes, and still pay for them. Not a day passes that I do not think of her.’

‘How outrageously noble of you!’ sneered Cawneil. ‘No doubt she would swoon with gratitude, if she could hear you now! I think on that day too, now and then. The day the Old Time ended. How we gathered outside the House of the Maker, thirsty for vengeance. How we put forth all of our Art and all of our anger, and could not make a scratch upon the gates. How you whispered to Tolomei in the night, begging her to let you in.’ She pressed her withered hands to her chest. ‘Such tender words you used. Words I never dreamed were in you. Even an old cynic like me was moved. How could an innocent like Tolomei deny you, whether it was her father’s gates or her own legs she was opening? And what was her reward, eh, brother, for her sacrifices? For helping you, for trusting you, for loving you? It must

have been quite the dramatic scene! The three of you, up on the roof. A foolish young woman, her jealous father, and her secret lover.' She snorted bitter laughter. 'Never a happy formula, but it can rarely have ended quite so badly. Father and daughter both. The long drop to the bridge!'

'Kanedias had no mercy in him,' growled Bayaz, 'even for his own child. Before my eyes he threw his daughter from the roof. We fought, and I cast him down in flames. So was our master avenged.'

'Oh, well done!' Cawneil clapped her hands in mock delight. 'Everyone loves a happy ending! Tell me only one thing more. What was it that made you weep so long for Tolomei, when I could never make you shed a tear? Did you decide you like your women pure, eh, brother?' And she fluttered her eyelashes in an ironical show, one strangely unsettling on that ancient face. 'Innocence? That most fleeting and worthless of virtues. One to which I have never laid claim.'

'Perhaps then, sister, the one thing you have never laid?'

'Oh, very good, my old love, very fine. It was always your ready wit that I enjoyed, above all else. Khalul was the more skilful lover, of course, but he never had your passion, nor your daring.' She speared a chunk of meat viciously with her fork. 'Travelling to the edge of the World, at your age? To steal that thing our master forbade? Courage indeed.'

Bayaz sneered his contempt down the table. 'What would you know of courage? You, who have loved no one in all these long years but yourself? Who have risked nothing, and given nothing, and made nothing? You, who have let all the gifts our master gave you rot! Keep your stories in the dust, sister. No one cares, and me least of all.'

The two Magi glared at each other in icy silence, the atmosphere heavy with their seething fury. The feet of Ninefingers' chair squealed gently as he edged it cautiously away from the table. Ferro sat opposite, her face locked in a frown of the deepest suspicion. Malacus Quai had his teeth bared, his fierce eyes fixed on his master. Jezal could only sit and hold his breath, hoping that the incomprehensible argument did not end with anyone on fire. Especially not him.

'Well,' ventured Brother Longfoot, 'I for one would like to thank our host for this excellent meal . . .' The two old Magi locked him simultaneously with their pitiless gazes. 'Now that we are close . . . to our final . . .

destination . . . er . . .’ And the Navigator swallowed and stared down at his plate. ‘Never mind.’

*

Ferro sat naked, one leg drawn up against her chest, picking at a scab on her knee, and frowning.

She frowned at the heavy walls of the room, imagining the great weight of old stone all round her. She remembered frowning at the walls of her cell in Uthman’s palace, pulling herself up to look through the tiny window, feeling the sun on her face and dreaming of being free. She remembered the chafing iron on her ankle, and the long thin chain, so much stronger than it had looked. She remembered struggling with it, and chewing on it, and dragging at her foot until the blood ran from her torn skin. She hated walls. For her, they had always been the jaws of a trap.

Ferro frowned at the bed. She hated beds, and couches, and cushions. Soft things make you soft, and she did not need them. She remembered lying in the darkness on a soft bed when she was first made a slave. When she was still a child, and small, and weak. Lying in the darkness and weeping to be alone. Ferro dug savagely at the scab and felt blood seep from underneath. She hated that weak, foolish, child who had allowed herself to be trapped. She despised the memory of her.

Ferro frowned most of all at Ninefingers, lying on his back with the blankets rucked and rumpled round him, his head tipped back and his mouth hanging open, eyes closed, breath hissing soft in his nose, one pale arm flung out wide at an uncomfortable-looking angle. Sleeping like a child. Why had she fucked him? And why did she keep doing it? She should never have touched him. She should never have spoken to him. She did not need him, the ugly, big pink fool.

She needed no one.

Ferro told herself she hated all these things, and that her hatred could never fade. But however she curled her lip, and frowned, and picked her scabs, it was hard to feel the same. She looked at the bed, at the dark wood shining in the glow from the embers in the fireplace, at the shifting blobs of shadow in the wrinkled sheet. What difference would it really make to

anyone, if she lay there rather than on the cold, wide mattress in her own room? The bed was not her enemy. So she got up from the chair, and padded over and slid down into it with her back to Ninefingers, taking care not to wake him. Not for his sake, of course.

But she had no wish to explain herself.

She wriggled her shoulders, moving backwards towards him where it was warmer. She heard him grunt in his sleep, felt him roll. She tensed to spring out of the bed, holding her breath. His arm slid over her side and he muttered something in her ear, meaningless sleep sounds, breath hot on her neck.

His big warm body pressed up tight against her back no longer made her feel so trapped. The weight of his pale hand resting gently against her ribs, his heavy arm around her felt almost . . . good. That made her frown.

Nothing good ever lasts for long.

And so she slid her hand over the back of his and felt his fingers, and the stump of the one that was missing, pressing into the spaces between hers, and she pretended that she was safe, and whole. Where was the harm? She held on to the hand tightly, and pressed it to her chest.

Because she knew it would not be for long.

Before the Storm

‘Welcome, gentlemen. General Poulder, General Kroy. Bethod has retreated as far as the Whiteflow, and it does not seem likely that he will find any more favourable ground on which to face us.’ Burr took a sharp breath, sweeping the gathering with a grave expression. ‘I think it very likely that there will be a battle tomorrow.’

‘Good show!’ shouted Poulder, slapping his thigh with great aplomb.

‘My men are ready,’ murmured Kroy, lifting his chin one regulation inch. The two generals, and the many members of their respective staffs, glowered at each other across the wide space of Burr’s tent, every man trying to outdo his opposite number with his boundless enthusiasm for combat. West felt his lip curling as he watched them. Two gangs of children in a schoolyard could scarcely have behaved with less maturity.

Burr raised his eyebrows and turned to his maps. ‘Luckily for us, the architects who built the fortress at Dunbrec also surveyed the surrounding land in some detail. We are blessed with highly accurate charts. Furthermore, a group of Northmen have recently defected to our cause, bringing with them detailed information on Bethod’s forces, position, and intentions.’

‘Why should we believe the word of a pack of Northern dogs,’ sneered General Kroy, ‘who have no loyalty even to their own king?’

‘Had Prince Ladisla been more willing to listen to them, sir,’ intoned West, ‘he might still be with us. As might his division.’ General Poulder chuckled heartily to himself and his staff joined him. Kroy, predictably, was less amused. He shot a deadly glare across the tent, one which West returned with an icy blankness.

Burr cleared his throat, and soldiered on. ‘Bethod holds the fortress of Dunbrec.’ The point of his stick tapped at the black hexagon. ‘Positioned to cover the only significant road out of Angland, where it fords the river Whiteflow, our border with the North. The road approaches the fortress from the west, cutting eastwards down a wide valley between two wooded ridges. The body of Bethod’s forces are encamped near the fortress, but he means to mount an attack, westward up the road, as soon as we show our

faces.' And Burr's stick slashed along the dark line, swishing against the heavy paper. 'The valley through which the road passes is bare, open grass with some gorse and rocky outcroppings, and will give him ample room for manoeuvre.' He turned back to the assembled officers, stick clenched tight, and placed his fists firmly on the table before him. 'I mean to fall into his trap. Or at least . . . to seem to. General Kroy?'

Kroy finally broke off glowering at West to reply with a sullen, 'Yes, Lord Marshal?'

'Your division is to deploy astride the road and push steadily eastwards towards the fortress, encouraging Bethod to launch his attack. Slowly and steadily, with no heroics. General Poulder's division, meanwhile, will have worked its way through the trees on top of the northern ridge, here,' and his stick tapped at the green blocks of the wooded high ground, 'just forward of General Kroy's position.'

'Just *forward* of General Kroy's position,' grinned Poulder, as though he was being shown special favour. Kroy scowled with disgust.

'*Just* forward, yes,' continued Burr. 'When Bethod's forces are entirely occupied in the valley, it shall be your task to attack them from above, and take them in the flank. It is important that you wait until the Northmen have been fully engaged, General Poulder, so that we can surround them, overwhelm them, and hope to bag the majority at one throw. If they are allowed to retire to the fords the fortress will cover their retreat, and we will be unable to pursue. Reducing Dunbrec might take us months.'

'Of course, my Lord Marshal,' exclaimed Poulder, 'my division will wait until the last moment, you may depend upon it!'

Kroy snorted. 'That should present no difficulty. Arriving late is a specialty of yours, I understand. There would be no need for a battle if you had intercepted the Northmen last week, rather than allowing them to get around you!'

Poulder bristled. 'Easy for you to say, while you were sitting on the right wing doing nothing! It's fortunate they didn't pass by in the night! You might have taken their retreat for an assault and fled with your entire division!'

'Gentlemen, please!' roared Burr, smashing the table with his stick. 'There will be fighting enough for every man in the army, that I promise you, and if each man does his part there will be ample glory too! We must

work together if this plan is to bear fruit!' He burped and grimaced and licked his lips sourly, while the two Generals and their staffs glowered at one another. West would almost have laughed, had men's lives not hung in the balance, his own among them.

'General Kroy,' said Burr, in the tone of a parent addressing a wayward child. 'I wish to make sure that you understand your orders.'

'To deploy my division in line astride the road,' hissed Kroy, 'and to advance slowly and in good order, eastwards down the valley towards Dunbrec, drawing Bethod and his savages into an engagement.'

'Indeed. General Poulder?'

'To move my division out of sight through the trees, just ahead of General Kroy's regiments, so that at the last moment I can charge down on the Northern scum and take them in the flank.'

Burr managed a smile. 'Correct.'

'An excellent plan, Lord Marshal, if I may!' Poulder tugged happily at his moustaches. 'You can depend upon it that my horse will cut them to pieces. To! Pieces!'

'I am afraid you will not have any cavalry, General,' said West in an emotionless monotone. 'The woods are dense and horse will be useless to you there. They might even alert the Northmen to your presence. A risk we cannot take.'

'But . . . my cavalry,' muttered Poulder, stricken with woe. 'My best regiments!'

'They will be kept here, sir,' droned West, 'near Marshal Burr's headquarters, and under his direct control, as a reserve. They will be deployed if they are needed.' Now it was Poulder's fury he met with a stonewall stare, while the faces of Kroy and his staff broke out in broad, neat, utterly joyless smiles.

'I hardly think—' hissed Poulder.

Burr cut him off. 'That is my decision. There is one last point that you should all bear in mind. There are some reports that Bethod has called on reinforcements. Some manner of wild men, savages from across the mountains to the north. Keep your eyes open and your flanks well screened. You will receive word from me tomorrow when it is time to move, most likely before first light. That is all.'

‘Can we really rely on them to do what they are told?’ muttered West as he watched the two surly groups file from the tent.

‘What choice do we have?’ The Marshal threw himself into a chair with a grimace and rested his hands on his belly, frowning up at the great map. ‘I wouldn’t worry. Kroy has no option but to move down the valley and fight.’

‘What about Poulder? I wouldn’t put it past him to find some excuse to stay sitting in the woods.’

The Lord Marshal grinned as he shook his head. ‘And leave Kroy to do all the fighting? What if he were to beat the Northmen on his own, and take all the glory for himself? No. Poulder could never risk that. This plan gives them no choice but to work together.’ He paused, looking up at West. ‘You might want to treat the pair of them with a touch more respect.’

‘Do you think they deserve it, sir?’

‘Of course not. But if, for instance, we should lose tomorrow, one of them will most likely step into my boots. Then where will you be?’

West grinned. ‘I’ll be finished, sir. But my being polite now won’t change that. They hate me for what I am, not what I say. I might as well say what I please while I can.’

‘I suppose you might at that. They’re a damn nuisance, but their folly can be predicted. It’s Bethod that worries me. Will he do what we want him to?’ Burr burped, and swallowed, and burped again. ‘Damn this damn indigestion!’

Threetrees and the Dogman were sprawled on a bench outside the tent flap, an odd pair in amongst the well-starched press of officers and guards.

‘Smells like battle to me,’ said Threetrees as West strode up to them.

‘Indeed.’ West pointed after Kroy’s black-uniformed staff. ‘Half the army are going down the valley tomorrow morning, hoping to draw Bethod into a fight.’ He pointed to Poulder’s crimson entourage. ‘The other half are going up into the trees, and hope to surprise them before they can get away.’

Threetrees nodded slowly to himself. ‘Sounds like a good plan.’

‘Nice and simple,’ said the Dogman. West winced. He could hardly bear to look at the man.

‘We’d have no plan at all if you hadn’t brought us that information,’ he managed to say through gritted teeth. ‘Are you sure we can trust it?’

‘Sure as we can be,’ said Threetrees.

Dogman grinned. ‘Shivers is alright, and from what I’ve scouted up, I reckon it’s true. No promises, course.’

‘Of course not. You deserve a rest.’

‘We wouldn’t say no.’

‘I’ve arranged a position for you up at the far left of the line, at the end of General Poulder’s division, up in the trees, on the high ground. You should be well out of the action there. The safest place in the whole army tomorrow, I shouldn’t wonder. Dig in and make yourself a fire, and if things go right, we’ll talk again over Bethod’s dead body.’ And he held out his hand.

Threetrees grinned as he took it. ‘Now that’s our kind of language, Furious. You take care, now.’ He and the Dogman started to trudge away up the slope towards the tree line.

‘Colonel West?’

He knew who it was before he turned. There weren’t many women in the camp that would have had much to say to him. Cathil, standing in the slush, a borrowed coat wrapped round her. She looked somewhat furtive, somewhat shamefaced, but the sight of her still somehow brought up a sudden surge of anger and embarrassment.

It was unfair, he knew. He had no rights over her. It was unfair, but that only made it worse. All he could think of was the side of the Dogman’s face and her grunting, uh . . . uh . . . uh. So horribly surprising. So horribly disappointing. ‘You’d better go with them,’ said West with an icy formality, scarcely able to bring himself to say anything at all. ‘Safest place.’ He turned away but she brought him up short.

‘It was you, wasn’t it, outside the tent . . . the other night?’

‘Yes, I’m afraid it was. I simply came to check if there was anything you needed,’ he lied. ‘I really had no idea . . . who you would be with.’

‘I certainly never meant for you to—’

‘The Dogman?’ he muttered, face suddenly crunching up with incomprehension. ‘Him? I mean . . . why?’ Why him instead of me, was what he wanted to say, but he managed to stop himself.

‘I know . . . I know you must think—’

‘You’ve no need to explain yourself to me!’ he hissed, though he knew he’d just asked her to. ‘Who cares what I think?’ He spat it out with a deal

more venom than he had intended, but his own loss of control only made him angrier, and he lost more. ‘I don’t care what you choose to fuck!’

She winced and stared down at the ground beside his feet. ‘I didn’t mean to . . . well. I owe you a lot, I know. It’s just that . . . you’re too angry for me. That’s all.’

West stared at her as she trudged off up the hill after the Northmen, hardly able to believe his ears. She was happy to bed that stinking savage, but *he* was too angry? It was so unfair he almost choked on his rage.

Questions

Colonel Glokta charged into his dining room in a tremendous hurry, wrestling manfully with the buckle on his sword belt. ‘Damn it!’ he fumed. He was all thumbs. Couldn’t get the thing closed. ‘Damn it, damn it!’

‘You need some help with that?’ asked Shickel, sitting wedged in behind the table, black burns across her shoulders, cuts hanging open, dry as meat in the butcher’s shop.

‘No I do not need bloody help!’ he shrieked, flinging his belt onto the floor. ‘What I need is for someone to explain what the hell is going on here! This is a disgrace! I will not have members of my regiment sitting around naked! Especially with such unsightly wounds! Where is your uniform, girl?’

‘I thought you were more worried about the Prophet.’

‘Never mind about him!’ snapped Glokta, worming his way onto the bench opposite her. ‘What about Bayaz? What about the First of the Magi? Who is he? What’s he really after, the old bastard?’

Shickel smiled a sweet smile. ‘Oh, that. I thought everyone knew that. The answer is . . .’

‘Yes!’ muttered the Colonel, mouth dry, eager as a schoolboy, ‘The answer is?’

She laughed, and slapped at the bench beside her. *Thump, thump, thump.*

‘The answer is . . .’

The answer is . . .

Thump, thump, thump. Glokta’s eyes snapped open. It was still half dark outside. Only a faint glow was coming through the curtains. *Who comes belting at the door at this hour? Good news comes in the daylight.*

Thump, thump, thump. ‘Yes, yes!’ he screeched. ‘I’m crippled, not deaf! I damn well hear you!’

‘Then open the bloody door!’ The voice came muffled from the corridor, but there was no mistaking the Styrian note. *Vitari, the bitch. Just what one needs in the middle of the night.* Glokta did his best to stifle his groans as he carefully disentangled his numb limbs from his sweaty blanket, rolling his

head gently from side to side, trying to stretch some movement into his twisted neck, and failing.

Thump, thump. *I wonder, when was the last time I had a woman beating down my bedroom door?* He snatched his cane from its place, resting against the mattress, then pressed one of his few teeth hard into his lip, grunting softly to himself as he wormed his way down the bed and let one leg flop off onto the boards. He threw himself forward, eyes squeezed shut at a withering pain through his back, and finally reached sitting, gasping as though he had run ten miles. *Fear me, fear me, all must fear me! If I can just get out of bed, that is.*

Thump. 'I'm coming, damn it!' He footed his cane on the floor and rocked himself up to standing. *Careful, careful.* The muscles in his mutilated left leg were shaking violently, making his toeless foot twitch and flop like a dying fish. *Damn this hideous appendage! It would feel like someone else's, if it didn't hurt so much. But calm, calm, we must be gentle.*

'Shhh,' he hissed, like a parent trying to sooth a wailing child, kneading softly at his ruined flesh and trying to breathe slow. 'Shhh.' The convulsions slowly calmed to a more manageable trembling. *About the best that we can hope for, I fear.* He was able to pull his nightshirt down and shuffle to the door, flip the key angrily round in the lock, and pull it open. Vitari stood outside in the corridor, draped against the wall, a darker shape in the shadows.

'You,' he grunted, hopping to the chair. 'You just can't stay away, can you? What is your fascination with my bedchamber?'

She sauntered through the door, peering around scornfully at the miserable room. 'Perhaps I just like seeing you in pain.'

Glokta snorted, rubbing gingerly at his burning knee. 'Then you must be wet between the legs right now.'

'Surprisingly, no. You look like death.'

'When don't I? Did you come to mock my looks, or have we some business?'

Vitari folded her long arms and leaned against the wall. 'You need to get dressed.'

'More excuses to see me naked?'

'Sult wants you.'

'Now?'

She rolled her eyes. ‘Oh no, we can take our time. You know how he is.’

‘Where are we going?’

‘You’ll see when we get there.’ And she upped her pace, making him gasp and wince, snorting his aching way through the dim archways, down the shadowy lanes and the grey court-yards of the Agriont, colourless in the thin light of early morning.

His clumsy boots crunched and scraped in the gravel of the park. The grass was heavy with cold dew, the air thick with dull mist. Trees loomed up, black and leafless claws in the murk, and then a towering, sheer wall. Vitari led him towards a high gate, flanked by two guards. Their heavy armour was worked with gold, their heavy halberds were studded with gold, the golden sun of the Union was stitched into their surcoats. *Knights of the Body. The King’s personal guard.*

‘The palace?’ muttered Glokta.

‘No, the slums, genius.’

‘Halt.’ One of the two knights raised his gauntleted hand, voice echoing slightly from the grill in his tall helmet. ‘State your names and business.’

‘Superior Glokta.’ He hobbled to the wall and leaned against the damp stones, pressing his tongue into his empty gums against the pain in his leg. ‘As for the business, ask her. This wasn’t my idea, I can damn well tell you that.’

‘Practical Vitari. And the Arch Lector is expecting us. You know that already, fool, I told you on the way out.’

If it were possible for a man in full armour to appear hurt, this one did. ‘It is a matter of protocol that I ask everyone—’

‘Just get it open!’ barked Glokta, pressing his fist into his trembling thigh, ‘while I can still lurch through on my own!’

The man thumped angrily on the gate and a small door opened inside it. Vitari ducked through and Glokta limped after her, along a path of carefully-cut stones through a shadowy garden. Drops of cold water clung to the budding branches, dripped from the towering statuary. The cawing of a crow somewhere out of sight seemed ridiculously loud in the morning stillness. The palace loomed up ahead of them, a confusion of roofs, towers, sculptures, ornamental stonework outlined against the first pale glow of morning.

‘What are we doing here?’ hissed Glokta.

‘You’ll find out.’

He limped up a step, between towering columns and two more Knights of the Body, still and silent enough to have been empty suits of armour. His cane clicked on the polished marble floor of an echoing hallway, half lit by flickering candles, the high walls covered entirely with dim friezes. Scenes of forgotten victories and achievements, one king after another pointing, brandishing weapons, reading proclamations, standing with their chests puffed out in pride. He struggled up a flight of steps, ceiling and walls carved entirely in a glorious pattern of golden flowers, flashing and glittering in the candlelight, while Vitari waited impatiently for him at the top. *Their being priceless doesn’t make them any easier to climb, damn it.*

‘Down there,’ she muttered at him.

A worried-looking group were gathered round a door twenty strides away. A Knight of the Body sat bent over on a chair, his helmet on the floor beside him, his head in his hands, fingers pushed through curly hair. Three other men stood, huddled together, their urgent whispering rebounding from the walls and echoing down the hallway.

‘Aren’t you coming?’

Vitari shook her head. ‘He didn’t ask for me.’

The three men looked up at Glokta as he limped towards them. *And what a group to find muttering in a palace corridor before daybreak.* Lord Chamberlain Hoff was wearing a quickly flung on nightgown, his puffy face stricken as though by a nightmare. Lord Marshal Varuz had one collar of his rumpled shirt sticking up, the other down, his iron grey hair shooting off his skull at all angles. High Justice Marovia’s cheeks were gaunt, his eyes were rimmed with red, and there was a slight tremble to his liverish hand as he raised it to point at the door.

‘In there,’ he whispered. ‘A terrible business. Terrible. Whatever shall be done?’

Glokta frowned, stepped past the sobbing guard and limped over the threshold.

It was a bedchamber. *And a magnificent one. This is a palace, after all.* The walls were papered with vivid silk, hung with dark canvases in old gilt frames. An enormous fireplace was carved from brown and red stone to look like a miniature Kantic temple. The bed was a monstrous four-posted

creation whose curtains probably enclosed more space than Glokta's entire bedroom. The covers were flung back and rumpled, but there was no sign of the former occupant. One tall window was standing ajar, and a chill breeze washed in from the grey world outside, making the flames on the candles dance and flutter.

Arch Lector Sult was standing near the centre of the room, frowning thoughtfully down at the floor on the other side of the bed. If Glokta had expected him to be as dishevelled as his three colleagues outside the door, he was disappointed. His white gown was spotless, his white hair neatly brushed, his white gloved hands clasped carefully before him.

'Your Eminence . . .' Glokta was saying as he shuffled up. Then he noticed something on the floor. Dark fluid, glistening black in the candlelight. *Blood. How very unsurprising.*

He hobbled a little further. The corpse lay on its back on the far side of the bed. Blood was spattered on the white sheets, smeared over the boards and across the wall behind, had soaked up into the hem of the opulent drapes by the window. The ripped nightshirt was soaked through with it. One hand was curled up, the other was torn off, ragged, just beyond the thumb. There was a gaping wound on one arm, a chunk of flesh missing. *As though it were bitten away.* One leg was broken and bent back on itself, a snapped off length of bone poking through split flesh. The throat had been so badly mauled that the head was barely attached, but there was no mistaking the face, seeming to grin up at the fine stucco work on the ceiling, teeth bared, eyes wide, bulging open.

'Crown Prince Raynault has been murdered,' muttered Glokta.

The Arch Lector raised his gloved hands and slowly, softly clapped two fingertips against his palm. 'Oh, very good. It is for just such insights that I sent for you. Yes, Prince Raynault has been murdered. A tragedy. An outrage. A terrible crime that strikes at the very heart of our nation, and at every one of its people. But that is far from the worst of it.' The Arch Lector took a long breath. 'The King has no siblings, Glokta, do you understand? Now he has no heirs. When the king dies, where do you suppose our next illustrious ruler will come from?'

Glokta swallowed. *I see. What a towering inconvenience.* 'From the Open Council.'

‘An election,’ sneered Sult. ‘The Open Council, voting for our next king. A few hundred self-serving halfwits who can’t be trusted to vote for their own lunch without guidance.’

Glokta swallowed. *I would almost be enjoying his Eminence’s discomfort, were my neck not on the block beside his.* ‘We are not popular with the Open Council.’

‘We are reviled by them. Few more so. Our actions against the Mercers, against the Spicers, against Lord Governor Vurms, and more besides. None of the nobles trust us.’

Then if the king dies . . . ‘How is the king’s health?’

‘Not. Good.’ Sult frowned down at the bloody remains. ‘All our work could be undone at this one stroke. Unless we can make friends in the Open Council, Glokta, while the king yet lives. Unless we can curry enough favour to choose his successor, or at least to influence the choice.’ He stared at Glokta, blue eyes glittering in the candlelight. ‘Votes must be bought, and blackmailed, coaxed and threatened our way. And you can depend upon it that those three old bastards outside are thinking just the same thing. How will I stay in power? With which candidate should I align myself? Whose votes can I control? When we announce the murder, we must assure the Open Council that the killer is already in our hands. Then swift, and brutal, and highly visible justice must be done. If the vote does not go our way, who knows what we could end up with? Brock on the throne, or Isher, or Heugen?’ Sult gave a horrified shudder. ‘We will be out of our jobs, at best. At worst . . .’ *Several bodies found floating by the docks* . . . ‘That is why I need you to find me the Prince’s murderer. Now.’

Glokta looked down at the body. *Or what remains of it*. He poked at the gouge out of Raynault’s arm with the tip of his cane. *We have seen wounds like these before, on that corpse in the park, months ago. An Eater did this, or at least, we are meant to think so.* The window tapped gently against its frame on a sudden cold draft. *An Eater who climbed in through the window? Unlike one of the Prophet’s agents to leave such clues behind. Why not simply vanished, like Davoust? A sudden loss of appetite, are we meant to suppose?*

‘Have you spoken to the guard?’

Sult waved his hand dismissively. ‘He says he stood outside the door all night as usual. He heard a noise, entered the room, found the Prince as you

see him, still bleeding, the window open. He sent immediately for Hoff. Hoff sent for me, and I for you.'

'The guard should be properly questioned, nonetheless . . .' Glokta peered down at Raynault's curled-up hand. There was something in it. He bent with an effort, his cane wobbling under his weight, and snatched it up between two fingers. *Interesting.* A piece of cloth. White cloth, it seemed, though mostly stained dark red now. He flattened it out and held it up. Gold thread glittered faintly in the dim candlelight. *I have seen cloth like this before.*

'What is that?' snapped Sult. 'Have you found something?' Glokta stayed silent. *Perhaps, but it was very easy. Almost too easy.*

Glokta nodded to Frost, and the albino reached forward and pulled the bag from the head of the Emperor's envoy. Tulkis blinked in the harsh light, took a deep breath, and squinted round at the room. A dirty white box, too brightly lit. He took in Frost, looming at his shoulder. He took in Glokta, seated opposite. He took in the rickety chairs, and the stained table, and the polished case sitting on top of it. He did not seem to notice the small black hole in the very corner opposite him, behind Glokta's head. He was not meant to. That was the hole through which the Arch Lector watched the proceedings. *The one through which he hears every word that is said.*

Glokta watched the envoy closely. *It is in these early moments that a man often gives away his guilt. I wonder what his first words will be? An innocent man would ask what crime he is accused of—*

'Of what crime am I accused?' asked Tulkis. Glokta felt his eyelid twitch. *Of course, a clever guilty man might easily ask the same question.*

'Of the murder of Crown Prince Raynault.'

The envoy blinked, and sagged back in his chair. 'My deepest condolences to the Royal Family, and to all the people of the Union on this black day. But is all this really necessary?' He nodded down at the yards of heavy chain wrapped round his naked body.

'It is. If you are what we suspect you might be.'

'I see. Might I ask if it will make any difference that I am innocent of any part in this heinous crime?'

I doubt it will. Even if you are. Glokta tossed the bloodstained fragment of white cloth onto the table. 'This was found clasped in the Prince's hand.' Tulkis frowned at it, puzzled. *Just as if he never saw it before.* 'It matches

exactly with a tear in a garment found in your chambers. A garment also stained liberally with blood.' Tulkis looked up at Glokta, eyes wide. *Just as though he has no idea how it got there.* 'How would you explain this?'

The envoy leaned forwards across the table, as far as he could with his hands chained behind him, and spoke swift and low. 'Please attend to me, Superior. If the Prophet's agents have discovered my mission – and they discover everything sooner or later – they will stop at nothing to make it fail. You know what they are capable of. If you punish me for this crime, it will be an insult to the Emperor. You will slap away his hand of friendship, and slap him in the face besides. He will swear vengeance, and when Uthman-ul-Dosht has sworn . . . my life means nothing, but my mission cannot fail. The consequences . . . for both our nations . . . please, Superior, I beg of you . . . I know you for an open-minded man—'

'An open mind is like to an open wound,' growled Glokta. 'Vulnerable to poison. Liable to fester. Apt to give its owner only pain.' He nodded to Frost and the albino placed the paper of confession carefully on the table top and slid it towards Tulkis with his white fingertips. He put the bottle of ink beside it and flipped open the brass lid. He placed the pen nearby. *All neat and crisp as a Sergeant-Major could wish for.*

'This is your confession.' Glokta waved his hand at the paper. 'In case you were wondering.'

'I am not guilty,' muttered Tulkis, his voice hardly more than a whisper.

Glokta twitched his face in annoyance. 'Have you ever been tortured?'

'No.'

'Have you ever seen torture carried out?'

The envoy swallowed. 'I have.'

'Then you have some inkling of what to expect.' Frost lifted the lid on Glokta's case. The trays inside lifted and fanned out like a huge and spectacular butterfly unfurling its wings for the first time, exposing Glokta's instruments in all their glittering, hypnotic, horrible beauty. He watched Tulkis' eyes fill with fear and fascination.

'I am the very best there is at this.' Glokta gave a long sigh and clasped his hands before him. 'It is not a matter for pride. It is a matter of fact. You would not be with me now if it were otherwise. I tell you so you can have no doubts. So you can answer my next question with no illusions. Look at me.' He waited for Tulkis' dark eyes to meet his. 'Will you confess?'

There was a pause. ‘I am innocent,’ whispered the ambassador.

‘That was not my question. I will ask it again. Will you confess?’

‘I cannot.’

They stared at each other for a long moment, and Glokta was left in no doubt. *He is innocent. If he could steal over the wall of the palace and in through the Prince’s window without being noticed, surely he could have stolen out of the Agriont and away before we were any the wiser? Why stay, and sleep, leaving his bloodstained garment hanging in the cupboard, waiting for us to discover it? A trail of clues so blatant a blind man could follow them. We are being duped, and not even subtly. To punish the wrong man, that is one thing. But to allow myself to be made a fool of? That is another.*

‘One moment,’ murmured Glokta. He struggled out of his chair to the door, shut it carefully behind him, hobbled wincing up the steps to the next room and went in.

‘What the hell are you up to in there?’ the Arch Lector snarled at him.

Glokta kept his head bowed in a position of deep respect. ‘I am trying to establish the truth, your Eminence—’

‘You are trying to establish *what*? The Closed Council are waiting for a confession, and you’re blathering about *what*?’

Glokta met the Arch Lector’s glare. ‘What if he is not lying? What if the Emperor does desire peace? What if he is innocent?’

Sult stared back at him, cold blue eyes wide open with disbelief. ‘Did you lose your teeth in Gurkhul or your fucking mind? Who cares a shit for innocent? What concerns us now is what must be done! What concerns us now is what is necessary! What concerns us now is ink on paper you . . . you . . .’ he was near frothing at the mouth, fists clenching and unclenching with fury, ‘. . . you crippled shred of a man! Make him sign, then we can be done with this and get to licking arses in the Open Council!’

Glokta bowed his head still lower. ‘Of course, your Eminence.’

‘Now is your perverse obsession with the *truth* going to cause me any more trouble tonight? I’d rather use a needle than a spade, but I’ll dig a confession out of this bastard either way! Must I send for Goyle?’

‘Of course not, your Eminence.’

‘Just get in there, damn you, and make . . . him . . . sign!’

Glokta shuffled out of his room, grumbling, stretching his neck to either side, rubbing his sore palms, working his aching shoulders round his ears and hearing the joints click. *A difficult interrogation.* Severard was sitting cross-legged on the floor opposite, his head resting against the dirty wall. 'Has he signed?'

'Of course.'

'Lovely. Another mystery solved, eh, chief?'

'I doubt it. He's no Eater. Not like Shickel was, anyway. He feels pain, believe me.'

Severard shrugged. 'She said the talents were different for each of them.'

'She did. She did.' *But still.* Glokta wiped at his runny eye, thinking. *Someone murdered the Prince. Someone had something to gain from his death. I would like to know who, even if no one else cares.* 'There are some questions I still need to ask. The guard at the Prince's chambers last night. I want to speak to him.'

The Practical raised his brows. 'Why? We've got the paper haven't we?'

'Just bring him in.'

Severard unfolded his legs and sprang up. 'Alright, then, you're the boss.' He pushed himself away from the greasy wall and sauntered off down the corridor. 'One Knight of the Body, coming right up.'

Holding the Line

‘Did you sleep?’ asked Pike, scratching at the less burned side of his ruined face. ‘No. You?’

The convict turned Sergeant shook his head.

‘Not for days,’ murmured Jalenhorm, wistfully. He shaded his eyes with a hand and squinted up towards the northern ridge, a ragged outline of trees under the iron grey sky. ‘Poulder’s division already set off through the woods?’

‘Before first light,’ said West. ‘We should hear that he’s in position soon. And now it looks as if Kroy’s ready to go. You have to respect his punctuality, at least.’

Below Burr’s command post, down in the valley, General Kroy’s division was moving into battle order. Three regiments of the King’s Own foot formed the centre, with a regiment of levies on the higher ground on either wing and the cavalry just behind. It was an entirely different spectacle from the ragged deployment of Ladisla’s makeshift army. The battalions flowed smoothly forwards in tightly ordered columns: tramping through the mud, the tall grass, the patches of snow in the hollows. They halted at their allotted positions and began to spread out into carefully dressed lines, a net of men stretching right across the valley. The chill air echoed with the distant thumping of their feet, the beating of their drums, the clipped calls of their commanders. Everything clean and crisp and according to procedure.

Lord Marshal Burr thrust aside his tent flap and strode out into the open air, acknowledging the salutes of the various guards and officers scattered about the space in front with sharp waves of his hand.

‘Colonel,’ he growled, frowning up at the heavens. ‘Still dry, then?’

The sun was a watery smudge on the horizon, the sky thick white with streaks of heavy grey, darker bruises hanging over the northern ridge. ‘For the moment, sir,’ said West.

‘No word from Poulder yet?’

‘No, sir. But it might be hard-going, the woods are dense.’ Not as dense as Poulder himself, West thought, but that hardly seemed the most professional

thing to say.

'Did you eat yet?'

'Yes, sir, thank you.' West had not eaten since last night, and even then not much. The very idea of food made him feel sick.

'Well at least one of us did.' Burr placed a hand sourly on his stomach. 'Damned indigestion, I can't touch a thing.' He winced and gave a long burp. 'Pardon me. And there they go.'

General Kroy must finally have declared himself satisfied with the precise positioning of every man in his division, because the soldiers in the valley had begun to move forward. A chilly breeze blew up and set the regimental standards, the flags of the battalions, the company ensigns snapping and fluttering. The watery sun twinkled on sharpened blades and burnished armour, shone on gold braid and polished wood, glittered on buckles and harness. All advanced smoothly together, as proud a display of military might as could ever have been seen. Beyond them, down the valley to the east, a great black tower loomed up behind the trees. The nearest tower of the fortress of Dunbrec.

'Quite the spectacle,' muttered Burr. 'Fifteen thousand fighting men, perhaps, all told, and almost as many more up on the ridge.' He nodded his head at the reserve, two regiments of cavalry, dismounted and restless down below the command post. 'Another two thousand there, waiting for orders.' He glanced back towards the sprawling camp: a city of canvas, of carts, of stacked-up boxes and barrels, spread out in the snowy valley, black figures crawling around inside. 'And that's without counting all the thousands back there – cooks and grooms, smiths and drivers, servants and surgeons.' He shook his head. 'Some responsibility, all that, eh? You wouldn't want to be the fool who had to take care of all that lot.'

West gave a weak smile. 'No, sir.'

'It looks like . . .' murmured Jalenhorm, shading his eyes and squinting down the valley into the sun. 'Are those . . . ?'

'Eye-glass!' snapped Burr, and a nearby officer produced one with a flourish. The Marshal flicked it open. 'Well, well. Who's this now?'

A rhetorical question, without a doubt. There was no one else it could be. 'Bethod's Northmen,' said Jalenhorm, ever willing to state the obvious.

West watched them rush across the open ground through the wobbling round window of his own eye-glass. They flowed out from the trees at the

far end of the valley, near to the river, spreading out like the dark stain creeping from a slit wrist. Dirty grey and brown masses congealed on the wings. Thralls, lightly armed. In the centre better ordered ranks took shape, dull metal gleaming, mail and blade. Bethod's Carls.

'No sign of any horse.' That made West more nervous than ever. He had already had one near-fatal encounter with Bethod's cavalry, and he did not care to renew the acquaintance.

'Feels good to actually see the enemy, at last,' said Burr, voicing the exact opposite of West's own feelings. 'They move smartly enough, that's sure.' His mouth curved up into a rare grin. 'But they're moving right where we want them to. The trap's baited and ready to spring, eh, Captain?' He passed the eye-glass to Jalenhorm, who peered through it and grinned himself.

'Right where we want them,' he echoed. West felt a good deal less confident. He could clearly remember the thin line of Northmen on the ridge, right where Ladisla had thought he wanted them.

Kroy's men halted and the units shuffled into perfect position once again, just as calmly as if they stood on a vast parade ground: lines four ranks deep, reserve companies drawn up neatly behind, a thin row of flatbowmen in front. West just made out the shouted orders to fire, saw the first volley float up from Kroy's line, shower down in amongst the enemy. He felt his nails digging painfully into his palm as he watched, fists clenched tight, willing the Northmen to die. Instead they sent back a well organised volley of their own, and then began to surge forward.

Their battle cry floated up to the officers outside the tent, that unearthly shriek, carrying on the cold air. West chewed at his lip, remembering the last time he heard it, echoing through the mist. Hard to believe it had only been a few weeks ago. Again he was guiltily glad to be well behind the lines, though a shiver down his back reminded him that it had done little good on that occasion.

'Bloody hell,' said Jalenhorm.

No one else spoke. West stood, teeth gritted, heart thumping, trying desperately to hold his eye-glass steady as the Northmen charged full-blooded down the valley. Kroy's flatbows gave them one more volley, then pulled back through the carefully prepared gaps in the carefully dressed ranks, forming up again behind the lines. Spears were lowered, shields were

raised, and in virtual silence, it seemed, the Union line prepared to meet the howling Northmen.

'Contact,' growled Lord Marshal Burr. The Union ranks seemed to wave and shift somewhat, the watery sunlight seemed to flash more rapidly on the mass of men, a vague rattling drifted on the air. Not a word was said in the command post. Each man was squinting through his eye-glass, or peering into the sun, craning to see what was happening down in the valley, hardly daring even to breathe.

After what seemed a horribly long time, Burr lowered his eye-glass. 'Good. They're holding. It seems your Northmen were right, West, we have the advantage in numbers, even without Poulder. When he gets here, it should be a rout—'

'Up there,' muttered West, 'on the southern ridge.' Something glinted in the treeline, and again. Metal. 'Cavalry, sir, I'd bet my life on it. It seems Bethod had the same idea as us, but on the other wing.'

'Damn it!' hissed Burr. 'Send word to General Kroy that the enemy has horse on the southern ridge! Tell him to refuse that flank and prepare to be attacked from the right!' One of the adjutants leaped smoothly into his saddle and galloped off in the direction of Kroy's headquarters, cold mud flying from his horse's hooves.

'More tricks, and this may not be the last of 'em.' Burr snapped the eye-glass closed and thumped it into his open palm. 'This must not be allowed to fail, Colonel West. Nothing must get in the way. Not Poulder's arrogance, not Kroy's pride, not the enemy's cunning, none of it. We must have victory here today. It *must* not be allowed to fail!'

'No, sir.' But West was far from sure what he could do about it.

The Union soldiers were trying to be quiet, which meant they made about as much racket as a great herd of sheep being shoved indoors for shearing. Moaning and grunting, slithering on the wet ground, armour rattling, weapons knocking on low branches. Dogman shook his head as he watched 'em.

'Lucky thing there's no one out here, or we'd have been heard long ago,' hissed Dow. 'These fools couldn't creep up on a corpse.'

'No need for you to be making noise,' hissed Threetrees, up ahead, then beckoned them all forward.

It was a strange feeling, marching with such a big crew again. There were two score of Shivers' Carls along with 'em, and quite an assortment. Tall men and short, young and old, all manner of different weapons and armour, but all pretty well seasoned, from what the Dogman could tell.

'Halt!' And the Union soldiers clattered and grumbled to a stop, started sorting themselves out into a line, spread across the highest part of the ridge. A great long line, the Dogman reckoned, judging from the number of men he'd watched going up into the woods, and they were right at the far end of it. He peered off into the empty trees on their left, and frowned. Lonely place to be, the end of a line.

'But the safest,' he muttered to himself.

'What's that?' asked Cathil, sitting down on a great fallen tree trunk.

'Safe here,' he said in her tongue, managing a grin. He still didn't have half an idea how to behave around her. There was a hell of a gap between them in the daylight, a yawning great gap of race, and age, and language that he wasn't sure could ever be bridged. Strange, how the gap dwindled down to nothing at night. They understood each other well enough in the dark. Maybe they'd work it out, in time, or maybe they wouldn't, and that'd be that. Still, he was glad she was there. Made him feel like a proper human man again, instead of just an animal slinking in the woods, trying to scratch his way from one mess to another.

He watched a Union officer break off from his men and walk towards them, strut up to Threetrees, some kind of a polished stick wedged under his arm. 'General Poulder asks that you remain here on the left wing, to secure the far flank.' He spoke slow and very loud, as though that'd make him understood if they didn't talk the language.

'Alright,' said Threetrees.

'The division will be deploying along the high ground to your right!' And he flicked his stick thing towards the trees where his men were slowly and noisily getting ready. 'We will be waiting until Bethod's forces are well engaged with General Kroy's division, and then we will attack, and drive them from the field!'

Threetrees nodded. 'You need our help with any of that?'

'Frankly I doubt it, but we will send word if matters change.' And he strutted off to join his men, slipping a few paces away and nearly going down on his arse in the muck.

‘He’s confident,’ said the Dogman.

Threetrees raised his brows. ‘Bit too much, if you’re asking me, but if it means he leaves us out I reckon I can live with it. Right then!’ he shouted, turning round to the Carls. ‘Get hold o’ that tree trunk and drag it up along the brow here!’

‘Why?’ asked one of ’em, sitting rubbing at one knee and looking sullen.

‘So you got something to hide behind if Bethod turns up,’ barked Dow at him. ‘Get to it, fool!’

The Carls downed their weapons and set to work, grumbling. Seemed that joining up with the legendary Rudd Threetrees was less of a laugh than they’d hoped. Dogman had to smile. They should’ve known. Leaders don’t get to be legendary by handing out light duty. The old boy himself was stood frowning into the woods as Dogman walked up beside him. ‘You worried, chief?’

‘It’s a good spot up here for hiding some men. A good spot for waiting ’til the battles joined, then charging down.’

‘It is,’ grinned the Dogman. ‘That’s why we’re here.’

‘And what? Bethod won’t have thought of that?’ Dogman’s grin started to fade. ‘If he’s got men to spare he might think they’d be well used up here, waiting for the right moment, just like we are. He might send ’em through these trees here and up this hill to right where we’re sitting. What’d happen then, d’you reckon?’

‘We’d set to killing each other, I daresay, but Bethod don’t have men to spare, according to Shivers and his boys. He’s outnumbered worse’n two to one as it is.’

‘Maybe, but he likes to cook up surprises.’

‘Alright,’ said Dogman, watching the Carls heaving the fallen tree trunk around so it blocked off the top of the slope. ‘Alright. So we drag a tree across here and we hope for the best.’

‘Hope for the best?’ grunted Threetrees. ‘Just when did that ever work?’ He strode off to mutter to Grim, and Dogman shrugged his shoulders. If a few hundred Carls did turn up all of a sudden, they’d be in a fix, but there weren’t much he could do about it now. So he knelt down beside his pack, pulled out his flint and some dry twigs, stacked it all up careful and started striking sparks.

Shivers squatted down near him, palms resting on his axe-handle. ‘What’re you at?’

‘What does it look like?’ Dogman blew into the kindling, watched the flame spreading out. ‘I’m making me a fire.’

‘Ain’t we waiting for a battle to start?’

Dogman sat back, pushed some of the dry twigs closer in and watched ’em take light. ‘Aye, we’re waiting, and that’s the best time for a fire, I reckon. War’s all waiting, lad. Weeks of your life, maybe, if you’re in our line o’ work. You could spend that time being cold, or you could try to get comfortable.’

He slid his pan out from his pack and onto the fire. New pan, and a good one, he’d got it off the Southerners. He unwrapped the packet inside. Five eggs there, still whole. Nice, brown, speckled eggs. He cracked one on the edge of the pan, poured it in, heard it hiss, grinning all the while. Things were looking up, alright. Hadn’t had eggs in a good long time. It was as he was cracking the last one that he smelled something, just as the breeze turned. Something more than eggs cooking. He jerked his head up, frowning.

‘What?’ asked Cathil.

‘Nothing, most likely.’ But it was best not to take chances. ‘You wait here a moment and watch these, eh?’

‘Alright.’

Dogman clambered over the fallen trunk, made for the nearest tree and leaned against it, squatting on his haunches, peering down the slope. Nothing to smell, that he could tell. Nothing to see in the trees either – just the wet earth patched with snow, the dripping pine branches and the still shadows. Nothing. Just Threetrees got him nervous with his talk about surprises.

He was turning back when he caught a whiff again. He stood up, took a few paces downhill, away from the fire and the fallen tree, staring into the woods. Threetrees came up beside him, shield on his arm, sword drawn and clutched in his big fist.

‘What is it, Dogman, you smell something?’

‘Could be.’ He sniffed again, long and slow, sucking the air through his nose, sifting at it. ‘Most likely nothing.’

‘Don’t nothing me, Dogman, your nose has got us out of a scrape or two before now. What d’you smell?’

The breeze shifted, and this time he caught it full. Hadn’t smelled it in a while, but there was no mistaking it. ‘Shit,’ he breathed. ‘Shanka.’

‘Oy!’ And the Dogman looked round, mouth open. Cathil was just climbing over the fallen tree, the pan in her hand. ‘Eggs are done,’ she said, grinning at the two of them.

Threetrees flailed his arm at her and bellowed at the top of his lungs. ‘Everyone get back behind the—’

A bowstring went, down in the brush. Dogman heard the arrow, felt it hiss past in the air. They’re not the best of archers, on the whole, the Flatheads, and it missed him by a stride or two. It was just piss-poor luck it found another mark.

‘Ah,’ said Cathil, blinking down at the shaft in her side. ‘Ah . . .’ and she fell down, just like that, dropping the pan in the snow. Then Dogman was running up the hill towards her, his breath scraping cold in his throat. Then he was scrabbling for her arms, saw Threetrees take a hold round her knees. It was a lucky thing she weren’t heavy. Not heavy at all. An arrow or two shot past. One stuck wobbling in the tree trunk, and they bundled her over and took cover on the other side.

‘There’s Shanka down there!’ Threetrees was shouting, ‘They shot the girl!’

‘Safest place in the battle?’ growled Dow, crouching down behind the tree, spinning his axe round and round in his hand. ‘Fucking bastards!’

‘Shanka? This far south?’ someone was saying.

Dogman took Cathil under the arms and pulled her groaning back to the hollow by the fire, her heels kicking at the mud. ‘They shot me,’ she muttered, staring down at the arrow, blood spreading out from it into her shirt. She coughed, looked up at the Dogman, eyes wide.

‘They’re coming!’ Shivers was shouting. ‘Ready, boys!’ Men were drawing their weapons, tightening their belts and their shield straps, gritting their teeth and thumping each other on the backs, making ready to fight. Grim was up behind the tree, shooting arrows down the hill, calm as you like.

‘I got to go,’ said the Dogman, squeezing at Cathil’s hand, ‘but I’ll be back, alright? You just sit tight, you hear? I’ll be back.’

‘What? No!’ He had to pry her fingers away from his. He didn’t like doing it, but what choice did he have? ‘No,’ she croaked at his back as he scrambled towards the tree and the thin line of Carls hunching down behind it, a couple kneeling up to shoot their own bows. An ugly spear came over the trunk and thudded into the earth just beside him. Dogman stared at it, then slithered past, up onto his knees not far from Grim, looking down the slope.

‘Fucking shit!’ The trees were alive with Flatheads. The trees below, the trees to their left, the trees to their right. Dark shapes moving, flapping shadows, swarming up the hill. Hundreds of them, it seemed like. Off to their right the Union soldiers were shouting and clattering, confused, armour clanking as they set their spears. Arrows hissed angry up out of the woods, flitted down into ’em. ‘Fucking shit!’

‘Maybe start shooting, aye?’ Grim loosed a shaft, pulled another out of his quiver. Dogman snatched out an arrow himself, but there were so many targets he could hardly bring himself to pick one, and he shot too high, cursing all the while. They were getting close now, close enough for him to see their faces, if you could call ’em faces. Open flapping jaws, snarling and full of teeth, hard little eyes, full of hate. Clumsy weapons – clubs with nails in, axes made from chipped stone, rust-spotted swords stolen from the dead. Up they came, seeming fast as wolves through the trees.

Dogman got one in the chest, saw it drop back. He hit another through the leg, but the rest weren’t slowing. ‘Ready!’ he heard Threetrees roaring, felt men standing up around him, lifting their blades, their spears, their shields, to meet the charge. He wondered how a man was meant to get ready for this.

A Flathead came springing through the air over the tree, mouth wide open and snarling. Dogman saw it there, black in the air, heard a great roar in his ear, then Tul’s sword ripped into it and flung it back, blood spraying out of it like water from a smashed bottle.

Another came scrambling up and Threetrees took its arm clean off with his sword, smashed it back down the slope with his shield. More of ’em were coming now, and still more, swarming over the fallen trunk in a crowd. Dogman shot one in the face at no more than a stride away, pulled his knife out and stabbed it in the gut, screaming as loud as he could, blood leaking warm over his hand. He tore its club from its claw as it fell and

swung it at another, missed and reeled away. Men were shouting and stabbing and hacking all over.

He saw Shivers wedge a Shanka's head against the tree with his boot, lift his shield high above his head and ram the metal rim deep into its face. He knocked another sprawling with his axe, spraying blood into Dogman's eyes, then caught a third in his arms as it sprang over the tree and they rolled onto the wet dirt together, flopping over and over. The Shanka came out on top and Dogman smashed it in the back with the club, once, twice, three times and Shivers shoved it off and scrambled up, stomped on the back of its head. He charged past, hacking another Flathead down just as it spitted a squealing Carl through the side with a spear.

Dogman blinked, trying to wipe the blood from his eyes on the back of his sleeve. He saw Grim lift his knife and stab it through a Flathead's skull, the blade sliding out its mouth and nailing it tight to a tree trunk. He saw Tul smashing his great fist into a Shanka's face, again and again until its skull was nothing but red pulp. A Flathead sprang up onto the tree above him, spear raised, but before it could stab him Dow leaped up and chopped its legs out from under it. It spun in the air, screaming.

Dogman saw a Shanka on top of a Carl, taking a great bite out of his neck. He snatched the spear out of the ground behind him and flung it square into the Flathead's back. It fell, gibbering and clawing over its own shoulders, trying to get to the thing, but it was stuck clean through.

Another Carl was thrashing around, roaring, a Shanka's teeth sunk into his arm, punching at it with his other hand. Dogman took a step to help him but before he got there a Flathead came at him with a spear. He saw it in good time and dodged round it, slashed it across the eyes with his knife as it came past, then cracked the club down on the back of its skull, felt it crunch like a breaking egg. He turned to face another. A damn big one. It opened its jaws at him and snarled, drool running out from its teeth, a great axe in its claws.

'Come on!' he screamed at it, raising the club and the knife. Before it could come at him Threetrees had stepped up behind it and split it open from shoulder to chest. Blood spattered out and it grovelled in the mud. It managed to get up a ways, somehow, but all that did was put its face in the best place for Dogman to stab his knife into.

Now the Shanka were falling back and the Carls were shouting and hacking them down as they turned. The last one squawked and went for the

tree, trying to scramble over. It gibbered as Dow's sword hacked a bloody gash across its back, all red meat and splinters of white bone. It fell tangled over a branch, twitched and lay still, its legs dangling.

'They're done!' roared Shivers, his face spotted with blood under his long hair. 'We did 'em!'

The Carls cheered and shouted and shook their weapons. Leastways most of 'em did. There were a couple lying still and a few more laid out wounded, groaning, gurgling through clenched teeth. The Dogman didn't reckon they felt much like celebrating. Neither did Threetrees.

'Shut up, you fools! They're gone for now but there'll be more. That's the thing with Flatheads, there's always more! Get them bodies out of the way! Salvage all the arrows we can get! We'll need 'em before today's through!'

The Dogman was already limping back towards the smouldering fire. Cathil was lying where he'd left her, breathing fast and shallow, one hand pressed against her ribs around the shaft. She watched him coming with wide, wet eyes and said nothing. He said nothing either. What was there to say? He took his knife and slit her bloody shirt, from the arrow down to the hem, peeled it away from her until he could see the shaft. It was stuck between two ribs on the right hand side, just under her tit. Not a good place to get shot, if there was such a thing.

'Is it alright?' she mumbled, teeth rattling. Her face was white as snow, eyes feverish bright. 'Is it alright?'

'It's alright,' he said, rubbing the dirt off her wet cheek with his thumb. 'Don't you fret now, eh? We'll get it sorted.' And all the time he was thinking, you fucking liar, Dogman, you fucking coward. She's got an arrow in her ribs.

Threetrees squatted down beside them. 'It'll have to come out,' he said, frowning hard. 'I'll hold her, you pull it.'

'Do what?'

'What's he saying?' hissed Cathil, blood on her teeth. 'What's he . . .' Dogman took hold of the shaft in both hands while Threetrees took her wrists. 'What're you—'

Dogman pulled, and it wouldn't come. He pulled, and blood ran out from the wound round the shaft and slid down her pale side in two dark lines. He pulled, and her body thrashed and her legs kicked and she screamed like he

was killing her. He pulled, and it wouldn't come, and it wouldn't even shift a finger's breadth.

'Pull it!' hissed Threetrees.

'It won't fucking come!' snarled the Dogman in his face.

'Alright! Alright.' Dogman let go the arrow and Cathil coughed and gurgled, shuddering and shaking, gasping in air and dribbling out pink spit.

Threetrees rubbed at his jaw, leaving a bloody smear across his face. 'If you can't pull it out, you'll have to push it on through.'

'What?'

'What's he . . . saying?' gurgled Cathil, her teeth chattering.

Dogman swallowed. 'We got to push it through.'

'No,' she muttered, eyes going wide. 'No.'

'We got to.' She snorted as he took hold of the shaft and snapped it off halfway down, cupped his palms over the broken end.

'No,' she whimpered.

'Just hold on, girl,' muttered Threetrees in common, gripping hold of her arms again. 'Just hold on, now. Do it, Dogman.'

'No . . .'

Dogman gritted his teeth and shoved down hard on the broken shaft. Cathil jerked and made a kind of sigh, then her eyes rolled back, passed out clean. Dogman half rolled her, body limp as a rag, saw the arrow head sticking out her back.

'Alright,' he muttered, 'alright, it's through.' He took hold of it just below the blade, twisted it gently as he slid it out. A splatter of blood came with it, but not too much.

'That's good,' said Threetrees. 'Don't reckon it got a lung, then.'

Dogman chewed at his lip. 'That's good.' He grabbed up a roll of bandage, put it against the leaking hole in her back, started winding it round her chest, Threetrees lifting her up while he passed it underneath her. 'That's good, that's good.' He said it over and over, winding the bandage round, fumbling fast as he could with cold fingers until it was done up tight, as good as he knew how. His hands were bloody, the bandage was bloody, her stomach and her back were covered in his pink finger marks, in streaks of dark dirt and dark blood. He pulled her shirt back down over her, rolled her gently onto her back. He touched her face – warm, eyes closed, her chest moving softly, her breath smoking round her mouth.

‘Need to get a blanket.’ He started up, fumbled through his pack, pulled out his blanket, scattering gear around the fire. He dragged it back, shook it out and laid it over her. ‘Keep you warm, eh? Nice and warm.’ He pushed it in around her, keep the cold out. He tugged it down over her feet. ‘Keep warm.’

‘Dogman.’

Threetrees was bending over, listening to her breath. He straightened up, and slowly shook his head. ‘She’s dead.’

‘What?’

White specks drifted down round them. It was starting to snow again.

‘Where the hell is Poulder?’ snarled Marshal Burr, staring down the valley, his fists clenching and unclenching with frustration. ‘I said wait until we’re engaged, not damn well overrun!’

West could think of no reply. Where, indeed, was Poulder? The snow was thickening now, coming down softly in swirls and eddies, letting fall a grey curtain across the battlefield, lending to everything an air of unreality. The sounds came up as though from impossibly far away, muffled and echoing. Messengers rode back and forth behind the lines, black dots moving swiftly over the white ground with urgent calls for reinforcement. The wounded were building up, dragged groaning in stretchers, gasping in carts, or trudging, silent and bloody down the road below the headquarters.

Even through the snow it was clear that Kroy’s men were hard pressed. The carefully drawn lines now bulged alarmingly in the centre, units dissolved into a single straining mass, merged with one another in the chaos and confusion of combat. West had lost track of the number of staff officers General Kroy had sent to the command post demanding support or permission to withdraw, all of them sent back with the same message. To hold, and to wait. From Poulder, meanwhile, came nothing but an ominous and unexpected silence.

‘Where the hell is he?’ Burr stomped back to his tent leaving dark footprints in the fresh crust of white. ‘You!’ he shouted at an adjutant, beckoning him impatiently. West followed at a respectful distance and pushed through the tent flap after him, Jalenhorm just behind.

Marshal Burr leaned over his table and snatched a pen from an ink-bottle, spattering black drops on the wood. ‘Get up into those woods and find

General Poulder! Establish what the hell he is doing and return to me at once!'

'Yes, sir!' squawked the officer, standing to vibrating attention.

Burr's pen scrawled orders across the paper. 'Inform him that he is commanded to begin his attack immediately!' He signed his name with an angry slash of the wrist and jerked the paper out to the adjutant.

'Of course, sir!' The young officer strode purposefully from the tent.

Burr turned back to his maps, wincing as he glared down, one hand tugging on his beard, the other pressed to his belly. 'Where the hell is Poulder?'

'Perhaps, sir, he has himself come under attack—'

Burr burped, and grimaced, burped again and thumped the table making the ink bottle rattle. 'Curse this fucking indigestion! ' His thick finger stabbed at the map. 'If Poulder doesn't arrive soon we'll have to commit the reserve, West, you hear me? Commit the cavalry.'

'Yes, sir, of course.'

'This cannot be allowed to fail.' The Marshal frowned, swallowed. It seemed to West he had gone suddenly very pale. 'This cannot . . . cannot . . .' He swayed slightly, blinking.

'Sir, are you—'

'Bwaaaah!' And Marshal Burr jerked forwards and sprayed black vomit over the table top. It splattered against the maps and turned the paper angry red. West stood frozen, his jaw gradually dropping open. Burr gurgled, fists clenched on the table in front of him, his body shaking, then he hunched over and poured out puke again. 'Guuurgh!' And he lurched away, red drool dangling from his lip, eyes starting from his white face, gave a strangled groan and toppled back, dragging one bloody chart with him.

West finally understood what was happening just in time to dive forwards and catch the Lord Marshal's limp body before he fell. He staggered across the tent, struggling to hold him up.

'Shit!' gasped Jalenhorm.

'Help me, damn it!' snarled West. The big man started over and took Burr's other arm, and together they half lifted, half dragged him to his bed. West undid the Marshal's top button, loosened his collar. 'Some sickness of the stomach,' he muttered through clenched teeth. 'He's been complaining for weeks . . .'

‘I’ll get the surgeon!’ squealed Jalenhorm.

He started up but West caught hold of his arm. ‘No.’

The big man stared back. ‘What?’

‘If it becomes known that he’s ill, there’ll be panic. Poulder and Kroy will do as they please. The army might fall apart. No one can know until after the battle.’

‘But—’

West got up and put his hand on Jalenhorm’s shoulder, looking him straight in the eye. He knew already what had to be done. He would not be a spectator at another disaster. ‘Listen to me. We must follow through with the plan. We must.’

‘Who must?’ Jalenhorm stared wildly round the tent. ‘Me and you, alone?’

‘If that’s what it takes.’

‘But this is a man’s life!’

‘This is thousands of men’s lives,’ hissed West. ‘It cannot be allowed to fail, you heard him say it.’

Jalenhorm had turned almost as pale as Burr. ‘I hardly think he meant that —’

‘Don’t forget you owe me.’ West leaned still closer. ‘Without me you’d be one in a pile of corpses rotting nicely north of the Cumnur.’ He didn’t like doing it, but it had to be done, and there was no time for niceties. ‘Do we understand each other, Captain?’

Jalenhorm swallowed. ‘Yes, sir, I think so.’

‘Good. You watch Marshal Burr, I’ll take care of things outside.’ West got up and made for the tent flap.

‘What if he—’

‘Improvise!’ he snapped, over his shoulder. There were bigger things to worry about now than any one man. He ducked out into the cold air. At least a score of officers and guards were scattered around the command post before the tent, pointing down into the white valley, peering through eye-glasses and muttering to one another. ‘Sergeant Pike!’ West beckoned to the convict and he strode over through the falling snow. ‘I need you to stand guard here, do you understand?’

‘Of course, sir.’

‘I need you to stand guard here, and admit no one but me or Captain Jalenhorm. No one.’ He dropped his voice lower. ‘Under any circumstances.’

Pike nodded, his eyes glittering in the pink mass of his face. ‘I understand.’ And he moved to the tent flap and stood beside it, almost carelessly, his thumbs tucked into his sword belt.

A moment later a horse plunged down the slope and into the headquarters, smoke snorting from its nostrils. Its rider slid down from his saddle, stumbled a couple of steps before West managed to get in his way.

‘An urgent message for Marshal Burr from General Poulder!’ blathered the man in a rush. He tried to take a stride towards the tent but West did not move.

‘Marshal Burr is busy. You can deliver your message to me.’

‘I was explicitly told to—’

‘To me, Captain!’

The man blinked. ‘General Poulder’s division is engaged, sir, in the woods.’

‘Engaged?’

‘Hotly engaged. There have been several savage attacks on the left wing and we’re hard pressed to hold our own. General Poulder requests permission to withdraw and regroup, sir, we’re all out of position!’

West swallowed. The plan was already coming unravelled, and in imminent danger of falling apart completely. ‘Withdraw? No! Impossible. If he pulls back, Kroy’s division will be left exposed. Tell General Poulder to hold his ground, and to go through with the attack if he possibly can. Tell him he must not withdraw under any circumstances! Every man must do his part!’

‘But, sir, I should—’

‘Go!’ shouted West. ‘At once!’

The man saluted and clambered back onto his horse. Even as he was spurring up the slope another visitor was pulling up his mount not far from the tent. West cursed under his breath. It was Colonel Felnigg, Kroy’s chief of staff. He would not be so easily put off.

‘Colonel West,’ he snapped as he swung down from the saddle. ‘Our division is fiercely engaged all across the line, and now cavalry has appeared on our right wing! A charge by cavalry against a regiment of

levies!' He was already making for the tent, pulling off his gloves. 'Without support they won't hold long, and if they break, our flank will be up in the air! It could be the end! Where the hell is Poulder?'

West attempted unsuccessfully to slow Felnigg down. 'General Poulder has come under attack himself. However, I will order the reserves released immediately and—'

'Not good enough,' growled Felnigg, brushing past him and striding towards the tent flap. 'I must speak to Marshal Burr at—'

Pike stepped out in front of him, one hand resting on the hilt of his sword. 'The Marshal . . . is busy,' he whispered. His eyes bulged from his burned face in a manner so horribly threatening that even West felt slightly unnerved. There was a tense silence for a moment as the staff officer and the faceless convict stared at one another.

Then Felnigg took a hesitant step back. He blinked, licked his lips nervously. 'Busy. I see. Well.' He took another step away. 'The reserves will be committed, you say?'

'Immediately.'

'Well then, well then . . . I will tell General Kroy to expect reinforcements.' Felnigg shoved one toe into his stirrup. 'This is highly irregular, though.' He frowned down at the tent, at Pike, at West. 'Highly irregular.' And he gave his horse the spurs and charged back down into the valley. West watched him go, thinking that Felnigg had no idea just how irregular. He turned to an adjutant.

'Marshal Burr has ordered the reserve into action on the right wing. They must charge Bethod's cavalry and drive them off. If that flank weakens, it will mean disaster. Do you understand?'

'I should have written orders from the Marshal—'

'There is no time for written orders!' roared West. 'Get down there and do your duty, man!'

The adjutant hurried obediently away down the slope towards the two regiments of reserves, waiting patiently in the snow. West watched him go, his fingers working nervously. The men began to mount up, began to trot into position for a charge. West was chewing at his lip as he turned around. The officers and guards of Burr's staff were all looking at him with expressions ranging from mildly curious to downright suspicious.

He nodded to a couple of them as he walked back, trying to give the impression that everything was routine. He wondered how long it would be before someone refused to simply take his word, before someone forced their way into the tent, before someone discovered that Lord Marshal Burr was halfway to the land of the dead, and had been for some time. He wondered if it would happen before the lines broke in the valley, and the command post was overrun by Northmen. If it was after, he supposed it would hardly matter.

Pike was looking over at him with an expression that might have been something like a grin. West would have liked to grin back, but he didn't have it in him.

The Dogman sat, and breathed. His back was to the fallen tree, his bow was hanging loose in his fist. A sword was stuck into the wet earth beside him. He'd taken it from a dead Carl, and put it to use, and he reckoned he'd have more use for it before the day was out. There was blood on him – on his hands, on his clothes, all over. Cathil's, Flatheads', his own. Wiping it off hardly seemed worth the effort – there'd be plenty more soon enough.

Three times the Shanka had come up the hill now, and three times they'd fought them off, each fight harder than the one before. Dogman wondered if they'd fight them off when they came again. He never doubted that they were coming. Not for a minute. When and how many were the questions that bothered him.

Through the trees he could hear the Union wounded screeching and squealing. Lots of wounded. One of the Carls had lost his hand the last time they came. Lost was the wrong word, maybe, since it got cut off with an axe. He'd been screaming loud just after, but now he was quiet, breathing soft and wheezy. They'd strapped the stump up with a rag and a belt, and now he was staring at it, with that look the wounded get sometimes. White and big-eyed, looking at his hacked-off wrist as if he couldn't understand what he was seeing. As if it was a constant surprise to him.

Dogman eased himself up slow, peering over the top of the fallen tree trunk. He could see the Flatheads, down in the woods. Sat there in the shadows. Waiting. He didn't like seeing 'em lurking down there. Shanka come at you until they're finished, or they run.

‘What are they waiting for?’ he hissed. ‘When did bloody Flatheads learn to wait?’

‘When did they learn to fight for Bethod?’ growled Tul, wiping his sword clean. ‘There’s a lot that’s changing, and none of it for the better.’

‘When did anything change for the better?’ snarled Dow from further down the line.

Dogman frowned. There was a new smell in his nose, like damp. There was something pale, down in the trees, getting paler while he watched. ‘What is that? That mist?’

‘Mist? Up here?’ Dow chuckled harsh as a crow calling. ‘This time of day? Hah! Hold on, though . . .’ They could all see it now – a trace of white, clinging to the wet slope. Dogman swallowed. His mouth was dry. He was feeling uneasy, all of a sudden, and not just from the Shanka waiting down there. Something else. The mist was creeping up through the trees, curling round the trunks, rising while they watched. The Flatheads were starting to move, dim shapes shifting in the grey murk.

‘Don’t like this,’ he heard Dow saying. ‘This ain’t natural.’

‘Steady, lads!’ Threetrees’ deep voice. ‘Steady, now!’ Dogman took heart from that, but his heart didn’t last long. He rocked back and forth, feeling sick.

‘No, no,’ whispered Shivers, his eyes sliding around like he was looking for a way out. Dogman could feel the hairs on his own arms rising, his skin prickling, his throat closing up tight. A nameless sort of a fear was taking him, flowing up the hillside along with the mist – creeping through the forest, swirling round the trees, sliding under the trunk they were using as cover.

‘It’s him,’ whispered Shivers, his eyes open wide as a pair of boot-tops, squashing himself down like he was scared of being heard. ‘It’s him!’

‘Who?’ croaked Dogman.

Shivers just shook his head and pressed himself to the cold earth. The Dogman felt a powerful need to do the same, but he forced himself to rise up, forced himself to take a look over the tree. A Named Man, scared as a child in the dark, and not knowing why? Better to face it, he thought. Big mistake.

There was a shadow in the mist, too tall and too straight for a Shanka. A great, huge man, big as Tul. Bigger even. A giant. Dogman rubbed his sore

eyes, thinking it must be some trick of the light in all that gloom, but it wasn't. He came on closer, this shadow, and he took on more shape, and more, and the clearer he got, the worse grew the fear.

He'd been long and far, the Dogman, all over the North, but he'd never seen so strange and unnatural a thing as this giant. One half of him was covered in great plates of black armour – studded and bolted, beaten and pointed, spiked and hammered and twisted metal. The other half was mostly bare, apart from the straps and belts and buckles that held the armour on. Bare foot, bare arm, bare chest, all bulging out with ugly slabs and cords of muscle. A mask was on his face, a mask of scarred black iron.

He came on closer, and he rose from the mist, and the Dogman saw the giant's skin was painted. Marked blue with tiny letters. Scrawled across with writing, every inch of him. No weapon, but he was no less terrible for that. He was more, if anything. He scorned to carry one, even on a battlefield.

'By the fucking dead,' breathed the Dogman, and his mouth hung wide with horror.

'Steady, lads,' growled Threetrees. 'Steady.' The old boy's voice was the only thing stopping the Dogman from running for it, and never coming back.

'It's him!' squealed one of the Carls, voice shrill as a girl's. 'It's the Feared!'

'Shut your fucking hole!' came Shivers' voice, 'We know what it is!'

'Arrows!' shouted Threetrees.

Dogman's hands were trembling as he took an aim on the giant. It was hard somehow, to do it, even from this distance. He had to make his hand let go the string, and then the arrow pinged off the armour and away into the trees, harmless. Grim's shot was better. His shaft sank clean into the giant's side, buried deep in his painted flesh. He seemed not even to notice. More arrows shot over from the Carls' bows. One hit him in the shoulder, another stuck right through his huge calf. The giant made not a sound. He came on, steady as the grass growing, and the mist, and the Flatheads, and the fear came with him.

'Fuck,' muttered Grim.

'It's a devil!' one of the Carls screeched. 'A devil from hell!' Dogman was starting to think the same thing. He felt the fear growing up all round him,

felt the men starting to waver. He felt himself edging backwards, almost without thinking about it.

'Alright, now!' bellowed Threetrees, voice deep and steady as if he felt no fear at all. 'On the count of three! On the count of three, we charge!'

Dogman stared over as if the old boy had lost his reason. At least they had a tree to hide behind up here. He heard a couple of the Carls muttering, no doubt thinking much the same. They didn't much like the sound of this for a plan, charging down a hill into a great crowd of Shanka, some unnatural giant at the heart of 'em.

'You sure about this?' Dogman hissed.

Threetrees didn't even look at him. 'Best thing for a man to do when he's afeared is charge! Get the blood up, and turn the fear to fury. The ground's on our side, and we ain't waiting here for 'em!'

'You sure?'

'We're going,' said Threetrees, turning away.

'We're going,' growled Dow, glaring round at the Carls, daring 'em to back down.

'On three!' rumbled the Thunderhead.

'Uh,' said Grim. Dogman swallowed, still not sure whether he'd be going or not. Threetrees peered over the trunk, his mouth a hard, flat line, watching the figures in the mist, and the great big one in the midst of 'em, his hand down flat behind him to say wait. Waiting for the right distance. Waiting for the right time.

'Do I go on three?' whispered Shivers, 'or after three?'

Dogman shook his head. 'Don't hardly matter, as long as you go.' But his feet felt like they were two great stones.

'One!'

One already? Dogman looked over his shoulder, saw Cathil's body lying stretched out under his blanket near the dead fire. Should have made him feel angry maybe, but it only made him feel more scared. Fact was, he'd no wish to end up like her. He swallowed and turned away, clutched tight to the handle of his knife, to the grip of the sword he'd borrowed off the dead. Iron felt no fear. Good weapons, ready to do bloody work. He wished he was halfway as ready himself, but he'd done this before, and he knew no one was ever really ready. You don't have to be ready. You just have to go.

'Two!'

Almost time. He felt his eyes opening wide, his nose sucking in cold air, his skin tingling cold. He smelled men and sharp pine trees, Shanka and damp mist. He heard quick breath behind, slow footsteps down below, shouts from along the line, his own blood thumping in his veins. He saw every bit of everything, all going slow as dripping honey. Men moved around him, hard men with hard faces, shifting their weight, pushing forward against the fear and the mist, making ready. They were going to go, he'd no doubt left of it. They were all going to go. He felt the muscles in his legs begin to squeeze, pushing him up.

'Three!'

Threetrees was first over the trunk and the Dogman was just behind, men all round him charging, and the air full of their shouts and their fury and their fear, and he was running, and screaming, feet pounding and shaking his bones, breath and wind rushing, black trees and white sky crashing and wobbling, mist flying up at him and dark shapes inside the mist, waiting.

He swung his sword at one as he roared past and the blade chopped deep into it and threw it back, turned the Dogman half round and he went along, spinning, falling, shouting. The blade hacked deep into a Shanka's leg and snatched it off its feet, and Dogman spilled down the slope, slithering around in the slush, trying to right himself. The sounds of fighting were all round, muffled and strange. Men bellowing curses, and Shanka snarling, and the rattles and thuds of iron on iron and iron in flesh.

He spun about, sliding between the trees, not knowing where the next Flathead might come from, not knowing whether he might get a spear in his back any minute. He saw a shape in the murk and sprang forward at it, shouting as hard as he could. The mist seemed to lift away in front of him, and he slithered to a horrified stop, the sound rattling out in his throat, nearly falling over backwards in his hurry to get away.

The Feared was no more than five strides from him, bigger and more terrible than ever, broken arrows sticking from his tattooed flesh all over. Didn't help that he had a Carl round the neck, out at arm's length, kicking and struggling. The painted sinews in his forearm twisted and squirmed and the huge fingers tightened, and the Carl's eyes bulged, and his mouth opened and no sound came out. There was a crunch, and the giant tossed the corpse away like a rag and it turned over and over in the snow and the mud, head flopping about, and lay still.

The Feared stood, mist flowing round him, looking down at the Dogman from behind his black mask, and the Dogman looked back, halfway to pissing himself.

But some things have to be done. Better to do 'em, than to live with the fear of 'em. That's what Logen would have said. So the Dogman opened his mouth, and screamed as loud as he could, and he charged, swinging the borrowed sword over his head.

The giant lifted his great iron-plated arm and caught the blade. Metal clanged on metal and rattled the Dogman's teeth, tore the sword away and sent it spinning, but he stabbed with his knife at the same moment and slipped it under the giant's arm, ramming it right to the hilt in his tattooed side.

'Hah!' shouted the Dogman, but he didn't get long to celebrate. The Feared's huge arm flashed through the mist, caught him a backhand across the chest and flung him gurgling through the air. The woods reeled and a tree came out of nowhere, crashed into his back and sent him sprawling in the mud. He tried to get a breath and couldn't. Tried to roll over and couldn't. Pain crushed his ribs, like a great rock pressing on his chest.

He looked up, hands clutching at the mud, hardly enough breath in him even to groan. The Feared was walking to him, no rush. He reached down and pulled the knife out of his side. It looked like a toy between his huge finger and thumb. Like a tooth-pick. He flicked it away into the trees, a long drip of blood going with it. He lifted his great armoured foot, ready to stomp down on the Dogman's head and crush his skull like a nut on an anvil, and Dogman could only lie there, helpless with pain and fear as the great shadow fell across his face.

'You bastard!' And Threetrees came flying out of the trees, crashed into the giant's armoured hip with his shield and knocked him sideways, the huge metal boot squelching into the dirt just beside the Dogman's face and spattering him with mud. The old boy pressed in, hacking away at the Feared's bare side while he was off balance, snarling and cursing at him while the Dogman gasped and squirmed, trying to get up and only making it as far as sitting, back to the tree.

The giant threw his armoured fist hard enough to bring a house down, but Threetrees got round it and turned it off his shield, brought his sword up and over and knocked a fearsome dent in the Feared's mask, snapping his

great head back and making him stagger, blood splattering from the mouth hole. The old boy pressed in quick and slashed hard across the plates on the giant's chest, blade striking sparks from the black iron and carving a great gash into the bare blue flesh beside it. A killing blow, no doubt, but only a few specks of blood flew off the swinging blade, and it left no wound at all.

The giant found his balance now, and he gave a great bellow that left Dogman trembling with fear. He set his huge foot behind him, lifted his massive arm and hurled it forward. It crashed into Threetrees' shield and ripped a chunk out of the edge, split the timbers and went on through, thudded into the old boy's shoulder and flung him groaning onto his back. The Feared pressed in on top of him, lifting his big blue fist up high. Threetrees snarled and stabbed his sword clean through his tattooed thigh right to the hilt. Dogman saw the point slide bloody out the back of his leg, but it didn't even slow him. That great hand dropped down and crunched into Threetrees' ribs with a sound like dry sticks breaking.

Dogman groaned, clawing at the dirt, but his chest was on fire and he couldn't get up, and he couldn't do anything but watch. The Feared lifted up his other fist now, covered in black iron. He lifted it up slow and careful, waited up high, then brought it whistling down, smashed it into Threetrees' other side and crushed him sighing into the dirt. The great arm went up again, red blood on blue knuckles.

And a black line came out of the mist and stabbed into the Feared's armpit, shoving him over sideways. Shivers, with a spear, jabbing at the giant and shouting, pushing him across the slope. The Feared rolled and slithered up, faked a step back and flicked out his hand quick as a massive snake, slapped Shivers away like a man might swat a fly, squawking and kicking into the mist.

Before the giant could follow him there was a roar like thunder and Tul's sword crashed into his armoured shoulder and flung him down on one knee. Now Dow came out of the mist, slashed a great chunk out of his leg from behind. Shivers was up again, snarling and jabbing with his spear, and the three of 'em seemed to have the giant penned in.

He should've been dead, however big he was. The wounds Threetrees, and Shivers, and Dow had given him, he should have been mud. Instead he rose up again, six arrows and Threetrees' sword stuck through his flesh, and he let go a roar from behind his iron mask that made Dogman tremble to his

toes. Shivers fell back on his arse, going white as milk. Tul blinked and faltered and let his sword drop. Even Black Dow took a step away.

The Feared reached down and took hold of the hilt of Threetrees' sword. He slid it out from his leg and let it drop bloody in the dirt at his feet. It left no wound behind. No wound at all. Then he turned and sprang away into the gloom, and the mist closed in behind him, and the Dogman heard the sounds of him crashing away through the trees, and he was never so glad to see the back of anything.

'Come 'ere!' Dow screamed, making ready to tear down the slope after him, but Tul got in his way with one big hand held up.

'You're going nowhere. We don't know how many Shanka there are down there. We can kill that thing another day.'

'Out o' my way, big lad!'

'No.'

Dogman rolled forward, wincing all the way at the pain in his chest, started clawing his way up the slope. The mist was already spilling back, leaving the cold clear air behind. Grim was coming down the other way, bow string drawn back with an arrow nocked. There were a lot of corpses in the mud and the snow. Shanka mostly, and a couple of Carls.

Seemed to take the Dogman an age to drag himself up to Threetrees. The old boy was lying on his back in the mud, one arm lying still with his broken shield strapped to it. Air was snorting in shallow through his nose, bubbling back out bloody from his mouth. His eyes rolled down to Dogman as he crawled up next to him, and he reached out and grabbed a hold of his shirt, pulled him down, hissing in his ear through clenched tight, bloody teeth.

'Listen to me, Dogman! Listen!'

'What, chief?' croaked Dogman, hardly able to talk for the pain in his chest. He waited, and he listened, and nothing came. Threetrees' eyes were wide open, staring up at the branches. A drop of water splattered on his cheek, ran down into his bloody beard. Nothing else.

'Back to the mud,' said Grim, face hanging slack as old cobwebs.

West chewed at his fingernails as he watched General Kroy and his staff riding up the road, a group of dark-dressed men on dark horses, solemn as a procession of undertakers. The snow had stopped, for now, but the sky was

angry black, the light so bad it felt like evening, and an icy wind was blowing through the command post making the fabric of the tent snap and rustle. West's borrowed time was almost done.

He felt a sudden impulse, almost overpowering, to turn and run. An impulse so ludicrous that he immediately had another, equally inappropriate, to burst out laughing. Luckily, he was able to stop himself from doing either. Lucky to stop himself laughing, at least. This was far from a laughing matter. As the clattering hooves came closer, he was left wondering whether the idea of running was such a foolish one after all.

Kroy pulled his black charger up savagely and climbed down, jerked his uniform smooth, adjusted his sword belt, turned sharply and came on towards the tent. West intercepted him, hoping to get the first word in and buy a few more moments. 'General Kroy, well done, sir, your division fought with great tenacity!'

'Of course they did, *Colonel West.*' Kroy sneered the name as though he were delivering a mortal insult, his staff gathering into a menacing half circle behind him.

'And might I ask our situation?'

'Our *situation*?' snarled the General. 'Our situation is that the Northmen are driven off, but not routed. We gave them a mauling, in the end, but my units were fought out, every man. Too weary to pursue. The enemy have been able to withdraw across the fords, thanks to Poulder's cowardice! I mean to see him cashiered in disgrace! I mean to see him hanged for treason! I will see it done, on my honour!' He glowered around the headquarters while his men muttered angrily amongst themselves. 'Where is Lord Marshal Burr? I demand to see the Lord Marshal!'

'Of course, if you could just give me . . .' West's words were smothered by the mounting noise of more rushing hooves, and a second group of riders careered around the side of the Marshal's tent. Who else but General Poulder, accompanied by his own enormous staff. A cart pulled into the headquarters along with them, crowding the narrow space with beasts and men. Poulder vaulted down from his saddle and hastened through the dirt. His hair was in disarray, his jaw was locked tight, there was a long scratch down his cheek. His crimson entourage followed behind him: steels rattling, gold braid flapping, faces flushed.

‘Poulder!’ hissed Kroy. ‘You’ve some nerve showing your face in front of me! Some nerve! The only damn nerve you’ve shown all day!’

‘How dare you!’ screeched Poulder. ‘I demand an apology! Apologise at once!’

‘Apologise? Me, apologise? Hah! You’ll be the one saying sorry, I’ll see to it! The plan was for you to come in from the left wing! We were hard pressed for more than two hours!’

‘Almost three hours, sir,’ chipped in one of Kroy’s staff, unhelpfully.

‘Three hours, damn it! If that is not cowardice I fumble for the definition!’

‘Cowardice? ’ shrieked Poulder. A couple of his staff went as far as to place their hands on their steels. ‘You will apologise to me immediately! My division came under a brutal and sustained attack upon our flank! I was obliged to lead a charge myself! On foot!’ And he thrust forward his cheek and indicated the scratch with one gloved finger. ‘It was we who did all the fighting! We who won the victory here today!’

‘Damn you, Poulder, you did nothing! The victory belongs to my men alone! An attack? An attack from what? From animals of the forest?’

‘Ah-ha! Exactly so! Show him!’

One of Poulder’s staff ripped back the oilskin on the cart, displaying what seemed at first to be a heap of bloody rags. He wrinkled up his nose and shoved it forward. The thing flopped off onto the ground, rolled onto its back and stared up at the sky with beetling black eyes. A huge, misshapen jaw hung open, long, sharp teeth sticking every which way. Its skin was a greyish brown colour, rough and calloused, its nose was an ill-formed stub. Its skull was flattened and hairless with a heavy ridge of brow and a small, receding forehead. One of its arms was short and muscular, the other much longer and slightly bent, both ending in claw-like hands. The whole creature seemed lumpen, twisted, primitive. West gawped down at it, open-mouthed.

Plainly, it was not human.

‘There!’ squealed Poulder in triumph. ‘Now tell us my division didn’t fight! There were hundreds of these . . . these creatures out there! Thousands, and they fight like mad things! We only just managed to hold our ground, and it’s damn lucky for you that we did! I demand!’ he frothed, ‘I demand!’ he ranted, ‘*I demand* !’ he shrieked, face turning purple, ‘an apology!’

Kroy's eyes twitched with incomprehension, with anger, with frustration. His lips twisted, his jaw worked, his fists clenched. Clearly there was no entry in the rule book for a situation such as this. He rounded on West.

'I demand to see Marshal Burr!' he snarled.

'As do I!' screeched Poulder shrilly, not to be outdone.

'The Lord Marshal is . . .' West's lips moved silently. He had no ideas left. No strategies, no ruses, no schemes. 'He is . . .' There would be no retreat across the fords for him. He was finished. More than likely he would end up in a penal colony himself. 'He is—'

'I am here.'

And to West's profound amazement, Burr was standing in the entrance to his tent. Even in the half-light, it seemed obvious that he was terribly ill. His face was ashen pale and there was a sheen of sweat across his forehead. His eyes were sunken and ringed with black. His lip quivered, his legs were unsteady, he clutched at the tent-pole beside him for support. West could see a dark stain down the front of his uniform that looked very much like blood.

'I am afraid I have been . . . somewhat unwell during the battle,' he croaked. 'Something I ate, perhaps.' His hand trembled on the pole and Jalenhorm lurked near his shoulder, ready to catch him if he fell, but by some superhuman effort of will the Lord Marshal stayed on his feet. West glanced nervously at the angry gathering, wondering what they might make of this walking corpse. But the two Generals were far too caught up in their own feud to pay any attention to that.

'Lord Marshal, I must protest about General Poulder—'

'Sir, I demand that General Kroy apologise—'

The best form of defence seemed to West to be an immediate attack. 'It would be traditional!' he cut in at the top of his voice, 'for us first to congratulate our commanding officer on his victory!' He began to clap, slowly and deliberately. Pike and Jalenhorm joined him without delay. Poulder and Kroy exchanged an icy glance, then they too raised their hands.

'May I be the first to—'

'The *very* first to congratulate you, Lord Marshal!'

Their staffs joined in, and others around the tent, and then more further away, and soon a rousing cheer was going up.

'A cheer for Lord Marshal Burr!'

'The Lord Marshal!'

‘Victory!’

Burr himself twitched and quivered, one hand clutched to his stomach, his face a mask of anguish. West slunk backwards, away from the attention, away from the glory. He had not the slightest interest in it. That had been close, he knew, impossibly close. His hands were trembling, his mouth tasted sour, his vision was swimming. He could still hear Poulder and Kroy, already arguing again, like a pair of furious ducks quacking.

‘We must move on Dunbrec immediately, a swift assault while they are unwary and—’

‘Pah! Foolishness! The defences are too strong. We must surround the walls and prepare for a lengthy—’

‘Nonsense! My division could carry the place tomorrow!’

‘Rubbish! We must dig in! Siegecraft is my particular area of expertise!’

And on, and on. West rubbed his fingertips in his ears, trying to block out the voices as he stumbled through the churned-up mud. A few paces further on and he clambered around a rocky outcrop, pressed his back to it and slowly slid down. Slid down until he was sitting hunched in the snow, hugging his knees, the way he used to do when he was a child, and his father was angry.

Down in the valley, in the gathering gloom, he could see men moving over the battlefield. Already starting to dig the graves.

A Fitting Punishment

It had been raining, not long ago, but it had stopped. The paving of the Square of Marshals was starting to dry, the flag-stones light round the edges, dark with damp in the centres. A ray of watery sun had finally broken through the clouds and was glinting on the bright metal of the chains hanging from the frame, on the blades, and hooks, and pincers of the instruments on their rack. *Fine weather for it, I suppose. It should be quite the event. Unless your name is Tulkis, of course, then it might be one you'd rather miss.*

The crowd were certainly anticipating a thrill. The wide square was full of their chattering, a heady mixture of excitement and anger, happiness and hate. The public area was packed shoulder to shoulder, and still filling, but there was ample room here in the government enclosure, fenced in and well guarded right in front of the scaffold. *The great and the good must have the best view, after all.* Over the shoulders of the row in front he could see the chairs where the members of the Closed Council were sitting. If he went up on his toes, an operation he dared not try too often, he could just see the Arch Lector's shock of white hair, stirred gracefully by the breeze.

He glanced sideways at Ardee. She was frowning grimly up at the scaffold, chewing slowly at her lower lip. *To think. The time was I would take young women to the finest establishments in the city, to the pleasure gardens on the hill, to concerts at the Hall of Whispers, or straight to my quarters, of course, if I thought I could manage it. Now I take them to executions.* He felt the tiniest of smiles at the corner of his mouth. *Ah well, things change.*

'How will it be done?' she asked him.

'He'll be hung and emptied.'

'What?'

'He will be lifted up by chains around his wrists and neck, not quite tight enough to kill him through strangulation. Then he will be opened with a blade, and gradually disembowelled. His entrails will be displayed to the crowd.'

She swallowed. 'He'll be alive?'

‘Possibly. Hard to say. Depends whether the executioners do their job properly. Anyway, he won’t live long.’ *Not without his guts.*

‘Seems . . . extreme.’

‘It is meant to be. It was the most savage punishment our savage forebears could dream up. Reserved for those who attempt harm to the royal person. Not carried out, I understand, for some eighty years.’

‘Hence the crowd.’

Glokta shrugged. ‘It’s a curiosity, but you always get a good showing for an execution. People love to see death. It reminds them that however mean, however low, however horrible their lives become . . . at least they have one.’

Glokta felt a tap on his shoulder and looked round, with some pain, to see Severard’s masked face hovering just behind him. ‘I dealt with that thing. That thing about Vitari.’

‘Huh. And?’

Severard’s eyes slid suspiciously sideways to Ardee, then he leaned forward to whisper in Glokta’s ear. ‘I followed her to a house, down below Galt’s Green, near the market there.’

‘I know it. And?’

‘I took a peek in through a window.’

Glokta raised an eyebrow. ‘You’re enjoying this, aren’t you? What was in there?’

‘Children.’

‘Children?’ muttered Glokta.

‘Three little children. Two girls and a boy. And what colour do you suppose their hair was?’

You don’t say. ‘Not flaming red, by any chance?’

‘Just like their mother.’

‘She’s got children?’ Glokta licked thoughtfully at his gums. ‘Who’d have thought it?’

‘I know. I thought that bitch had a block of ice for a cunt.’

That explains why she was so keen to get back from the South. All that time, she had three little ones waiting. The mothering instinct. How terribly touching. He wiped some wet from beneath his stinging left eye. ‘Well done, Severard, this could be useful. What about that other thing? The Prince’s guard?’

Severard lifted his mask for a moment and scratched underneath it, eyes darting nervously around. ‘That’s a strange one. I tried but . . . it seems he’s gone missing.’

‘Missing?’

‘I spoke to his family. They haven’t seen him since the day before the Prince died.’

Glokta frowned. ‘The day before?’ *But he was there . . . I saw him.* ‘Get Frost, and Vitari too. Get me a list of everyone who was in the palace that night. Every lord, every servant, every soldier. I am getting to the truth of this.’ *One way or another.*

‘Did Sult tell you to?’

Glokta looked round sharply. ‘He didn’t tell me not to. Just get it done.’

Severard muttered something, but his words were lost as the noise of the crowd suddenly swelled in a wave of angry jeering. Tulkis was being led out onto the scaffold. He shuffled forwards, chains rattling round his ankles. He did not cry or wail, nor did he yell in defiance. He simply looked drawn, and sad, and in some pain. There were light bruises round his face, tracks of angry red spots down his arms and legs, across his chest. *Impossible to use hot needles without leaving some marks, but he looks well, considering.* He was naked aside from a cloth tied round his waist. *To spare the delicate sensibilities of the ladies present. Watching a man’s entrails spilling out is excellent entertainment, but the sight of his cock, well, that would be obscene.*

A clerk stepped to the front of the scaffold and started reading out the prisoner’s name, the nature of the charge, the terms of his confession and his punishment, but even at this distance he could hardly be heard for the sullen muttering of the crowd, punctuated by an occasional furious scream. Glokta grimaced and worked his leg slowly back and forth, trying to loosen the cramping muscles.

The masked executioners stepped forward and took hold of the prisoner, moving with careful skill. They pulled a black bag over the envoy’s head, snapped manacles shut around his neck, his wrists, his ankles. Glokta could see the canvas moving in and out in front of his mouth. *The desperate last breaths. Does he pray, now? Does he curse and rage? Who can know, and what difference can it make?*

They hoisted him up into the air, spreadeagled on the frame. Most of his weight was on his arms. Enough on the collar round his neck to choke him, not quite enough to kill. He struggled somewhat, of course. *Entirely natural. An animal instinct to climb, to writhe, to wriggle out and breathe free. An instinct that cannot be resisted.* One of the executioners went to the rack, pulled out a heavy blade, displayed it to the crowd with a flourish, the thin sun flashing briefly on its edge. He turned his back on the audience, and began to cut.

The crowd went silent. Almost deathly still, aside from the odd hushed whisper. It was a punishment that brooked no calling out. A punishment which demanded awestruck silence. A punishment to which there could be no response other than a horrified, fascinated staring. *That is its design.* So there was only silence, and perhaps the wet gurgling of the prisoner's breath. *Since the collar makes screaming impossible.*

'A fitting punishment, I suppose,' whispered Ardee as she watched the envoy's bloody gut slithering out of his body, 'for the murderer of the Crown Prince.'

Glokta bowed his head to whisper in her ear. 'I'm reasonably sure that he did not kill anyone. I suspect he is guilty of nothing more than being a courageous man, who came to us speaking truth and holding out the hand of peace.'

Her eyes widened. 'Then why hang him?'

'Because the Crown Prince has been murdered. Someone has to hang.'

'But . . . who really killed Raynault?'

'Someone who wants no peace between Gurkhul and the Union. Someone who wants the war between us to grow, and spread, and never end.'

'Who could want that?'

Glokta said nothing. *Who indeed?*

You don't have to admire that Fallow character, but he can certainly pick a good chair. Glokta settled back into the soft upholstery with a sigh, stretching his feet out towards the fire, working his aching ankles round and round in clicking circles.

Ardee did not seem quite so comfortable. *But then this morning's diversion was hardly a comforting spectacle.* She stood frowning out of the window, thoughtful, one hand pulling nervously at a strand of hair. 'I need a

drink.' She went to the cabinet and opened it, took out a bottle and a glass. She paused, and looked round. 'Aren't you going to tell me it's a little early in the day?'

Glokta shrugged. 'You know what the time is.'

'I need something, after that . . .'

'Then have something. You don't need to explain yourself to me. I'm not your brother.'

She jerked her head round and gave him a hard look, opened her mouth as though about to speak, then she shoved the bottle angrily away and the glass after it, snapped the doors of the cabinet shut. 'Happy?'

He shrugged. 'About as close as I get, since you ask.'

Ardee dumped herself into a chair opposite, staring sourly down at one shoe. 'What happens now?'

'Now? Now we will delight each other with humorous observations for a lazy hour, then a stroll into town?' He winced. 'Slowly, of course. Then a late lunch, perhaps, I was thinking of—'

'I meant about the succession.'

'Oh,' muttered Glokta. 'That.' He reached round and dragged a cushion into a better position, then stretched out further with a satisfied grunt. *One could almost pretend, sitting in this warm and comfortable room, in such attractive and agreeable company, that one still had some kind of life.* He nearly had a smile on his face as he continued. 'There will be a vote in Open Council. Meaning, I have no doubt, that there will be an orgy of blackmail, bribery, corruption and betrayal. A carnival of deal-making, alliance-breaking, intrigue and murder. A merry dance of fixing, of rigging, of threats and of promises. It will go on until the king dies. *Then* there will be a vote in Open Council.'

Ardee gave her crooked smile. 'Even commoners' daughters are saying the king cannot live long.'

'Well, well,' and Glokta raised his eyebrows. 'Once the commoners' daughters start saying a thing, you know it must be true.'

'Who are the favourites?'

'Why don't you tell me who the favourites are?'

'Alright, then, I will.' She sat back, one fingertip rubbing thoughtfully at her jaw. 'Brock, of course.'

'Of course.'

‘Then Barezin, I suppose, Heugen, and Isher.’

Glokta nodded. *She’s no fool.* ‘They’re the big four. Who else, do we think?’

‘I suppose Meed sunk his chances when he lost to the Northmen. What about Skald, the Lord Governor of Starikland?’

‘Very good. You could get long odds for him, but he’d be on the sheet—’

‘And if the Midderland candidates split the vote enough—’

‘Who knows what could happen?’ They grinned at each other for a moment. ‘At this point it really could be anyone,’ he said. ‘And then any illegitimate children of the king might also be considered . . .’

‘Bastards? Are there any?’

Glokta raised an eyebrow. ‘I believe I could point out a couple.’ She laughed, and he congratulated himself on it. ‘There are rumours, of course, as there always are. Carmee dan Roth, have you heard of her? A lady-at-court, and reckoned an exceptional beauty. She was quite a favourite with the king at one point, years ago. She disappeared suddenly and was later said to have died, perhaps in childbirth, but who can say? People love to gossip, and beautiful young women will die from time to time, without ever bearing a royal bastard.’

‘Oh, it’s true, it’s true!’ Ardee fluttered her eyelashes and pretended to swoon. ‘We certainly are a sickly breed.’

‘You are, my dear, you are. Looks are a curse. I thank my stars every day to have been cured of that.’ And he leered his toothless grin at her. ‘Members of the Open Council are flooding to the city in their scores, and I daresay many of them have never set foot in the Lords’ Round in their lives. They smell power, and they want to be a part of it. They want to get something out of it, while there’s something to be had. It might well be the only time in ten generations that the nobles get to make a real decision.’

‘But what a decision,’ muttered Ardee, shaking her head.

‘Indeed. The race could be lengthy and the competition near the front will be savage.’ *If not to say lethal.* ‘I would not like to discount the possibility of some outsider coming up at the last moment. Someone without enemies. A compromise candidate.’

‘What about the Closed Council?’

‘They’re forbidden from standing, of course, to ensure impartiality. ’ He snorted. ‘Impartiality! What they passionately want is to foist some nobody

on the nation. Someone they can dominate and manipulate, so they can continue their private feuds uninterrupted.'

'Is there such a candidate?'

'Anyone with a vote is an option, so in theory there are hundreds, but of course the Closed Council cannot agree on one, and so they scramble with scant dignity behind the stronger candidates, changing their loyalties day by day, hoping to insure their futures, doing their best to stay in office. Power has shifted so quickly from them to the nobles their heads are spinning. And some of them will roll one way or another, you may depend on that.'

'Will yours roll, do you think?' asked Ardee, looking up at him from under her dark brows.

Glokta licked slowly at his gums. 'If Sult's does, it may well be that mine will follow.'

'I hope not. You've been kind to me. Kinder than anyone else. Kinder than I deserve.' It was a trick of utter frankness that he had seen her use before, but still an oddly disarming one.

'Nonsense,' mumbled Glokta, wriggling his shoulders in the chair, suddenly awkward. *Kindness, honesty, comfortable living rooms . . . Colonel Glokta would have known what to say, but I am a stranger here.* He was still groping for a reply when a sharp knocking echoed in the hallway. 'Are you expecting anyone?'

'Who would I be expecting? My entire acquaintance is here in the room.'

Glokta strained to listen as the front door opened, but could hear nothing more than vague muttering. The door handle turned and the maid poked her head into the room.

'Begging your pardon, but there is a visitor for the Superior.'

'Who?' snapped Glokta. *Severard, with news of Prince Raynault's guard? Vitari, with some message from the Arch Lector? Some new problem that needs solving? Some new set of questions to ask?*

'He says his name is Mauthis.'

Glokta felt the whole left side of his face twitching. Mauthis? He had not thought about him for some time, but an image of the gaunt banker sprang instantly into his mind now, holding out the receipt, neatly and precisely, for Glokta to sign. *A receipt for a gift of one million marks. It may be that in the future, a representative of the banking house of Valint and Balk will come to you requesting . . . favours.*

Ardee was frowning over at him. ‘Something wrong?’

‘No, nothing,’ he croaked, striving to keep his voice from sounding strangled. ‘An old associate. Could you give me the room for a moment? I need to talk with this gentleman.’

‘Of course.’ She got up and started to walk to the door, her dress swishing on the carpet behind her. She paused halfway, looked over her shoulder, biting her lip. She went to the cabinet and opened it, pulled out the bottle and the glass. She shrugged her shoulders. ‘I need something.’

‘Don’t we all,’ whispered Glokta at her back as she went out.

Mauthis stepped through the door a moment later. The same sharp bones in his face, the same cold eyes in deep sockets. There was something changed in his demeanour, however. *A certain nervousness. A certain anxiety, perhaps?*

‘Why, Master Mauthis, what an almost unbearable honour it is to—’

‘You may dispense with the pleasantries, Superior.’ His voice was shrill and grating as rusty hinges. ‘I have no ego to bruise. I prefer to speak plainly.’

‘Very well, what can I—’

‘My employers, the banking house of Valint and Balk, are not pleased with your line of investigation.’

Glokta’s mind raced. ‘My line of investigation into what?’

‘Into the murder of Crown Prince Raynault.’

‘That investigation is concluded. I assure you that I have no—’

‘Speaking plainly, Superior, they know. It would be easier for you to assume that they know everything. They usually will. The murder has been solved, with impressive speed and competence, I may say. My employers are delighted with the results. The guilty man has been brought to justice. No one will benefit from your delving any deeper into this unfortunate business.’

That is speaking very plainly indeed. But why would Valint and Balk mind my questions? They gave me money to frustrate the Gurkish, now they seem to object to my investigating a Gurkish plot? It makes no sense . . . unless the killer did not come from the South at all. Unless Prince Raynault’s murderers are much closer to home . . .

‘There are some loose ends that need to be tied,’ Glokta managed to mumble. ‘There is no need for your employers to be angry—’

Mauthis took a step forward. His forehead was glistening with sweat, though the room was not hot. ‘They are not angry, Superior. You could not have known that they would be displeased. Now you know. Were you to continue with this line of investigation, knowing that they are displeased . . . then they would be angry.’ He leaned down towards Glokta and almost whispered. ‘Please allow me to tell you, Superior, as one piece on the board to another. We do not want them angry.’ There was a strange note in his voice. *He does not threaten me. He pleads.*

‘Are you implying,’ Glokta murmured, scarcely moving his lips, ‘that they would inform Arch Lector Sult of their little gift to the defence of Dagoska?’

‘That is the very least of what they would do.’ Mauthis’ expression was unmistakable. *Fear.* Fear, in that emotionless mask of a face. Something about it left a certain bitterness on Glokta’s tongue, a certain coldness down his back, a certain tightness in his throat. It was a feeling he remembered, from long ago. It was the closest he had come to being afraid, himself, in a long time. *They have me. Utterly and completely. I knew it when I signed. That was the price, and I had no choice but to pay.*

Glokta swallowed. ‘You may tell your employers that there will be no further enquiries.’

Mauthis closed his eyes for a moment and blew out with evident relief. ‘I am delighted to carry that message back to them. Good day.’ And he turned and left Glokta alone in Ardee’s living room, staring at the door, and wondering what had just happened.

The Abode of Stones

The prow of the boat crunched hard into the rocky beach and stones groaned and scraped along the underside. Two of the oarsmen floundered out into the washing surf and dragged the boat a few steps further. Once it was firmly grounded they hurried back in as though the water caused intense pain. Jezal could not entirely blame them. The island at the edge of the World, the ultimate destination of their journey, the place called Shabulyan, had indeed a most forbidding appearance.

A vast mound of stark and barren rock, the cold waves clutching at its sharp promontories and clawing at its bare beaches. Above rose jagged cliffs and slopes of treacherous scree, piled steeply upwards into a menacing mountain, looming black against the dark sky.

'Care to come ashore?' asked Bayaz of the sailors.

The four oarsmen showed no sign of moving, and their Captain slowly shook his head. 'We have heard bad things of this island,' he grunted in common so heavily accented it was barely intelligible. 'They say it is cursed. We will wait for you here.'

'We may be some time.'

'We will wait.'

Bayaz shrugged. 'Wait, then.' He stepped from the boat and waded through knee-high breakers. Slowly and somewhat reluctantly the rest of the party followed him through the icy sea and up onto the beach.

It was a bleak and blasted place, a place fit only for stones and cold water. Waves foamed greedily up the shore and sucked jealously back out through the shingle. A pitiless wind cut across this wasteland and straight through Jezal's wet trousers, whipping his hair in his eyes and chilling him to the marrow. It snatched away any trace of excitement he might have felt at reaching the end of their journey. It found chinks and holes in the boulders and made them sing, and sigh, and wail in a mournful choir.

There was precious little vegetation. Some colourless grass, ill with salt, some thorny bushes more dead than alive. A few clumps of withered trees, higher up away from the sea, clung desperately to the unyielding stone,

curved and bent over in the direction of the wind as though they might be torn away at any moment. Jezal felt their pain.

'A charming spot!' he shouted, his words flying off into the gale as soon as they left his lips. 'If you are an enthusiast for rocks!'

'Where does the wise man hide a stone?' Bayaz hurled back at him. 'Among a thousand stones! Among a million!'

There certainly was no shortage of stones here. Boulders, rocks, pebbles and gravel also were in abundant supply. It was the profound lack of anything else that rendered the place so singularly unpleasant. Jezal glanced back over his shoulder, feeling a sudden stab of panic at the notion of the four oarsmen shoving the boat back out to sea and leaving them marooned.

But they were still where they had been, their skiff rocking gently near the beach. Beyond them, on the churning ocean, Cawneil's ill-made tub of a ship sat at anchor, its sails lowered, its mast a black line against the troubled sky, moving slowly back and forward with the stirring of the uneasy waves.

'We need to find somewhere out of the wind!' Logen bellowed.

'Is there anywhere out of the wind in this bloody place?' Jezal shouted back.

'There'll have to be! We need a fire!'

Longfoot pointed up towards the cliffs. 'Perhaps up there we might find a cave, or a sheltered spot. I will lead you!'

They clambered up the beach, first sliding in the shingle, then hopping from teetering rock to rock. The edge of the World hardly seemed worth all the effort, as far as final destinations went. They could have found cold stone and cold water in plenty without ever leaving the North. Logen had a bad feeling about this barren place, but there was no point in saying so. He'd had a bad feeling for the last ten years. Call on this spirit, find this Seed, and then away, and quickly. What then, though? Back to the North? Back to Bethod, and his sons, racks full of scores and rivers of bad blood? Logen winced. None of that held much appeal. Better to do it, than to live in fear of it, his father would have said, but then his father said all kinds of things, and a lot of them weren't much use.

He looked over at Ferro, and she looked back. She didn't frown, she didn't smile. He'd never been much at understanding women, of course, or anyone else, but Ferro was some new kind of riddle. She acted just as cold

and angry by day as she ever had, but most nights now she still seemed to find her way under his blanket. He didn't understand it and he didn't dare ask. The sad fact was, she was about the best thing he'd had in his life for a long time. He puffed his cheeks out and scratched his head. That didn't say much for his life, now he thought about it.

They found a kind of cave at the base of the cliffs. More of a hollow really, in the lee of two great boulders, where the wind didn't blast quite so strongly. Not much of a place for a conversation, but the island was a wasteland and Logen saw little chance of finding a better. You have to be realistic, after all.

Ferro took her sword to a stunted tree nearby and soon they had enough sticks to make an effort at a flame. Logen hunched over and fumbled the tinderbox out with numb fingers. Draughts blew in around the rocks and the wood was damp, but after much cursing and fumbling with the flint he finally managed to light a fire fit for the purpose. They huddled in around it.

'Bring out the box,' said Bayaz, and Logen hauled the heavy thing out from his pack and set it down next to Ferro with a grunt. Bayaz felt around its edge with his fingertips, found some hidden catch and the lid lifted silently. There were a set of metal coils underneath, pointing in from all sides to leave a space the size of Logen's fist.

'What are they for?' he asked.

'To keep what is inside still and well-cushioned.'

'It needs to be cushioned?'

'Kanedias thought so.' That answer did not make Logen feel any better. 'Place it inside as soon as you are able,' said the Magus, turning to Ferro. 'We do not wish to be exposed to it for longer than we must. It is best that you all keep your distance.' And he ushered the others back with his palms. Luthar and Longfoot nearly scrambled over each other in their eagerness to get away, but Quai's eyes were fixed on the preparations and he scarcely moved.

Logen sat cross-legged in front of the flickering fire, feeling the weight of worry in his stomach growing steadily heavier. He was starting to regret ever getting involved with this business, but it was a bit late now for second thoughts. 'Something to offer them will help,' he said, looking round, and found Bayaz already holding a metal flask out. Logen unscrewed the cap

and took a sniff. The smell of strong spirits greeted his nostrils like a sorely missed lover. ‘You had this all the time?’

Bayaz nodded. ‘For this very purpose.’

‘Wish I’d known. I could’ve put it to good use more than once.’

‘You can put it to good use now.’

‘Not quite the same thing.’ Logen tipped the flask up and took a mouthful, resisted a powerful urge to swallow, puffed out his cheeks and blew it out in a mist over the fire, sending up a gout of flame.

‘And now?’ asked Bayaz.

‘Now we wait. We wait until—’

‘I am here, Ninefingers.’ A voice like the wind through the rocks, like the stones falling from the cliffs, like the sea draining through the gravel. The spirit loomed over them in their shallow cave among the stones, a moving pile of grey rock as tall as two men, casting no shadow.

Logen raised his eyebrows. The spirits never answered promptly, if they bothered to answer at all. ‘That was quick.’

‘I have been waiting.’

‘A long time, I reckon.’ The spirit nodded. ‘Well, er, we’ve come for—’

‘For that thing that the sons of Euz entrusted to me. There must be desperate business in the world of men for you to seek it out.’

Logen swallowed. ‘When isn’t there?’

‘Do you see anything?’ Jezal whispered behind him.

‘Nothing,’ replied Longfoot. ‘It is indeed a most remarkable—’

‘Shut your mouths!’ snarled Bayaz over his shoulder.

The spirit loomed down close over him. ‘This is the First of the Magi?’

‘It is,’ said Logen, keeping the talk to the point.

‘He is shorter than Juvens. I do not like his look.’

‘What does it say?’ snapped Bayaz impatiently, staring into the air well to the left of the spirit.

Logen scratched his face. ‘It says that Juvens was tall.’

‘Tall? What of it? Get what we came for and let us be gone!’

‘He is impatient,’ rumbled the spirit.

‘We’ve come a long way. He has Juvens’ staff.’

The spirit nodded. ‘The dead branch is familiar to me. I am glad. I have held this thing for long winters, and it has been a heavy weight to carry. Now I will sleep.’

‘Good idea. If you could—’

‘I will give it to the woman.’

The spirit dug its hand into its stony stomach and Logen shuffled back warily. The fist emerged, and something was clutched inside, and he felt himself shiver as he saw it.

‘Hold your hands out,’ he muttered to Ferro.

Jezal gave an involuntary gasp and scrambled away as the thing dropped down into Ferro’s waiting palms, raising an arm to shield his face, his mouth hanging open with horror. Bayaz stared, eyes wide. Quai craned eagerly forward. Logen grimaced and rocked back. Longfoot scrambled almost all the way out of the hollow. For a long moment all six of them stared at the dark object in Ferro’s hands, no one moving, no one speaking, no sound except for the keening wind. There it was, before them. That thing which they had come so far, and braved so many dangers to find. That thing which Glustrod dug from the deep earth long years ago. That thing which had made a blasted ruin of the greatest city in the world.

The Seed. The Other Side, made flesh. The very stuff of magic.

Then Ferro slowly began to frown. ‘This is it?’ she asked doubtfully. ‘This is the thing that will turn Shaffa to dust?’

It did, in fact, now that Jezal was overcoming the shock of its sudden appearance, look like nothing more than a stone. A chunk of unremarkable grey rock the size of a big fist. No sense of unearthly danger washed from it. No deadly power was evident. No withering rays or stabs of lightning shot forth. It did, in fact, look like nothing more than a stone.

Bayaz blinked. He shuffled closer, on his hands and knees. He peered down at the object in Ferro’s palms. He licked his lips, lifting his hand ever so slowly while Jezal watched, his heart pounding in his ears. Bayaz touched the rock with his little finger tip then jerked it instantly back. He did not suddenly wither and expire. He probed it once more with his finger. There was no thunderous detonation. He pressed his palm upon it. He closed his thick fingers round it. He lifted it up. And still, it looked like nothing more than a stone.

The First of the Magi stared down at the thing in his hand, his eyes growing wider and wider. ‘This is not it,’ he whispered, his lip trembling. ‘This is just a stone!’

There was a stunned silence. Jezal stared at Logen, and the Northman gazed back, scarred face slack with confusion. Jezal stared at Longfoot, and the Navigator could only shrug his bony shoulders. Jezal stared at Ferro, and he watched her frown grow harder and harder. ‘Just a stone?’ she muttered.

‘Not it?’ hissed Quai.

‘Then . . .’ The meaning of Bayaz’ words was only just starting to sink into Jezal’s mind. ‘I came all this way . . . for nothing?’ A sudden gust blew up, snuffing out the miserable tongue of flame and blowing grit in his face.

‘Perhaps there is some mistake,’ ventured Longfoot. ‘Perhaps there is another spirit, perhaps there is another—’

‘No mistake,’ said Logen, firmly shaking his head.

‘But . . .’ Quai’s eyes were bulging from his ashen face. ‘But . . . how?’

Bayaz ignored him, muscles working on the side of his head. ‘Kanedias. His hand is in this. He found some way to trick his brothers, and switch this lump of nothing for the Seed, and keep it for himself. Even in death, the Maker denies me!’

‘Just a stone?’ growled Ferro.

‘I gave up my chance to fight for my country,’ murmured Jezal, indignation starting to flicker up in his chest, ‘and I slogged hundreds of miles across the wasteland, and I was beaten, and broken, and left scarred . . . for nothing?’

‘The Seed.’ Quai’s pale lips were curling back from his teeth, his breath snorting fast through his nose. ‘Where is it? Where?’

‘If I knew that,’ barked his master, ‘do you suppose we would be sitting here on this forsaken island, bantering with spirits for a chunk of worthless rock?’ And he lifted his arm and dashed the stone furiously onto the ground. It cracked open and split into fragments, and they bounced, and tumbled, and clattered down among a hundred others, a thousand others, a million others the same.

‘It’s not here.’ Logen shook his head sadly. ‘Say one thing for—’

‘Just a stone?’ snarled Ferro, her eyes swivelling from the fallen chunks of rock to Bayaz’ face. ‘You fucking old liar!’ She sprang up, fists clenched tight by her sides. ‘You promised me vengeance! ’

Bayaz rounded on her, his face twisted with rage. ‘You think I have no greater worries than your *vengeance*?’ he roared, flecks of spit flying from

his lips and out into the rushing gale. ‘Or your *disappointment*?’ he screamed in Quai’s face, veins bulging in his neck. ‘Or your fucking *looks*?’ Jezal swallowed and faded back into the hollow, trying to seem as small as he possibly could, his own anger extinguished by Bayaz’ towering rage as sharply as the meagre fire had been by the blasting wind a moment before. ‘Tricked!’ snarled the First of the Magi, his hands opening and closing with aimless fury. ‘With what now will I fight Khalul?’

Jezal winced and cowered, sure at any moment that one of the party would be ripped apart, or be flung through the air and dashed on the rocks, or would burst into brilliant flames, quite possibly him. Brother Longfoot chose a poor moment to try and calm matters. ‘We should not be downhearted, my comrades! The journey is its own reward—’

‘Say that once more, you shaven dolt!’ hissed Bayaz. ‘Only once more, and I’ll make ashes of you!’ The Navigator shrank trembling away, and the Magus snatched up his staff and stalked off, down from the hollow towards the beach, his coat flailing around him in the bitter wind. So terrible had his fury been that, for a brief moment, the idea of staying on the island seemed preferable to getting back into a boat with him.

It was with that ill-tempered outburst, Jezal supposed, that their quest was declared an utter failure.

‘Well then,’ murmured Logen, after they had all sat in the wind for a while longer. ‘I reckon that’s it.’ He snapped the lid of the Maker’s empty box shut. ‘No point crying about it. You have to be—’

‘Shut your fucking mouth, fool!’ snarled Ferro at him. ‘Don’t tell me what I have to be!’ And she strode out of the hollow and down towards the hissing sea.

Logen winced as he pushed the box back into his pack, sighed as he swung it up onto his shoulder. ‘Realistic,’ he muttered, then set off after her. Longfoot and Quai came next, all sullen anger and silent disappointment. Jezal came up the rear, stepping from one jagged stone to another, eyes nearly shut against the wind, turning the whole business over in his mind. The mood might have been deathly sombre, but as he picked his way back towards the boat, he found to his surprise that he was almost unable to keep the smile from his face. After all, success or failure in this mad venture had never really meant anything to him. All that mattered was that he was on his way home.

The water slapped against the prow, throwing up cold white spray. The sailcloth bulged and snapped, the beams and the ropes creaked. The wind whipped at Ferro's face but she narrowed her eyes and ignored it. Bayaz had gone below decks in a fury and one by one the others had followed him out of the cold. Only she and Ninefingers stayed there, looking down at the sea.

'What will you do now?' he asked her.

'Go wherever I can kill the Gurkish.' She snapped it without thinking. 'I will find other weapons and fight them wherever I can.' She hardly even knew if it was true. It was hard to feel the hatred as she had done. It no longer seemed so important a matter if the Gurkish were left to their business, and she to hers, but her doubts and her disappointment only made her bark it the more fiercely. 'Nothing has changed. I still need vengeance.'

Silence.

She glanced sideways, and she saw Ninefingers frowning down at the pale foam on the dark water, as if her answer had not been the one he had been hoping for. It would have been easy to change it. 'I'll go where you go,' she could have said, and who would have been worse off? No one. Certainly not her. But Ferro did not have it in her to put herself in his power like that. Now it came to the test there was an invisible wall between them. One that there was no crossing.

There always had been.

All she could say was, 'You?' He seemed to think about it a while, angry-looking, chewing at his lip. 'I should go back to the North.' He said it unhappily, without even looking at her. 'There's work there I should never have left. Dark work, that needs doing. That's where I'll go, I reckon. Back to the North, and settle me some scores.'

She frowned. Scores? Who was it told her you had to have more than vengeance. Now scores was all he wanted? Lying bastard. 'Scores,' she hissed. 'Good.'

And the word was sour as sand on her tongue.

He looked her in the eye for a long moment. He opened his mouth, as if he was about to speak, and he stayed there, his lips formed into a word, one hand part-way lifted towards her.

Then he seemed suddenly to slump, and he set his jaw, and he turned his shoulder to her and leaned back on the rail. ‘Good.’

And that easily it was all done between them.

Ferro scowled as she turned away. She curled up her fists and felt her nails digging into her palms, furious hard. She cursed to herself, and bitterly. Why could she not have said different words? Some breath, and a shape of the mouth, and everything is changed. It would have been easy.

Except that Ferro did not have it in her, and she knew she never would have. The Gurkish had killed that part of her, far away, and long ago, and left her dead inside. She had been a fool to hope, and in her bones she had known it all along.

Hope is for the weak.

Back to the Mud

Dogman and Dow, Tul and Grim, West and Pike. Six of them, stood in a circle and looking down at two piles of cold earth. Below in the valley, the Union were busy burying their own dead, Dogman had seen it. Hundreds of 'em, in pits for a dozen each. It was a bad day for men, all in all, and a good one for the ground. Always the way, after a battle. Only the ground wins.

Shivers and his Carls were just through the trees, heads bowed, burying their own. Twelve in the earth already, three more wounded bad enough they'd most likely follow before the week was out, and another that'd lost his hand – might live, might not, depending on his luck. Luck hadn't been good lately. Near half their number dead in one day's work. Brave of 'em to stick after that. Dogman could hear their words. Sad words and proud, for the fallen. How they'd been good men, how they'd fought well, how bad they'd be missed and all the rest. Always the way, after a battle. Words for the dead.

Dogman swallowed and looked back to the fresh turned dirt at his feet. Tough work digging, in the cold, ground frozen hard. Still, you're better off digging than getting buried, Logen would've said, and the Dogman reckoned that was right enough. Two people he'd just finished burying, and two parts of himself along with 'em. Cathil deep down under the piled-up dirt, stretched out white and cold and would never be warm again. Threetrees not far from her, his broken shield across his knees and his sword in his fist. Two sets of hopes Dogman had put in the mud – some hopes for the future, and some hopes from the past. All done now, and would never come to nothing, and they left an aching hole in him. Always the way, after a battle. Hopes in the mud.

'Buried where they died,' said Tul softly. 'That's fitting. That's good.'

'Good?' barked Dow, glaring over at West. 'Good, is it? Safest place in the whole battle? Safest place, did you tell 'em?' West swallowed and looked down, guilty seeming.

'Alright, Dow,' said Tul. 'You know better than to blame him for this, or anyone else. It's a battle. Folk die. Threetrees knew that well enough, none better.'

‘We could’ve been somewhere else,’ growled Dow.

‘We could’ve been,’ said Dogman, ‘but we weren’t, and there it is. No changing it, is there? Threetrees is dead, and the girl’s dead, and that’s hard enough for everyone. Don’t need you adding to the burden.’

Dow’s fists bunched up and he took a deep breath in like he was about to shout something. Then he let it out, and his shoulders sagged, and his head fell. ‘You’re right. Nothing to be done, now.’

Dogman reached out and touched Pike on his arm. ‘You want to say something for her?’ The burned man looked at him, then shook his head. He wasn’t much for speaking, the Dogman reckoned, and he hardly blamed him. Didn’t look like West was about to say nothing either, so Dogman cleared his throat, wincing at the pain across his ribs, and tried it himself. Someone had to.

‘This girl we buried here, Cathil was her name. Can’t say I knew her too long, or nothing, but what I knew I liked . . . for what that’s worth. Not much I reckon. Not much. But she had some bones to her, I guess we all saw that on the way north. Took the cold and the hunger and the rest and never grumbled. Wish I’d known her better. Hoped to, but, well, don’t often get what you hope for. She weren’t one of us, really, but she died with us, so I reckon we’re proud to have her in the ground with ours.’

‘Aye,’ said Dow. ‘Proud to have her.’

‘That’s right,’ said Tul. ‘Ground takes everyone the same.’

Dogman nodded, took a long ragged breath and blew it out. ‘Anyone want to speak for Threetrees?’

Dow flinched and looked down at his boots, shifting ’em in the dirt. Tul blinked up at the sky, looking like he had a bit of damp in his eye. Dogman himself was only a stride away from weeping as it was. If he had to speak another word he knew he’d set to bawling like a child. Threetrees would have known what to say, but there was the trouble, he was gone. Seemed like no one had any words. Then Grim took a step forward.

‘Rudd Threetrees,’ he said, looking round at ’em one by one. ‘Rock of Uffrith, they called him. No bigger name in all the North. Great fighter. Great leader. Great friend. Lifetime o’ battles. Stood face to face with the Bloody-Nine, then shoulder to shoulder with him. Never took an easy path, if he thought it was the wrong one. Never stepped back from a fight, if he thought it had to be done. I stood with him, walked with him, fought with

him, ten years, all over the North.' His face broke out in a smile. 'I've no complaints.'

'Good words, Grim,' said Dow, looking down at the cold earth. 'Good words.'

'There'll be no more like Threetrees,' muttered Tul, wiping his eye like he'd got something in it.

'Aye,' said the Dogman. That was all he could manage.

West turned and trudged off through the trees, his shoulders hunched up, not a word said. Dogman could see the muscles clenching in the side of his head. Blaming himself, most likely. Men liked to do that a lot when folk died, in the Dogman's experience, and West seemed the type for it. Pike followed him, and the two of them passed Shivers, coming up the other way.

He stopped beside the graves, frowning down, hair hanging round his face, then he looked up at them. 'Don't mean no disrespect. None at all. But we need a new chief.'

'The earth's only just turned on him,' hissed Dow, giving him the eye.

Shivers held up his hands. 'Best time to discuss it, then, I reckon. So there's no confusion. My boys are jumpy, being honest. They've lost friends, and they've lost Threetrees, and they need someone to look to, that's a fact. Who's it going to be?'

Dogman rubbed his face. He hadn't even thought about it yet, and now that he did he didn't know what to think. Tul Duru Thunderhead and Black Dow were two big, hard names, both led men before, and well. Dogman looked at them, standing there, frowning at each other. 'I don't care which o' you it is,' he said. 'I'll follow either one. But it's clear as clear, it has to be one of you two.'

Tul glared down at Dow, and Dow glowered back up at him. 'I can't follow him,' rumbled Tul, 'and he won't follow me.'

'That's a fact,' hissed Dow. 'We talked it out already. Never work.'

Tul shook his head. 'That's why it can't be either one of us.'

'No,' said Dow. 'It can't be one of us.' He sucked at his teeth, snorted some snot into his face and spat it out onto the dirt. 'That's why it has to be you, Dogman.'

'That's why what now?' said Dogman, his eyes wide open and staring.

Tul nodded. 'You're the chief. We've all agreed it.'

‘Uh,’ said Grim, not even looking up.

‘Ninefingers gone,’ said Dow, ‘and Threetrees gone, and that leaves you.’

Dogman winced. He was waiting for Shivers to say, ‘You what? Him? Chief?’ He was waiting for them all to start laughing, and tell him it was a joke. Black Dow, and Tul Duru Thunderhead, and Harding Grim, not to mention two dozen Carls besides, all taking his say-so. Stupidest idea he ever heard. But Shivers didn’t laugh.

‘That’s a good choice, I reckon. Speaking for my lads, that’s what I was going to suggest. I’ll let ’em know.’ And he turned and made off through the trees, with the Dogman gawping after him.

‘But what about them others?’ he hissed once Shivers was well out of hearing, wincing at a stab of pain in his ribs. ‘There’s twenty fucking Carls down there, and jumpy! They need a name to follow!’

‘You got the name,’ said Tul. ‘You came across the mountains with Ninefingers, fought all those years with Bethod. There ain’t no bigger names than yours left standing. You seen more battles than any of us.’

‘Seen ’em, maybe—’

‘You’re the one,’ said Dow, ‘and that’s all. So you ain’t the hardest killer since Skarling, so what? Your hands are bloody enough for me to follow, and there’s no better scout alive. You know how to lead. You’ve seen the best at it. Ninefingers, and Bethod, and Threetrees, you’ve watched ’em all, close as can be.’

‘But I can’t . . . I mean . . . I couldn’t make no one charge, not the way Threetrees did—’

‘No one could,’ said Tul, nodding down at the earth. ‘But Threetrees ain’t an option no more, sorry to say. You’re the chief, now, and we’ll stand behind you. Any man don’t care to do as you tell ’em can speak to us.’

‘And that’ll be one short-arsed conversation,’ growled Dow.

‘You’re the chief.’ Tul turned and strode off through the trees.

‘It’s decided.’ And Black Dow followed him.

‘Uh,’ said Grim, shrugging his shoulders and making off with the other two.

‘But,’ muttered the Dogman. ‘Hold on . . .’

They’d gone. So he guessed that made him chief.

He stood there for a moment, blinking, not knowing what to think. He was never leader before. He didn’t feel no different. He didn’t have any

ideas, all of a sudden. No notions of what to tell men to do. He felt like an idiot. Even more of one than usual.

He knelt down, between the graves, and he stuck his hand in the soil, and he felt it cold and wet around his fingers. ‘Sorry, girl,’ he muttered. ‘Didn’t deserve this.’ He gripped the ground tight, and he squeezed it in his palm. ‘Fare you well, Threetrees. I’ll try and do what you’d have done. Back to the mud, old man.’

And he stood up, and he wiped his hand on his shirt, and he walked away, back to the living, and left the two of them behind him in the earth.

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Four people without whom . . .
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Nick Abercrombie, whose ears are sore from hearing about it
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And who could forget . . .
Gillian Redfearn, who not only made it happen, but made it better

THE FIRST LAW: BOOK THREE

JOE
ABERCROMBIE

Last Argument Of Kings

For the Four Readers
You know who you are

Table of Contents

Dedication
Title Page

PART I – ‘Life being what it is, one dreams of revenge.’

The Poison Trade
Being Chief
This Noble Business
The New Man
Feeding Time
So Much in Common
Honesty
Ghosts
Bad Debts
A Ragged Multitude
Beloved of the Moon
Flowers and Plaudits
Too Many Knives
Best of Enemies
Fortunes of War
The Kingmaker
The Trap
Horrible Old Men
Prepared for the Worst
The Habit of Command
The First Day
Such Sweet Sorrow
Picked Up A Shadow
Questions
The Fourth Day
The Perfect Couple

The Seventh Day
Too Many Masters
Sweet Victory
Rude Awakenings

PART II – ‘Last Argument of Kings’

The Number of the Dead
Leaves on the Water
Authority
The Circle
Greater Good
Skarling’s Chair
Leadership
A Rock and a Hard Place
Charity
Better Left Buried
Tomorrow’s Hero
Nightfall
Questions
The Day of Judgement
Sacrifices
Open the Box
Dark Paths
Reckonings
After the Rains
Answers
The Wounded
Patriotic Duties
The First Law
Tea and Threats
Behind the Throne
Good Men, Evil Men
Not What You Wanted
Loose Ends

Does the devil know he is a devil?

Acknowledgements

PART I

‘Life being what it is, one dreams of revenge.’

Paul Gauguin

The Poison Trade

Superior Glokta stood in the hall, and waited. He stretched his twisted neck out to one side and then to the other, hearing the familiar clicks, feeling the familiar cords of pain stretching out through the tangled muscles between his shoulder-blades. *Why do I do it, when it always hurts me? Why must we test the pain? Tongue the ulcer, rub the blister, pick the scab?*

'Well?' he snapped.

The marble bust at the foot of the stairs offered only its silent contempt. *And I get more than enough of that already.* Glokta shuffled away, his useless foot scraping over the tiles behind him, the tapping of his cane echoing amongst the mouldings on the faraway ceiling.

When it came to the great noblemen on the Open Council, Lord Ingelstad, the owner of this oversized hall, was an undersized man indeed. The head of a family whose fortunes had declined with the passing years, whose wealth and influence had shrivelled to almost nothing. *And the more shrivelled the man, the more swollen his pretensions must become. Why do they never realise? Small things only seem smaller in large spaces.*

Somewhere in the shadows a clock vomited up a few sluggish chimes. *Good and late already. The more shrivelled the man, the longer the wait on his pleasure. But I can be patient, when I must. I have no dazzling banquets, no ecstatic crowds, no beautiful women waiting breathlessly for my arrival, after all. Not any more. The Gurkish saw to that, in the darkness beneath the Emperor's prisons*. He pressed his tongue into his empty gums and grunted as he shifted his leg, needles from it shooting up his back and making his eyelid flicker. *I can be patient. The one good thing about every step being an ordeal. You soon learn how to tread carefully.*

The door beside him opened sharply and Glokta snapped his head round, doing his best to hide a grimace as his neck bones crunched. Lord Ingelstad stood in the doorway: a big, fatherly man with a ruddy complexion. He offered up a friendly smile as he beckoned Glokta into the room. *Quite as though this were a social call, and a welcome one at that.*

'I must apologise for keeping you waiting, Superior. I have had so many visitors since I arrived in Adua, my head is in quite a spin!' *Let us hope it*

doesn't spin right off. 'So very many visitors!' Visitors with offers, no doubt. Offers for your vote. Offers for your help in choosing our next king. But my offer, I think, you will find painful to refuse. 'Will you take wine, Superior?'

'No, my Lord, thank you.' Glokta hobbled painfully over the threshold. 'I will not stay long. I, too, have a great deal of business to attend to.' *Elections don't rig themselves, you know.*

'Of course, of course. Please be seated.' Ingelstad dropped happily into one of his chairs and gestured to another. It took Glokta a moment to get settled, lowering himself carefully, then shifting his hips until he discovered a position in which his back did not give him constant pain. 'And what did you wish to discuss with me?'

'I have come on behalf of Arch Lector Sult. I hope you will not be offended if I am blunt, but his Eminence wants your vote.'

The nobleman's heavy features twisted in feigned puzzlement. *Very badly feigned, as it goes.* 'I am not sure that I understand. My vote on what issue?'

Glokta wiped some wet from beneath his leaking eye. *Must we engage in such undignified dancing? You have not the build for it, and I have not the legs.* 'On the issue of who will next occupy the throne, Lord Ingelstad.'

'Ah. That.' *Yes, that. Idiot.* 'Superior Glokta, I hope I will not disappoint you, or his Eminence, a man for whom I have nothing but the highest respect,' and he bowed his head with an exaggerated show of humility, 'when I say that I could not, in all good conscience, allow myself to be influenced in any one direction. I feel that I, and all the members of the Open Council, have been given a sacred trust. I am duty bound to vote for the man who seems to me to be the very finest candidate, from the many excellent men available.' And he assumed a grin of the greatest self-satisfaction.

A fine speech. A village dunce might have even believed it. How often have I heard it, or its like, the past few weeks? Traditionally, the bargaining would come next. The discussion of how much, exactly, a sacred trust is worth. How much silver outweighs a good conscience. How much gold cuts through the bindings of duty. But I am not in a bargaining mood today.

Glokta raised his eyebrows very high, 'I must congratulate you on a noble stand, Lord Ingelstad. If everyone had your character we would be living in a better world. A noble stand indeed . . . especially when you have so much

to lose. No less than everything, I suppose.' He winced as he took his cane in one hand and rocked himself painfully forward towards the edge of the chair. 'But I see you will not be swayed, and so I take my leave—'

'What can you refer to, Superior?' The nobleman's unease was written plainly across his plump face.

'Why, Lord Ingelstad, to your corrupt business dealings.'

The ruddy cheeks had lost much of their glow. 'There must be some mistake.'

'Oh no, I assure you.' Glokta slid the papers of confession from the inside pocket of his coat. 'You are mentioned often in the confessions of senior Mercers, you see? Very often.' And he held the crackling pages out so they both could see them. 'Here you are referred to as – and not my choice of words, you understand – an "accomplice". Here as the "prime beneficiary" of a most unsavoury smuggling operation. And here, you will note – and I almost blush to mention it – your name and the word "treason" appear in close proximity.'

Ingelstad sagged back into his chair and set his glass rattling down on the table beside him, a quantity of wine sloshing out onto the polished wood. *Oh, we really should wipe that up. It could leave an awful stain, and some stains are impossible to remove.*

'His Eminence,' continued Glokta, 'counting you as a friend, was able to keep your name out of the initial enquiries, for everybody's sake. He understands that you were merely trying to reverse the failing fortunes of your family, and is not without sympathy. If you were to disappoint him in this business of votes, however, his sympathy would be quickly exhausted. Do you take my meaning?' *I feel that I have made it abundantly clear.*

'I do,' croaked Ingelstad.

'And the bonds of duty? Do they feel any looser, now?'

The nobleman swallowed, the flush quite vanished from his face. 'I am eager to assist his Eminence in any way possible, of course, but . . . the thing is—' *What now? A desperate offer? A despairing bribe? An appeal to my conscience, even?* 'A representative of High Justice Marovia came to me yesterday. A man called Harlen Morrow. He made very similar representations . . . and not dissimilar threats.' Glokta frowned. *Did he now? Marovia, and his little worm. Always just one step ahead, or just one step behind. But never far away.* A shrill note crept into Ingelstad's voice. 'What

am I to do? I cannot support you both! I will leave Adua, Superior, and never return! I will . . . I will abstain from voting—'

'You'll do no such fucking thing!' hissed Glokta. 'You'll vote the way I tell you and Marovia be damned!' *More prodding? Distasteful, but so be it. Are my hands not filthy to the elbow? Rummaging through another sewer or two will scarcely make the difference.* He let his voice soften to an oily purr. 'I observed your daughters in the park, yesterday.' The nobleman's face lost its last vestige of colour. 'Three young innocents on the very cusp of womanhood, dressed all in the height of fashion, and each one lovelier than the last. The youngest would be . . . fifteen?'

'Thirteen,' croaked Ingelstad.

'Ah.' And Glokta let his lips curl back to display his toothless smile. 'She blooms early. They have never before visited Adua, am I correct?'

'They have not,' he nearly whispered.

'I thought not. Their excitement and delight as they toured the gardens of the Agriont were perfectly charming. I swear, they must have caught the eye of every eligible suitor in the capital.' He allowed his smile slowly to fade. 'It would break my heart, Lord Ingelstad, to see three such delicate creatures snatched suddenly away to one of Angland's harshest penal institutions. Places where beauty, and breeding, and a gentle disposition, attract an entirely different and far less enjoyable kind of attention.' Glokta gave a carefully orchestrated shudder of dismay as he leaned slowly forward to whisper. 'I would not wish that life on a dog. And all on account of the indiscretions of a father who had the means of reparation well within his grasp.'

'But my daughters, they were not involved—'

'We are electing a new king! Everyone is involved!' *Harsh, perhaps. But harsh times demand harsh actions.* Glokta struggled to his feet, hand wobbling on his cane with the effort. 'I will tell his Eminence that he can count on your vote.'

Ingelstad collapsed, suddenly and completely. *Like a stabbed wine-skin.* His shoulders sagged, his face hung loose with horror and hopelessness. 'But the High Justice . . .' he whispered. 'Have you no pity?'

Glokta could only shrug. 'I did have. As a boy I was soft-hearted beyond the point of foolishness. I swear, I would cry at a fly caught in a spider's

web.’ He grimaced at a brutal spasm through his leg as he turned for the door. ‘Constant pain has cured me of that.’

It was an intimate little gathering. *But the company hardly inspires warmth.* Superior Goyle glared at Glokta from across the huge, round table in the huge, round office, his beady eyes staring from his bony face. *And not with tender feelings, I rather think.*

The attention of his Eminence the Arch Lector, the head of his Majesty’s Inquisition, was fixed elsewhere. Pinned to the curving wall, taking up perhaps half of the entire chamber, were three hundred and twenty sheets of paper. *One for every great heart on our noble Open Council.* They crackled gently in the breeze from the great windows. *Fluttering little papers for fluttering little votes. Each one was marked with a name. Lord this, Lord that, Lord someone of wherever. Big men and little men. Men whose opinions, on the whole, no one cared a damn for until Prince Raynault fell out of his bed and into his grave.*

Many of the pages had a blob of coloured wax on their corner. Some had two, or even three. Allegiances. *Which way will they vote? Blue for Lord Brock, red for Lord Isher, black for Marovia, white for Sult, and so on. All subject to change, of course, depending which way the wind blows them*. Below were written lines of small, dense script. Too small for Glokta to read from where he was sitting, but he knew what they said. *Wife was once a whore. Partial to young men. Drinks too much for his good. Murdered a servant in a rage. Gambling debts he cannot cover. Secrets. Rumours. Lies. The tools of this noble trade. Three hundred and twenty names, and just as many sordid little stories, each one to be picked at, and dug out, and jabbed our way. Politics. Truly, the work of the righteous.*

So why do I do this? Why?

The Arch Lector had more pressing concerns. ‘Brock still leads,’ he murmured in a dour drone, staring at the shifting papers with his white gloved hands clasped behind his back. ‘He has some fifty votes, more or less certain.’ As certain as we can be in these uncertain times. ‘Isher is not far behind, with forty or more to his name. Skald has made some recent gains, as far as we can tell. An unexpectedly ruthless man. He has the Starikland delegation more or less in his hand, which gives him thirty votes,

perhaps, and Barezin about the same. They are the four main contenders, as things stand.'

But who knows? Perhaps the King will live another year, and by the time it comes to a vote we'll all have killed each other. Glokta had to stifle a grin at the thought. The Lords' Round heaped with richly-dressed corpses, every great nobleman in the Union and all twelve members of the Closed Council. *Each stabbed in the back by the man beside. The ugly truth of government . . .*

'Did you speak to Heugen?' snapped Sult.

Goyle tossed his balding head and sneered at Glokta with seething annoyance. 'Lord Heugen is still struggling under the delusion that he could be our next king, though he cannot certainly control more than a dozen chairs. He barely had time to hear our offer he was so busy scrabbling to coax out more votes. Perhaps in a week, or two, he will see reason. Then he might be encouraged to lean our way, but I wouldn't bet on it. More likely he'll throw in his lot with Isher. The two of them have always been close, I understand.'

'Good for them,' hissed Sult. 'What about Ingelstad?'

Glokta stirred in his seat. 'I presented him with your ultimatum in very blunt terms, your Eminence.'

'Then we can count on his vote?'

How to put this? 'I could not say so with absolute certainty. High Justice Marovia was able to make threats almost identical to our own, through his man Harlen Morrow.'

'Morrow? Isn't he some lickspittle of Hoff's?'

'It would seem he has moved up in the world.' *Or down, depending on how you look at it.*

'He could be taken care of.' Goyle wore a most unsavoury expression. 'Quite easily—'

'No!' snapped Sult. 'Why is it, Goyle, that no sooner does a problem appear than you want to kill it! We must tread carefully for now, and show ourselves to be reasonable men, open to negotiation.' He strode to the window, the bright sunlight glittering purple through the great stone on his ring of office. 'Meanwhile the business of actually running the country is ignored. Taxes go uncollected. Crimes go unpunished. This bastard they call the Tanner, this demagogue, this traitor, speaks in public at village fairs,

urging open rebellion! Daily now, peasants leave their farms and turn to banditry, perpetrating untold theft and damage. Chaos spreads, and we have not the resources to stamp it out. There are only two regiments of the King's Own left in Adua, scarcely enough to maintain order in the city. Who knows if one of our noble Lords will tire of waiting and decide to try and seize the crown prematurely? I would not put it past them!'

'Will the army return from the North soon?' asked Goyle.

'Unlikely. That oaf Marshal Burr has spent three months squatting outside Dunbrec, and given Bethod ample time to regroup beyond the Whiteflow. Who knows when he'll finally get the job done, if ever!' *Months spent destroying our own fortress. It almost makes one wish we'd put less effort into building the place.*

'Twenty-five votes.' The Arch Lector scowled at the crackling papers. 'Twenty-five, and Marovia has eighteen? We're scarcely making progress! For every vote we gain we lose one somewhere else!'

Goyle leaned forwards in his chair. 'Perhaps, your Eminence, the time has come to call again on our friend at the University—'

The Arch Lector hissed furiously, and Goyle snapped his mouth shut. Glokta looked out the great window, pretending that he had heard nothing out of the ordinary. The six crumbling spires of the University dominated the view. *But what help could anyone possibly find there? Amongst the decay, and the dust, from those old idiots of Adepti?*

Sult did not give him long to consider it. 'I will speak to Heugen myself.' And he jabbed one of the papers with a finger. 'Goyle, write to Lord Governor Meed and try to elicit his support. Glokta, arrange an interview with Lord Wetterlant. He has yet to declare himself one way or the other. Get out there, the pair of you.' Sult turned from his sheets full of secrets and fixed on Glokta with his hard blue eyes. 'Get out there and get . . . me . . . votes!'

Being Chief

Cold night!' shouted the Dogman. 'Thought it was meant to be summer!' The three of 'em looked up. The nearest was an old man with grey hair and a face looked like it had seen some weather. Just past him was a younger man, missing his left arm above the elbow. The third was no more'n a boy, stood down the end of the quay and frowning out at the dark sea.

Dogman faked a nasty limp as he walked over, dragging one leg behind him and wincing like he was in pain. He shuffled under the lamp, dangling on its high pole with the warning bell beside it, and held up the jar so they could all see.

The old man grinned, and leaned his spear against the wall. 'Always cold, down by the water.' He came up, rubbing his hands together. 'Just as well we got you to keep us warm, eh?'

'Aye. Good luck all round.' Dogman pulled out the stopper and let it dangle, lifted one of the mugs and poured out a slosh.

'No need to be shy, eh, lad?'

'I guess there ain't at that.' Dogman sloshed out some more. The man with one arm had to set his spear down when he got handed his mug. The boy came up last, and looked Dogman over, wary.

The old one nudged him with an elbow. 'You sure your mother'd care for you drinking, boy?'

'Who cares what she'd say?' he growled, trying to make his high voice sound gruff.

Dogman handed him a mug. 'You're old enough to hold a spear, you're old enough to hold a cup, I reckon.'

'I'm old enough!' he snapped, snatching it out o' Dogman's hand, but he shuddered when he drank from it. Dogman remembered his first drink, feeling mighty sick and wondering what all the fuss was about, and he smiled to himself. The boy thought he was being laughed at, most likely. 'Who are you anyway?'

The old boy tutted. 'Don't mind him. He's still young enough to think that rudeness wins respect.'

‘‘S’ alright,’ said Dogman, pouring himself a mug then setting the jar down on the stones, taking time to think out what to say, make sure he didn’t make no mistakes. ‘My name’s Cregg.’ He’d known a man called Cregg once, got killed in a scrap up in the hills. Dogman hadn’t liked him much, and he’d no idea why that name came to mind, but one was about as good as another right then, he reckoned. He slapped his thigh. ‘Got poked in the leg up at Dunbrec and it ain’t healed right. Can’t march no more. Reckon my days at holding a line are over, so my chief sent me down here, to watch the water with you lot.’ He looked out at the sea, flapping and sparkling under the moon like a thing alive. ‘Can’t say I’m too sorry about it, though. Being honest, I had a skin full o’ fighting.’ That last bit was no lie, at least.

‘Know how you feel,’ said One-Arm, waving his stump in Dogman’s face. ‘How’re things up there?’

‘Alright. Union are still sat outside their own walls, trying everything to get in, and we’re on the other side o’ the river, waiting for ’em. Been that way for weeks.’

‘I heard some boys have gone over to the Union. I heard old Threetrees was up there, got killed in that battle.’

‘He was a great man, Rudd Threetrees,’ said the old boy, ‘great man.’

‘Aye.’ Dogman nodded. ‘That he was.’

‘Heard the Dogman took his place, though,’ said One-Arm.

‘That a fact?’

‘So I heard. Mean bastard, that. Huge big lad. They call him Dogman ’cause he bit some woman’s teats off one time.’

Dogman blinked. ‘Do they now? Well, I never saw him.’

‘I heard the Bloody-Nine was up there,’ whispered the boy, eyes big like he was talking about a ghost.

The other two snorted at him. ‘The Bloody-Nine’s dead, boy, and good riddance to that evil fucker.’ One-Arm shuddered. ‘Damn it but you get some fool notions!’

‘Just what I heard, is all.’

The old boy swilled down some more grog and smacked his lips. ‘Don’t much matter who’s where. Union’ll most likely get bored once they’ve got their fort back. Get bored and go home, across the sea, and everything back to normal. None of ’em will be coming down here to Uffrith, anyway.’

‘No,’ said One-Arm happily. ‘They’ll not be coming here.’

‘Then why we out here watching for ’em?’ whined the boy.

The old man rolled his eyes, like he’d heard it ten times before and always made the same answer. ‘ ’Cause that’s the task we been given, lad.’

‘And once you got a task, you best do it right.’ Dogman remembered Logen telling him the same thing, and Threetrees too. Both gone now, and back in the mud, but it was still as true as it ever was. ‘Even if it’s a dull task, or a dangerous, or a dark one. Even if it’s a task you’d rather not do.’ Damn it, but he needed to piss. Always did, at a time like this.

‘True enough,’ said the old man, smiling down into his mug. ‘Things’ve got to get done.’

‘That they do. Shame, though. You seem a nice enough set o’ lads.’ And the Dogman reached behind his back, just like he was scratching his arse.

‘Shame?’ The boy looked puzzled. ‘How d’you mean a—’

That was when Dow came up behind him and cut his neck open.

Same moment, almost, Grim’s dirty hand clamped down on One-Arm’s mouth and the bloody point of a blade slid out the gap in his cloak. Dogman jumped forward and gave the old man three quick stabs in the ribs. He wheezed, and stumbled, eyes wide, mug still hanging from his hand, groggy drool spilling out his open mouth. Then he fell down.

The boy crawled a little way. He had one hand to his neck, trying to keep the blood in, the other reaching out towards the pole the warning bell was hung on. He had some bones, the Dogman reckoned, to be thinking of the bell with a slit throat, but he didn’t drag himself more’n a stride before Dow stomped down hard on the back of his neck and squashed him flat.

Dogman winced as he heard the boy’s neck bones crunch. He hadn’t deserved to die like that, most likely. But that’s what war is. A lot of folk getting killed that don’t deserve it. The job had needed doing, and they’d done it, and were all three still alive. About as much as he could’ve hoped for from a piece of work like that, but somehow it still left a sour taste on him. He’d never found it easy, but it was harder than ever, now he was chief. Strange, how it’s that much easier to kill folk when you’ve got someone telling you to do it. Hard business, killing. Harder than you’d think.

Unless your name’s Black Dow, of course. That bastard would kill a man as easy as he’d take a piss. That was what made him so damn good at it.

Dogman watched him bend down, strip the cloak from One-Arm's limp body and pull it round his own shoulders, then roll the corpse off into the sea, careless as dumping rubbish.

'You got two arms,' said Grim, already with the old man's cloak on.

Dow looked down at himself. 'What're you saying exactly? I ain't cutting my arm off to make for a better disguise, y'idiot!'

'He means keep it out o' sight.' Dogman watched Dow wipe out a mug with a dirty finger, pour himself a slug and knock it back. 'How can you drink at a time like this?' he asked, pulling the boy's bloody cloak off his corpse.

Dow shrugged as he poured himself another. 'Shame to waste it. And like you said. Cold night.' He broke a nasty grin. 'Damn it, but you can talk, Dogman. Name's Cregg.' He took a couple of limping steps. 'Stabbed in me arse up at Dunbrec! Where d'you get it from?' He slapped Grim's shoulder with the back of his hand. 'Fucking lovely, eh? They got a word for it, don't they? What's that word, now?'

'Plausible,' said Grim.

Dow's eyes lit up. 'Plausible. That's what y'are, Dogman. You're one plausible bastard. I swear, you could've told 'em you was Skarling Hoodless his own self and they'd have believed it. Don't know how you can keep a straight face!'

Dogman didn't feel too much like laughing. He didn't like looking at them two corpses, still laid out on the stones. Kept worrying that the boy'd get cold without his cloak. Damn fool thing to think about, given he was lying in a pool of his own blood a stride across.

'Never mind about that,' he grunted. 'Dump these two here and get over by the gate. Don't know when there'll be others coming.'

'Right y'are, chief, right y'are, whatever you say.' Dow heaved the two of them off into the water, then he unhooked the clapper from inside the bell and tossed that into the sea for good measure.

'Shame,' said Grim.

'What is?'

'Waste of a bell.'

Dow blinked at him. 'Waste of a bell, I swear! You got yourself a lot to say all of a sudden, and you know what? I think I liked you better before. Waste of a bell? You lost your mind, boy?'

Grim shrugged. ‘Southerners might want one, when they get here.’

‘They can fucking take a dive for the clapper then, can’t they!’ And Dow snatched up One-Arm’s spear and strode over to the open gate, one hand stuffed inside his stolen cloak, grumbling to himself. ‘Waste of a bell . . . by the fucking dead . . .’

The Dogman stretched up on his toes and unhooked the lamp, held it up, facing the sea, then he lifted one side of his cloak to cover it, brought it down again. Lifted it up, brought it down. One more time and he hooked it flickering back on the pole. Seemed a tiny little flame right then, to warm all their hopes at. A tiny little flame, to be seen all the way out there on the water, but the only one they had.

He was waiting all the time for the whole business to go wrong, for the clamour to go up in the town, for five dozen Carls to come pouring out that open gate and give the three o’ them the killing they deserved. He was bursting to piss, thinking about it. But they didn’t come. No sound but the empty bell creaking on its pole, the cold waves slapping on stone and wood. It was just the way they’d planned it.

The first boat came gliding out the darkness, Shivers grinning in the prow. A score of Carls were pressed into the boat behind him, working the oars real careful, white faces tensed up, teeth gritted with the effort of keeping quiet. Still, every click and clank of wood and metal set the Dogman’s nerves to jumping.

Shivers and his boys hung some sacks of straw over the side as they brought the boat in close, stopping the wood scraping on the stones, all thought out the week before. They tossed up ropes and Dogman and Grim caught ’em, dragged the boat up tight and tied it off. Dogman looked over at Dow, leaning still and easy against the wall by the gate, and he shook his head gently, to say no one was moving in the town. Then Shivers was up the steps, smooth and quiet, squatting down in the darkness.

‘Nice work, chief,’ he whispered, smiling right across his face. ‘Nice and neat.’

‘There’ll be time to slap each others’ backs later. Get the rest o’ them boats tied off.’

‘Right y’are.’ There were more boats coming now, more Carls, more sacks of straw. Shivers’ boys pulled them in, started dragging men up onto the quay. All kinds of men who’d come over the last few weeks. Men who

didn't care for Bethod's new way of doing things. Soon there was a good crowd of 'em down by the water. So many Dogman could hardly believe they weren't seen.

They formed up into groups, just the way they'd planned, each one with their own chief and their own task. A couple of the lads knew Uffrith and they'd made a plan of the place in the dirt, the way Threetrees used to. Dogman had every one of 'em learn it. He grinned when he thought of how much Black Dow had carped about that, but it was worth it now. He squatted by the gate, and they came past, one dark and silent group at a time.

Tul was first up, a dozen Carls behind him. 'Alright, Thunderhead,' said Dogman, 'you got the main gate.'

'Aye,' nodded Tul.

'Biggest task o' the lot, so try and get it done quiet.'

'Quiet, you got it.'

'Luck then, Tul.'

'Won't need it.' And the giant hurried off into the dark streets with his crew behind.

'Red Hat, you got the tower by the well and the walls beside.'

'That I have.'

'Shivers, you and your boys are keeping a watch on the town square.'

'Like the owl watches, chief.'

And so on, past they went, through the gate and into the dark streets, making no more noise than the wind off the sea and the waves on the dock, Dogman giving each crew their task and slapping 'em off on their way. Black Dow came up last, and a hard-looking set of men he had behind him.

'Dow, you got the headman's hall. Stack it up with some wood, like we said, but don't set fire to it, you hear? Don't kill anyone you don't have to. Not yet.'

'Not yet, fair enough.'

'And Dow.' He turned back. 'Don't go bothering any womenfolk either.'

'What do you think I am?' he asked, teeth gleaming in the darkness, 'Some kind of an animal?'

And that was it done. There was just him and Grim, and a few others to watch the water. 'Uh,' said Grim, nodding his head slowly. That was high praise indeed from him.

Dogman pointed over at the pole. ‘Get us that bell, would you?’ he said. ‘Might have a use for it after all.’

By the dead, but it made a sound. Dogman had to half close his eyes, his whole arm trembling as he whacked at the bell with the handle of his knife. He didn’t feel too comfortable in amongst all those buildings, squashed in by walls and fences. He hadn’t spent much time in towns in his life, and what he had spent he hadn’t much enjoyed. Either burning things and causing mischief after a siege, or lying around in Bethod’s prisons, waiting to be killed.

He blinked round at the jumble of slate roofs, the walls of old grey stone, black wood, dirty grey render, all greasy with the thin rain. Seemed a strange way to live, sleeping in a box, waking all your days in the exact same spot. The idea alone made him restless, as though that bell hadn’t got him twitchy enough already. He cleared his throat and set it down on the cobbles beside him. Then he stood there waiting, one hand on the hilt of his sword in a way that he hoped meant business.

Some flapping footfalls came from down a street and a little girl ran out into the square. Her jaw dropped open when she saw them standing there, a dozen men all bearded and armed, Tul Duru in their midst. Probably she never saw a man half so big. She turned around sharp to run the other way, almost slipping over on the slick cobbles. Then she saw Dow sitting on a pile of wood just behind her, leaning back easy against the wall, his drawn sword on his knees, and she froze stone still.

‘That’s alright, girl,’ growled Dow. ‘You can stay where y’are.’

There were more of ’em coming now, hurrying down into the square from all around, all getting that same shocked look when they saw Dogman and his lads stood waiting. Women and boys, mostly, and a couple of old men. Dragged out o’ their beds by the bell and still half asleep, eyes red and faces puffy, clothes tangled, armed with whatever was to hand. A boy with a butcher’s cleaver. An old man all stooped over with a sword looked even older than he was. A girl at the front with a pitch fork and a lot of messy dark hair, had a look on her face reminded Dogman of Shari. Hard and thoughtful, the way she used to look at him before they started lying

together. Dogman frowned down at her dirty bare feet, hoping that he wouldn't have to kill her.

Getting 'em good and scared would be the best way to get things done quick and easy. So Dogman tried to talk like someone to be feared, rather than someone who was shitting himself. Like Logen might've talked. Or maybe that was more fear than was needful. Like Threetrees, then. Tough but fair, wanting what was best for everyone.

'The headman among you?' he growled.

'I'm him,' croaked the old man with the sword, his face all slack with shock at finding a score of well-armed strangers standing in the middle of his town square. 'Brass is my name. Who the hell might you be?'

'I'm the Dogman, and this here is Harding Grim, and the big lad is Tul Duru Thunderhead.' Some eyes went wide, some folk muttered to each other. Seemed they'd heard the names before. 'We're here with five hundred Carls and last night we took your city off you.' A few gasps and squeals at that. It was closer to two hundred, but there was no point telling 'em so. They might've got the notion that fighting was a good idea and he'd no wish to end up stabbing a woman, or getting stabbed by one either. 'There's plenty more of us, round about, and your guards are all trussed up, those we didn't have to kill. Some o' my boys, and you ought to know I'm talking of Black Dow—'

'That's me.' Dow flashed his nasty grin, and a few folk shuffled fearfully away from him like they'd been told hell itself was sat there.

'. . . Well, they were for putting the torch straight to your houses and getting some killing done. Do things like we used to with the Bloody-Nine in charge, you take my meaning?' Some child in amongst the rest started to cry a bit, a wet kind of snuffling. The boy stared round him, cleaver wobbling in his hand, the dark-haired girl blinked and clung on tighter to her pitch-fork. They got the gist, alright. 'But I thought I'd give you a fair chance to give up, being as the town's full with womenfolk and children and all the rest. My score's with Bethod, not with you people. The Union want to use this place as a port, bring in men and supplies and whatever. They'll be here inside an hour, in their ships. A lot of 'em. It's happening with or without your say so. I guess my point is we can do this the bloody way, if that's the way you want it. The dead know we've had the practice.

Or you can give up your weapons, if you've got 'em, and we can all get along, nice and . . . what's the word for it?'

'Civilised,' said Grim.

'Aye. Civilised. What d'you say?'

The old man fingered his sword, looking like he'd rather have leant on it than swung it, and he stared up at the walls, where a few of the Carls were looking down, and his shoulders slumped. 'Looks like you got us cold. The Dogman, eh? I always heard you was a clever bastard. No one much left here to fight you, anyway. Bethod took every man could hold a spear and a shield at once.' He looked round at the sorry crowd behind him. 'Will you leave the women be?'

'We'll leave 'em be.'

'Those that want to be left be,' said Dow, leering at the girl with the pitchfork.

'We'll leave 'em be,' growled Dogman, giving him a hard look. 'I'll see to it.'

'Well then,' wheezed the old man, shuffling up and wincing as he knelt and dropped his rusty blade at Dogman's feet. 'You're a better man than Bethod, far as I'm concerned. I suppose I ought to be thanking you for your mercy, if you keep your word.'

'Uh.' Dogman didn't feel too merciful. He doubted the old boy he'd killed on the dock would be thanking him, or the one-armed man stabbed through from behind, or the lad with the cut throat who'd had his whole life stolen.

One by one the rest of the crowd came forward, and one by one the weapons, if you could call 'em that, got dropped in a heap. A pile of old rusty tools and junk. The boy came up last and let his cleaver clatter down with the rest, gave a scared look at Black Dow, then hurried back to the others and clung to the dark-haired girl's hand.

They stood there, in a wide-eyed huddle, and Dogman could almost smell their fear. They were waiting for Dow and his Carls to set to hacking 'em down where they stood. They were waiting to get herded in a house and locked in and the place set fire to. Dogman had seen all that before. So he didn't blame 'em one bit as they all crowded together like sheep pressed up in a field in winter. He'd have done the same.

'Alright!' he barked. 'That's it! Back to your houses, or whatever. Union'll be here before midday, and it'd be better if the streets were empty.'

They blinked at Dogman, and at Tul, and at Black Dow, and at each other. They swallowed and trembled, and muttered their thanks to the dead. They broke up, slowly, and spread out, and went off their own ways. Alive, to everyone's great relief.

'Nicely done, chief,' said Tul in Dogman's ear. 'Threetrees himself couldn't have done it no better.'

Dow sidled up from the other side. 'About the women, though, if you're asking my opinion—'

'I'm not,' said Dogman.

'Have you seen my son?' There was one woman who wasn't going home. She was coming up from one man to another, half-tears in her eyes and her face all wild from worry. The Dogman put his head down and looked the other way. 'My son, he was on guard, down by the water! You seen him?' She tugged at Dogman's coat, her voice cracked and wet-sounding. 'Please, where's my son?'

'You think I know where everyone's at?' he snapped in her weepy face. He strode away like he had a load of important stuff to do, and all the while he was thinking – you're a coward, Dogman, you're a bastard bloody coward. Some hero, pulling a neat trick on a bunch of women, and children, and old men.

It ain't easy, being chief.

This Noble Business

The great moat had been drained early in the siege, leaving behind a wide ditch full of black mud. At the far end of the bridge across it four soldiers worked by a cart, dragging corpses to the bank and rolling them flopping down to the bottom. The corpses of the last defenders, gashed and burned, spattered with blood and dirt. Wild men, from past the River Crinna far to the east, tangle-haired and bearded. Their limp bodies seemed pitifully withered after three months sealed up behind the walls of Dunbrec, pitifully starved. Scarcely human. It was hard for West to take much joy in the victory over such sorry creatures as these.

'Seems a shame,' muttered Jalenhorm, 'after they fought so bravely. To end like that.'

West watched another ragged corpse slither down the bank and into the tangled heap of muddy limbs. 'This is how most sieges end. Especially for the brave. They'll be buried down there in the muck, then the moat will be flooded again. The waters of the Whiteflow will surge over them, and their bravery, or lack of it, will have meant nothing.'

The fortress of Dunbrec loomed over the two officers as they crossed the bridge, black outlines of walls and towers like great, stark holes in the heavy white sky. A few ragged birds circled above. A couple more croaked from the scarred battlements.

It had taken General Kroy's men a month to make this same journey, bloodily repulsed time and again, and to finally break through the heavy doors under a steady rain of arrows, stones, and boiling water. Another week of claustrophobic slaughter to force the dozen strides down the tunnel beyond, to burst through the second gate with axe and fire and finally seize control of the outer wall. Every advantage had lain with the defenders. The place had been most carefully designed to ensure that it was so.

And once they had made it through the gatehouse, their problems were only just beginning. The inner wall was twice the height and thickness of the outer, dominating its walkways at every point. There had been no shelter from missiles from the six monstrous towers.

To conquer that second wall Kroy's men had tried every strategy in the manual of siege. They had worked with pick and crowbar, but the masonry was five strides thick at the base. They had made an effort at a mine but the ground was waterlogged outside the fortress and solid Angland rock beneath. They had bombarded the place with catapults, but scarcely scratched the mighty bastions. They had come with scaling ladders, again and again, in waves and in parties, by surprise at night or brazenly in the day, and in the darkness and the light the straggling lines of Union wounded had shuffled away from their failed attempts, the dead dragged solemnly behind. They had finally tried reasoning with the wild defenders, through the medium of a Northern translator, and the unfortunate man had been pelted with night soil.

It had been pure fortune, in the end. After studying the movements of the guards, one enterprising sergeant had tried his luck with a grapple under cover of night. He had climbed up and a dozen other brave men had followed him. They took the defenders by surprise, killed several of them and seized the gatehouse. The whole effort took ten minutes and cost one Union life. It was a fitting irony, to West's mind, that having tried every roundabout method and been bloodily repulsed, the Union army had finally entered the inner fortress by its open front gate.

A soldier was bent over near that archway now, being noisily sick onto the stained flagstones. West passed him with some foreboding, the sound of his clicking boot heels echoing around the long tunnel, and emerged into the wide courtyard at the centre of the fortress. It was a regular hexagon, echoing the shape of the inner and outer walls, all part of the perfectly symmetrical design. West doubted that the architects would have approved, however, of the state in which the Northmen had left the place.

A long wooden building at one side of the yard, perhaps a stables, had caught fire in the attack and was now reduced to a mass of charred beams, the embers still glowing. Those clearing away the mess had too much work outside the walls, and the ground was still scattered with fallen weapons and tangled corpses. The Union dead had been stretched out in rows near one corner and covered up with blankets. The Northmen lay in every attitude, on their faces or on their backs, curled up or stretched out where they fell. Beneath the bodies the stone flags were deeply scored, and not just with the random damage of a three-month siege. A great circle had been

chiselled from the rock, and other circles within it, strange marks and symbols laid out in an intricate design. West did not care for its look in the least. Worse still, he was becoming aware of a repulsive stench to the place, more pungent even than the tang of burned wood.

'What ever is that smell?' muttered Jalenhorm, putting one hand over his mouth.

A sergeant nearby overheard him. 'Seems that our Northern friends chose to decorate the place.' He pointed up above their heads, and West followed the gauntleted finger with his eyes.

They were so decayed that it took him a moment to realise he was looking at the remains of men. They had been nailed, spread-eagled, to the inside walls of each of the towers, high above the lean-to buildings round the courtyard. Rotting offal hung down from their bellies, crawling with flies. Cut with the Bloody Cross, as the Northmen would say. Tattered shreds of brightly-coloured Union uniforms were still vaguely visible, fluttering in the breeze among the masses of putrefying flesh.

Clearly they had been hanging there some time. Since before the siege began, certainly. Perhaps since the fortress first fell to the Northmen. Corpses of the original defenders, nailed there, rotting, for all those months. Three appeared to be without their heads. The companion pieces, perhaps, to those three gifts that had been sent to Marshal Burr all that time ago. West found himself wondering, pointlessly, whether any of them had been alive when they were nailed up. Spit rushed into his mouth, the sound of flies buzzing seeming suddenly, sickeningly loud.

Jalenhorm had gone pale as a ghost. He did not say anything. He did not have to. 'What happened here?' muttered West through his gritted teeth, as much to himself as anything.

'Well, sir, we think they were hoping to get help.' The sergeant grinned at him, clearly possessed of a very strong stomach. 'Help from some unfriendly gods, we've been guessing. Seems that no one was listening down below though, eh?'

West frowned at the ragged markings on the ground. 'Get rid of them! Tear up the flags and replace them if you have to.' His eyes strayed to the decaying cadavers above, and he felt his stomach give a painful squeeze. 'And offer a ten-mark bounty to the man with guts enough to climb up there and cut those corpses down.'

‘Ten marks, sir? Bring me over that ladder!’

West turned and strode out through the open gates of the fortress of Dunbrec, holding his breath and hoping like hell that he never had occasion to visit the place again. He knew that he would be back, though. If only in his dreams.

Briefings with Poulder and Kroy were more than enough to sicken the healthiest of men, and Lord Marshal Burr was by no means in that category. The commander of His Majesty’s armies in Angland was as pitifully shrunken as the defenders of Dunbrec had been, his simple uniform hanging loose around him while his pale skin seemed stretched too tight over the bones. In a dozen short weeks he had aged as many years. His hand shook, his lip trembled, he could not stand for long, and could not ride at all. From time to time he would grimace and shiver as though he was racked by unseen pangs. West hardly knew how he was able to carry on, but carry on he did, fourteen hours a day and more. He attended to his duties with all his old diligence. Only now they seemed to eat him up, piece by piece.

Burr frowned grimly up at the great map of the border region, his hands resting on his belly. The Whiteflow was a winding blue line down the middle, Dunbrec a black hexagon marked in swirly script. On its left, the Union. On its right, the North. ‘So,’ he croaked, then coughed and cleared his throat, ‘The fortress is back in our hands.’

General Kroy gave a stiff nod. ‘It is.’

‘Finally,’ observed Poulder under his breath. The two generals still appeared to regard Bethod and his Northmen as a minor distraction from the real enemy; each other.

Kroy bristled, his staff muttering around him like a flock of angry crows. ‘Dunbrec was designed by the Union’s foremost military architects, and no expense was spared in its construction! Capturing it has been no mean task!’

‘Of course, of course,’ growled Burr, doing his best to mount a diversion. ‘Damned difficult place to take. Do we have any notion of how the Northmen managed it?’

‘None survived to tell us what trickery they employed, sir. They fought, without exception, to the death. The last few barricaded themselves in the

stables and set fire to the structure.'

Burr glanced at West, and slowly shook his head. 'How can one understand such an enemy? What is the condition of the fortress now?'

'The moat was drained, the outer gatehouse partly destroyed, considerable damage done to the inner wall. The defenders tore down some buildings for wood to burn and stones to throw and left the rest in . . .' Kroy worked his lips as though struggling to find the words. 'A very poor condition. Repairs will take some weeks.'

'Huh.' Burr rubbed unhappily at his stomach. 'The Closed Council are anxious that we cross the Whiteflow into the North as soon as possible, and take the fight to the enemy. Positive news for the restless populace, and so on.'

'The capture of Uffrith,' leaped in Poulder, with a grin of towering smugness, 'has left our position far stronger. We have gained at a stroke one of the best ports in the North, perfectly situated to supply our forces as we push into enemy territory. Before, everything had to come the length of Angland by cart, over bad roads in bad weather. Now we can bring in supplies and reinforcements by ship and almost straight to the front! And the whole thing managed without a single casualty!'

West was not about to allow him to steal the credit for that. 'Absolutely,' he droned in an emotionless monotone. 'Our northern allies have once again proved invaluable.'

Poulder's red-jacketed staff frowned and grumbled. 'They played a part,' the General was forced to admit.

'Their leader, the Dogman, came to us with the original plan, executed it himself using his own men, and delivered the town to you, its gates open and its people compliant. That was my understanding.'

Poulder frowned angrily across at Kroy, who was now allowing himself the very thinnest of smiles. 'My men are in possession of the city and are already building up a stockpile of supplies! We have outflanked the enemy and forced him to fall back towards Carleon! That, Colonel West, is surely the issue here, and not precisely who did what!'

'Indeed!' cut in Burr, waving one big hand. 'You have both done great services for your country. But we must now look forward to future successes. General Kroy, arrange for work parties to be left behind to complete the repairs to Dunbrec, and a regiment of levies to man the

defences. With a commander that knows his business, please. It would be embarrassing, to say the least, if we were to lose the fortress for a second time.'

'There will be no mistake,' snarled Kroy at Poulder, 'you can depend on it.'

'The rest of the army can cross the Whiteflow and form up on the far bank. Then we can begin to press east and northward, towards Carleon, using the harbour at Uffrith to bring in our supplies. We have driven the enemy out of Angland. Now we must press forward and grind Bethod to his knees.' And the Marshal twisted a heavy fist into his palm by way of demonstration.

'My division will be across the river by tomorrow evening,' hissed Poulder at Kroy, 'and in good order!'

Burr grimaced. 'We must move carefully, whatever the Closed Council say. The last time a Union army crossed the Whiteflow was when King Casamir invaded the North. I need hardly remind you that he was forced to withdraw in some disarray. Bethod has caught us out before, and will only grow stronger as he falls back into his own territory. We must work together. This is not a competition, gentlemen.'

The two generals immediately competed with each other to be the one to agree most. West gave a long sigh, and rubbed at the bridge of his nose.

The New Man

‘And so we return.’ Bayaz frowned towards the city: a bright, white crescent spread out around the glittering bay. Slowly but decisively it came closer, reaching out and wrapping Jezal in its welcoming embrace. The features grew distinct, green parks peeping out between the houses, white spires thrusting up from the mass of buildings. He could see the towering walls of the Agriont, sunlight glinting from burnished domes above. The House of the Maker loomed high over all, but even that forbidding mass now seemed, somehow, to speak of warmth and safety.

He was home. He had survived. It felt like a hundred years since he had stood at the stern of a not dissimilar ship, miserable and forlorn, watching Adua slide sadly away into the distance. Over the surging water, the snapping sailcloth, the cries of the seabirds, he began to distinguish the distant rumble of the city. It sounded like the most wonderful music he had ever heard. He closed his eyes and dragged the air in hard through his nostrils. The rotten salt tang of the bay was sweet as honey on his tongue.

‘One takes it you enjoyed the trip, then, Captain?’ asked Bayaz, with heavy irony.

Jezal could only grin. ‘I’m enjoying the end of it.’

‘No need to be downhearted,’ offered Brother Longfoot. ‘Sometimes a difficult journey does not deliver its full benefit until long after one returns. The trials are brief, but the wisdom gained lasts a lifetime!’

‘Huh.’ The First of the Magi curled his lip. ‘Travel brings wisdom only to the wise. It renders the ignorant more ignorant than ever. Master Ninefingers! Are you determined to return to the North?’

Logen took a brief break from frowning at the water. ‘I’ve got no reason to stay.’ He glanced sideways at Ferro, and she glared back.

‘Why look at me?’

Logen shook his head. ‘Do you know what? I’ve no fucking idea.’ If there had been anything vaguely resembling a romance between them, it appeared now to have collapsed irreparably into a sullen dislike.

‘Well,’ said Bayaz, raising his brows, ‘if you are decided.’ He held his hand out to the Northman and Jezal watched them shake. ‘Give Bethod a

kick from me, once you have him under your boot.'

'That I will, unless he gets me under his.'

'Never easy, kicking upwards. My thanks for your help, and for your manners. Perhaps you will be my guest again, one day, at the library. We will look out at the lake, and laugh about our high adventures in the west of the World.'

'I'll hope for it.' But Logen hardly looked as if there was much laughter in him, or much hope either. He looked like a man who had run out of choices.

In silence Jezal watched as the ropes were thrown down to the quay and made fast, the long gangplank squealed out to the shore and scraped onto the stones. Bayaz called out to his apprentice. 'Master Quai! Time for us to disembark!' And the pale young man followed his master down from the ship without a backward glance, Brother Longfoot behind them.

'Good luck, then,' said Jezal, offering his hand to Logen.

'And to you.' The Northman grinned, ignored the hand and folded him in a tight and unpleasant-smelling embrace. They stayed there for a somewhat touching, somewhat embarrassing moment, then Ninefingers clapped him on the back and let him go.

'Perhaps I'll see you, up there in the North.' Jezal's voice was just the slightest bit cracked, in spite of all his efforts. 'If they send me . . .'

'Maybe, but . . . I think I'll hope not. Like I said, if I was you I'd find a good woman and leave the killing to those with less sense.'

'Like you?'

'Aye. Like me.' He looked over at Ferro. 'So that's it then, eh, Ferro?'

'Uh.' She shrugged her scrawny shoulders, and strode off down the gangplank.

Logen's face twitched at that. 'Right,' he muttered at her back. 'Nice knowing you.' He waggled the stump of his missing finger at Jezal. 'Say one thing for Logen Ninefingers, say he's got a touch with the women.'

'Mmm.'

'Aye.'

'Right.' Jezal was finding actually leaving strangely difficult. They had been almost constant companions for the last six months. To begin with he had felt nothing but contempt for the man, but now that it came to it, it was like leaving a much-respected older brother. Far worse, in fact, for Jezal had

never thought too highly of his actual brothers. So he dithered on the deck, and Logen grinned at him as though he guessed just what he was thinking.

'Don't worry. I'll try to get along without you.'

Jezal managed half a smile. 'Just try to remember what I told you, if you get in another fight.'

'I'd say, unfortunately, that's pretty much a certainty.'

Then there was really nothing Jezal could do but turn away and clatter down to the shore, pretending that something had blown into his eye on the way. It seemed a long walk to the busy quay, to stand next to Bayaz and Quai, Longfoot and Ferro.

'Master Ninefingers can look after himself, I daresay,' said the First of the Magi.

'Oh, yes indeed,' chuckled Longfoot, 'few better!'

Jezal took a last look back over his shoulder as they headed off into the city. Logen raised one hand to him from the rail of the ship, and then the corner of a warehouse came between them, and he was gone. Ferro loitered for a moment, frowning back towards the sea, her fists clenched and a muscle working on the side of her head. Then she turned and saw Jezal watching her.

'What are you looking at?' And she pushed past him and followed the others, into the swarming streets of Adua.

The city was just as Jezal remembered it, and yet everything was different. The buildings seemed to have shrunk and huddled in meanly together. Even the wide Middleway, the great central artery of the city, felt horribly squashed after the huge open spaces of the Old Empire, the awe-inspiring vistas of ruined Aulcus. The sky had been higher, out there on the great plain. Here everything was reduced, and, to make matters worse, had an unpleasant smell he had never before noticed. He went with his nose wrinkled, dodging between the buffeting flow of passers-by with bad grace.

It was the people that were strangest of all. It had been months since Jezal had seen more than ten at one time. Now there were suddenly thousands pressed in all around him, furiously intent on their own doings. Soft, and scrubbed, and decked out in gaudy colours, as freakish to him now as circus performers. Fashions had moved on while he was away facing death in the barren west of the World. Hats were worn at a different angle, sleeves had swollen to a wider cut, shirt collars had shrivelled to a length that would

have been thought preposterously short a year before. Jezal snorted to himself. It seemed bizarre that such nonsense could ever have interested him, and he watched a group of perfumed dandies strutting past with the highest contempt.

Their group dwindled as they passed on through the city. First Longfoot made his effusive farewells with much pressing of hands, talk of honours and privileges, and promises of reunion that Jezal suspected, and indeed rather hoped, were insincere. Near the great market square of the Four Corners, Quai was dispatched on some errand or other with all his habitual sullen silence. That left only the First of the Magi as a companion, with Ferro slouching angrily along behind.

Being honest, Jezal would not have minded had the group dwindled considerably further. Ninefingers might have proved himself a staunch companion, but the rest of the dysfunctional family would hardly have been among Jezal's chosen dinner guests. He had long ago given up any hope that Ferro's armour of scowls would crack to reveal a caring soul within. But at least her abysmal temper was predictable. Bayaz, if anything, was an even more unnerving companion: one half grand-fatherly good humour, the other half who knew what? Whenever the old man opened his mouth Jezal flinched in anticipation of some ugly surprise.

But he chatted pleasantly enough for the time being. 'Might I ask what your plans are now, Captain Luthar?'

'Well, I suppose I will be sent to Angland, to fight against the Northmen.'

'I imagine so. Although we never know what turns fate may take.'

Jezal did not much care for the sound of that. 'And you? Will you be going back to . . .' He realised he had not the slightest idea of where the Magus had appeared from in the first place.

'Not quite yet. I will remain in Adua for the moment. Great things are afoot, my boy, great things. Perhaps I will stay to see how they turn out.'

'Move, bitch!' came a yell from the side of the road.

Three members of the city watch had gathered round a dirty-faced girl in a tattered dress. One was leaning down over her with a stick clenched in his fist, shouting in her face while she cringed back. An unhappy-seeming press had gathered to watch, workmen and labourers mostly, scarcely cleaner than the beggar herself.

'Why don't you let her be?' one grumbled.

One of the watchmen took a warning step at them, raising his stick, while his friend seized hold of the beggar by her shoulder, kicking over a cup in the road, sending a few coins tinkling into the gutter.

'That seems excessive,' said Jezal under his breath.

'Well.' Bayaz watched down his nose. 'These sort of things happen all the time. Are you telling me you've never seen a beggar moved along before?'

Jezal had, of course, often, and never raised an eyebrow. Beggars could not simply be left to clutter up the streets, after all. And yet for some reason the process was making him uncomfortable. The unfortunate waif kicked and cried, and the guardsman dragged her another stride on her back with entirely unnecessary violence, clearly enjoying himself. It was not so much the act itself that Jezal objected to, as that they would do it in front of him without a thought for his feelings. It rendered him somehow complicit.

'That is a disgrace,' he hissed through gritted teeth.

Bayaz shrugged. 'If it bothers you that much, why not do something about it?'

The watchman chose that moment to seize the girl by her scruffy hair and give her a sharp blow with his stick, and she squealed and fell, her arms over her head. Jezal felt his face twist. In a moment he had shoved through the crowd and dealt the man a resounding boot to his backside, sending him sprawling in the gutter. One of his companions came forward with his stick out, but stumbled back a moment later. Jezal realised he had his steels drawn, the polished blades glinting in the shadows beside the building.

The audience gasped and edged back. Jezal blinked. He had not intended the business to go anything like this far. Damn Bayaz and his idiotic advice. But there was nothing for it now but to carry it through. He assumed his most fearless and arrogant expression.

'One step further and I'll stick you like the swine you are.' He looked from one of the watchmen to the other. 'Well? Do any of you care to test me?' He earnestly hoped that none of them did, but he need not have worried. They were predictably cowardly in the face of determined resistance, and loitered just out of range of his steels.

'No one deals with the watch like that. We'll find you, you can depend on —'

'Finding me will present no difficulty. My name is Captain Luthar, of the King's Own. I am resident in the Agriont. You cannot miss it. It is the

fortress that dominates the city!' And he jabbed up the street with his long steel, making one of the watchmen stumble away in fear. 'I will receive you at your convenience and you can explain to my patron, Lord Marshal Varuz, your disgraceful behaviour towards this woman, a citizen of the Union guilty of no greater crime than being poor!'

A ludicrously overblown speech, of course. Jezal found himself almost flushing with embarrassment at that last part. He had always despised poor people, and he was far from sure his opinions had fundamentally changed, but he got carried away halfway through and had no choice but to finish with a flourish.

Still, his words had their effect on the city watch. The three men backed away, for some reason grinning as if the whole business had gone just as they planned, leaving Jezal to the unwanted approval of the crowd.

'Well done, lad!'

'Good thing someone's got some guts.'

'What did he say his name was?'

'Captain Luthar!' roared Bayaz suddenly, causing Jezal to jerk round halfway through sheathing his steels. 'Captain Jezal dan Luthar, the winner of last year's Contest, just now returned from his adventures in the west! Luthar, the name!'

'Luthar, did he say?'

'The one who won the Contest?'

'That's him! I saw him beat Gorst!'

The whole crowd were staring, wide-eyed and respectful. One of them reached out, as though to touch the hem of his coat, and Jezal stumbled backwards, almost tripping over the beggar-girl who had been the cause of the whole fiasco.

'Thank you,' she gushed, in an ugly commoner's accent rendered still less appealing by her bloody mouth. 'Oh, thank you, sir.'

'It was nothing.' Jezal edged away, deeply uncomfortable. She was extremely dirty, at close quarters, and he had no wish to contract an illness. The attention of the group as a whole was, in fact, anything but pleasant. He continued to shuffle backwards while they watched him, all smiles and admiring mutterings.

Ferro was frowning at him as they moved away from the Four Corners. 'Is there something?' he snapped.

She shrugged. ‘You’re not as much of a coward as you were.’

‘My thanks for that epic praise.’ He rounded on Bayaz. ‘What the hell was that?’

‘That was you carrying out a charitable act, my boy, and I was proud to see it. It would seem my lessons have not been entirely wasted on you.’

‘I meant,’ growled Jezal, who felt himself to have gained less than nothing from Bayaz’ constant lecturing, ‘what were you about, proclaiming my name to all and sundry? The story will now spread all over town!’

‘I had not considered that.’ The Magus gave a faint smile. ‘I simply felt that you deserved the credit for your noble actions. Helping those less fortunate, the aid of a lady in distress, protecting the weak and so forth. Admirable, truly.’

‘But—’ muttered Jezal, unsure whether he was being taken for a fool.

‘Here our paths diverge, my young friend.’

‘Oh. They do?’

‘Where are you going?’ snapped Ferro suspiciously.

‘I have a few matters to attend to,’ said the Magus, ‘and you will be coming with me.’

‘Why would I do that?’ She appeared to be in a worse mood even than usual since they left the docks, which was no mean achievement.

Bayaz’ eyes rolled to the sky. ‘Because you lack the social graces necessary to function for longer than five minutes on your own in such a place as this. Why else? You will be going back to the Agriont, I assume?’ he asked Jezal.

‘Yes. Yes, of course.’

‘Well, then. I would like to thank you, Captain Luthar, for the part you played in that little adventure of ours.’

‘How dare you, you magical arsehole? The entire business was a colossal, painful, disfiguring waste of my time, and a failure to boot.’ But what Jezal really said was, ‘Of course, yes.’ He took the old man’s hand, preparing to give it a limp shake. ‘It has been an honour.’

Bayaz’ grip was shockingly firm. ‘That is good to hear.’ Jezal found himself drawn very close to the old man’s face, staring into his glittering green eyes at unnervingly close quarters. ‘We may have the need to collaborate again.’

Jezal blinked. Collaborate really was an ugly choice of word. ‘Well then . . . er . . . perhaps I will . . . see you later?’ Never would have been preferable, in his opinion.

But Bayaz only grinned as he let go of Jezal’s buzzing fingers. ‘Oh, I feel sure we shall meet again.’

The sun shone pleasantly through the branches of the aromatic cedar, casting a dappled shade on the ground beneath, just as it used to. A pleasant breeze fluttered through the courtyard and the birds twittered in the branches of the trees, just as they always had. The old buildings of the barracks had not changed, crowding in, coated with rustling ivy on all sides of the narrow courtyard. But there the similarity to Jezal’s happy memories ended. A dusting of moss had crept up the legs of the chairs, the surface of the table had acquired a thick crust of bird droppings, the grass had gone unclipped for weeks on end and seed-heads thrashed at Jezal’s calves as he wandered past.

The players themselves were long gone. He watched the shadows shifting on the grey wood, remembering the sound of their laughter, the taste of smoke and strong spirits, the feel of the cards in his hand. Here Jalenhorm had sat, playing at being tough and manly. Here Kaspa had laughed at jokes at his own expense. Here West had leaned back and shaken his head with resigned disapproval. Here Brint had shuffled nervously at his hand, hoping for big wins that never came.

And here had been Jezal’s place. He dragged the chair out from the clutching grass, sat down in it with one boot up on the table and rocked it onto its rear legs. It seemed hard to believe, now, that he had sat here, watching and scheming, thinking about how best to make his friends seem small. He told himself he would never have engaged in any such foolishness now. No more than a couple of hands, anyway.

If he had thought that a thorough wash, a careful shave, a plucking of bristles and a long-winded arranging of hair would make him feel at home, he was disappointed. The familiar routines left him feeling like a stranger in his own dusty rooms. It was hard to become excited over the shining of the boots and buttons, or the arrangement of the gold braid just so.

When he finally stood before the mirror, where long ago he had whiled away so many delightful hours, he found his reflection decidedly unnerving. A lean and weather-worn adventurer stared bright-eyed from the Visserine glass, his sandy beard doing little to disguise the ugly scar down his bent jaw. His old uniforms were all unpleasantly tight, scratchily starched, chokingly constricted round the collar. He no longer felt like he belonged in them to any degree. He no longer felt like a soldier.

He scarcely even knew who he should report to, after all this time away. Every officer he was aware of, more or less, was with the army in Angland. He supposed he could have sought out Lord Marshal Varuz, had he really wanted to, but the fact was he had learned enough about danger now to not want to rush at it. He would do his duty, if he was asked. But it would have to find him first.

In the meantime, he had other business to attend to. The very thought made him terrified and thrilled at once, and he pushed a finger inside his collar and tugged at it in an effort to relieve the pressure in his throat. It did not work. Still, as Logen Ninefingers had been so very fond of saying: it was better to do it, than to live with the fear of it. He picked up his dress sword, but after a minute of staring at the absurd brass scrollwork on the hilt, he tossed it on the floor and kicked it under his bed. Look less than you are, Logen would have said. He retrieved his travel-worn long steel and slid it through the clasp on his belt, took a deep breath, and walked to the door.

There was nothing intimidating about the street. It was a quiet part of town, far off from chattering commerce and rumbling industry. In the next road a knife sharpener was throatily proclaiming his trade. Under the eaves of the modest houses a pigeon coo-cooed halfheartedly. Somewhere nearby the sound of clopping hooves and crackling carriage-wheels rose and faded. Otherwise all was quiet.

He had already walked past the house once in each direction, and dared not do so again for fear that Ardee would see him through a window, recognise him, and wonder what the hell he was up to. So he made circuits of the upper part of the street, practising what he would say when she appeared at the door.

‘I am returned.’ No, no, too high-blown. ‘Hello, how are you?’ No, too casual. ‘It’s me, Luthar.’ Too stiff. ‘Ardee . . . I’ve missed you.’ Too needy. He saw a man frowning at him from an upstairs window, and he coughed and made off quickly towards the house, murmuring to himself over and over. ‘Better to do it, better to do it, better to do it . . .’

His fist pounded against the wood. He stood and waited, heart thumping in his teeth. The latch clicked and Jezal put on his most ingratiating smile. The door opened and a short, round-faced and highly unattractive girl stared at him from the doorway. There could be no doubt, however things had changed, that she was not Ardee. ‘Yes?’

‘Er . . .’ A servant. How could he have been such a fool as to think Ardee would open her own front door? She was a commoner, not a beggar. He cleared his throat. ‘I am returned . . . I mean to say . . . does Ardee West live here?’

‘She does.’ The maid opened the door far enough for Jezal to step through into the dim hallway. ‘Who shall I say is calling?’

‘Captain Luthar.’

Her head snapped round as though it had an invisible string attached to it and he had given it a sudden jerk. ‘Captain . . . Jezal dan Luthar?’

‘Yes,’ he muttered, mystified. Could Ardee have been discussing him with the help?

‘Oh . . . oh, if you wait . . .’ The maid pointed to a doorway and hurried off, eyes wide, quite as if the Emperor of Gurkhul had come calling.

The dim living room gave the impression of having been decorated by someone with too much money, too little taste, and not nearly enough space for their ambitions. There were several garishly upholstered chairs, an over-sized and over-decorated cabinet, and a monumental canvas on one wall which, had it been any bigger, would have required the room to be knocked through into the neighbouring house. Two dusty shafts of light came in through the gaps in the curtains, gleaming on the highly polished, if slightly wonky, surface of an antique table. Each piece might have passed muster on its own, but crowded together the effect was quite suffocating. Still, Jezal told himself as he frowned round at it all, he had come for Ardee, not for her furniture.

It was ridiculous. His knees were weak, his mouth was dry, his head was spinning, and with every moment that passed it got worse. He had not felt

this scared in Aulcus, with a crowd of screaming Shanka bearing down on him. He took a nervous circuit of the room, fists clenching and unclenching. He peered out into the quiet street. He leaned over a chair to examine the massive painting. A muscular-seeming king lounged in an outsize crown while fur-trimmed lords bowed and scraped around his feet. Harod the Great, Jezal guessed, but the recognition brought him little joy. Bayaz' favourite and most tiresome topic of conversation had been the achievements of that man. Harod the Great could be pickled in vinegar for all Jezal cared. Harod the Great could go—

'Well, well, well . . .'

She stood in the doorway, bright light from the hall beyond glowing in her dark hair and down the edges of her white dress, her head on one side and the faintest ghost of a smile on her shadowy face. She seemed hardly to have changed. So often in life, moments that are long anticipated turn out to be profound disappointments. Seeing Ardee again, after all that time apart, was undoubtedly an exception. All his carefully prepared conversation evaporated in that one instant, leaving him as empty-headed as he had been when he first laid eyes on her.

'You're alive, then,' she murmured.

'Yes . . . er . . . just about.' He managed half an awkward smile. 'Did you think I was dead?'

'I hoped you were.' That wiped the grin off his face with sharp effect. 'When I didn't get so much as a letter. But really I thought you'd just forgotten about me.'

Jezal winced. 'I'm sorry I didn't write. Very sorry. I wanted to . . .' She swung the door shut and leaned against it with her hands behind her, frowning at him all the while. 'There wasn't a day I didn't want to. But I was called for, and never had the chance to tell anyone, not even my family. I was . . . I was far away, in the west.'

'I know you were. The whole city is buzzing with it, and if I've heard, it must be common knowledge indeed.'

'You've heard?'

Ardee jerked her head towards the hall. 'I had it from the maid.'

'From the maid?' How the hell could anyone in Adua have heard anything about his misadventures, let alone Ardee West's maid? He was assailed with sudden unpleasing images. Crowds of servants giggling at the thought of

him lying around crying over his broken face. Everyone who was anyone gossiping about what a fool he must have looked being fed with a spoon by a scarred brute of a Northman. He felt himself blushing to the tips of his ears. ‘What did she say?’

‘Oh, you know.’ She wandered absently into the room. ‘That you scaled the walls at the siege of Darmium, was it? Opened the gates to the Emperor’s men and so on.’

‘What?’ He was even more baffled than before. ‘Darmium? I mean to say . . . who told her . . .’

She came closer, and closer, and he grew more and more flustered until he stammered to a stop. Closer yet, and she was looking slightly upwards into his face with her lips parted. So close that he was sure she was going to take him in her arms and kiss him. So close that he leaned forward slightly in anticipation, half-closing his eyes, his lips tingling . . . Then she passed him, her hair nearly flicking in his face, and went on to the cabinet, opening it and taking out a decanter, leaving him behind, marooned on the carpet.

In gormless silence he watched her fill two glasses and offer one out, wine slopping and trickling stickily down the side. ‘You’ve changed.’ Jezal felt a sudden surge of shame and his hand jerked up to cover his scarred jaw on an instinct. ‘I don’t mean that. Not just that, anyway. Everything. You’re different, somehow.’

‘I . . .’ The effect she had on him was, if anything, stronger now than it used to be. Then there had not been all the weight of expectation, all the long day-dreaming and anticipation out in the wilderness. ‘I’ve missed you.’ He said it without thinking, then found himself flushing and had to try and change the subject. ‘Have you heard from your brother?’

‘He’s been writing every week.’ She threw her head back and drained her glass, started to fill it again. ‘Ever since I found out he was still alive, anyway.’

‘What?’

‘I thought he was dead, for a month or more. He only just escaped from the battle.’

‘There was a battle?’ squeaked Jezal, just before remembering there was a war on. Of course there had been battles. He brought his voice back under control. ‘What battle?’

‘The one where Prince Ladisla was killed.’

‘Ladisla’s dead?’ he squealed, voice shooting up into a girlish register again. The few times he had seen the Crown Prince the man had seemed so self-absorbed as to be indestructible. It was hard to believe he could simply be stabbed with a sword, or shot with an arrow, and die, like anyone else, but there it was.

‘And then his brother was murdered—’

‘Raynault? Murdered?’

‘In his bed in the palace. When the king dies, they’ll choose a new one by a vote in Open Council.’

‘A vote?’ His voice rose so high at that he almost felt some sick at the back of his throat.

She was already filling her glass again. ‘Uthman’s emissary was hanged for the murder, despite most likely being innocent, and so the war with the Gurkish is dragging on—’

‘We’re at war with the Gurkish as well?’

‘Dagoska fell at the start of the year.’

‘Dagoska . . . fell?’ Jezal emptied his glass in one long swallow and stared at the carpet, trying to fit it all into his head. He should not have been surprised, of course, that things had moved on while he was away, but he had hardly expected the world to turn upside down. War with the Gurkish, battles in the North, votes to choose a new king?

‘You need another?’ asked Ardee, tilting the decanter in her hand.

‘I think I’d better.’ Great events, of course, just as Bayaz had said. He watched her pour, frowning down intently, almost angrily, as the wine gurgled out. He saw a little scar on her top lip that he had never noticed before, and he felt a sudden compulsion to touch it, and push his fingers in her hair, and hold her against him. Great events, but it all seemed of small importance compared to what happened now, in this room. Who knew? The course of his life might turn on the next few moments, if he could find the right words, and make himself say them.

‘I really did miss you,’ he managed. A miserable effort which she dismissed with a bitter snort.

‘Don’t be a fool.’

He caught her hand, making her look him in the eye. ‘I’ve been a fool all my life. Not now. There were times, out there on the plain, the only thing that kept me alive was the thought that . . . that I might be with you again.

Every day I wanted to see you . . .' She did nothing but frown back at him, entirely unmoved. Her failure to melt into his arms was highly frustrating, after all he had been through. 'Ardee, please, I didn't come here to argue.'

She scowled at the floor as she threw down another glass. 'I don't know why you did come here.'

'Because I love you, and I want never to be separated from you again! Please, tell me that you will be my wife!' He almost said it, but at the last moment he saw her scornful sneer, and he stopped himself. He had entirely forgotten how difficult she could be. 'I came here to say that I'm sorry. I let you down, I know. I came as soon as I could, but I see that you're not in the mood. I'll come back later.'

He brushed past her and made for the door but Ardee got there first, twisted the key in the lock and snatched it out. 'You leave me all alone here, without so much as a letter, then when you come back you want to leave without even a kiss?' She took a lurching step at him and Jezal found himself backing off.

'Ardee, you're drunk.'

She flicked her head with annoyance. 'I'm always drunk. Didn't you say you missed me?'

'But,' he muttered, starting for some reason to feel slightly scared, 'I thought—'

'There's your problem, you see? Thinking. You're no good at it.' She herded him back against the edge of the table, and he got his sword so badly tangled up with his legs he had to put a hand down to stop himself falling.

'Haven't I been waiting?' she whispered, and her breath on his face was hot and sour-sweet with wine. 'Just like you asked me?' Her mouth brushed gently against his, and the tip of her tongue slipped out and lapped against his lips, and she made soft gurgling sounds in her throat and pressed herself up against him. He felt her hand slide down onto his groin, rubbing at him gently through his trousers.

The feeling was pleasant, of course, and caused an instant stiffening. Pleasant in the extreme, but more than slightly worrying. He looked nervously towards the door. 'What about the servants?' he croaked.

'If they don't like it they can find another fucking job, can't they? They weren't my idea.'

'Then whose—ah!'

She twisted her fingers in his hair and dragged his head painfully round so she was speaking right into his face. ‘Forget about them! You came here for me, didn’t you?’

‘Yes . . . yes, of course!’

‘Say it, then!’ Her hand pressed up hard against his trousers, almost painful, but not quite.

‘Ah . . . I came for you.’

‘Well? Here I am.’ And her fingers fumbled with his belt and dragged it open. ‘No need to be shy now.’

He tried to catch her wrist. ‘Ardee, wait—’ Her other hand caught him a stinging slap right across the face and knocked his head sideways, hard enough to make his ears ring.

‘I’ve been sitting here for six months doing nothing!’ she hissed in his face, words slightly slurred. ‘Do you know how bored I’ve been? And now you’re telling me to wait? Fuck yourself!’ She dug roughly into his trousers and dragged his prick out, rubbing at him with one hand, squeezing at his face with the other while he closed his eyes and gasped shallow breaths into her mouth, nothing in his mind but her fingers.

Her teeth nipped at his lip, almost painful, and then harder. ‘Ah,’ he grunted. ‘Ah!’ She was decidedly biting him. Biting with a will, as though his lip were a piece of gristle to be chewed through. He tried to pull away but the table was at his back and she had him fast. The pain was almost as great as the shock, and then, as the biting went on, considerably greater.

‘Aargh!’ He grabbed hold of her wrist with one hand and twisted it behind her back, yanked her arm and shoved her down onto the table. He heard her gasp as her face cracked hard against the polished wood.

He stood over her, frozen with dismay, his mouth salty with blood. He could see one dark eye through Ardee’s tangled hair, expressionless, watching him over her twisted shoulder. The hair moved round her mouth as she breathed, fast. He let go of her wrist, suddenly, saw her arm move, the marks left by his fingers angry pink on her skin. Her hand slid down and took hold of a fistful of her dress and pulled it up, took another fistful and pulled it up, until her skirts were all tangled around her waist and her bare, pale arse was slicking up at him.

Well. He might have been a new man, but he was still a man.

With each thrust her head tapped against the plaster, and his skin slapped against the backs of her thighs, and his trousers sagged further and further down his legs until his sword-hilt was scraping against the carpet. With each thrust the table made an outraged creaking, louder and louder every time, as though they were fucking over the back of some disapproving old man. With each thrust she made a grunt, and he made a gasp, not of pleasure or pain in particular, but a necessary moving of air in response to vigorous exercise. It was all over with merciful swiftness.

So often in life, moments that are long anticipated prove to be a profound disappointment. This was undoubtedly one of those occasions. When he had spent all those interminable hours out on the plain, saddle-sore and in fear of his life, dreaming of seeing Ardee again, a quick and violent coupling on the table in her tasteless living-room had not been quite what he'd had in mind. When they were done he pushed his wilting prick back inside his trousers, guilty, and ashamed, and miserable in the extreme. The sound of his belt-buckle clinking made him want to smash his face against the wall.

She got up, and let her skirts drop, and smoothed them down, her face to the floor. He reached for her shoulder. 'Ardee—' She shook him angrily off, and walked away. She tossed something on the floor behind her and it rattled on the carpet. The key to the door.

'You can go.'

'I can what?'

'Go! You got what you wanted, didn't you?'

He licked disbelieving at his bloody lip. 'You think this is what I wanted?' Nothing but silence. 'I love you.'

She gave a kind of cough, as if she was about to be sick, and she slowly shook her head. 'Why?'

He wasn't sure he knew. He wasn't sure what he meant, or how he felt any more. He wanted to start again, but he didn't know how. The whole thing was an inexplicable nightmare from which he hoped soon to wake. 'What do you mean, why?'

She bent over, fists clenched, and screamed at him. 'I'm fucking nothing! Everyone who knows me hates me! My own father hated me! My own brother!' Her voice cracked, and her face screwed up, and her mouth spat with anger and misery. 'Everything I touch I ruin! I'm nothing but shit!

Why can’t you see it?’ And she put her hands over her face, and turned her back on him, and her shoulders shook.

He blinked at her, his own lip trembling. The old Jezal dan Luthar would most likely have made a quick grab for that key, sprinted from the room and off down the street, never to come back, and counted himself lucky to have got away so easily. The new one thought about it. He thought about it hard. But he had more character than that. Or so he told himself.

‘I love you.’ The words tasted like lies in his bloody mouth, but he had gone far too far now to turn back. ‘I still love you.’ He crossed the room, and though she tried to push him off he put his arms around her. ‘Nothing’s changed.’ He pushed his fingers into her hair, and held her head against his chest while she cried softly, sobbing snot down the front of his garish uniform.

‘Nothing’s changed,’ he whispered. But of course it had.

Feeding Time

They did not sit so close that it was obvious they were together. *Two men who, in the course of their daily business, happen to have placed their arses on the same piece of wood.* It was early morning, and although the sun cast a stinging glare in Glokta's eyes and lent the dewy grass, the rustling trees, the shifting water in the park a golden glow, there was still a treacherous nip to the air. Lord Wetterlant was evidently an early riser. *But then so am I. Nothing encourages a man to leave his bed like being kept awake all night by searing cramps.*

His Lordship reached into a paper bag, drew out a pinch of bread dust between thumb and forefinger, and tossed it at his feet. A mob of self-important ducks had already gathered, and now they fussed at each other furiously in their efforts to get at the crumbs while the old nobleman watched them, his lined face a slack and emotionless mask.

'I am under no illusions, Superior,' he droned, almost without moving his lips and without looking up at all. 'I am not a big enough man to compete in this contest, even should I wish to. But I am big enough to get something from it. I intend to get what I can.' *Straight to business, then, for once. No need to talk about the weather, or how the children are, or the relative merits of different-coloured ducks.*

'There is no shame in that.'

'I do not think so. I have a family to feed, and it grows by the year. I strongly advise against too many children.' *Hah, That shouldn't be a problem.* 'And then I keep dogs, and they must be fed also, and have great appetites.' Wetterlant gave a long, wheezing sigh, and tossed the birds another pinch of bread. 'The higher you rise, Superior, the more dependents cry at you for scraps; that is a sad fact.'

'You carry a large responsibility, my Lord.' Glokta grimaced at a spasm in his leg, and cautiously stretched it out until he felt his knee click. 'How large, might I ask?'

'I have my own vote, of course, and control the votes of three other chairs on the Open Council. Families tied to my own by bonds of land, of

friendship, of marriage, and of long tradition.' *Such bonds may prove insubstantial in times such as these.*

'You are certain of those three?'

Wetterlant turned his cold eyes on Glokta. 'I am no fool, Superior. I keep my dogs well chained. I am certain of them. As certain as we can be of anything, in these uncertain times.' He tossed more crumbs into the grass and the ducks quacked, and pecked, and beat at each other with their wings.

'Four votes in total, then.' *No mean share of the great pie.*

'Four votes in total.'

Glokta cleared his throat, checked quickly that there was no one within earshot. A girl with a tragic face stared listlessly into the water just down the path. Two dishevelled officers of the King's Own sat on a bench as far away on the other side, holding forth to each other loudly about who had been drunker the night before. Might the tragic girl be listening for Lord Brock? *Might the two officers report to High Justice Marovia? I see agents everywhere, and it is just as well. There are agents everywhere*. He lowered his voice to a whisper. 'His Eminence would be willing to offer fifteen thousand marks for each vote.'

'I see.' Wetterlant's hooded eyes did not so much as twitch. 'So little meat would scarcely satisfy my dogs. It would leave nothing for my own table. I should tell you that Lord Barezin, in a highly roundabout manner, already offered me eighteen thousand a vote, as well as an excellent stretch of land that borders my own estates. Deer hunting woods. Are you a hunting man, Superior?'

'I was.' Glokta tapped his ruined leg. 'But not for some time.'

'Ah. My commiserations. I have always loved the sport. But then Lord Brock came to visit me.' *How charming for you both.* 'He was good enough to make an offer of twenty thousand, and a very suitable match of his youngest daughter for my eldest son.'

'You accepted?'

'I told him it was too early to accept anything.'

'I am sure his Eminence could stretch to twenty-one, but that would have to be—'

'High Justice Marovia's man already offered me twenty-five.'

'Harlen Morrow?' hissed Glokta through his remaining teeth.

Lord Wetterlant raised an eyebrow. 'I believe that was the name.'

‘I regret that I can only match that offer at present. I will inform his Eminence of your position.’ *His delight, I am sure, will know no bounds.*

‘I look forward to hearing from you, Superior.’ Wetterlant turned back to his ducks and permitted them a few more crumbs, a vague smile hovering round his lips as he watched them tussle with each other.

Glokta hobbled painfully up to the ordinary house in the unexceptional street, something resembling a smile on his face. *A moment free of the suffocating company of the great and the good. A moment in which I do not have to lie, or cheat, or watch for a knife in my back. Perhaps I’ll even find a room that doesn’t still stink of Harlen Morrow. That would be a refreshing —*

The door opened sharply even as he raised his fist to knock, and he was left staring into the grinning face of a man wearing the uniform of an officer in the King’s Own. It was so unexpected that Glokta did not recognise him at first. Then he felt a surge of dismay.

‘Why, Captain Luthar. What a surprise.’ *And a thoroughly unpleasant one.*

He was considerably changed. Where once he had been boyish and smooth, he had acquired a somewhat angular, even a weather-beaten look. Where once he had carried his chin with an arrogant lift, he now had an almost apologetic tilt to his face. He had grown a beard too, perhaps in an unsuccessful attempt to disguise a vicious-looking scar *through his lip and down his jaw. Though it has far from rendered him ugly, alas*.

‘Inquisitor Glokta . . . er . . .’

‘Superior.’

‘Really?’ Luthar blinked at him for a moment. ‘Well . . . in that case . . .’ The easy smile reappeared, and Glokta was surprised to find himself being shaken warmly by the hand. ‘Congratulations. I would love to chat but duty calls. I haven’t long in the city, you see. Off to the North, and so on.’

‘Of course.’ Glokta frowned after him as he stepped jauntily off up the street, with just the one furtive glance over his shoulder as he rounded the corner. *Leaving only the question of why he was here in the first place.* Glokta hobbled through the open door and shut it quietly behind him. *Although honestly, a young man leaving a young woman’s house in the early morning? One scarcely requires his Majesty’s Inquisition to solve that*

particular mystery. Did I not leave more than my share of residences in the early hours, after all? Pretending to hope that I wasn't observed, but really rather hoping that I was? He passed through the doorway into the living room. Or was that a different man?

Ardee West stood with her back to him, and he heard the sound of wine trickling into a glass. 'Did you forget something?' she asked over her shoulder, voice soft and playful. *Not a tone I often get to hear women use. Horror, disgust, and the slightest touch of pity are more common.* There was a clinking as she put the bottle away. 'Or did you decide you really couldn't live without another—' She had a crooked smile on her face as she turned, but it slid off suddenly when she saw who was standing there.

Glokta snorted. 'Don't worry, I get that reaction from everyone. Even myself, every morning, when I look into the mirror.' *If I can even manage to stand up in front of the damn thing.*

'It's not like that, and you know it. I just wasn't expecting you to wander in.'

'We've all had quite the shock this morning, then. You'll never guess who I passed in your hallway.'

She froze for just a moment, then tossed her head dismissively and slurped wine from her glass. 'Aren't you going to give me a clue?'

'Alright, I will.' Glokta winced as he lowered himself into a chair, stretching his aching leg out in front of him. 'A young officer in the King's Own, no doubt with a scintillating future ahead of him.' Though *we can all hope otherwise.*

Ardee glared at him over the rim. 'There are so many officers in the King's Own I can scarcely tell one from another.'

'Really? This one won last year's Contest, I believe.'

'I hardly remember who was in the final. Every year is like the last, don't you find?'

'True. Since I competed it's been straight downhill. But I thought you might remember this particular fellow. Looked as if someone might have hit him in the face since we last met. Quite hard, I would say.' *Though not half as hard as I'd have liked.*

'You're angry with me,' she said, but without the appearance of the slightest concern.

‘I’d say disappointed. But what would you expect? I thought you were cleverer than this.’

‘Cleverness is no guarantee of sensible behaviour. My father used to say so all the time.’ She finished her wine with a practised flick of her head. ‘Don’t worry. I can look after myself.’

‘No you can’t. You’ve made that abundantly clear. You realise what will happen if people find out? You’ll be shunned.’

‘What would be the difference?’ she sneered at him. ‘Perhaps you’ll be surprised to learn I get few invitations to the palace now. I barely even qualify as an embarrassment. No one speaks to me.’ *Apart from me, of course, but I’m hardly the type of company young women hope for.* ‘No one cares a shit what I do. If they find out it will be no worse than they expect from a slattern like me. Damn commoners, no more self-control than animals, don’t you know. Anyway, didn’t you tell me I could fuck who I pleased?’

‘I also told you the less fucking the better.’

‘And I suppose that’s what you told all your conquests, is it?’

Glokta grimaced. *Not exactly. I coaxed and I pleaded, I threatened and I bullied. Your beauty has wounded me, wounded me in the heart! I am wretched, I will die without you! Have you no pity? Do you not love me? I did everything short of display the instruments, then when I got what I wanted I tossed them aside and went merrily on to the next with never a backward glance.*

‘Hah!’ snorted Ardee, as though she guessed what he was thinking. ‘Sand dan Glokta, giving lectures on the benefits of chastity? Please! How many women did you ruin before the Gurkish ruined you? You were notorious!’

A muscle began to tremble in his neck, and he worked his shoulder round until he felt it soften. *She makes a fair point. Perhaps a soft word with the gentleman in question will do the trick. A soft word, or a hard night with Practical Frost.* ‘Your bed, your business, I suppose, as they say in Styria. How does the great Captain Luthar come to be among the civilians in any case? Doesn’t he have Northmen to rout? Who will save Angland, while he’s here?’

‘He wasn’t in Angland.’

‘No?’ *Father find him a nice, out of the way spot, did he?*

‘He’s been in the Old Empire, or some such. Across the sea to the west and far away.’ She sighed as though she had heard a great deal about it and was now thoroughly bored of the subject.

‘Old Empire? What the hell was he up to out there?’

‘Why don’t you ask him? Some journey. He talked a lot about a Northman. Ninefingers, or something.’

Glokta’s head jerked up. ‘Ninefingers?’

‘Mmm. Him and some old bald man.’

A flurry of twitches ran down Glokta’s face. ‘Bayaz.’ Ardee shrugged and swigged from her glass again, already developing a slight drunken clumsiness to her movements. Bayaz. *All we need, with an election coming, is that old liar sticking his hairless head in.* ‘Is he here, now, in the city?’

‘How should I know?’ grumbled Ardee. ‘Nobody tells me anything.’

So Much in Common

Ferro stalked round the room, and scowled. She poured her scorn out into the sweet-smelling air, onto the rustling hangings, over the great windows and the high balcony beyond them. She sneered at the dark pictures of fat pale kings, at the shining furniture scattered about the wide floor. She hated this place, with its soft beds and its soft people. She infinitely preferred the dust and thirst of the Badlands of Kanta. Life there was hard, and hot, and brief.

But at least it was honest.

This Union, and this city of Adua in particular, and this fortress of the Agriont especially, were all packed to bursting with lies. She felt them on her skin, like an oily stain she could not rub off. And Bayaz was sunk in the very midst of it. He had tricked her into following him across the world for nothing. They had found no ancient weapon to use against the Gurkish. Now he smiled, and laughed, and whispered secrets with old men. Men who came in sweating from the heat outside, and left sweating even more.

She would never have admitted it to anyone else. She despised having to admit it to herself. She missed Ninefingers. Though she had never been able to show it, it had been a reassurance, having someone she could halfway trust.

Now she had to look over her own shoulder.

All she had for company was the apprentice, and he was worse than nothing. He sat and watched her in silence, his book ignored on the table beside him. Watching and smiling without joy, as though he knew something she should have guessed. As though he thought her a fool for not seeing it. That only made her angrier than ever. So she prowled round the room, frowning at everything, her fists clenched and her jaw locked light.

'You should go back to the South, Ferro.'

She stopped in her tracks, and scowled at Quai. He was right, of course. Nothing would have pleased her more than to leave these Godless pinks behind forever and fight the Gurkish with weapons she understood. Tear vengeance from them with her teeth, if she had to. He was right, but that

changed nothing. Ferro had never been much for taking advice. ‘What do you know about what I should do, scrawny pink fool?’

‘More than you think.’ He did not take his slow eyes away from her for a moment. ‘We are much alike, you and I. You may not see it, and yet we are. So much in common.’ Ferro frowned. She did not know what the sickly idiot meant by that, but she did not like the sound of it. ‘Bayaz will bring you nothing you need. He cannot be trusted. I found out too late, but you still have time. You should find another master.’

‘I have no master,’ she snapped at him. ‘I am free.’

One corner of Quai’s pale lips twitched up. ‘Neither of us will ever be free. Go. There is nothing for you here.’

‘Why do you stay, then?’

‘For vengeance.’

Ferro frowned deeper. ‘Vengeance for what?’

The apprentice leaned forward, his bright eyes fixed on hers. The door creaked open and he snapped his mouth shut, sat back and looked out of the window. Just as if he had never meant to speak.

Damn apprentice with his damn riddles. Ferro turned her scowl towards the door.

Bayaz came slowly through into the room, a teacup held carefully level in one hand. He did not so much as look in Ferro’s direction as he swept past and out the open door onto the balcony. Damn Magus. She stalked after, narrowing her eyes at the glare. They were high up, and the Agriont was spread out before them, as it had been when she and Ninefingers climbed over the rooftops, long ago. Groups of idle pinks lazed on the shining grass below, just as they had done before Ferro left for the Old Empire. And yet not everything was the same.

Everywhere in the city, now, there was a kind of fear. She could see it in each soft, pale face. In their every word and gesture. A breathless expectation, like the air before the storm breaks. Like a field of dry grass, ready to burst into flame at the slightest spark. She did not know what they were waiting for, and she did not care.

But she had heard a lot of talk about votes.

The First of the Magi watched her as she stepped through the door, the bright sun shining on the side of his bald head. ‘Tea, Ferro?’

Ferro hated tea, and Bayaz knew it. Tea was what the Gurkish drank when they had treachery in mind. She remembered the soldiers drinking it while she struggled in the dust. She remembered the slavers drinking it while they talked prices. She remembered Uthman drinking it while he chuckled at her rage and her helplessness. Now Bayaz drank it, little cup held daintily between his thick thumb and forefinger, and he smiled.

Ferro ground her teeth. 'I am done here, pink. You promised me vengeance and have given me nothing. I am going back to the South.'

'Indeed? We would be sorry to lose you. But Gurkhul and the Union are at war. There are no ships sailing to Kanta at present. There may not be for some time to come.'

'Then how will I get there?'

'You have made it abundantly clear that you are not my responsibility. I have put a roof over your head and you show scant gratitude. If you wish to leave, you can make your own arrangements. My brother Yulwei should return to us shortly. Perhaps he will be prepared to take you under his wing.'

'Not good enough.' Bayaz glared at her. A fearsome look, perhaps, but Ferro was not Longfoot, or Luthar, or Quai. She had no master, and would never have another. 'Not good enough, I said!'

'Why is it that you insist on testing the limits of my patience? It is not without an end, you know.'

'Neither is mine.'

Bayaz snorted. 'Yours scarcely even has a beginning, as Master Ninefingers could no doubt testify. I do declare, Ferro, you have all the charm of a goat, and a mean-tempered goat at that.' He stuck his lips out, tipped up his cup and sucked delicately from the rim. Only with a mighty effort was Ferro able to stop herself from slapping it out of his hand, and butting the bald bastard in the face into the bargain. 'But if fighting the Gurkish is still what you have in mind—'

'Always.'

'Then I am sure that I can still find a use for your talents. Something that does not require a sense of humour. My purposes with regard to the Gurkish are unchanged. The struggle must continue, albeit with other weapons.' His eyes slid sideways, towards the great tower that loomed up over the fortress.

Ferro knew little about beauty and cared still less, but that building was a beautiful thing to her mind. There was no softness, no indulgence in that mountain of naked stone. There was a brutal honesty in its shape. A merciless precision in its sharp, black angles. Something about it fascinated her.

'What is that place?' she asked.

Bayaz narrowed his eyes at her. 'The House of the Maker.'

'What is inside?'

'None of your business.'

Ferro almost spat with annoyance. 'You lived there. You served Kanedias. You helped the Maker with his works. You told us all this, out on the plains. So tell me, what is inside?'

'You have a sharp memory, Ferro, but you forget one thing. We did not find the Seed. I do not need you. I do not need, in particular, to answer your endless questions any longer. Imagine my dismay.' He sucked primly at his tea again, raising his brows and peering out at the lazy pinks in the park.

Ferro forced a smile onto her own face. Or as close as she could get to a smile. She bared her teeth, at least. She remembered well enough what the bitter old woman Cawneil had said, and how much it had annoyed him. She would do the same. 'The Maker. You tried to steal his secrets. You tried to steal his daughter. Tolomei was her name. Her father threw her from the roof. In return for her betrayal, in opening his gates to you. Am I wrong?'

Bayaz angrily flicked the last drops from his cup over the balcony. Ferro watched them glitter in the bright sun, tumbling downwards. 'Yes, Ferro, the Maker threw his daughter from the roof. It would seem that we are both unlucky in love, eh? Bad luck for us. Worse luck for our lovers. Who would have dreamed we have so much in common?' Ferro wondered about shoving the pink bastard off the balcony after his tea. But he still owed her, and she meant to collect. So she only scowled, and ducked back through the doorway.

There was a new arrival in the room. A man with curly hair and a wide smile. He had a tall staff in his hand, a case of weathered leather over one shoulder. There was something strange about his eyes – one light, one dark. There was something about his watchful gaze that made Ferro suspicious. Even more than usual.

‘Ah, the famous Ferro Maljinn. Forgive my curiosity, but it is not every day that one encounters a person of your . . . remarkable ancestry.’

Ferro did not like that he knew her name, or her ancestry, or anything about her. ‘Who are you?’

‘Where are my manners? I am Yoru Sulfur, of the order of Magi,’ and he offered his hand. She did not take it but he only smiled. ‘Not one of the original twelve, of course, not I. Merely an afterthought. A late addition. I was once apprentice to great Bayaz.’

Ferro snorted. That hardly qualified him for trust in her estimation. ‘What happened?’

‘I graduated.’

Bayaz tossed his cup down rattling on a table by the window. ‘Yoru,’ he said, and the newcomer humbly bowed his head. ‘My thanks for your work thus far. Precise and to the point, as always.’

Sulfur’s smile grew broader. ‘A small cog in a large machine, Master Bayaz, but I try to be a sturdy one.’

‘You have yet to let me down. I do not forget that. How is your next little game progressing?’

‘Ready to begin, at your command.’

‘Let us begin now. There is nothing to be gained by delay.’

‘I shall make the preparations. I have also brought this, as you asked.’ He swung the bag down from his shoulder and gingerly reached inside. He slowly drew out a book. Large and black, its heavy covers hacked, and scarred, and charred by fire. ‘Glustrod’s book,’ he murmured softly, as though afraid to say the words.

Bayaz frowned. ‘Keep it, for now. There was an unexpected complication.’

‘A complication?’ Sulfur slid the book back into its case with some relief.

‘What we sought . . . was not there.’

‘Then—’

‘As regards our other plans, nothing is changed.’

‘Of course.’ Sulfur bowed his head again. ‘Lord Isher will already be on his way.’

‘Very well.’ Bayaz glanced over at Ferro, as though he had only just remembered that she was there. ‘For the time being, perhaps you would be good enough to give us the room? I have a visitor that I must attend to.’

She was happy to leave, but she took her time moving, if only because Bayaz wanted her gone quickly. She unfolded her arms, stood on the spot and stretched. She strolled to the door by a roundabout route, letting her feet scuff against the boards and fill the room with their ugly scraping. She stopped on the way to gaze at a picture, to poke at a chair, to flick at a shiny pot, none of which interested her at all. All the while Quai watched, and Bayaz frowned, and Sulfur grinned his knowing little grin. She stopped in the doorway.

'Now?'

'Yes, now,' snapped Bayaz.

She looked round the room one more time. 'Fucking Magi,' she snorted, and slid through the door.

She almost walked into a tall old pink in the room beyond. He wore a heavy robe, even in the heat, and had a sparkling chain around his shoulders. A big man loomed behind him, grim and watchful. A guard. Ferro did not like the old pink's look. He stared down his nose at her, chin tilted up, as though she were a dog.

As though she were a slave.

'Ssssss.' She hissed in his face as she shouldered past him. He gave an outraged snort and his guard gave Ferro a hard look. She ignored it. Hard looks mean nothing. If he wanted her knee in his face he could try and touch her. But he did not. The two of them went in through the door.

'Ah, Lord Isher!' she heard Bayaz saying, just before it shut. 'I am delighted that you could visit us at short notice.'

'I came at once. My grandfather always said that—'

'Your grandfather was a wise man, and a good friend. I would like to discuss with you, if I may, the situation in the Open Council. Will you take tea . . . ?'

Honesty

Jezal lay on his back, his hands behind his head, the sheets around his waist. He watched Ardee looking out of the window, her elbows on the sill, her chin on her hands. He watched Ardee, and he thanked the fates that some long-forgotten designer of military apparel had seen fit to provide the officers of the King's Own with a high-waisted jacket. He thanked them with a deep and earnest gratitude, because his jacket was all she was wearing.

It was amazing how things had changed between them, since that bitter, bewildering reunion. For a week they had not spent a night apart, and for a week the smile had barely left his face. Occasionally the memory would wallow up, of course, unbidden and horribly surprising, like a bloated corpse bobbing to the surface of the pond while one enjoys a picnic on the shore, of Ardee biting and hitting him, crying and screaming in his face. But when it did so he would fix his grin, and see her smile at him, and soon enough he would be able to shove those unpleasant thoughts back down again, at least for now. Then he would congratulate himself on being a big enough man to do it, and on giving her the benefit of the doubt.

'Ardee,' he wheedled at her.

'Mmm?'

'Come back to bed.'

'Why?'

'Because I love you.' Strange, how the more he said it, the easier it became.

She gave a bored sigh. 'So you keep saying.'

'It's true.'

She turned round, hands on the sill behind, her body a dark outline against the bright window. 'And what does that mean, exactly? That you've been fucking me for a week and you haven't had enough yet?'

'I don't think I'll ever get enough.'

'Well,' and she pushed herself away from the window and padded across the boards. 'I don't suppose there's any harm in finding out, is there? No

more harm, anyway.' She stopped at the foot of the bed. 'Just promise me one thing.'

Jezal swallowed, worried at what she might ask him, worried at what he might say in reply. 'Anything,' he murmured, forcing himself to smile.

'Don't let me down.'

His smile grew easier. That was not so hard to say yes to. He was a changed man, after all. 'Of course, I promise.'

'Good.' She crept up on to the bed, on her hands and knees, eyes fixed on his face while he wriggled his toes in anticipation under the sheet. She knelt up, one leg on either side of him, and jerked the jacket smooth across her chest. 'Well then, Captain, do I pass muster?'

'I would say . . .' and he grabbed the front of the jacket and pulled her down on top of him, slipped his hands inside it, 'that you are without a doubt . . .' and he slid his hand under her breast and rubbed at her nipple with his thumb, 'the finest-looking soldier in my company.'

She pressed her groin against his through the sheet, and worked her hips back and forward. 'Ah, the Captain is already at attention . . .'

'For you? Constantly . . .'

Her mouth licked and sucked at his, smearing spit on his face, and he pushed his hand between her legs and she rubbed herself against it for a while, his sticky fingers squelching in and out of her. She grunted and sighed in her throat, and he did the same. She reached down and dragged the sheet out of the way. He took hold of his prick and she wriggled her hips until they found the right spot and worked her way down onto him, her hair tickling at his face, her rasping breath tickling at his ear.

There were two heavy knocks at the door, and they both froze. Another two knocks. Ardee put her head up, pushing her hair out of her flushed face. 'What is it?' she called, voice thick and throaty.

'There's someone for the Captain.' The maid. 'Is he . . . is he still here?'

Ardee's eyes rolled down to Jezal's. 'I daresay I could get a message to him!' He bit on his lip to stifle a laugh, reached up and pinched at her nipple and she slapped his hand away. 'Who is it?'

'A Knight Herald!' Jezal felt his smile fading. Those bastards never seemed to bring good news, and always at the worst possible times. 'Lord Marshal Varuz needs to speak to the Captain urgently. They're all over town

looking for him.' Jezal cursed under his breath. It seemed that the army had finally realised he was back.

'Tell him that when I see the Captain I will let him know!' shouted Ardee, and the sound of footsteps retreated down the corridor outside.

'Fuck!' Jezal hissed as soon as he was sure the maid was gone, not that she could have been in too much doubt about what had been going on for the past few days and nights. 'I'll have to go.'

'Now?'

'Now, curse them. If I don't they'll just keep looking, and the sooner I go, the sooner I can get back.'

She sighed and rolled over onto her back while he slithered off the bed and started hunting round the room for his scattered clothes. His shirt had a wine stain down the front, his trousers were creased and rumpled, but they would have to do. Cutting the perfect figure was no longer his one goal in life. He sat down on the bed to pull his boots on and he felt her kneel behind him, her hands sliding across his chest, her lips brushing at his ear as she whispered to him. 'So you'll be leaving me all alone again, will you? Heading off to Angland, to slaughter Northmen with my brother?'

Jezal leaned down with some difficulty and heaved one boot on. 'Perhaps. Perhaps not.' The idea of the soldiering life no longer inspired him. He had seen enough of violence, close up, to know it was extremely frightening and hurt like hell. Glory and fame seemed like meagre rewards for all the risks involved. 'I'm giving serious thought to the idea of resigning my commission.'

'You are? And doing what?'

'I'm not sure.' He turned his head and raised an eyebrow at her. 'Maybe I'll find a good woman and settle down.'

'A good woman? Do you know any?'

'I was hoping you might have some suggestions.'

She pressed her lips together. 'Let me think. Does she have to be beautiful?'

'No, no, beautiful women are always so bloody demanding. Plain as ditchwater, please.'

'Clever?'

Jezal snorted. 'Anything but that. I am notorious for my emptyheadedness. A clever woman would only make me look the dunce the

whole time.' He dragged the other boot on, peeled her hands away and stood up. 'A wide-eyed and thoughtless calf would be ideal. Someone to endlessly agree with me.'

Ardee clapped her hands. 'Oh yes, I can see her on you now, trailing from your arm like an empty dress, a kind of echo at a higher pitch. Noble blood though, I imagine?'

'Of course, nothing but the best. One point on which I could never compromise. And fair hair, I have a weakness for it.'

'Oh, I entirely agree. Dark hair is so commonplace, so very much the colour of dirt, and filth, and muck.' She shuddered. 'I feel sullied just thinking of it.'

'Above all,' as he pushed his sword through the clasp on his belt, 'a calm and even temper. I have had my fill of surprises.'

'Naturally. Life is difficult enough without a woman making trouble. So terribly undignified.' She raised her eyebrows. 'I will think through my acquaintance.'

'Excellent. In the meantime, and although you wear it with far greater dash than I ever could, I will need my jacket.'

'Oh, yes, sir.' She pulled it off and flung it at him, then stretched out on the bed, stark naked, back arched, hands above her head, wriggling her hips slowly back and forth, one knee in the air, the other leg stretched out, big toe pointing at him. 'You aren't going to leave me alone for too long, though, are you?'

He watched her for a moment. 'Don't you dare move a fucking inch,' he croaked, then he pulled the jacket on, wedged his prick between his thighs and waddled out the door, bent over. He hoped it would go down before he had his briefing with the Lord Marshal, but he was not entirely sure it would.

Once again, Jezal found himself in one of High Justice Marovia's cavernous chambers, standing all alone on the empty floor, facing the enormous, polished table while three old men regarded him grimly from the other side.

As the clerk shut the high doors with an echoing boom, he had a deeply worrying sense of having lived through this very experience before. The day he had been summoned from the boat for Angland, torn from his friends

and his ambitions, to be sent on a madcap, doomed journey into the middle of nowhere. A journey that had cost him some of his looks and nearly his life. It was safe to say that he did not entirely relish being back here, and hoped most fervently for a better outcome.

From that point of view, the absence of the First of the Magi was something of a tonic, even if the panel was otherwise far from comforting. Facing him were the hard old faces of Lord Marshal Varuz, High Justice Marovia, and Lord Chamberlain Hoff.

Varuz was busy waxing on about Jezal's fine achievements in the Old Empire. He had, evidently, heard a very different version of events from the one that Jezal himself remembered.

'. . . great adventures in the west, as I understand it, bringing honour to the Union on foreign fields. I was particularly impressed by the story of your charge across the bridge at Darmium. Did that really happen the way I have been told?'

'Across the bridge, sir, well, truthfully, er . . .' He should probably have asked the old fool what the hell he was talking about, but he was far too busy thinking of Ardee, stretched out naked. Shit on his country. Duty be damned. He could resign his commission now and be back in her bed before the hour was out. 'The thing is—'

'That was your favourite, was it?' asked Hoff, lowering his goblet. 'It was the one about the Emperor's daughter that most caught my fancy.' And he looked at Jezal with a twinkle in his eye that implied a story of a saucy tone.

'Honestly, your Grace, I've not the slightest idea how that rumour began. Nothing of the kind occurred, I assure you. The whole business appears somehow to have become greatly exaggerated—'

'Well, one glorious rumour is worth ten disappointing truths, would you not agree?'

Jezal blinked. 'Well, er, I suppose—'

'In any case,' cut in Varuz, 'the Closed Council have received excellent reports of your conduct while abroad.'

'They have?'

'Many and various reports, and all glowing.'

Jezal could not help grinning, though he had to wonder from whom such reports might have come. He could scarcely imagine Ferro Maljinn gushing about his fine qualities. 'Well, your lordships are very kind, but I must—'

‘As a result of your dedication and courage in this difficult and vital task, I am delighted to announce that you have been elevated to the rank of Colonel, with immediate effect.’

Jezal’s eyes opened up very wide. ‘I have?’

‘You have indeed, my boy, and no one could deserve it more.’

To rise two ranks in one afternoon was an unprecedented honour, especially when he had fought in no battle, carried out no recent deeds of valour, and made no ultimate sacrifices. Unless you counted leaving off the most recent bedding of his best friend’s sister halfway. A sacrifice, no doubt, but scarcely the kind that usually earned the King’s favour.

‘I, er, I . . .’ He could not escape a glow of satisfaction. A new uniform, and more braid, and so forth, and more people to tell what to do. Glory and fame were meagre rewards, perhaps, but he had taken the risks already, and now had only to say yes. Had he not suffered? Had he not earned it?

He did not have to think about it for so very long. He scarcely had to think about it at all. The idea of leaving the army and settling down receded rapidly into the far distance. ‘I would be entirely honoured to accept this exceptional . . . er . . . honour.’

‘Then we are all equally delighted,’ said Hoff sourly. ‘Now to business. You are aware, Colonel Luthar, that there has been some trouble with the peasants of late?’

Surprisingly, no news had reached Ardee’s bedroom. ‘Nothing serious, surely, your Grace?’

‘Not unless you call a full-blown revolt serious.’

‘Revolt?’ Jezal swallowed.

‘This man, the Tanner,’ spat the Lord Chamberlain. ‘He has been touring the countryside for months, whipping up dissatisfaction, sowing the seeds of disobedience, inciting the peasantry to crimes against their masters, against their lords, against their king!’

‘No one ever suspected it would reach the point of open rebellion.’ Varuz worked his mouth angrily. ‘But following a demonstration near Keln a group of peasants encouraged by this Tanner armed themselves and refused to disband. They won a victory over the local landowner, and the insurrection spread. Now we hear they crushed a significant force under Lord Finster yesterday, burned his manor house and hung three tax

collectors. They are in the process of ravaging the countryside in the direction of Adua.'

'Ravaging?' murmured Jezal, glancing at the door. Ravaging really was a very ugly word.

'It is a most regrettable business,' bemoaned Marovia. 'Half of them are honest men, faithful to their king, pushed to this through the greed of their landlords.'

Varuz sneered his disgust. 'There can be no excuse for treason! The other half are thieves, and blackguards, and malcontents. They should be whipped to the gallows!'

'The Closed Council has made its decision,' cut in Hoff. 'This Tanner has declared his intention to present a list of demands to the King. To the King! New freedoms. New rights. Every man the equal of his brother and other such dangerous nonsense. Soon it will become known that they are on their way and there will be panic. Riots in support of the peasants, and riots against them. Things are balanced on a knife edge already. Two wars in progress and the king in fading health, with no heir?' Hoff bashed at the table with his fist, making Jezal jump. 'They must not be allowed to reach the city.'

Marshal Varuz clasped his hands before him. 'The two regiments of the King's Own that have remained in Midderland will be sent out to counter this threat. A list of concessions,' and he scowled as he said the word, 'has been prepared. If the peasants will accept negotiation, and return to their homes, their lives can be spared. If this Tanner will not see reason, then his so-called army must be destroyed. Scattered. Broken up.'

'Killed,' said Hoff, rubbing at a stain on the table with his heavy thumb. 'And the ringleaders delivered to his Majesty's Inquisition.'

'Regrettable,' murmured Jezal, without thinking, feeling a cold shiver at the very mention of that institution.

'Necessary,' said Marovia, sadly shaking his head.

'But hardly straightforward.' Varuz frowned at Jezal across the table. 'In each village, in each town, in every field and farm they have passed through they have picked up more recruits. The country is alive with malcontents. Ill-disciplined, of course, and ill-equipped, but at our last estimate they numbered some forty thousand.'

‘Forty . . . thousand?’ Jezal shifted his weight nervously. He had supposed they were perhaps discussing a few hundred, and those without proper footwear. There was no danger here, of course, safe behind the walls of the Agriont, the walls of the city. But forty thousand was an awful lot of very angry men. Even if they were peasants.

‘The King’s Own are making their preparations: one regiment of horse and one of foot. All that is missing now is a commander for the expedition.’

‘Huh,’ grunted Jezal. He did not begrudge that unfortunate man his position, commanding a force outnumbered five to one against a bunch of savages buoyed up by righteousness and petty victories, drunk on hatred of noblemen and monarchy, thirsty for blood and loot . . .

Jezal’s eyes went wider still. ‘Me?’

‘You.’

He fumbled for the words. ‘I do not wish to seem . . . ungrateful, you understand, but, surely, I mean to say, there must be men better suited to the task. Lord Marshal, you yourself have—’

‘This is a complicated time.’ Hoff glared sternly at Jezal from beneath his bushy brows. ‘A very complicated time. We need someone without . . . affiliations. We need someone with a clean slate. You fit the bill admirably.’

‘But . . . negotiating with peasants, your Grace, your Worship, Lord Marshal, I have no understanding of the issues! I have no understanding of law!’

‘We are not blind to your deficiencies,’ said Hoff. ‘That is why there will be a representative from the Closed Council with you. Someone who possesses unchallenged expertise in all those areas.’

A heavy hand slapped suddenly down on Jezal’s shoulder. ‘I told you it would be sooner rather than later, my boy!’ Jezal slowly turned his head, a feeling of terrible dismay boiling up from his stomach, and there was the First of the Magi, grinning into his face from a distance of no more than a foot, very much present after all. It was no surprise, really, that the bald old meddler was involved in this. Strange and painful events seemed to follow in his wake like stray dogs barking behind the butcher’s wagon.

‘The peasants’ army, if we can call it such, is camped within four days’ slovenly march of the city, spread out across the country, seeking for forage.’ Varuz craned forward, poking at the table with a finger. ‘You will

proceed immediately to intercept them. Our hopes hang on this, Colonel Luthar. Do you understand your orders?'

'Yes, sir,' he whispered, trying and utterly failing to sound enthusiastic.

'The two of us, back together?' Bayaz chuckled. 'They'd better run, eh, my boy?'

'Of course,' murmured Jezal, miserably. He had had his own chance to escape, his chance to start a new life, and he had given it up in return for an extra star or two on his jacket. Too late he realised his awful blunder. Bayaz' grip tightened round his shoulder, drew him to a fatherly distance, and did not feel like releasing him. There really was no way out.

Jezal stepped out of the door to his quarters in a great hurry, cursing as he dragged his box behind him. It really was an awful imposition that he had been obliged to carry his own luggage, but time was extremely pressing if he was to save the Union from the madness of its own people. He had given only the briefest consideration to the idea of sprinting for the docks and taking passage on the first ship to distant Suljuk, before angrily dismissing it. He had taken the promotion with his eyes open, and now he supposed he had no choice but to see it through. Better to do it, than to live with the fear of it, and so forth. He twisted his key in the lock, turned around, and recoiled with a girlish gasp of shock. There was someone in the shadows opposite his door, and the feeling of horror only worsened when he realised who it was.

The cripple Glokta stood against the wall, leaning heavily on his cane and grinning his repulsive, toothless grin. 'A word, Colonel Luthar.'

'If you are referring to this business with the peasants, it is well in hand.' Jezal was unable to keep the sneer of disgust entirely off his face. 'You need not trouble yourself on that—'

'I am not referring to that business.'

'Then what?'

'Ardee West.'

The corridor seemed suddenly very empty, very quiet. The soldiers, the officers, the servants, all away in Angland. There were just the two of them, for all Jezal knew, in the entire barracks. 'I fail to see how that is any concern of—'

‘Her brother, our mutual friend Collem West, you do remember him? Worried-looking fellow, losing his hair. Bit of a temper.’ Jezal felt a guilty flush across his face. He remembered the man well enough, of course, and his temper in particular. ‘He came to me shortly before departing for the war in Angland. He asked me to look to his sister’s welfare while he was away, risking his life. I promised to do so.’ Glokta shuffled slightly closer and Jezal’s flesh crept. ‘A responsibility which, I assure you, I take as seriously as any task the Arch Lector might choose to give me.’

‘I see,’ croaked Jezal. That certainly explained the cripple’s presence at her house the other day, which had, until then, been causing him some confusion. He felt no easier in his mind, however. Considerably less, in fact.

‘I hardly think that Collem West would be best pleased with what has been transpiring these last few days, do you?’

Jezal shifted guiltily from one foot to the other. ‘I admit that I have visited her—’

‘Your visits,’ whispered the cripple, ‘are not good for that girl’s reputation. We are left with three options. Firstly, and this is my personal favourite, you walk away, and you pretend you never met her, and you never see her again.’

‘Unacceptable,’ Jezal found himself saying, his voice surprisingly brash.

‘Secondly, then, you marry the lady, and all’s forgotten.’

A course that Jezal was considering, but he was damned if he’d be bullied into it by this twisted remnant of a man. ‘And third?’ he enquired, with what he felt was fitting contempt.

‘Third?’ A particularly disgusting flurry of twitches crawled up the side of Glokta’s wasted face. ‘I don’t think you want to know too much about number three. Let us only say that it will include a long night of passion with a furnace and a set of razors, and an even longer morning involving a sack, an anvil, and the bottom of the canal. You might find that one of the other two options suits you better.’

Before he knew what he was doing Jezal had taken a step forward, forcing Glokta to rock back, wincing, against the wall. ‘I do not have to explain myself to you! My visits are between me and the lady in question, but for your information, I long ago resolved to marry her, and am merely waiting for the right moment!’ Jezal stood there in the darkness, hardly able to

believe what he had heard himself say. Damn his mouth, it still landed him in all manner of trouble.

Glokta's narrow left eye blinked. 'Ah, lucky her.'

Jezal found himself moving forward again, almost butting the cripple in the face and crushing him helpless against the wall. 'That's right! So you can shove your threats up your crippled arse!'

Even squashed against the wall, Glokta's surprise only lasted an instant. Then he leered his toothless grin, his eyelid fluttering and a long tear running down his gaunt cheek. 'Why, Colonel Luthar, it is difficult for me to concentrate with you so very close.' He stroked the front of Jezal's uniform with the back of his hand. 'Especially given your unexpected interest in my arse.' Jezal jerked back, mouth sour with disgust. 'It seems that Bayaz succeeded where Varuz failed, eh? He taught you where your spine is! My congratulations on your forthcoming wedding. But I think I'll keep my razors handy, just in case you don't follow through. I'm so glad we had this chance to talk.' And Glokta limped off towards the stairs, his cane tapping on the boards, his left boot scraping along behind.

'As am I!' shouted Jezal after him. But nothing could have been further from the truth.

Ghosts

Uffrith didn't look much like it used to. Of course, the last time Logen had seen the place had been years ago, at night, after the siege. Crowds of Bethod's Carls wandering the streets – shouting, and singing, and drinking. Looking for folk to rob and rape, setting fire to anything that would hold a flame. Logen remembered lying in that room after he'd beaten Threetrees, crying and gurgling at the pain all through him. He remembered scowling out the window and seeing the glow from the flames, listening to the screams over the town, wishing he was out there making mischief and wondering if he'd ever stand up again.

It was different now, with the Union in charge, but it wasn't so very much more organised. The grey harbour was choked with ships too big for the wharves. Soldiers swarmed through the narrow streets, dropping gear all over. Carts and mules and horses, all loaded down and piled up, tried to shove a way through the press. Wounded limped on crutches down towards the docks, or were carried on stretchers through the spotting drizzle, bloody bandages stared at wide-eyed by the fresh-faced lads going the other way. Here and there, looking greatly puzzled at this mighty flood of strange people sweeping through their town, some Northerner was standing in a doorway. Women mostly, and children, and old men.

Logen walked fast up the sloping streets, pushing through the crowds with his head down and his hood up. He kept his fists bunched at his sides, so no one would see the stump of his missing finger. He kept the sword that Bayaz had given him wrapped up in a blanket on his back, under his pack, where it wouldn't make anyone nervous. All the same, his shoulders prickled every step of the way. He was waiting to hear someone shout, 'It's the Bloody-Nine!' He was waiting for folk to start running, screaming, pelting him with rubbish, faces all stamped with horror.

But no one did. One more figure that didn't belong was nothing to look at in all that damp chaos, and if anyone might have known him here, they weren't looking for him. Most likely they'd all heard he went back to the mud, far away, and were good and glad about it too. Still, there was no point staying longer than he had to. He strode up to a Union officer who

looked as if he might be in charge of something, pushed his hood back and tried to put a smile on his face.

He got a scornful look for his trouble. ‘We’ve no work for you, if that’s what you’re looking for.’

‘You don’t have my kind of work.’ Logen held out the letter that Bayaz had given him.

The man unfolded it and looked it over. He frowned and read it again. Then he looked doubtfully up at Logen, mouth working. ‘Well then. I see.’ He pointed towards a crowd of young men, standing nervous and uncertain a few strides away, huddled miserably together as the rain started to thicken up. ‘There’s a convoy of reinforcements leaving for the front this afternoon. You can travel with us.’

‘Fair enough.’ They didn’t look like they’d be much reinforcement, those scared-seeming lads, but that didn’t matter to him. He didn’t much care who he travelled with, as long as they were pointed at Bethod.

The trees clattered by on either side of the road – dim green and black, full of shadows. Full of surprises, maybe. It was a tough way to travel. Tough on the hands from clinging to the rail all the way, even tougher on the arse from bouncing and jolting on that hard seat. But they were getting there, gradually, and Logen reckoned that was the main thing.

There were more carts behind, spread out in a slow line along the road, loaded down with men, food, clothes, weapons, and all the stuff you need to make a war. Each one had a lamp lit, hanging up near the front, so there was a trail of bobbing lights in the dull dusk, down into the valley and up the far slope, marking out the path of the road they’d followed through the woods.

Logen turned and looked at the Union boys, gathered up in a clump near the front of the cart. Nine of them, all jolting and swaying about together with the jumping of the axles, and all keeping as well clear of him as they could.

‘You seen scars like that on a man before?’ one muttered, not guessing he could speak their tongue.

‘Who is he anyway?’

‘Dunno. A Northman, I guess.’

‘I can see he’s a Northman, idiot. I mean what’s he doing here with us?’

‘Maybe he’s a scout.’

‘Big bastard for a scout, ain’t he?’

Logen grinned to himself as he watched the trees roll past. He felt the cool breeze on his face, smelled the mist, the earth, the cold, wet, air. He never would have thought he’d be happy to be back in the North, but he was. It was good, after all that time a stranger, to be in a place where he knew the rules.

They camped out on the road, the ten of them. One group out of many, strung out through the woods, each one clustered close to their cart. Nine lads on one side of a big fire, a pot of stew bubbling over the top of it and giving off a fine-smelling steam. Logen watched them stirring it, talking to each other about home, and what was coming, and how long they’d be out there.

After a while one of them started spooning the food out into bowls and handing them round. He looked over at Logen, once he was done with the rest, then served up one more. He edged over like he was coming at a wolf’s cage.

‘Er . . .’ He held the bowl out at arm’s length. ‘Stew?’ He opened his mouth up wide and pointed into it with his free hand.

‘Thanks, friend,’ said Logen as he took the bowl, ‘but I know where to put it.’

The lads all stared at him, a row of worried-looking faces, lit up flickering yellow on the far side of the fire, more suspicious than ever at him speaking their language. ‘You talk common? You kept that quiet, didn’t you?’

‘Best to seem less than you are, in my experience.’

‘If you say so,’ said the lad who’d given him the bowl. ‘What’s your name, then?’

Logen wondered for a moment if he should make up a lie. Some nothing name that no one could have heard of. But he was who he was, and sooner or later someone would know him. That, and he’d never been much at lying. ‘Logen Ninefingers, they call me.’

The lads looked blank. They’d never heard of him, and why would they have? A bunch of farmers’ sons from far away, in the sunny Union. They looked like they barely knew their own names.

‘What are you here for?’ one of them asked him.

‘Same as you. I’m here to kill.’ The boys looked a bit nervy at that. ‘Not you, don’t worry. I’ve got some scores to settle.’ He nodded off up the road. ‘With Bethod.’

The lads exchanged some glances, then one of them shrugged. ‘Well. Long as you’re on our side, I guess.’ He got up and dragged a bottle out of his pack. ‘You want a drink?’

‘Well, now.’ Logen grinned and held out his cup. ‘I’ve never yet said no to that.’ He knocked it down in one, smacked his lips as he felt it warming his gullet. The lad poured him another. ‘Thanks. Best not give me too much, though.’

‘Why?’ he asked. ‘Will you kill us then?’

‘Kill you? If you’re lucky.’

‘And if we’re not?’

Logen grinned over his mug. ‘I’ll sing.’

The lad cracked a smile at that, and one of his mates started laughing. Next moment an arrow hissed into his side and he coughed blood down his shirt, the bottle dropping on the grass, wine gurgling out in the dark. Another boy had a shaft sticking in his thigh. He sat there, frozen, staring down at it. ‘Where did that . . .’ Then everyone was shouting, fumbling for weapons or throwing themselves flat on their faces. A couple more arrows whizzed over, one clattering into the fire and sending up a shower of sparks.

Logen threw his stew away, snatched up his sword and started running. He blundered into one of the boys on the way and knocked him on his face, slipped and slid, righted himself and ran full tilt for the trees where the arrow came from. It was run right at them, or run away, and he made the choice without thinking. Sometimes it doesn’t matter too much what choice you make, as long as you make it quick and stick to it. Logen saw one of the archers as he rushed up close, a flash of his pale skin in the darkness as he reached for another arrow. He pulled the Maker’s sword from its tattered sheath and let go a fighting roar.

The bowman could’ve got his arrow away before Logen was on him, most likely, but it would’ve been a close thing, and in the end he didn’t have the bones to stand there waiting. Not many men can weigh their choices properly while death comes racing up at them. He dropped the bow too late and turned to run, and Logen hacked him in the back before he got more than a stride or two, knocked him screaming into the bushes. He dragged

himself round face up, all tangled in the brush, screeching and fumbling for a knife. Logen lifted the sword to finish the job. Then blood sprayed out of the archer's mouth and he trembled, fell back and was quiet.

'Still alive,' Logen mouthed to himself, squatting down low beside the corpse, straining into the darkness. It would probably have been better for all concerned if he'd run the other way, but it was a bit late for that. Probably have been better if he'd stayed in Adua, but it was a bit late for that too.

'Bloody North,' he cursed in a whisper. If he let these bastards go they'd be making mischief all the way to the front and Logen wouldn't get a wink of sleep for worrying, aside from the good chance of an arrow in his face. Better odds coming for them, than waiting for them to come to him. A lesson he'd learned from hard experience.

He could hear the rest of the ambush crashing away through the brush and he set out after them, fist clenched tight round the grip of his sword. He felt his way between the trunks, keeping his distance. The light of the fire and the noise of the Union boys shouting dwindled behind him until he was deep in the woods, smelling of pines and wet earth, only the sound of men's hurrying feet to guide him. He made himself part of the forest, the way he had in the old days. It wasn't so hard to do. The knack came right back as though he'd been creeping in the trees every night for years. Voices echoed through the night, and Logen pressed himself still and silent up behind a pine-trunk, listening.

'Where's Dirty-Nose?'

There was a pause. 'Dead, I reckon.'

'Dead? How?'

'They had someone with 'em, Crow. Some big fucker.' Crow. Logen knew the name. Knew the voice too, now that he heard it. A Named Man who'd fought for Littlebone. You couldn't have called them friends, him and Logen, but they'd known each other. They'd been close together in the line at Carleon, fighting side by side. And now here they were again with no more than a few strides between them, more than willing to kill each other. Strange, the turns fate can take. Fighting with a man and fighting against him are only a whisker apart. Far closer together than not fighting at all.

'Northman, was he?' came Crow's voice.

‘Might’ve been. Whoever it was he knew his business. Came up real quick. I didn’t have time to get a shaft away.’

‘Bastard! We ain’t letting that pass. We’ll camp out here and follow ’em tomorrow. Might be we’ll get him then, this big one.’

‘Oh aye, we’ll fucking get him. Don’t you worry about that none. I’ll cut his neck for him, the bastard.’

‘Good for you. ’Til then you can keep an eye open for him while the rest of us catch some sleep. Might be the anger’ll keep you awake this time, eh?’

‘Aye, chief. Right y’are.’

Logen sat and watched, catching glimpses through the trees as four of them spread out their blankets and rolled up to sleep. The fifth took his place, back to the others, and looked out the way they’d come, sitting guard. Logen waited, and he heard one begin to snore. Some rain started up, and it tapped and trickled on the branches of the pines. After a while it spattered into his hair, into his clothes, ran down his face and fell to the wet earth, drip, drip, drip. Logen sat, still and silent as a stone.

It can be a fearsome weapon, patience. One that few men ever learn to use. A hard thing, to keep your mind on killing once you’re out of danger and your blood’s cooled off. But Logen had always had the trick of it. So he sat and let the slow time sneak by, and thought about long ago, until the moon was high, and there was pale light washing down between the trees with the tickling rain. Pale light enough for him to see his tasks by.

He uncurled his legs and started moving, working his way between the tree trunks, planting his feet nice and gentle in the brush. The rain was his ally, patter and trickle masking the soft sounds his boots made as he circled round behind the guard.

He slid out a knife, wet blade glinting once in the patchy moonlight, and he padded out from the trees and through their camp. Between the sleeping men, close enough to touch them. Close as a brother. The guard sniffed and shifted unhappily, dragging his wet blanket round his shoulders, all beaded up with twinkling rain drops. Logen stopped and waited, looked down at the pale face of one of the sleepers, turned sideways, eyes closed and mouth wide open, breath making faint smoke in the clammy night.

The guard was still now, and Logen slipped up close behind him, holding his breath. He reached out with his left hand, fingers working in the misty

air, feeling for the moment. He reached out with his right hand, fist clenched tight round the hard grip of his knife. He felt his lips curling back from his gritted teeth. Now was the time, and when the time comes, you strike with no backward glances.

Logen reached round and clamped his hand tight over the guard's mouth, cut his throat quick and hard, deep enough that he felt the blade scraping on his neck bones. He jerked and struggled for a moment, but Logen held him tight, tight as a lover, and he made no more than a quiet gurgle. Logen felt blood over his hands, hot and sticky. He didn't worry yet about the others. If one of them woke all they'd see would be the outline of one man in the darkness, and that was all they were expecting.

It wasn't long before the guard went limp, and Logen laid him down gently on his side, head flopping. Four shapes lay there under their wet blankets, helpless. Maybe there'd been a time when Logen would've had to work himself up to a job like this. When he'd have had to think about why it was the right thing to do. But if there had been, it was long gone. Up in the North, the time you spend thinking will be the time you get killed in. All they were now were four tasks to get done.

He crept up to the first, lifted his bloody knife, overhand, and stabbed him clean in the heart right through his coat, hand pressed over his mouth. He died quieter than he slept. Logen came up on the second one, ready to do the same. His boot clattered into something metal. Water flask, maybe. Whatever it was, it made quite the racket. The sleeping man's eyes worked open, he started to lift himself up. Logen rammed the knife in his gut and dragged at it, slitting his belly open. He made a kind of a wheeze, mouth and eyes wide, clutching at Logen's arm.

'Eh?' The third one sat straight up and staring. Logen tore his hand free and heaved his sword out. 'Wha' the—' The man lifted his arm up, on an instinct, and the dull blade took his hand off at the wrist and chopped deep into his skull, sending black spots of blood showering into the wet air and knocking him down on his back.

But that gave the last of them time enough to roll out of his blanket and grab up an axe. Now he stood hunched over, hands spread out, fighting ready like a man who'd had plenty of practice at it. Crow. Logen could hear his breath hissing, see it smoking in the rain.

'You should've started wi' me!' he hissed.

Logen couldn't deny it. He'd been concentrating on getting them all killed, and hadn't paid much mind to the order. Still, it was a bit late to worry now. He shrugged. 'Start or finish, ain't too much difference.'

'We'll see.' Crow weighed his axe in the misty air, shifting around, looking for an opening. Logen stood still and caught his breath, the sword hanging down by his side, the grip cold and wet in his clenched fist. He'd never been much of a one for moving until it was time. 'Best tell me your name, while you still got breath in you. I like to know who I've killed.'

'You already know me, Crow.' Logen held his other hand up, and he let the fingers spread out, and the moonlight glinted black on his bloody hand, and on the bloody stump of his missing finger. 'We were side by side in the line at Carleon. Never thought you'd all forget me so soon. But things don't often turn out the way we expect, eh?'

He'd stopped moving now, had Crow. Logen couldn't see more than a gleam of his eyes in the dark, but he could tell the doubt and the fear in the way he stood. 'No,' he whispered, shaking his head in the darkness. 'Can't be! Ninefingers is dead!'

'That so?' Logen took a deep breath and pushed it out, slow, into the wet night. 'Reckon I must be his ghost.'

They'd dug some sort of a hole to squat in, the Union lads, sacks and boxes up on the sides as a rampart. Logen could see the odd face moving over the top, staring off into the trees, the dull light from the guttering fire glinting on an arrow head or a spear tip. Dug in, watching for another ambush. If they'd been nervy before, they were most likely shitting themselves now. Probably one of them would get scared and shoot him as soon as he made himself known. Damn Union bows had a trigger that went off at a touch, once they were drawn. Would have been just about his luck, to get killed over nothing in the middle of nowhere, and by his own side too, but he didn't have much of a choice. Not unless he wanted to walk up to the front.

So he cleared his throat and called out. 'Now no one shoot or anything!' A string went and a bolt thudded into a tree a couple of strides to his left. Logen hunched down against the wet earth. 'No one shoot, I said!'

'Who's out there?'

'It's me, Ninefingers!' Silence. 'The Northman who was on the cart!'

A long pause, and some whispering. ‘Alright! But come out slow, and keep your hands where we can see them!’

‘Fair enough!’ He straightened up and crept out from the trees, hands held high. ‘Just don’t shoot me, eh? That’s your end of the deal!’

He walked across the ground towards the fire, arms spread out, wincing at the thought of getting a bolt in his chest any minute. He recognised the faces of the lads from before, them and the officer who had charge of the supply column. A couple of them followed him with their bows as he stepped slowly over the makeshift parapet and down into the trench. It had been dug along in front of the fire, but not that well, and there was a big puddle in the bottom.

‘Where the hell did you get to?’ demanded the officer angrily.

‘Tracking them that ambushed us tonight.’

‘Did you catch ’em?’ one of the boys asked.

‘That I did.’

‘And?’

‘Dead.’ Logen nodded at the puddle in the bottom of the hole. ‘So you needn’t sleep in the water tonight. Any of that stew left?’

‘How many were there?’ snapped the officer.

Logen poked around the embers of the fire, but the pot was empty. Just his luck, again. ‘Five.’

‘You, on your own, against five?’

‘There were six to begin with, but I killed one at the start. He’s in the trees over there somewhere.’ Logen dug a heel of bread out of his pack and rubbed it round the inside of the pot, trying to get a bit of meat grease on there, at least. ‘I waited until they were sleeping, so I only had to fight one of ’em, face to face. Always been lucky that way, I guess.’ He didn’t feel that lucky. Looking at his hand in the firelight, it was still stained with blood. Dark blood under his fingernails, dried into the lines in his palm. ‘Always been lucky.’

The officer hardly looked convinced. ‘How do we know that you aren’t one of them? That you weren’t spying on us? That they aren’t waiting out there now, for you to give them a signal when we’re vulnerable?’

‘You’ve been vulnerable the whole way,’ snorted Logen. ‘But it’s a fair question. I thought you might ask it.’ He pulled the canvas bag out from his belt. ‘That’s why I brought you this.’ The officer frowned as he reached out

for it, shook it open, peered suspiciously inside. He swallowed. ‘Like I said, there were five. So you got ten thumbs in there. That satisfy you?’

The officer looked more sick than satisfied, but he nodded, lips squeezed together, and held the bag back out to him at arm’s length.

Logen shook his head. ‘Keep it. It’s a finger I’m missing. I got all the thumbs I need.’

The cart lurched to a stop. For the last mile or two they’d moved at a crawl. Now the road, if you could use the word about a sea of mud, was choked up with floundering men. They squelched their way from one near solid spot to another, flowing through the thin rain between the press of mired carts and unhappy horses, the stacks of crates and barrels, the ill-pitched tents. Logen watched a group of filth-caked lads straining at a wagon stuck up to its axles in the muck, without much success. It was like seeing an army sink slowly into a bog. A vast shipwreck, on land.

Logen’s travelling companions were down to seven now, hunched and gaunt, looking mighty tired from sleepless nights and bad weather on the trail. One dead, one sent back to Uffrith already with an arrow in his leg. Not the best start to their time in the North, but Logen doubted it would get any better from here on. He clambered down off the back of the cart, boots sinking into the well-rutted mud, arched his back and stretched his aching legs out, dragged his pack down.

‘Luck, then,’ he said to the lads. None of them spoke. They’d hardly said a word to him since the night of the ambush. Most likely that whole business with the thumbs had got them worried. But if that was the worst they saw while they were up here they’d have done alright, Logen reckoned. He shrugged and turned away, started floundering through the muck.

Just up ahead the officer from the supply column was being dealt a talking-to by a tall, grim-looking man in a red uniform, seemed like the closest thing they had in all this mess to someone in charge. It took Logen a minute to recognise him. They’d sat together at a feast, in very different surroundings, and they’d talked of war. He looked older, leaner, tougher, now. He had a hard frown on his face and a lot of hard grey in his wet hair,

but he grinned when he saw Logen standing there, and walked up to him with his hand out.

'By the dead,' he said in good Northern, 'but fate can play some tricks. I know you.'

'Likewise.'

'Ninefingers, wasn't it?'

'That's right. And you're West. From Angland.'

'That I am. Sorry I can't give you a better welcome, but the army only got up here a day or two ago and, as you can see, things aren't quite in order yet. Not there, idiot!' he roared at a driver trying to get his cart between two others, the space between them nowhere near wide enough. 'Do you have such a thing as summer in this bloody country?'

'You're looking at it. Didn't you see winter?'

'Huh. You've a point there. What brings you up here, anyway?'

Logen handed West the letter. He hunched over to shield it from the rain and read it, frowning.

'Signed by Lord Chamberlain Hoff, eh?'

'That a good thing?'

West pursed his lips as he handed the letter back. 'I suppose that depends. It means you've got some powerful friends. Or some powerful enemies.'

'Bit of both, maybe.'

West grinned. 'I find they go together. You've come to fight?'

'That I have.'

'Good. We can always use a man with experience.' He watched the recruits clambering down off the carts and gave a long sigh. 'We've still got far too many here without. You should go up and join the rest of the Northmen.'

'You've got Northmen with you?'

'We have, and more coming over every day. Seems that a lot of them aren't too happy with the way their King has been leading them. About his deal with the Shanka in particular.'

'Deal? With the Shanka?' Logen frowned. He'd never have thought that even Bethod would stoop that low, but it was hardly the first time he'd been disappointed. 'He's got Flatheads fighting with him?'

'He certainly does. He's got Flatheads, and we've got Northmen. It's a strange world, alright.'

‘That it surely is,’ said Logen, shaking his head. ‘How many do you have?’

‘About three hundred, I’d say, at last count, though they don’t take too well to being counted.’

‘Reckon I’ll make it three hundred and one, then, if you’ll have me.’

‘They’re camped up there, on the left wing,’ and he pointed towards the dark outline of trees against the evening sky.

‘Right enough. Who’s the chief?’

‘Fellow called the Dogman.’

Logen stared at him for a long moment. ‘Called the what?’

‘Dogman. You know him?’

‘You could say that,’ whispered Logen, a smile spreading right across his face. ‘You could say that.’

Dusk was pressing on fast and night was pressing in fast behind, and they’d just got the long fire burning as Logen walked up. He could see the shapes of the Carls taking their places down each side of it, heads and shoulders cut out black against the flames. He could hear their voices and their laughter, loud in the still evening now the rain had stopped.

It had been a long time since he heard a crowd of men all speaking Northern, and it sounded strange in his ears, even if it was his own tongue. It brought back some ugly memories. Crowds of men shouting at him, shouting for him. Crowds charging into battle, cheering their victories, mourning their dead. He could smell meat cooking from somewhere. A sweet, rich smell that tickled his nose and made his gut grumble.

There was a torch set up on a pole by the path, and a bored-looking lad stood underneath it with a spear, frowning at Logen as he walked up. Must’ve drawn the short straw, to be on guard while the others were eating, and he didn’t look too happy about it.

‘What d’you want?’ he growled.

‘You got the Dogman here?’

‘Aye, what of it?’

‘I’ll need to speak to him.’

‘Will you, now?’

Another man walked up, well past his prime, with a shock of grey hair and a leathery face. ‘What we got here?’

‘New recruit,’ grumbled the lad. ‘Wants to see the chief.’

The old man squinted at Logen, frowning. ‘Do I know you, friend?’

Logen lifted up his face so the torchlight fell across it. Better to look a man in the eye, and let him see you, and show him you feel no fear. That was the way his father had taught him. ‘I don’t know. Do you?’

‘Where did you come over from? Whitesides’ crew, is it?’

‘No. I been working alone.’

‘Alone? Well, now. Seems like I recognise—’ The old boy’s eyes opened up wide, and his jaw sagged open, and his face went white as cut chalk. ‘By all the fucking dead,’ he whispered, taking a stumbling step back. ‘It’s the Bloody-Nine!’

Maybe Logen had been hoping no one would know him. That they’d all have forgotten. That they’d have new things to worry them, and he’d be just a man like any other. But now he saw that look on the old boy’s face – that shitting-himself look, and it was clear enough how it would be. Just the way it used to be. And the worst of it was, now that Logen was recognised, and he saw that fear, and that horror, and that respect, he wasn’t sure that he didn’t like seeing it. He’d earned it, hadn’t he? After all, facts are facts.

He was the Bloody-Nine.

The lad didn’t quite get it yet. ‘Having a joke on me are yer? You’ll be telling me it’s Bethod his self come over next, eh?’ But no one laughed, and Logen lifted his hand up and stared through the gap where his middle finger used to be. The lad looked from that stump, to the trembling old man and back.

‘Shit,’ he croaked.

‘Where’s your chief, boy?’ Logen’s own voice scared him. Flat, and dead, and cold as the winter.

‘He’s . . . he’s . . .’ The lad raised a quivering finger to point towards the fires.

‘Well then. Guess I’ll sniff him out myself.’ The two of them edged out of Logen’s way. He didn’t exactly smile as he passed. More he drew his lips back to show them his teeth. There was a certain reputation to be lived up to, after all. ‘No need to worry,’ he hissed in their faces. ‘I’m on your side, ain’t I?’

No one said a word to him as he walked along behind the Carls, up towards the head of the fire. A couple of them glanced over their shoulders, but nothing more than any newcomer in a camp might get. They'd no idea who he was, yet, but they soon would have. That lad and that old man would be whispering, and the whispers would spread around the fire, as whispers do, and everyone would be watching him.

He started as a great shadow moved beside him, so big he'd taken it for a tree at first. A huge, big man, scratching at his beard, smiling at the fire. Tul Duru. There could be no mistaking the Thunderhead, even in the half-light. Not a man that size. Made Logen wonder afresh how the hell he'd beaten him in the first place.

He felt a strange urge, right then, just to put his head down and walk past, off into the night and never look back. Then he wouldn't have to be the Bloody-Nine again. It would just have been a fresh lad and an old man, swore they saw a ghost one night. He could've gone far away, and started new, and been whoever he wanted. But he'd tried that once already, and it had done him no good. The past was always right behind him, breathing on his neck. It was time to turn around and face it.

'Alright there, big lad.' Tul peered at him in the dusk, orange light and black shadow shifting across his big rock of a face, his big rug of a beard.

'Who . . . hold on . . .' Logen swallowed. He'd no idea, now he thought about it, what any of them might make of seeing him again. They'd been enemies long before they were friends, after all. Each one of them had fought him. Each one had been keen to kill him, and with good reasons too. Then he'd run off south and left them to the Shanka. What if all he got after a year or more apart was a cold look?

Then Tul grabbed hold of him and folded him in a crushing hug. 'You're alive!' He let go of him long enough to check he had the right man, then hugged him again.

'Aye, I'm alive,' wheezed Logen, just enough breath left in him to say it. Seemed he'd get one warm welcome, at least.

Tul was grinning all over his face. 'Come on.' And he beckoned Logen after. 'The lads are going to shit!'

He followed Tul, his heart beating in his mouth, up to the head of the fire, where the chief would sit with his closest Named Men. And there they were, sat around on the ground. Dogman was in the middle, muttering

something quiet to Dow. Grim was on the other side, leaning on one elbow, fiddling with the flights on his arrows. It was just like nothing had changed.

'Got someone here to see you, Dogman,' said Tul, his voice squeaky from keeping the surprise in.

'Have you, now?' Dogman peered up at Logen, but he was hidden in the shadows behind Tul's great shoulder. 'Can't it wait 'til after we've eaten?'

'Do you know, I don't think it can.'

'Why? Who is it?'

'Who is it?' Tul grabbed Logen's shoulder and shoved him lurching out into the firelight. 'It's only Logen fucking Ninefingers!' Logen's boot slid in the mud and he nearly pitched on his arse, had to wave his arms around all over to keep his balance. The talk around the fire all sputtered out in a moment and every face was turned towards him. Two long, frozen rows of them, slack in the shifting light, no sound but the sighing wind and the crackling fire. The Dogman stared up at him as though he was seeing the dead walk, his mouth hanging wider and wider open with every passing moment.

'I thought you was all killed,' said Logen as he got his balance back. 'Guess there's such a thing as being too realistic.'

Dogman got to his feet, slowly. He held out his hand, and Logen took hold of it.

There was nothing to say. Not for men who'd been through as much as the two of them had together – fighting the Shanka, crossing the mountains, getting through the wars, and after. Years of it. Dogman pressed his hand and Logen slapped his other hand on top of it, and Dogman slapped his other hand on top of that. They grinned at each other, and nodded, and things were back the way they had been. Nothing needed saying.

'Grim. Good to see you.'

'Uh,' grunted Grim, handing him up a mug then looking back to his shafts, just as though Logen had gone for a piss a minute ago and come back a minute later like everyone had expected. Logen had to grin. He'd have hoped for nothing else.

'That Black Dow hiding down there?'

'I'd have hidden better if I knew you were coming.' Dow looked Logen up and down with a grin not entirely welcoming. 'If it ain't Ninefingers his self. Thought you said he went over a cliff?' he barked at Dogman.

‘That’s what I saw.’

‘Oh, I went over.’ Logen remembered the wind in his mouth, the rock and the snow turning around him, the crash as the water crushed his breath out. ‘I went on over and I washed up whole, more or less.’ Dogman made room for him on the stretched-out hides by the fire, and he sat down, and the others sat near him.

Dow was shaking his head. ‘You always was a lucky bastard when it came to staying alive. I should’ve known you’d turn up.’

‘I thought the Flatheads had got you all sure,’ said Logen. ‘How d’you get out of there?’

‘Threetrees got us out,’ said Dogman.

Tul nodded. ‘Led us out and over the mountains, and hunted through the North, and all the way down into Angland.’

‘Squabbling all the way like a bunch of old women, no doubt?’ Dogman grinned across at Dow. ‘There was some moaning on the trail.’

‘Where’s Threetrees now, then?’ Logen was looking forward to having a word with that old boy.

‘Dead,’ said Grim.

Logen winced. He’d guessed that might be the way, since Dogman was in charge. Tul nodded his big head. ‘Died fighting. Leading a charge, into the Shanka. Died fighting that thing. That Feared.’

‘Bastard fucking thing.’ And Dow hawked some spit into the mud.

‘What about Forley?’

‘Dead n’all,’ barked Dow. ‘He went into Carleon, to warn Bethod that the Shanka were coming over the mountains. Calder had him killed, just for the sport of it. Bastard!’ And he spat again. He’d always been a great one for spitting, had Dow.

‘Dead.’ Logen shook his head. Forley dead, and Threetrees dead, it was a damn shame. But it wasn’t so long since he thought the whole lot of them were back in the mud, so four still going was quite the bonus, in a way. ‘Well. Good men both. The best, and died well, by the sound of it. As well as men can, anyway.’

‘Aye,’ said Tul, lifting up a mug. ‘As well as you can. Here’s to the dead.’

They all drank in silence, and Logen smacked his lips at the taste of beer. Too long away. ‘So, a year gone by,’ grunted Dow. ‘We done some killing, and we walked a damn long way, and we fought in a bastard of a battle. We

lost two men and we got us a new chief. What the hell you been up to, Ninefingers?'

'Well . . . that there is some kind of a tale.' Logen wondered what kind, exactly, and found he wasn't sure. 'I thought the Shanka got you all, since life's taught me to expect the worst, so I went south, and I fell in with this wizard. I went a sort of journey with him, across the sea and far away, to find some kind of a thing, which when we got there . . . weren't there.' It all sounded more than a bit mad now he said it.

'What kind of a thing?' asked Tul, his face all screwed up with puzzlement.

'Do you know what?' Logen sucked at his teeth, tasting of drink. 'I can't say that I really know.' They all looked at each other as if they never heard such a damn-fool story, and Logen had to admit they probably hadn't. 'Still, it hardly matters now. Turns out life ain't quite the bastard I took it for.' And he gave Tul a friendly clap on the back.

The Dogman puffed out his cheeks. 'Well, we're glad you're back, anyway. Guess you'll be taking your place again now, eh?'

'My place?'

'You'll be taking over, no? I mean to say, you were chief.'

'Used to be, maybe, but I've no plans to go back to it. Seems as if these lads are happy enough with things the way they are.'

'But you know a sight more than me about leading men—'

'I don't know that's a fact. Me being in charge never worked out too well for anyone, now did it? Not for us, not for those who fought with us, not for them we fought against.' Logen hunched his shoulders at the memories. 'I'll put my word in, if you want it, but I'd sooner follow you. I did my time, and it wasn't a good one.'

Dogman looked like he'd been hoping for a different outcome. 'Well . . . if you're sure . . .'

'I'm sure.' And Logen slapped him on the shoulder. 'Not easy, is it, being chief?'

'No,' grumbled Dogman. 'It bloody ain't.'

'Besides, I reckon a lot of these lads have been on the other side of an argument with me before, and they're not altogether pleased to see me.' Logen looked down the fire at the hard faces, heard the mutterings with his

name in them, too quiet to tell the matter for sure, but he could guess that it wasn't complimentary.

'They'll be glad enough to have you alongside 'em when the fighting starts, don't worry about that.'

'Maybe.' Seemed an awful shame that he'd have to set to killing before folk would give him so much as a nod. Sharp looks came at him from out the dark, flicking away when he looked back. There was only one man, more or less, who met his eye. A big lad with long hair, halfway down the fire.

'Who's that?' asked Logen.

'Who's what?'

'That lad down there staring at me.'

'That there is Shivers.' Dogman sucked at his pointed teeth. 'He's got a lot of bones, Shivers. Fought with us a few times now, and he does it damn well. First of all I'll tell you he's a good man and we owe him. Then I ought to mention that he's Rattleneck's son.'

Logen felt a wave of sickness. 'He's what?'

'His other son.'

'The boy?'

'Long time ago now, all that. Boys grow up.'

A long time ago, maybe, but nothing was forgotten. Logen could see that straight away. Nothing was ever forgotten, up here in the North, and he should've known better than to think it might be. 'I should say something to him. If we have to fight together . . . I should say something.'

Dogman winced. 'Might be better that you don't. Some wounds are best not picked at. Eat, and talk to him in the morning. Everything sounds fairer in the daylight. That or you can decide against it.'

'Uh,' grunted Grim.

Logen stood up. 'You're right, most likely, but it's better to do it—'

'Than to live with the fear of it.' Dogman nodded into the fire. 'You been missed, Logen, and that's a fact.'

'You too, Dogman. You too.'

He walked down through the darkness, smelly with smoke and meat and men, along behind the Carls sitting at the fire. He felt them hunching their shoulders, muttering as he passed. He knew what they were thinking. The Bloody-Nine, right behind me, and there's no worse man in the world to

have your back to. He could see Shivers watching him all the way, one eye cold through his long hair, lips pressed together in a hard line. He had a knife out for eating, but just as good for stabbing a man. Logen watched the firelight gleaming on its edge as he squatted down beside him.

'So you're the Bloody-Nine.'

Logen grimaced. 'Aye. I reckon.'

Shivers nodded, still staring at him. 'This is what the Bloody-Nine looks like.'

'Hope you're not disappointed.'

'Oh no. Not me. Good to have a face on you, after all this time.'

Logen looked down at the ground, trying to think of some way to come at it. Some way to move his hands, or set his face, some words that might start to make the tiniest part of it right. 'Those were hard times, back then,' he ended up saying.

'Harder'n now?'

Logen chewed at his lip. 'Well, maybe not.'

'Times are always hard, I reckon,' said Shivers between gritted teeth. 'That ain't an excuse for doing a runny shit.'

'You're right. There ain't any excuses for what I did. I'm not proud of it. Don't know what else I can say, except I hope you can put it out of the way, and we can fight side by side.'

'I'll be honest with you,' said Shivers, and his voice was strangled-sounding, like he was trying not to shout, or trying not to cry, or both at once, maybe. 'It's a hard thing to just put behind me. You killed my brother, when you'd promised him mercy, and you cut his arms and legs off, and you nailed his head on Bethod's standard.' His knuckles were trembling white round the grip of his knife, and Logen saw that it was taking all he had not to stab him in the face, and he didn't blame him. He didn't blame him one bit. 'My father never was the same after that. He'd nothing in him any more. I spent a lot of years dreaming of killing you, Bloody-Nine.'

Logen nodded, slowly. 'Well. You'll never be alone with that dream.' He caught other cold looks from across the flames, now. Frowns in the shadows, grim faces in the flickering light. Men he didn't even know, afraid to their bones, or nursing scores against him. A whole lot of fear and a whole lot of scores. He could count on the fingers of one hand the folk who

were pleased to see him alive. Even missing a finger. And this was supposed to be his side of the fight.

Dogman had been right. Some wounds are best not picked at. Logen got up, his shoulders prickling, and walked back to the head of the fire, where the talk came easier. He'd no doubt Shivers wanted to kill him just as much as he ever had, but that was no surprise.

You have to be realistic. No words could ever make right the things he'd done.

Bad Debts

Superior Glokta,

Though I believe that we have never been formally introduced, I have heard your name mentioned often these past few weeks. Without causing offence, I hope, it seems as if every room I enter you have recently left, or are due soon to arrive in, and every negotiation I undertake is made more complicated by your involvement.

Although our employers are very much opposed in this business, there is no reason why we should not behave like civilised men. It may be that you and I can hammer out between us an understanding that will leave us both with less work and more progress.

I will be waiting for you at the slaughter-yard near the Four Corners tomorrow morning from six. My apologies for such a noisy choice of spot but I feel our conversation would be better kept private.

I daresay that neither one of us is to be put off by a little ordure underfoot.

Harlen Morrow,

Secretary to High Justice Marovia.

Being kind, the place stank. It would seem that a few hundred live pigs do not smell so sweet as one would expect. The floor of the shadowy warehouse was slick with their stinking slurry, the thick air full of their desperate noise. They honked and squealed, grunted and jostled each other in their writhing pens, sensing, perhaps, that the slaughterman's knife was not so very far away. But, as Morrow had observed, Glokta was not one to be put off by the noise, or the knives, or, for that matter, an unpleasant odour. I spend my days wading through the metaphorical filth, after all. Why not the real thing? The slippery footing was more of a problem. He hobbled with tiny steps, his leg burning. *Imagine arriving at my meeting caked in pig dung. That would hardly project the right image of fearsome ruthlessness, would it?*

He saw Morrow now, leaning on one of the pens. *Just like a farmer admiring his prize-winning herd*. Glokta limped up beside him, boots squelching, wincing and breathing hard, sweat trickling down his back. 'Well, Morrow, you know just how to make a girl feel special, I'll give you that.'

Marovia's secretary grinned up at him, a small man with a round face and eyeglasses. 'Superior Glokta, may I first say that I have nothing but the highest respect for your achievements in Gurkhul, your methods in negotiation, and—'

'I did not come here to exchange pleasantries, Morrow. If that's all your business I can think of sweeter-smelling venues.'

'And sweeter companions too, I do not doubt. To business, then. These are trying times.'

'I'm with you there.'

'Change. Uncertainty. Unease amongst the peasantry—'

'A little more than unease, I would say, wouldn't you?'

'Rebellion, then. Let us hope that the Closed Council's trust in Colonel Luthar will be justified, and he will stop the rebels outside the city.'

'I wouldn't trust his corpse to stop an arrow, but I suppose the Closed Council have their reasons.'

'They always do. Though, of course, they do not always agree with each other.' *They never agree about anything. It's practically a rule of the damn institution.* 'But it is those that serve them,' and Morrow peered significantly over the rims of his eye-glasses, 'that carry the burden for their lack of accord. I feel that we, in particular, have been stepping on each other's toes rather too much for either of our comfort.'

'Huh,' sneered Glokta, working his numb toes inside his boot. 'I do hope your feet aren't too bruised. I could never live with myself if I caused you to limp. Might you have a solution in mind?'

'You could say that.' He smiled down at the pigs, watching them squirm and grunt and clamber over one another. 'We had hogs on the farm, where I grew up.' *Mercy. Anything but the life story.* 'It was my responsibility to feed them. Rising in the morning, so early it was still dark, breath smoking in the cold.' *Oh, he paints a vivid picture! Young Master Morrow, up to his knees in filth, watching his pigs gorge themselves, and dreaming of escape. A brave new life in the glittering city!* Morrow grinned up at him, dim light

twinkling on the lenses of his spectacles. ‘You know, these things will eat anything. Even cripples.’

Ah. So that’s it.

It was then that Glokta became aware of a man moving furtively towards them from the far end of the shed. A burly-looking man in a ragged coat, keeping to the shadows. He had his arm pressed tightly by his side, hand tucked up in his sleeve. J*ust as if he were hiding a knife up there, and not doing it very well. Better just to walk up with a smile on your face and the knife in plain view. There are a hundred reasons to carry a blade in a slaughterhouse. But there can only ever be one reason to try and hide one.*

He glanced over his shoulder, wincing as his neck clicked. Another man, much like the first, was creeping up from that direction. Glokta raised his eyebrows. ‘Thugs? How very unoriginal.’

‘Unoriginal, perhaps, but I think you will find them quite effective.’

‘So I’m to be slaughtered in the slaughterhouse, eh, Morrow? Butchered at the butchers! Sand dan Glokta, breaker of hearts, winner of the Contest, hero of the Gurkish war, shat out the arses of a dozen different pigs!’ He snorted with laughter and had to wipe some snot off his top lip.

‘I’m so glad you enjoy the irony,’ muttered Morrow, looking slightly put out.

‘Oh, I do. Fed to the swine. So obvious I can honestly say it’s not what I expected.’ He gave a long sigh. ‘But not expected and not planned for are two quite different things.’

The bowstring made no sound over the clamour of the hogs. The thug seemed at first to slip, to drop his shining knife and fall on his side for no reason. Then Glokta saw the bolt poking from his side. *Not too great a surprise, of course, and yet it always seems like magic.*

The hired man at the other end of the warehouse took a shocked step back, never seeing Practical Vitari slip silently over the rail of the empty pen behind him. There was a flash of metal in the darkness as she slashed the tendons at the back of his knee and brought him down, his cry quickly shut off as she pulled her chain tight round his neck.

Severard dropped down easily from the rafters off to Glokta’s left and squelched into the muck. He sauntered over, flatbow across his shoulder, kicked the fallen knife off into the darkness and looked down at the man he

had shot. ‘I owe you five marks,’ he called to Frost. ‘Missed his heart, damn it. Liver, maybe?’

‘Lither,’ grunted the albino, emerging from the shadows at the far end of the warehouse. The man struggled up to his knees, clutching at the shaft through his side, twisted face half crusted with filth. Frost lifted his stick as he passed and dealt him a crunching blow on the back of the head, putting a sharp end to his cries and knocking him face down in the muck. Vitari, meanwhile, had wrestled her man onto the floor and was kneeling on his back, dragging at the chain round his neck. His struggling grew weaker, and weaker, and stopped. *A little more dead meat on the floor of the slaughterhouse.*

Glokta looked back to Morrow. ‘How quickly things can change, eh, Harlen? One minute everyone wants to know you. The next?’ He tapped sadly at his useless foot with the filthy toe of his cane. ‘You’re fucked. It’s a tough lesson.’ *I should know.*

Marovia’s secretary backed away, tongue darting over his lips, one hand held out in front of him. ‘Now hold on—’

‘Why?’ Glokta pushed out his bottom lip. ‘Do you really think we can grow to love each other again after all this?’

‘Perhaps we can come to some—’

‘I’m not upset that you tried to kill me. But to make such a pathetic effort at it? We’re professionals, Morrow. It’s an insult, that you thought this might work.’

‘I’m hurt,’ muttered Severard.

‘Wounded,’ sang Vitari, chain jingling in the darkness.

‘Deethly othended,’ grunted Frost, herding Morrow back towards the pen.

‘You should have stuck to licking Hoff’s big drunk arse. Or maybe you should have stayed on the farm, with your pigs. Tough work, perhaps, in the early morning, and so on. But it’s a living.’

‘Just wait! Just wuurgh—’

Severard grabbed Morrow’s shoulder from behind, stabbed him through the side of his neck and chopped his throat out as calmly as if he was gutting a fish.

Blood showered over Glokta’s boots and he stumbled back, wincing as pain shot up his ruined leg. ‘Shit!’ he hissed through his gums, nearly stumbling and falling on his arse in the filth, only managing to stay upright

by clinging desperately to the fence beside him. ‘Couldn’t you just have strangled him?’

Severard shrugged. ‘Same result, isn’t it?’ Morrow slid to his knees, eyeglasses skewed across his face, one hand clutching at his cut neck while blood bubbled out into his shirt collar.

Glokta watched the clerk tip onto his back, one leg kicking at the floor, his scraping heel leaving long streaks in the stinking muck. *Alas for the pigs on the farm. They will never now see young master Morrow coming back over the hill, returned from his brave life in the glittering city, his breath smoking in the cold, cold morning . . .*

The secretary’s convulsions grew gentler, and gentler, and he lay still. Glokta clung to the rail for a moment, watching the corpse. When was it exactly that I became . . . this? By small degrees, *I suppose. One act presses hard upon another, on a path we have no choice but to follow, and each time there are reasons. We do what we must, we do what we are told, we do what is easiest. What else can we do but solve one sordid problem at a time? Then one day we look up and find that we are . . . this.*

He looked at the blood gleaming on his boot, wrinkled his nose and wiped it off on Morrow’s trouser leg. *Ah, well. I would love to spend more time on philosophy, but I have officials to bribe, and noblemen to blackmail, and votes to rig, and secretaries to murder, and lovers to threaten. So many knives to juggle. And as one clatters to the filthy floor, another must go up, blade spinning razor sharp above our heads. It never gets any easier.*

‘Our magical friends are back in town.’

Severard lifted his mask and scratched behind it. ‘The Magi?’

‘The First of the bastards, no less, and his bold company of heroes. Him, and his slinking apprentice, and that woman. The Navigator too. Keep an eye on them, and see if there’s a piglet we can separate from the herd. It’s high time we knew what they were about. Do you still have your charming house, by the water?’

‘Of course.’

‘Good. Perhaps for once we can get ahead of the game, and when his Eminence demands answers we can have them to hand.’ *And I can finally earn a pat on the head from my master.*

‘What shall we do with these?’ asked Vitari, jerking her spiky head towards the corpses.

Glokta sighed. ‘The hogs will eat anything, apparently.’

The city was growing dark as Glokta dragged his ruined leg through the emptying streets and up towards the Agriont. The shopkeepers were closing their doors, the householders were lighting their lamps, candlelight spilling out into the dusky alleyways through chinks around the shutters. *Happy families settling down to happy dinners, no doubt. Loving fathers with their lovely wives, their adorable children, their full and meaningful lives. My heartfelt congratulations.*

He pressed his remaining teeth into his sore gums with the effort of maintaining his pace, sweat starting to dampen his shirt, his leg burning more and more with every lurching step. But I’m not stopping for this useless lump of dead meat. The pain crept up from ankle to knee, from knee to hip, from hip all the way up his twisted spine and into his skull. *All this effort just to kill a mid-level administrator, who worked no more than a few buildings away from the House of Questions in any case. It’s a damn waste of my time, is what it is, it’s a damn—*

‘Superior Glokta?’

A man had stepped up, respectfully, his face in shadow. Glokta squinted at him. ‘Do I—’

It was well done, there was no denying it. He was not even aware of the other man until the bag was over his head and one of his arms was twisted behind his back, pushing him helplessly forward. He stumbled, fumbled his cane and heard it clatter to the cobbles.

‘Aargh!’ A searing spasm shot through his back as he tried unsuccessfully to drag his arm free, and he was forced to hang limp, gasping with pain inside the bag. In a moment they had his wrists tied and he felt a powerful hand shoved under each of his armpits. He was marched away with great speed, one man on each side, his feet barely scraping on the cobbles as they went. The fastest I’ve walked in a good long while, anyway. *Their grip was not rough, but it was irresistible. Professionals. An altogether better class of thug than Morrow stretched to. Whoever ordered this is no fool. So who did order it?*

Sult himself, or one of Sult’s enemies? One of his rivals in the race for the throne? High Justice Marovia? Lord Brock? Anyone on the entire Open

Council? Or could it be the Gurkish? They have never been my closest friends. The banking house of Valint and Balk, perhaps, chosen finally to call in their debt? Might I have seriously misjudged young Captain Luthar, even? Or could it simply be Superior Goyle, no longer keen to share his job with the cripple? It was quite the list, now that he was forced to consider it.

He heard the footfalls slapping around him. Narrow alleys. He had no idea how far they had come. His breath echoed in the bag, rasping, throaty. *The heart thumps, the skin prickles with cold sweat. Excited. Scared, even. What might they want with me? People are not snatched from the street in order to be given promotions, or confections, or tender kisses, more's the pity. I know why people are snatched from the street. Few better.*

Down a set of steps, the toes of his boots scuffing helplessly against the treads. The sound of a heavy door being heaved shut. Footsteps echoing in a tiled corridor. Another door closing. He felt himself dumped unceremoniously in a chair. *And now, no doubt, for better or worse, we shall find out . . .*

The bag was snatched suddenly from his head and Glokta blinked as harsh light stabbed at his eyes. *A white room, too bright for comfort. A type of room with which I am sadly familiar. And yet it looks so much uglier from this side of the table. Someone was sitting opposite. Or the blurry outline of a someone.* He closed one eye and peered through the other as his vision adjusted.

'Well,' he murmured. 'What a surprise.'

'A pleasant one, I hope.'

'I suppose we'll see.' Carlot dan Eider had changed. *And it would* seem that exile has not entirely disagreed with her. Her hair had grown back, not all the way, perhaps, but more than far enough to manage a fetching style. The bruises round her throat had faded, there were only the very faintest of marks where her cheek had been covered in scabs. She had swapped traitor's sack-cloth for the travelling clothes of a lady of means, and looked extremely well in them. Jewels twinkled on her fingers, and around her neck. She seemed every bit as rich and sleek as when they first met. That, and she was smiling. *The smile of the player who holds all the cards. Why is it that I cannot learn? Never do a good turn. Especially not for a woman.*

A small pair of scissors lay on the table before her, within easy reach. Of the type that rich women use to trim their nails. *But just as good for*

trimming the skin from the soles of a man's feet, for trimming his nostrils wider, for trimming his ears off, strip by slow strip . . .

Glokta found it decidedly difficult to move his eyes away from those polished little blades, shining in the bright lamplight. 'I thought I told you never to come back,' he said, but his voice lacked its customary authority.

'You did. But then I thought . . . why ever not? I have assets in the city that I was not willing to relinquish, and some business opportunities that I am keen to take advantage of.' She took up the scissors, trimmed the thinnest scrap from the corner of one already perfectly-shaped thumbnail, and frowned at the results. 'And it's hardly as though you'll be telling anyone I'm here, now, is it?'

'My concerns for your safety are all laid to rest,' grunted Glokta. *My concerns for my own, alas, grow with every moment. A man is never so crippled, after all, that he could not be more so.* 'Did you really need to go to all this trouble just to share your travel arrangements?'

Her smile grew somewhat broader, if anything. 'I hope my men didn't hurt you. I did ask them to be gentle. At least for the time being.'

'A gentle kidnapping is still a kidnapping, though, don't you find?'

'Kidnapping is such an ugly word. Why don't we think of it as an invitation difficult to resist? At least I let you keep your clothes, no?'

'That particular favour is a mercy to us both, believe me. An invitation to what, might I ask, beyond a painful manhandling and a brief conversation?'

'I'm hurt that you need more. But there was something else, since you mention it.' She pared away another sliver of nail with her scissors, and her eyes rolled up to his. 'A little debt left over, from Dagoska. I fear that I will not sleep easily until it is repaid.'

A few weeks in a black cell and a choking to the point of death? What form of repayment might that earn me? 'Please, then,' hissed Glokta through his gums, his eyelid flickering as he watched those blades snip, snip, snip. 'I can scarcely stand the suspense.'

'The Gurkish are coming.'

He paused for a moment, wrong-footed. 'Coming here?'

'Yes. To Midderland. To Adua. To you. They have built a fleet, in secret. They began building it after the last war, and now it is complete. Ships to rival anything the Union has.' She tossed her scissors down on the table and gave a long sigh. 'Or so I hear.'

The Gurkish fleet, just as my midnight visitor Yulwei told me. Rumours and ghosts, perhaps. But rumours are not always lies. 'When will they arrive?'

'I really couldn't say. The mounting of such an expedition is a colossal work of organisation. But then the Gurkish have always been so very much better organised than us. That's what makes doing business with them such a pleasure.'

My own dealings with them have been less than delightful, but still. 'In what numbers will they come?'

'A very great number, I imagine.'

Glokta snorted. 'Forgive me if I regard the words of a proven traitor with a certain scepticism, especially as you are rather thin on the details.'

'Have it your way. You're here to be warned, not convinced. I owe you that much, I think, for giving me my life.'

How wonderfully old-fashioned of you. 'And that is all?'

She spread her hands. 'Can a lady not trim her nails without giving offence?'

'Could you not simply have written?' snapped Glokta, 'and spared me the chafing on my under-arms?'

'Oh, come now. You never struck me as a man to bridle at a little chafing. Besides, it has given us the chance to renew a thoroughly enjoyable friendship. And you have to allow me my little moment of triumph, after what you put me through.'

I suppose that I can. I've had less charming threats, and at least she has better taste than to meet in a pig sty. 'I can simply walk away, then?'

'Did anyone pick up a cane?' No one spoke. Eider gave a happy smile, showing Glokta her perfect white teeth. 'You can crawl away, then. How does that sound?'

Better than floating to the top of the canal after a few days on the bottom, bloated up like a great pale slug and smelling like all the graves in the city. 'As good as I'll get, I suppose. I do wonder, though. What is to stop me having my Practicals follow the scent of expensive perfume after we are done here and finish what they started?'

'It is so very like you to say such a thing.' She sighed. 'I should inform you that an old and trustworthy business acquaintance of mine has a sealed

letter in his possession. In the event of my death, it will be sent to the Arch Lector, laying out to him the exact nature of my sentence in Dagoska.'

Glokta sucked sourly at his gums. *Just what I need, another knife to juggle*. 'And what will occur if, entirely independently from my actions, you succumb to the rot? Or a house falls on you? Or you choke on a slice of bread?'

She opened her eyes very wide, as though the thought had only just occurred. 'In any of those cases . . . I suppose . . . the letter would be sent anyway, despite your innocence.' She gave a helpless laugh. 'The world is nothing like as fair a place as it should be, in my opinion, and I daresay that the natives of Dagoska, the enslaved mercenaries, and the butchered Union soldiers who you made fight for your lost cause would concur.' She smiled as sweetly as if they were discussing gardening. 'Things would probably have been far simpler for you if you'd had me strangled, after all.'

'You read my mind.' *But it is far too late now. I did a good thing, and so, of course, there is a price to be paid.*

'So tell me, before we part ways again, for what, we can both only hope, will be the last time – are you involved with this business of the vote?'

Glokta felt his eye twitch. 'My duties would seem to touch upon it.' *Indeed it occupies my every waking hour.*

Carlot dan Eider leaned forward to a conspiratorial distance, her elbows on the table, her chin in her hands. 'Who will be the next king of the Union, do you suppose? Will it be Brock? Isher? Will it be someone else?'

'A little early to say. I'm working on it.'

'Off you hobble, then.' She pushed out her bottom lip. 'And it's probably better if you don't mention our meeting to his Eminence.' She nodded, and Glokta felt the bag forced back over his face.

A Ragged Multitude

Jezal's command post, if you could use the phrase in relation to a man as utterly confused and clueless as he felt, was at the crest of a long rise. It offered a splendid view of the shallow valley below. At least, it would have been a splendid view in happier times. As things stood, it had to be admitted, the spectacle was far from pleasant.

The main body of the rebels entirely covered several large fields further down the valley, and a dark, and grubby, and threatening infestation they seemed, glinting in places with bright steel. Farming implements and tradesman's tools, perhaps, but sharp ones.

Even at this distance there was disturbing evidence of organisation. Straight, regular gaps through the men for the quick movement of messengers and supplies. It was plain, even to Jezal's unpractised eye, that this was as much an army as a mob, and that someone down there knew his business. A great deal better than he did, most likely.

Smaller, less organised groups of rebels were scattered far and wide across the landscape, each one a considerable body in its own right. Men sent foraging for food and water, picking the country clean. That crawling black mass on the green fields reminded Jezal of a horde of black ants crawling over a pile of discarded apple peelings. He had not the slightest idea how many of them there were, but it looked at this distance as though forty thousand might have been a considerable underestimate.

Down in the village in the bottom of the valley, behind the main mass of rebels, fires were burning. Bonfires or buildings it was hard to say, but Jezal rather feared the latter. Three tall columns of dark smoke rose up and drifted apart high above, giving to the air a faint and worrying tang of fire.

It was a commander's place to set a tone of fearlessness which his men would not be able to help but follow. Jezal knew that, of course. And yet, looking down that long, sloping field, he could not help but reflect on the very great number of men at the other end, so ominously purposeful. He could not stop his eyes from darting back towards their own lines, so thin, meagre, and uncertain-seeming. He could not avoid wincing and tugging uncomfortably at his collar. The damn thing still felt far too tight.

‘How do you wish the regiments deployed, sir?’ asked his adjutant, Major Opker, with a look which somehow managed to be both condescending and sycophantic all at once.

‘Deployed? Er . . . well . . .’ Jezal racked his brains for something vaguely appropriate, let alone correct, to say. He had discovered early in his military career that if one has an effective and experienced officer above, coupled with effective and experienced soldiers below, one need do, and know, nothing. This strategy had stood him in fine stead for several comfortable peacetime years, but its one shortcoming was now starkly laid bare. If by some miracle one rises to complete command, the system collapses entirely.

‘Deployed . . .’ he growled, furrowing his brow and trying to give the impression he was surveying the ground, though he had only a hazy idea what that even meant. ‘Infantry in double line . . .’ he ventured, remembering a fragment of some story Collem West had once told him. ‘Behind this hedgerow here.’ And he slashed his baton portentously across the landscape. The use of a baton, at least, he was expert in, having practiced extensively before the mirror.

‘In front of the hedgerow, the Colonel means to say, of course,’ threw in Bayaz smoothly. ‘Infantry deployed in double line to either side of that milestone. The light cavalry in the trees there, heavy cavalry in a wedge on the far flank, where they can use the open field to their advantage.’ He displayed an uncanny familiarity with military parlance. ‘Flatbows in a single line behind the hedgerow where they will at first be hidden from the enemy, and can give them plunging fire from the high ground.’ He winked at Jezal. ‘An excellent strategy, Colonel, if I may say.’

‘Of course,’ sneered Opker, turning away to give the orders.

Jezal gripped tight to his baton behind his back, rubbing nervously at his jaw with the other hand. Evidently there was a lot more to command than simply being called ‘sir’ by everyone. He would really have to read some books when he got back to Adua. If he got back.

Three small dots had detached themselves from the crawling mass of humanity down in the valley and started moving up the rise toward them. Shading his eyes with his hand, Jezal could just see a shred of white moving in the air above them. A flag of parley. He felt Bayaz’ decidedly uncomforting hand on his shoulder.

‘Don’t worry, my boy, we are well prepared for violence. But I feel confident it will not come to that.’ He grinned down at the vast mass of men below. ‘Very confident.’

Jezal ardently wished he could have said the same.

*

For a famous demagogue, traitor, and inciter of riots, there was nothing in the least remarkable about the man known as the Tanner. He sat calmly in his folding chair at the table in Jezal’s tent, an ordinary face under a mop of curly hair, a man of medium size in a coat of unexceptional style and colour, a grin on his face that implied he knew very well that he held the upper hand.

‘They call me the Tanner,’ he said, ‘and I have been nominated to speak for the alliance of the oppressed, and the exploited, and the put-upon down in the valley. These are two of my partners in this righteous and entirely patriotic venture. My two generals, one might say. Goodman Hood,’ and he nodded sideways at a burly man with a shovel beard, a ruddy complexion, and a seething frown, ‘and Cotter Holst,’ and he jerked his head the other way towards a weaselly type with a long scar on his cheek and a lazy eye.

‘Honoured,’ said Jezal warily, though they looked more like brigands than Generals as far as he was concerned. ‘I am Colonel Luthar.’

‘I know. I saw you win the Contest. Fine swordplay, my friend, very fine.’

‘Oh, well, er . . .’ Jezal was caught off guard, ‘thank you. This is my adjutant, Major Opker, and this is . . . Bayaz, the First of the Magi.’

Goodman Hood snorted his disbelief, but the Tanner only stroked thoughtfully at his lip. ‘Good. And you have come to fight, or negotiate?’

‘We have come for either one.’ Jezal embarked on his statement. ‘The Closed Council, while condemning the method of your demonstration, concede that you may have legitimate demands—’

Hood made a rumbling snort. ‘What choice have they got, the bastards?’

Jezal pressed on. ‘Well, er . . . they have instructed me to offer you these concessions.’ He held up the scroll that Hoff had prepared for him, a huge thing with elaborately carved handles and a seal the size of a saucer. ‘But I must caution you,’ doing his very best to sound confident, ‘should you

refuse, we are quite ready to fight, and that my men are the best trained, best armed, best prepared in the King's service. Each one of them is worth twenty of your rabble.'

The burly farmer gave a threatening chuckle. 'Lord Finster thought the same, and our rabble kicked his arse all the way from one end of his estates to the other. He would have got himself hung for his trouble if he'd had a slower horse. How fast is your horse, Colonel?'

The Tanner touched him gently on the shoulder. 'Peace, now, my fiery friend. We came to get terms, if we can get terms we can accept. Why not show us what you have there, Colonel, and we'll see if there is any need for threats.'

Jezal held out the weighty document and Hood snatched it angrily from his hand, tore it open and began to read, the thick paper crackling as it unrolled. The more he read, the grimmer grew his frown.

'An insult!' he snapped when he was done, giving Jezal a brooding stare. 'Lighter taxes and some shit about the use of common land? And that much they'll most likely never honour!' He tossed the scroll sideways to the Tanner, and Jezal swallowed. He had not the leanest understanding of the concessions or their possible shortcomings, of course, but Hood's response hardly seemed to promise an early agreement.

The Tanner's eyes moved lazily over the parchment. Different-coloured eyes, Jezal noticed: one blue, one green. When he got to the bottom he laid the document down and gave a theatrical sigh. 'These terms will do.'

'They will?' Jezal's eyes opened wide with surprise, but nowhere near as far as Goodman Hood's.

'But these are worse than the last terms we were offered!' shouted the farmer. 'Before we sent Finster's men running! You said then we could accept nothing but land for every man!'

The Tanner screwed his face up. 'That was then.'

'That was then?' muttered Hood, gaping with disbelief. 'What happened to honest wages for honest work? What happened to shares in the profit? What happened to equal rights no matter the cost? You stood there, and you promised me!' He shoved his hand towards the valley. 'You promised all of them! What's changed, except that Adua's within our grasp? We can take all we want! We can—'

‘I say these terms will do!’ snarled the Tanner with a sudden fury. ‘Unless you care to fight the King’s men on your own! They follow me, Hood, not you, in case you hadn’t noticed.’

‘But you promised us freedom, for every man! I trusted you!’ The farmer’s face hung slack with horror. ‘We all trusted you.’

Jezal had never seen a man look so utterly indifferent as the Tanner did now. ‘I suppose I must have that kind of face that people trust,’ he droned, and his friend Holst shrugged and stared at his fingernails.

‘Damn you, then! Damn you all!’ And Hood turned and shoved angrily out through the tent flap.

Jezal was aware of Bayaz leaning sideways to whisper to Major Opker. ‘Have that man arrested before he leaves the lines.’

‘Arrested, my Lord, but . . . under a flag of parley?’

‘Arrested, placed in irons, and conducted to the House of Questions. A shred of white cloth can be no hiding place from the King’s justice. I believe Superior Goyle is handling the investigations.’

‘Er . . . of course.’ Opker rose to follow the Goodman out of the tent, and Jezal smiled nervously. There was no doubt that the Tanner had heard the exchange, but he grinned on as though the future of his erstwhile companion was no longer any of his concern.

‘I must apologise for my associate. In a matter like this, you can’t please everyone.’ He gave a flamboyant wave of his hand. ‘But don’t worry. I’ll give the little people a big speech, and tell them we have all we fought for, and they’ll soon be off back to their homes with no real harm done. Some few will be determined to make trouble perhaps, but I’m sure you can round them up without much effort, eh, Colonel Luthar?’

‘Er . . . well,’ mumbled Jezal, left without the slightest idea of what was going on. ‘I suppose that we—’

‘Excellent.’ The Tanner sprang to his feet. ‘I fear I must now take my leave. All kinds of errands to be about. Never any peace, eh, Colonel Luthar? Never the slightest peace.’ He exchanged a long glance with Bayaz, then ducked out into the daylight and was gone.

‘If anyone should ask,’ murmured the First of the Magi in Jezal’s ear, ‘I would tell them that it was a testing negotiation, against sharp and determined opponents, but that you held your nerve, reminded them of their

duty to king and country, implored them to return to their fields, and so forth.'

'But . . .' Jezal felt like he wanted to cry, he was so baffled. Hugely baffled and hugely relieved at once. 'But I—'

'If anyone should ask.' There was an edge to Bayaz' voice that implied the episode was now finished with.

Beloved of the Moon

The Dogman stood, squinting into the sun, and watched the Union lads all shuffling past the other way. There's a certain look the beaten get, after a fight. Slow-moving, hunched-up, mud-spattered, mightily interested in the ground. Dogman had seen that look before often enough. He'd had it himself more'n once. Sorrowful they'd lost. Shamed they'd been beaten. Guilty, to have given up without getting a wound. Dogman knew how that felt, and a gnawing feeling it could be, but guilt was a sight less painful than a sword-cut, and healed a sight quicker.

Some of the hurt weren't so badly off. Bandaged or splinted, limping with a stick or with their arm round a mate's shoulders. Enough to get light duty for a few weeks. Others weren't so lucky. Dogman thought he knew one. An officer, hardly old enough for a beard, his smooth face all twisted up with white pain and shock, his leg off just above the knee, his clothes, and the stretcher, and the two men carrying him, all specked and spattered with dark blood. He was the one who'd sat on the gate, when Dogman and Threetrees had first come to Ostenhorm to join up with the Union. The one who'd looked at 'em like they were a pair of turds. He didn't sound so very clever now, squealing with every jolt of his stretcher, but it hardly made the Dogman smile. Losing a leg seemed like harsh punishment for a sneering manner.

West was down there by the path, talking to an officer with a dirty bandage round his head. Dogman couldn't hear what they were saying, but he could guess the gist. From time to time one of 'em would point up towards the hills they'd come from. A steep and nasty-looking pair, wooded mostly, with a few hard faces of bare rock showing. West turned and caught the Dogman's eye, and his face was grim as a gravedigger's. It hardly took a quick mind to see that the war weren't won quite yet.

'Shit,' muttered the Dogman, under his breath. He felt that sucking feeling in his gut. That low feeling he used to get whenever he had to scout out a new piece of ground, whenever Threetrees called for weapons, whenever there was nothing for breakfast but cold water. Since he was chief, though,

he seemed to have it pretty much all the time. Everything was his problem now. ‘Nothing doing?’

West shook his head as he walked up. ‘Bethod was waiting for us, and in numbers. He’s dug in on those hills. Well dug in and well prepared, between us and Carleon. More than likely he was ready for this before he even crossed the border.’

‘He always did like to be ready, did Bethod. No way round him?’

‘Kroy’s tried both the roads and had two maulings. Now Poulder’s tried the hills head on and had a worse one.’

Dogman sighed. ‘No way round.’

‘No way that won’t give Bethod a nice chance to stick the knife right into us.’

‘And Bethod won’t be missing no chance like that. It’s what he’ll be hoping for.’

‘The Lord Marshal agrees. He wants you to take your men north.’ West glared out at the grey whispers of other hills, further off. ‘He wants you to look for a weakness. There’s no way Bethod can cover the whole range.’

‘Is there not?’ asked Dogman. ‘I guess we’ll see.’ Then he headed off into the trees. The boys were going to love this.

He strode up the track, soon came up on where his crew were camped out. They were growing all the time. Might’ve been four hundred now, all counted, and a tough crowd too. Those who’d never much cared for Bethod in the first place, mostly, who’d fought against him in the wars. Who’d fought against the Dogman as well, for that matter. The woods were choked up with ’em, sat round fires, cooking, polishing at weapons and working at gear, a couple having a practice at each other with blades. Dogman winced at the sound of steel clashing. There’d be more of that later, and with bloodier results, he didn’t doubt.

‘Chief!’ they shouted at him. ‘Dogman! The chief! Hey hey!’ They clapped their hands and tapped their weapons on the rocks they sat on. Dogman held up his fist, and gave the odd half-grin, and said ‘aye, good, good,’ and all that. He still didn’t have the slightest clue how to act like a chief, if the truth be told, so he just acted like he always had. The band all seemed happy enough, though. He guessed they always did. Until they started losing fights, and decided they wanted a new chief.

He came up on the fire where the pick of his Named Men were passing the day. No sign of Logen, but the rest of the old crew were sat round it, looking bored. Those that were still alive, leastways. Tul saw him coming. ‘The Dogman’s back.’

‘Uh,’ said Grim, trimming at some feathers with a razor.

Dow was busy mopping grease out of a pan with a chunk o’ bread. ‘How’d the Union get on with them hills, then?’ And he had a sneer to his voice that said he knew the answer already. ‘Make a shit from it, did they?’

‘Well, they came out second, if that’s what you’re asking.’

‘Second o’ two sides is what I call shit.’

Dogman took a deep breath and let it pass. ‘Bethod’s dug in good, watching the roads to Carleon. No one can see an easy way to come at him, or an easy way around him neither. He was good and ready for this, I reckon.’

‘I could’ve bloody told you that!’ barked Dow, spraying out greasy crumbs. ‘He’ll have Littlebone on one o’ them hills, and Whitesides on the other, then he’ll have Pale-as-Snow and Goring further out. Those four won’t be giving anyone any chances, but if they decide to, Bethod’ll be sat behind with the rest, and his Shanka, and his fucking Feared, ready to snuff ’em out double-time.’

‘More’n likely.’ Tul held his sword up to the light, peered at it, then set to polishing up the blade again. ‘Always liked to have a plan, did Bethod.’

‘And what do them that hold our leash have to say?’ sneered Dow. ‘What sort of work’s the Furious got for his animals?’

‘Burr wants us to move north a way, through the woods, see if Bethod’s left a weak spot up there.’

‘Huh,’ snorted Dow. ‘Bethod ain’t in the habit of leaving holes. Not unless he’s left one he means for us to fall into. Fall into and break our necks.’

‘Well I guess we’d better be careful where we tread then, eh?’

‘More bloody errands.’

Dogman reckoned he was getting about as sick of Dow’s moaning as Threetrees used to be. ‘And just what else would it be, eh? That’s what life is. A bunch of errands. If you’re worth a shit you do your best at ’em. What’s got up your arse anyway?’

‘This!’ Dow jerked his head into the trees. ‘Just this! Nothing’s changed that much, has it? We might be over the Whiteflow, and back in the North, but Bethod’s dug in good and proper up there, with no way for the Union to get round him that won’t leave their arses hanging out. And if they do knock him off them hills, what then? If they get to Carleon and they get in, and they burn it just as good as Ninefingers did the last time, so what? Don’t mean nothing. Bethod’ll keep going, just like he always does, fighting and falling back, and there’ll always be more hills to sit on, and more tricks to play. Time’ll come, the Union will have had their fill and they’ll piss off south and leave us to it. Then Bethod’s going to turn around, and what d’you know? He’ll be the one chasing us all the way across the fucking North and back. Winter, summer, winter, summer, and it’s more of the same old shit. Here we are, fewer of us than there used to be, but still pissing around in the woods. Feel familiar?’

It did, somewhat, now it was mentioned, but Dogman didn’t see what he could do about it. ‘Logen’s back, now, eh? That’ll help.’

Dow snorted again. ‘Hah! Just when did the Bloody-Nine bring anything but death along with him?’

‘Steady now,’ grunted Tul. ‘You owe him, remember? We all do.’

‘There’s a limit on what a man should owe, I reckon.’ Dow tossed his pan down by the fire and stood up, wiping his hands on his coat. ‘Where’s he been, eh? He left us up in the valleys without a word, didn’t he? Left us to the Flatheads and pissed off halfway across the world! Who’s to say he won’t wander off again, if it suits him, or go over to Bethod, or set to murder over nothing, or the dead know what?’

Dogman looked at Tul, and Tul looked back, guilty. They’d all seen Logen do some damn dark work, when the mood was on him. ‘That was a long time ago,’ said Tul. ‘Things change.’

Dow only grinned. ‘No. They don’t. Tell yourselves that tale if it makes you sleep easier, but I’ll be keeping one eye open, I can tell you that! It’s the Bloody-Nine we’re talking of! Who knows what he’ll do next?’

‘I’ve one idea.’ The Dogman turned round and saw Logen, leaning up against a tree, and he was starting to smile when he saw the look in his eye. A look Dogman remembered from way back, and dragged all kind of ugly memories up after it. That look the dead have, when the life’s gone out of ’em, and they care for nothing any more.

‘You got a thing to say then you can say it to my face, I reckon.’ Logen walked up, right up close to Dow, with his head falling on one side, scars all pale on his hanging-down face. The Dogman felt the hairs on his arms standing up, cold feeling even though the sun was warm.

‘Come on, Logen,’ wheedled Tul, trying to sound like the whole business was all a laugh when it was plain as a slow death it was no such thing. ‘Dow didn’t mean nothing by it. He’s just—’

Logen spoke right over him, staring Dow in the face with his corpse’s eyes all the long while. ‘I thought when I gave you the last lesson that you’d never need another. But I guess some folk have short memories.’ He came in even closer, so close that their faces were almost touching. ‘Well? You need a learning, boy?’

Dogman winced, sure as sure they’d set to killing one another, and how the hell he’d stop ’em once they started he hadn’t the faintest clue. A tense moment all round, it seemed to last for ever. He wouldn’t have taken that from any other man, alive or dead, Black Dow, not even Threetrees, but in the end he just split a yellow grin.

‘Nah. One lesson’s all I need.’ And he turned his head sideways, hawked up and spat onto the ground. Then he backed off, no hurry, that grin still on his face, like he was saying he’d take a telling this time, maybe, but he might not the next.

Once he was gone, and no blood spilled, Tul blew out hard like they’d got away with murder. ‘Right then. North, was it? Someone better get the lads ready to move.’

‘Uh,’ said Grim, sliding the last arrow into his quiver and following him off through the trees.

Logen stood there for a moment, watching ’em walk. When they’d got away out of sight he turned round, and he squatted down by the fire, hunched over with his arms resting on his knees and his hands dangling. ‘Thank the dead for that. I nearly shit myself.’

Dogman realised he’d been holding onto his breath the whole while, and he let it rush out in a gasp. ‘I think I might’ve, just a bit. Did you have to do that?’

‘You know I did. Let a man like Dow take liberties and he won’t ever stop. Then all the rest of these lads will get the idea that the Bloody-Nine

ain't anything like so frightening as they heard, and it'll be a matter of time before someone with a grudge decides to take a blade to me.'

Dogman shook his head. 'That's a hard way of thinking about things.'

'That's the way they are. They haven't changed any. They never do.'

True, maybe, but they weren't ever going to change if no one gave 'em half a chance. 'Still. You sure all that's needful?'

'Not for you maybe. You got that knack that folk like you.' Logen scratched at his jaw, looking sadly off into the woods. 'Reckon I missed my chance at that about fifteen years ago. And I ain't getting another.'

The woods were warm and familiar. Birds twittered in the branches, not caring a damn for Bethod, or the Union, or any o' the doings of men. Nowhere had ever seemed more peaceful, and Dogman didn't like that one bit. He sniffed at the air, sifting it through his nose, over his tongue. He was double careful these days, since that shaft came over and killed Cathil in the battle. Might have been he could've saved her, if he'd trusted his own nose a mite more. He wished he had saved her. But wishing don't help any.

Dow squatted down in the brush, staring off into the still forest. 'What is it, Dogman? What d'you smell?'

'Men, I reckon, but kind of sour, somehow.' He sniffed again. 'Smells like —'

An arrow flitted up out of the trees, clicked into the tree trunk just beside Dogman and stuck there, quivering.

'Shit!' he squealed, sliding down on his arse and fumbling his own bow off his shoulder, much too late as always. Dow slithered down cursing beside him and they got all tangled up with each other. Dogman nearly got his eye poked out on Dow's axe before he managed to push him off. He shoved his palm out at the men behind to say stop, but they were already scattering for cover, crawling for trees and rocks on their bellies, pulling out weapons and staring into the woods.

A voice drifted over from the forest ahead. 'You with Bethod?' Whoever it was spoke Northern with some strange-sounding accent.

Dow and Dogman looked at each other for a minute, then shrugged. 'No!' Dow roared back. 'And if you are, you'd best make ready to meet the dead!'

A pause. ‘We’re not with that bastard, and never will be!’

‘Good enough!’ shouted Dogman, putting his head up no more’n an inch, his bow full drawn and ready in his hands. ‘Show yourselves, then!’

A man stepped out from behind a tree maybe six strides distant. Dogman was that shocked he nearly fumbled the string and let the shaft fly. More men started sliding out of the woods all round. Dozens of ’em. Their hair was tangled, their faces were smeared with streaks of brown dirt and blue paint, their clothes were ragged fur and half-tanned hides, but the heads of their spears, and the points of their arrows, and the blades of their rough-forged swords all shone bright and clean.

‘Hillmen,’ Dogman muttered.

‘Hillmen we are, and proud of it!’ A great big voice, echoing out from the woods. A few of ’em started to shuffle to one side, like they were making way for someone. Dogman blinked. There was a child coming between them. A girl, maybe ten years old, with dirty bare feet. She had a huge hammer over one shoulder, a thick length of wood a stride long with a scarred lump of iron the size of a brick for a head. Far and away too big for her to swing. It was giving her some trouble even holding it up.

A little boy came next. He had a round shield across his back, much too wide for him, and a great axe he was lugging along in both hands. Another boy was at his shoulder with a spear twice as high as he was, the bright point waving around above his head, gold twinkling under the blade in the strips of sunlight. He kept having to look up to make sure he didn’t catch it on a branch.

‘I’m dreaming,’ muttered the Dogman. ‘Aren’t I?’

Dow frowned. ‘If y’are it’s a strange one.’

They weren’t alone, the three children. Some huge bastard was coming up behind. He had a ragged fur round his great wide shoulders, and some big necklace hanging down on his great fat belly. A load of bones. Fingerbones, the Dogman saw as he got closer. Men’s fingers, mixed up with flat bits of wood, strange signs cut into them. He had a great yellow grin hacked out from his grey-brown beard, but that didn’t put the Dogman any more at ease.

‘Oh shit,’ groaned Dow, ‘let’s go back. Back south and enough o’ this.’

‘Why? You know him?’

Dow turned his head and spat. ‘Crummock-i-Phail, ain’t it.’

Dogman almost wished it had turned out to be an ambush, now, rather than a chat. It was a fact that every child knew. Crummock-i-Phail, chief of the hillmen, was about the maddest bastard in the whole damn North.

He pushed the spears and the arrows gently out of his way as he came. 'No need for that now, is there, my beauties? We're all friends, or got the same enemies, at least, which is far better, d'you see? We all have a lot of enemies up in them hills, don't we, though? The moon knows I love a good fight, but coming at them great big rocks, with Bethod and all his arse-lickers stuck in tight on top? That's a bit too much fight for anyone, eh? Even your new Southern friends.'

He stopped just in front of them, fingerbones swinging and rattling. The three children stopped behind him, fidgeting with their great huge weapons and frowning up at Dow and the Dogman.

'I'm Crummock-i-Phail,' he said. 'Chief of all the hillmen. Or all the ones as are worth a shit.' He grinned as though he'd just turned up to a wedding. 'And who might be in charge o' this merry outing?'

Dogman felt that hollow feeling again, but there was nothing for it. 'That'd be me.'

Crummock raised his brows at him. 'Would it now? You're a little fellow to be telling all these big fellows just what to be about, are you not? You must have quite some name on your shoulders, I'm thinking.'

'I'm the Dogman. This is Black Dow.'

'Some strange sort of a crew you got here,' said Dow, frowning at the children.

'Oh it is! It is! And a brave one at that! The lad with my spear, that's my son Scofen. The one with my axe is my son Rond.' Crummock frowned at the girl with the hammer. 'This lad's name I can't remember.'

'I'm your daughter!' shouted the girl.

'What, did I run out of sons?'

'Scenn got too old and you give him 'is own sword, and Sceft's too small to carry nothing yet.'

Crummock shook his head. 'Don't hardly seem right, a bloody woman taking the hammer.'

The girl threw the hammer down on the ground and booted Crummock in his shin. 'You can carry it yourself then, y'old bastard!'

‘Ah!’ he squawked, laughing and rubbing his leg at once. ‘Now I remember you, Isern. Your kicking’s brought it all back in a rush. You can take the hammer, so you can. Smallest one gets the biggest load, eh?’

‘You want the axe, Da?’ The smaller lad held the axe up, wobbling.

‘You want the hammer?’ The girl dragged it up out the brush and shouldered her brother out the way.

‘No, my loves, all I need for now is words, and I’ve plenty of those without your help. You can watch your father work some murder soon, if things run smooth, but there’ll be no need for axes or hammers today. We didn’t come here to kill.’

‘Why did you come here?’ asked Dogman, though he wasn’t sure he even wanted the answer.

‘Right to business is it, and no time to be friendly?’ Crummock stretched his neck to the side, his arms over his head, and lifted one foot and shook it around. ‘I came here because I woke in the night, and I walked out into the darkness, and the moon whispered to me. In the forest, d’you see? In the trees, and in the voices of the owls in the trees, and d’you know what the moon said?’

‘That you’re mad as fuck?’ growled Dow.

Crummock slapped his huge thigh. ‘You’ve a pretty way of talking for an ugly man, Black Dow, but no. The moon said . . .’ And he beckoned to the Dogman like he had some secret to share. ‘You got the Bloody-Nine down here.’

‘What if we do?’ Logen came up quiet from behind, left hand resting on his sword. Tul and Grim came with him, frowning at all the painted-face hillmen stood about, and at the three dirty children, and at their great fat father most of all.

‘There he is!’ roared Crummock, sticking out one great sausage of a trembling finger. ‘Take your fist off that blade, Bloody-Nine, before I piss my breaks!’ He dropped down on his knees in the dirt. ‘This is him! This is the one!’ He shuffled forward through the brush and he clung to Logen’s leg, pressing himself up against it like a dog to his master.

Logen stared down at him. ‘Get off my leg.’

‘That I will!’ Crummock jerked away and dropped down on his fat arse in the dirt. Dogman had never seen such a performance. Looked like the

rumours about him being cracked were right enough. ‘Do you know a fine thing, Bloody-Nine?’

‘More’n one, as it goes.’

‘Here’s another, then. I saw you fight Shama Heartless. I saw you split him open like a pigeon for the pot, and I couldn’t have done it better my blessed self. A lovely thing to see!’ Dogman frowned. He’d been there too, and he didn’t remember much lovely about it. ‘I said then,’ and Crummock rose up to his knees, ‘and I said since,’ and he stood up on his feet, ‘and I said when I came down from the hills to seek you out,’ and he lifted up his arm to point at Logen. ‘That you’re a man more beloved of the moon than any other!’

Dogman looked over at Logen, and Logen shrugged. ‘Who’s to say what the moon likes or doesn’t? What of it?’

‘What of it, he says! Hah! I could watch him kill the whole world, and a thing of beauty it would be! The what of it is, I have a plan. It flowed up with the cold springs under the mountains, and was carried along in the streams under the stones, and washed up on the shore of the sacred lake right beside me, while I was dipping my toes in the frosty.’

Logen scratched at his scarred jaw. ‘We’ve got work to be about, Crummock. You got something worth saying you can get to it.’

‘Then I will. Bethod hates me, and the feeling’s mutual, but he hates you more. Because you’ve stood against him, and you’re living proof a man of the North can be his own man, without bending on his knee and tonguing the arse of that golden-hat bastard and his two fat sons and his witch.’ He frowned. ‘Though I could be persuaded to take my tongue to her. D’you follow me so far?’

‘I’m keeping up,’ said Logen, but Dogman weren’t altogether sure that he was.

‘Just whistle if you drop behind and I’ll come right back for you. My meaning’s this. If Bethod were to get a good chance at catching you all alone, away from your Union friends, your crawling-like-ants sunny-weather lovers over down there yonder, then, well, he might give up a lot to take it. He might be coaxed down from his pretty hills for a chance like that, I’m thinking, hmmm?’

‘You’re betting that he hates me a lot.’

‘What? Do you doubt that a man could hate you that much?’ Crummock turned away, spreading his great long arms out wide at Tul and Grim. ‘But it’s not just you, Bloody-Nine! It’s all of you, and me as well, and my three sons here!’ The girl threw the hammer down again and planted her hands on her hips, but Crummock blathered on regardless. ‘I’m thinking your boys join up with my boys and it might be we’ll have eight hundred spears. We’ll head up north, like we’re going up into the High Places, to get around behind Bethod and play merry mischief with his arse end. I’m thinking that’ll get his blood up. I’m thinking he won’t be able to pass on a chance to put all of us back in the mud.’

The Dogman thought it over. Chances were that a lot of Bethod’s people were jumpy about now. Worried to be fighting on the wrong side of the Whiteflow. Maybe they were hearing the Bloody-Nine was back, and thinking they’d picked the wrong side. Bethod would love to put a few heads on sticks for everyone to look at. Ninefingers, and Crummock-i-Phail, Tul Duru and Black Dow, and maybe even the Dogman too. He’d like that, would Bethod. Show the North there was no future in anything but him. He’d like it a lot.

‘Supposing we do wander off north,’ asked Dogman. ‘How’s Bethod even going to know about it?’

Crummock grinned wider than ever. ‘Oh, he’ll know because his witch’ll know.’

‘Bloody witch,’ piped up the lad with the spear, his thin arms trembling as he fought to keep it up straight.

‘That spell-cooking, painted-face bitch Bethod keeps with him. Or does she keep him with her? There’s a question, though. Either way, she’s watching. Ain’t she, Bloody-Nine?’

‘I know who you mean,’ said Logen, and not looking happy. ‘Caurib. A friend o’ mine once told me she had the long eye.’ Dogman didn’t have the first clue about all that, but if Logen was taking it to heart he reckoned he’d better too.

‘The long eye, is it?’ grinned Crummock. ‘Your friend’s got a pretty name for an ugly trick. She sees all manner of goings-on with it. All kind of things it’d be better for us if she didn’t. Bethod trusts her eyes before he trusts his own, these days, and he’ll have her watching for us, and for you in particular. She’ll have both her long eyes open for it, that she will. I may be

no wizard,' and he spun one of the wooden signs around and around on his necklace, 'but the moon knows I'm no stranger to the business neither.'

'And what if it goes like you say?' rumbled Tul, 'what happens then? Apart from we give Bethod our heads?'

'Oh, I like my head where it is, big lad. We draw him on, north by north, that's what the forest told me. There's a place up in the mountains, a place well loved by the moon. A strong valley, and watched over by the dead of my family, and the dead of my people, and the dead of the mountains, all the way back until when the world was made.'

Dogman scratched his head. 'A fortress in the mountains?'

'A strong, high place. High and strong enough for a few to hold off a many until help were to arrive. We lure him on up into the valley, and your Union friends follow up at a lazy distance. Far enough that his witch don't see 'em coming, she's so busy looking at us. Then, while he's all caught up in trying to snuff us out for good and all, the Southerners creep up behind, and—' He slapped his palms together with an echoing crack. 'We squash him between us, the sheep-fucking bastard!'

'Sheep-fucker!' cursed the girl, kicking at the hammer on the ground.

They all looked at each other for a moment. Dogman didn't much like the sound of this for a plan. He didn't much like the notion of trusting their lives to the say-so o' this crazy hillman. But it sounded like some kind of a chance. Enough that he couldn't just say no, however much he'd have liked to. 'We got to talk on this.'

'Course you do, my new best friends, course you do. Don't take too long about it though, eh?' Crummock grinned wide. 'I been down from the High Places for way too long, and the rest o' my beautiful children, and my beautiful wives, and the beautiful mountains themselves will all of them be missing me. Think on the sunny side o' this. If Bethod don't follow, you get a few nights sat up in the High Places as the summer dies, warming yourselves at my fire, and listening to my songs, and watching the sun going down over the mountains. That sound so bad? Does it?'

'You thinking of listening to that mad bastard?' muttered Tul, once they'd got out of earshot. 'Witches and wizards and all that bloody rubbish? He makes it up as he goes along!'

Logen scratched his face. 'He's nowhere near as mad as he sounds. He's held out against Bethod all these years. The only one who has. Twelve

winters is it now, he's been hiding, and raiding, and keeping one foot ahead? Up in the mountains maybe, but still. He'd have to be slippery as fishes and tough as iron to make that work.'

'You trust him, then?' asked Dogman.

'Trust him?' Logen snorted. 'Shit, no. But his feud with Bethod's deeper even than ours is. He's right about that witch, I seen her, and I seen some other things this past year . . . if he says she'll see us, I reckon I believe him. If she doesn't, and Bethod don't come, well, nothing lost is there?'

Dogman had that empty feeling, worse'n ever. He looked over at Crummock, sitting on a rock with his children round him, and the madman smiled back a mouthful of yellow teeth. Hardly the man you'd want to hang all your hopes on, but Dogman could feel the wind changing. 'We'd be taking one bastard of a risk,' he muttered. 'What if Bethod caught up to us and got his way?'

'We move fast, then, don't we!' growled Dow. 'It's a war. Taking risks is what you do if you reckon on winning!'

'Uh,' grunted Grim.

Tul nodded his big head. 'We've got to do something. I didn't come here to watch Bethod sit on a hill. He needs to be got down.'

'Got down where we can set to work on him!' hissed Dow.

'But it's your choice.' Logen clapped his hand down on the Dogman's shoulder. 'You're the chief.'

He was the chief. He remembered them deciding on it, gathered round Threetrees' grave. Dogman had to admit, he'd much rather have told Crummock to fuck himself, then turned round and headed back, and told West they never found a thing except woods. But once you've got a task, you get it done. That's what Threetrees would've said. Dogman gave a long sigh, that feeling in his gut bubbling up so high he was right on the point of puking. 'Alright. But this plan ain't going to get us anything but dead unless the Union are ready to do their part, and in good time too. We'll take it to Furious, and let their chief Burr know what we're about.'

'Furious?' asked Logen.

Tul grinned. 'Long story.'

Flowers and Plaudits

Jezal still did not have the slightest idea why it was necessary for him to wear his best uniform. The damn thing was stiff as a board and creaking with braid. It had been designed for standing to attention in rather than riding, and, as a result, dug painfully into his stomach with every movement of his horse. But Bayaz had insisted, and it was surprisingly difficult to say no to the old fool, whether Jezal was supposed to be in command of this expedition or not. It had seemed easier, in the end, just to do as he was told. So he rode at the head of the long column in some discomfort, constantly tugging at his tunic and sweating profusely in the bright sun. The one consolation was that he got to breathe fresh air. Everyone else had to eat his dust.

To further add to his pain, Bayaz was intent on continuing the themes that had made Jezal so very bored all the way to the edge of the World and back.

'. . . it is vital for a king to maintain the good opinion of his subjects. And it is not so very hard to do. The lowly have small ambitions, and are satisfied with small indulgences. They need not get fair treatment. They need only think that they do . . .'

Jezal found that after a while he could ignore the droning of the old man's voice, in the same way that one could ignore the barking of an old dog that barked all the time. He slumped into his saddle and allowed his thoughts to wander. And where else would they find their way, but to Ardee?

He had landed himself in quite a pickle, alright. Out on the plain, things had seemed so very simple. Get home, marry her, happily ever after. Now, back in Adua, back among the powerful, and back in his old habits, they grew more complicated by the day. The possibility of damage to his reputation and his prospects were issues that could not simply be dismissed. He was a Colonel in the King's Own, and that meant certain standards to uphold.

'. . . Harod the Great always had respect for the common man. More than once, it was the secret of his victories over his peers . . .'

And then Ardee herself was so much more complicated in person than she had been as a silent memory. Nine parts witty, clever, fearless, attractive.

One part a mean and destructive drunk. Every moment with her was a lottery, but perhaps it was that sense of danger that struck the sparks when they touched, made his skin tingle and his mouth go dry . . . his skin was tingling now, even at the thought. He had never felt like this about a woman before, not ever. Surely it was love. It had to be. But was love enough? How long would it last? Marriage, after all, was forever, and forever was a very long time.

An indefinite extension of their current not-so secret romance would have been his preferred choice, but that bastard Glokta had stuck his ruined foot through that possibility. Anvils, and sacks, and canals. Jezal remembered that white monster shoving his bag over a prisoner's head on a public thoroughfare, and shuddered at the thought. But he had to admit that the cripple was right. Jezal's visits were not good for that girl's reputation. One should treat others the way one would want to be treated, he supposed, just as Ninefingers had once said. But it certainly was a damned inconvenience.

'. . . are you even listening, my boy?'

'Eh? Er . . . yes, of course. Harod the Great, and so forth. The high respect he had for the common man.'

'Appeared to have,' grumbled Bayaz. 'And he knew how to take a lesson too.'

They were getting close to Adua now, passing out of the farmland and through one of the huddles of shacks, impromptu dwellings, cheap inns and cheaper brothels that had grown up around each of the city's gates, huddling about the road, each one almost a town in its own right. Up into the long shadow of Casamir's Wall, the outermost of the city's lines of defence. A dour guardsmen stood on either side of the high archway, gates marked with the Golden sun of the Union standing open. They passed through the darkness and out into the light. Jezal blinked.

A not inconsiderable number of people had gathered in the cobbled space beyond, pressing in on either side of the road, held back by members of the city watch. They burst into a chorus of happy cheers as they saw him ride through the gate. Jezal wondered for a moment if it was a case of mistaken identity, and they had been expecting someone of actual importance. Harod the Great, perhaps, for all he knew. He soon began to make out the name 'Luthar' repeated amongst the noise, however. A girl at the front flung a flower at him, lost under his horse's hooves, and shouted something he

could not make out. But her manner left Jezal with no doubts. All these people had gathered for him.

'What's happening?' he whispered to the First of the Magi.

Bayaz grinned as though he, at least, had expected it. 'I imagine the people of Adua wish to celebrate your victory over the rebels.'

'They do?' He winced and gave a limp-wristed wave, and the cheering grew noticeably in volume. The crowd only thickened as they made their way into the city and the space reduced. There were people scattered up and down the narrow streets, people at the downstairs windows and people higher up, whooping and cheering. More flowers were thrown from a balcony high above the road. One stuck in his saddle and Jezal picked it up, turned it round and round in his hand.

'All this . . . for me?'

'Did you not save the city? Did you not stop the rebels, and without spilling a drop of blood on either side?'

'But they gave up for no reason. I didn't do anything!'

Bayaz shrugged, snatched the flower from Jezal's hand and sniffed at it, then tossed it away and nodded his head towards a clump of cheering tradesmen crowding a street corner. 'It would seem they disagree. Just keep your mouth shut and smile. That's always good advice.'

Jezal did his best to oblige, but the smiles were not coming easily. Logen Ninefingers, he was reasonably sure, would not have approved. If there was an opposite to trying to look like less than you were, then this, surely, was its very definition. He glanced nervously around, convinced that the crowds would suddenly recognise him for the utter fraud he felt, and replace the flowers and calls of admiration with angry jeers and the contents of their chamber pots.

But it did not happen. The cheering continued as Jezal and his long column of soldiers worked their slow way through the Three Farms district. With each street Jezal passed down he relaxed a little more. He slowly began to feel as if he must indeed have achieved something worthy of the honour. To wonder if he might, in fact, have been a dauntless commander, a masterful negotiator. If the people of the city wished to worship him as their hero, he began to suppose it would be churlish to refuse.

They passed through a gate in Arnault's Wall and into the central district of the city. Jezal sat up tall in his saddle and puffed out his chest. Bayaz

dropped behind to a respectful distance, allowing him to lead the column alone. The cheering mounted as they tramped down the wide Middleway, as they crossed the Four Corners towards the Agriont. It was like the feeling of victory at the Contest, only it had involved considerably less work, and was that really such an awful thing? What harm could it do? Ninefingers and his humility be damned. Jezal had earned the attention. He plastered a radiant smile across his face. He lifted his arm with self-satisfied confidence, and began to wave.

The great walls of the Agriont rose up ahead and Jezal crossed the moat to the looming south gatehouse, rode up the long tunnel into the fortress, the crackling hooves and tramping boots of the King's Own echoing in the darkness behind him. He processed slowly down the Kingsway, approvingly observed by the great stone monarchs of old and their advisers, between high buildings crammed with onlookers, and into the Square of Marshals.

Crowds had been carefully arranged on each side of the vast open space, leaving a long track of bare stone down the middle. At the far end a wide stand of benches had been erected, a crimson canopy in the centre denoting the presence of royalty. The noise and spectacle were breathtaking.

Jezal remembered the triumph laid on for Marshal Varuz when he returned from his victory over the Gurkish, remembered staring wide-eyed, little more than a child. He had caught one fleeting glimpse of the Marshal himself, seated high on a grey charger, but never imagined that one day he might ride in the place of honour. It still seemed strange, if he was honest. After all, he had defeated a bunch of peasants rather than the most powerful nation in the Circle of the World. Still, it was hardly his place to judge who was worthy of a triumph and who was not, was it?

And so Jezal spurred his horse forwards, passing between the rows of smiling faces, waving arms, through air thick with support and approval. He saw that the great men of the Closed Council were arranged across the front row of benches. He recognised Arch Lector Sult in shining white, High Justice Marovia in solemn black. His erstwhile fencing master, Lord Marshal Varuz, was there, Lord Chamberlain Hoff just beside him. All applauding, mostly with a faint disdain which Jezal found rather ungracious. In the midst, well propped up on a gilded chair, was the King himself.

Jezal, now fully adjusted to his role of conquering hero, dragged hard on the bridle making his steed rear up, front hooves thrashing theatrically at the air. He vaulted from the saddle, approached the royal dais, and sank gracefully down on one knee, head bowed, the applause of the crowd echoing around him, to await the King's gratitude. Would it be too much to hope for a further promotion? Perhaps even a title of his own? It seemed suddenly hard to believe that he had been forced to consider a quiet life in obscurity, not so very long ago.

'Your Majesty . . .' he heard Hoff saying, and he peered up from under his brows. The King was asleep, his eyes firmly closed, his mouth hanging open. Hardly a great surprise in its own way, the man was long past his best, but Jezal could not help being galled. It was the second time, after all, that he had slumbered through one of Jezal's moments of glory. Hoff nudged the monarch as subtly as possible with an elbow, but when he did not wake, was forced to lean close to whisper in his ear.

'Your Majesty—' He got no further. The King leaned sideways, his head slumping, and fell all of a sudden from his gilded chair, sprawling on his back before the stricken members of the Closed Council like a landed whale. His scarlet robe flopped open to reveal a great wet stain across his trousers and the crown tumbled from his head, bounced once and clattered across the flags.

There was a collective gasp, punctuated by a shriek from a lady near the back. Jezal could only stare, open mouthed, as the Lord Chamberlain flung himself down on his knees, bending over the stricken King. A silent moment passed, a moment in which every person in the Square of Marshals held their breath, then Hoff got slowly to his feet. His face had lost all of its redness.

'The King is dead!' he wailed, the tortured echoes ringing from the towers and buildings around the square. Jezal could only grimace. It was just his luck. Now no one would be cheering for him.

Too Many Knives

Logen sat on a rock, twenty strides from the track that Crummock was leading them up. He knew all the ways, Crummock-i-Phail, all the ways in the North. That was the rumour, and Logen hoped it was a fact. He didn't fancy being led straight into an ambush. They were heading north, towards the mountains. Hoping to draw Bethod down off his hills and up into the High Places. Hoping the Union would come up behind him, and catch him in a trap. An awful lot of hoping, that.

It was a hot, sunny day, and the earth under the trees was broken with shadow and slashed with bright sunlight, shifting as the branches moved in the wind, the sun slipping through and stabbing in Logen's face from time to time. Birds tweeted and warbled, trees creaked and rustled, insects floated in the still air, and the forest floor was spattered with clumps of flowers, white and blue. Summer, in the North, but none of it made Logen feel any better. Summer was the best season for killing, and he'd seen plenty more men die in good weather than in bad. So he kept his eyes open, looking out into the trees, watching hard and listening harder.

That was the task Dogman had given him. Staying out on the right flank, making sure none of Bethod's boys crept up while they were all spread out in file down that goat track. It suited Logen well enough. Kept him on the edge, where none of his own side might get tempted to try and kill him.

Watching men moving quiet through the trees, voices kept down low, weapons at the ready, brought back a rush of memories. Some good, some bad. Mostly bad, it had to be said. One man came away from the others as Logen watched, started walking towards him through the trees. He had a big grin on his face, just as friendly as you like, but that meant nothing, Logen had known plenty of men who could grin while they planned to kill you. He'd done it himself, and more than once.

He turned his body sideways a touch, sliding his hand down out of sight and curling it tight round the grip of a knife. You can never have too many knives, his father had told him, and that was strong advice. He looked around, slow and easy, just to make sure there was no one at his back, but there were only empty trees. So he shifted his feet for a better balance and

stayed sitting, trying to look as if nothing worried him, but with every muscle tensed and ready to spring.

'My name's Red Hat.' The man stopped no more than a stride away, still grinning, his left hand slack on the pommel of his sword, the other just hanging.

Logen's mind raced, thinking over all the men he'd wronged, or hurt, or got bound up in a feud with. Those he'd left alive, anyway. Red Hat. He couldn't find a place for it anywhere, but that was no reassurance. Ten men with ten big books couldn't have kept track of all the enemies he'd made, and the friends and the family and the allies of all his enemies. And that was without a man trying to kill him without much of a reason, just to make his own name bigger. 'Can't say I recognise the name.'

Red Hat shrugged. 'No reason you should do. I fought for Old Man Yawl, way back. He was a good man, was Yawl, a man you could respect.'

'Aye,' said Logen, still watching hard for a sudden move.

'But when he went back to the mud I got a place with Littlebone.'

'Never saw eye to eye with Littlebone, even when we were on the same side.'

'Neither did I, being honest. A right bastard. All bloated up with victories that Bethod won for him. Didn't sit well with me. That's why I came over, you know? When I heard Threetrees was here.' He sniffed and looked down at the earth. 'Someone needs to do something about that fucking Feared.'

'So they tell me.' Logen was hearing a lot about this Feared, and none of it good, but it'd take more than a few words in the right direction to get his hand off his knife.

'Still, the Dogman's a good chief, I reckon. One of the best I've had. Knows his business. Careful, like. Thinks about things.'

'Aye. Always thought he would be.'

'You think Bethod's following us?'

Logen didn't take his eyes from Red Hat's. 'Maybe he is, maybe he isn't. Don't reckon we'll know 'til we get up in the mountains and hear him knocking at the door.'

'You think the Union'll keep to their end of it?'

'Don't see why not. That Burr seems to know what he's about, far as I can tell, and his boy Furious as well. They said they'll come, I reckon they'll come. Not much we can do about it either way now, though, is there?'

Red Hat wiped some sweat from his forehead, squinting off into the trees. ‘I reckon you’re right. Anyway, all’s I wanted to say was, I was in the battle, at Ineward. I was on the other side from you, but I saw you fight, and I kept well away, I can tell you that.’ He shook his head, and grinned. ‘Never saw anything like that, before or since. I suppose what I’m saying is, I’m happy to have you with us. Real happy.’

‘Y’are?’ Logen blinked. ‘Alright, then. Good.’

Red Hat nodded. ‘Well. That’s all. See you in the fight, I reckon.’

‘Aye. In the fight.’ Logen watched him stride away through the trees, but even when Red Hat was well out of sight, he somehow couldn’t make his hand uncurl from the grip of his knife, still couldn’t lose the feeling that he had to watch his back.

Seemed he’d let himself forget what the North was like. Or he’d let himself pretend it would be different. Now he saw his mistake. He’d made a trap for himself, years ago. He’d made a great heavy chain, link by bloody link, and he’d bound himself up in it. Somehow he’d been offered the chance to get free, a chance he didn’t come near to deserving, but instead he’d blundered back in, and now things were apt to get bloody.

He could feel it coming. A great weight of death, like the shadow of a mountain falling on him. Every time he said a word, or took a step, or had a thought, even, it seemed he’d somehow brought it closer. He drank it down with every swallow, he sucked it in with every breath. He hunched his shoulders up and stared down at his boots, strips of sunlight across the toes. He should never have let go of Ferro. He should have clung to her like a child to its mother. How many things halfway good had he been offered in his life? And now he’d turned one down, and chosen to come back and settle some scores. He licked his teeth, and he spat sour spit out onto the earth. He should’ve known better. Vengeance is never halfway as simple, or halfway as sweet, as you think it’s going to be.

‘I bet you’re wishing you didn’t come back at all, eh?’

Logen jerked his head up, on the point of pulling the knife and setting to work. Then he saw it was only Tul standing over him. He pushed the blade away and let his hands drop. ‘Do you know what? The thought had occurred.’

The Thunderhead squatted down beside him. ‘Sometimes I find my own name’s a heavy weight to carry. Dread to think how a name like yours must

drag at a man.'

'It can seem a burden.'

'I bet it can.' Tul watched the men moving past, single file, down on the dusty track. 'Don't mind 'em. They'll get used to you. And if things get low, well, you've always got Black Dow's smile to fall back on, eh?'

Logen grinned. 'That's true. It's quite the smile he has, that man. It seems to light up the whole world, don't it?'

'Like sunshine on a cloudy day.' Tul sat down on the rock next to him, pulled the stopper from his canteen and held it out. 'I'm sorry.'

'You're sorry? For what?'

'That we didn't look for you, after you went over that cliff. Thought you were dead.'

'Can't say I hold much of a grudge for that. I was pretty damn sure I was dead myself. I'm the one should have gone looking for you lot, I reckon.'

'Well. Should've looked for each other, maybe. But I guess you learn to stop hoping, after a while. Life teaches you to expect the worst, eh?'

'You have to be realistic, I reckon.'

'That you do. Still, it came out alright. Back with us now, aren't you?'

'Aye.' Logen sighed. 'Back to warring, and bad food, and creeping through woods.'

'Woods,' grunted Tul, and he split a big grin. 'Will I ever get tired of 'em?'

Logen took a drink from the canteen, then handed it back, and Tul took a swig himself. They sat there, silent, for a minute.

'I didn't want this, you know, Tul.'

'Course not. None of us wanted this. Don't mean we don't deserve it, though, eh?' Tul slapped his big hand down on Logen's shoulder. 'You need to talk it over, I'm around.'

Logen watched him go. He was a good man, the Thunderhead. A man that could be trusted. There were still a few left. Tul, and Grim, and the Dogman. Black Dow too, in his own way. It almost gave Logen some hope, that did. Almost made him glad that he chose to come back to the North. Then he looked back at the file of men and he saw Shivers in there, watching him. Logen would have liked to look away, but looking away wasn't something the Bloody-Nine could do. So he sat there on his rock, and they stared at each other, and Logen felt the hatred digging at him until

Shivers was lost through the trees. He shook his head again, and sucked his teeth again, and spat.

You can never have too many knives, his father had told him. Unless they're pointed at you, and by people who don't like you much.

Best of Enemies

‘Tap, tap.’ ‘Not now!’ stormed Colonel Glokta. ‘I have all these to get through!’ There must have been ten thousand papers of confession for him to sign. His desk was groaning with great heaps of them, and the nib of his pen was soft as butter. What with the red ink, his marks looked like dark bloodstains sprayed across the pale paper. ‘Damn it!’ he raged as he knocked over the bottle with his elbow, splashing ink out over the desk, soaking into the piles of papers, dripping to the floor with a steady tap, tap, tap.

‘There will be time later for you to confess. Ample time.’

The Colonel frowned. The air had grown decidedly chill. ‘You again! Always at the worst times!’

‘You remember me, then?’

‘I seem to . . .’ In truth, the Colonel was finding it hard to recall from where. It looked like a woman in the corner, but he could not make out her face.

‘The Maker fell burning . . . he broke upon the bridge below . . .’ The words were familiar, but Glokta could not have said why. Old stories and nonsense. He winced. Damn it but his leg hurt.

‘I seem to . . .’ His usual confidence was all ebbing away. The room was icy cold now, he could see his breath smoking before his face. He stumbled up from his chair as his unwelcome visitor came closer, his leg aching with a vengeance. ‘What do you want?’ he managed to croak.

The face came into the light. It was none other than Mauthis, from the banking house of Valint and Balk. ‘The Seed, Colonel.’ And he smiled his joyless smile. ‘I want the Seed.’

‘I . . . I . . .’ Glokta’s back found the wall. He could go no further.

‘The Seed!’ Now it was Goyle’s face, now Sult’s, now Severard’s, but they all made the same demand. ‘The Seed! I lose patience!’

‘Bayaz,’ he whispered, squeezing his eyes closed, tears running out from underneath his lids. ‘Bayaz knows—’

‘Tap, tap, torturer.’ The woman’s hissing voice again. A finger-tip jabbed at the side of his head, painfully hard. ‘If that old liar knew, it would be

mine already. No. You will find it.' He could not speak for fear. 'You will find it, or I will tear the price from your twisted flesh. So tap, tap, time to wake.'

The finger stabbed at his skull again, digging into the side of his head like a dagger blade. 'Tap, tap, cripple!' hissed the hideous voice in his ear, breath so cold it seemed to burn his bare cheek. 'Tap, tap!'

Tap, tap.

For a moment Glokta hardly knew where he was. He jerked upright, struggling with the sheets, staring about him, hemmed in on every side by threatening shadows, his own whimpering breath hissing in his head. Then everything fell suddenly into place. My new apartments. A pleasant breeze stirred the curtains in the sticky night, washing through the one open window. Glokta saw its shadow shifting on the rendered wall. It swung shut against the frame, open, then shut again.

Tap, tap.

He closed his eyes and breathed a long sigh. Winced as he sagged back in his bed, stretching his legs out, working his toes against the cramps. *Those toes the Gurkish left me, at least. Only another dream. Everything is—*

Then he remembered, and his eyes snapped wide open. *The King is dead. Tomorrow we elect a new one.*

The three hundred and twenty papers were hanged, lifeless, from their nails. They had grown more and more creased, battered, greasy and grubby over the past few weeks. *As the business itself has slid further into the filth.* Many were ink smudged, covered with angrily scrawled notes, with fillings-in and crossings-out. *As men were bought and sold, bullied and blackmailed, bribed and beguiled.* Many were torn where wax had been removed, added, replaced with other colours. *As the allegiances shifted, as the promises were broken, as the balance swung this way and that.*

Arch Lector Sult stood glaring at them, like a shepherd at his troublesome flock, his white coat rumpled, his white hair in disarray. Glokta had never before seen him look anything less than perfectly presented. *He must, at last, taste blood. His own. I would almost want to laugh, if my own mouth were not so terribly salty*.

‘Brock has seventy-five,’ Sult was hissing to himself, white gloved hands fussing with each other behind his back. ‘Brock has seventy-five. Isher has fifty-five. Skald and Barezin, forty a piece. Brock has seventy-five . . .’ He muttered the numbers over and over, as though they were a charm to protect him from evil. *Or from good, perhaps.* ‘Isher has fifty-five . . .’

Glokta had to suppress a smile. *Brock, then Isher, then Skald and Barezin, while the Inquisition and Judiciary struggle over scraps. For all our efforts, the shape of things is much the same as when we began this ugly dance. We might as well have led the country then and saved ourselves the trouble. Perhaps it is still not too late . . .*

Glokta noisily cleared his throat and Sult’s head jerked round. ‘You have something to contribute?’

‘In a manner of speaking, your Eminence.’ Glokta kept his tone as servile as he possibly could. ‘I received some rather . . . troubling information recently.’

Sult scowled, and nodded his head at the papers. ‘More troubling than this?’

Equally, at any rate. After all, whoever wins the vote will have but a brief celebration if the Gurkish arrive and slaughter the lot of us a week later. ‘It has been suggested to me . . . that the Gurkish are preparing to invade Midderland.’

There was a brief, uncomfortable pause. *Scarcely a promising reception, but we have set sail now. What else to do but steer straight for the storm?* ‘Invade?’ sneered Goyle. ‘With what?’

‘It is not the first time I have been told they have a fleet.’ *Trying desperately to patch my foundering vessel.* ‘A considerable fleet, built in secret, after the last war. We could easily make some preparations, then if the Gurkish do come—’

‘And what if you are wrong?’ The Arch Lector was frowning mightily. ‘From whom did this information come?’

Oh, dear me no, that would never do. Carlot dan Eider? Alive? But how? Body found floating by the docks . . . ‘An anonymous source, Arch Lector.’

‘Anonymous?’ His Eminence glowered through narrowed eyes. ‘And you would have me go to the Closed Council, at a time like this, and put before them the unproven gossip of your anonymous source?’ *The waves swamp the deck . . .*

‘I merely wished to alert your Eminence to the possibility—’

‘When are they coming?’ *The torn sailcloth flaps in the gale . . .*

‘My informant did not—’

‘Where will they land?’ *The sailors topple screaming from the rigging . . .*

‘Again, your Eminence I cannot—’

‘What will be their numbers?’ *The wheel breaks off in my shaking hands . . .*

Glokta winced, and decided not to speak at all.

‘Then kindly refrain from distracting us with rumours,’ sneered Sult, his lip twisted with contempt. *The ship vanishes beneath the merciless waves, her cargo of precious warnings consigned to the deep, and her captain will not be missed.* ‘We have more pressing concerns than a legion of Gurkish phantoms!’

‘Of course, your Eminence.’ *And if the Gurkish come, who will we hang? Oh, Superior Glokta, of course. Why ever did that damn cripple not speak up?*

Sult’s mind had already slipped back into its well-worn circles. ‘We have thirty-one votes and Marovia has something over twenty. Thirty-one. Not enough to make the difference.’ He shook his head grimly, blue eyes darting over the papers. *As if there were some new way to look at them that would alter the terrible mathematics.* ‘Nowhere near enough.’

‘Unless we were to come to an understanding with High Justice Marovia.’ Again, a pause, even more uncomfortable than last time. Oh dear. I must have said that out loud.

‘An understanding?’ hissed Sult.

‘With Marovia?’ squealed Goyle, his eyes bulging with triumph. *When the safe options are all exhausted, we must take risks. Is that not what I told myself as I rode down to the bridge, while the Gurkish massed upon the other side? Ah well, once more into the tempest . . .*

Glokta took a deep breath. ‘Marovia’s seat on the Closed Council is no safer than anyone else’s. We may have been working against each other, but only out of habit. On the subject of this vote our aims are the same. To secure a weak candidate and maintain the balance. Together you have more than fifty votes. That might well be enough to tip the scales.’

Goyle sneered his contempt. ‘Join forces with that peasant-loving hypocrite? Have you lost your reason?’

‘Shut up, Goyle.’ Sult glared at Glokta for a long while, his lips pursed in thought. *Considering my punishment, perhaps? Another tongue-lashing? Or a real lashing? Or my body found floating—* ‘You are right. Go and speak to Marovia.’

Sand dan Glokta, once more the hero! Goyle’s jaw hung open. ‘But . . . your Eminence!’

‘The time for pride is far behind us!’ snarled Sult. ‘We must seize any chance of keeping Brock and the rest from the throne. We must find compromises, however painful, and we must take whatever allies we can. Go!’ he hissed over his shoulder, folding his arms and turning back to his crackling papers. ‘Strike a deal with Marovia.’

Glokta got stiffly up from his chair. *A shame to leave such lovely company, but when duty calls* . . . He treated Goyle to the briefest of toothless smiles, then took up his cane and limped for the door.

‘And Glokta!’ He winced as he turned back into the room. ‘Marovia’s aims and ours may meet for now. But we cannot trust him. Tread carefully.’

‘Of course, your Eminence.’ *I always do. What other choice, when every step is agony?*

The private office of the High Justice was as big as a barn, its ceiling covered in festoons of old moulding, riddled with shadows. Although it was only late afternoon, the thick ivy outside the windows, and the thick grime on the panes, had sunk the place into a perpetual twilight. Tottering heaps of papers were stacked on every surface. Wedges of documents tied with black tape. Piles of leather-bound ledgers. Stacks of dusty parchments in ostentatious, swirling script, stamped with huge seals of red wax and glittering gilt. A kingdom’s worth of law, it looked like. *And, indeed, it probably is.*

‘Superior Glokta, good evening.’ Marovia himself was seated at a long table near the empty fireplace, set for dinner, a flickering candelabra making each dish glisten in the gloom. ‘I hope you do not mind if I eat while we talk? I would rather dine in the comfort of my rooms, but I find myself eating here more and more. So much to do, you see? And one of my secretaries appears to have taken a holiday unannounced.’ *A holiday to the slaughterhouse floor, in fact, by way of the intestines of a herd of swine*.

‘Would you care to join me?’ Marovia gestured at a large joint of meat, close to raw in the centre, swimming in bloody gravy.

Glokta licked at his empty gums as he manoeuvred himself into a chair opposite. ‘I would be delighted, your Worship, but the laws of dentistry prevent me.’

‘Ah, of course. Those laws there can be no circumventing, even by a High Justice. You have my sympathy, Superior. One of my greatest pleasures is a good cut of meat, and the bloodier the better. Just show them the flame, I always tell my cook. Just show it to them.’ *Funny. I tell my Practicals to start the same way*. ‘And to what do I owe this unexpected visit? Do you come on your own initiative, or at the urging of your employer, my esteemed colleague from the Closed Council, Arch Lector Sult?’

Your bitter mortal enemy from the Closed Council, do you mean? ‘His Eminence is aware that I am here.’

‘Is he?’ Marovia carved another slice and lifted it dripping onto his plate. ‘And with what message has he sent you? Something relating to tomorrow’s business in the Open Council, perhaps?’

‘You spoil my surprise, your Worship. May I speak plainly?’

‘If you know how.’

Glokta showed the High Justice his empty grin. ‘This affair with the vote is a terrible thing for business. The doubt, the uncertainty, the worry. Bad for everyone’s business.’

‘Some more than others.’ Marovia’s knife squealed against the plate as he slit a ribbon of fat from the edge of his meat.

‘Of course. At particular risk are those that sit on the Closed Council, and those that struggle on their behalf. They are unlikely to be given such a free hand if powerful men such as Brock or Isher are voted to the throne.’ *Some of us, indeed, are unlikely to live out the week.*

Marovia speared a slice of carrot with his fork and stared sourly at it. ‘A lamentable state of affairs. It would have been preferable for all concerned if Raynault or Ladisla were still alive.’ He thought about it for a moment. ‘If Raynault were still alive, at least. But the vote will take place tomorrow, however much we might tear our hair. It is hard now to see our way to a remedy.’ He looked from the carrot to Glokta. ‘Or do you suggest one?’

‘You, your Worship, control between twenty and thirty votes on the Open Council.’

Marovia shrugged. ‘I have some influence, I cannot deny it.’

‘The Arch Lector can call on thirty votes himself.’

‘Good for his Eminence.’

‘Not necessarily. If the two of you oppose each other, as you always have, your votes will mean nothing. One for Isher, the other for Brock, and no difference made.’

Marovia sighed. ‘A sad end to our two glittering careers.’

‘Unless you were to pool your resources. Then you might have sixty votes between you. As many, almost, as Brock controls. Enough to make a King of Skald, or Barezin, or Heugen, or even some unknown, depending on how things go. Someone who might be more easily influenced in the future. Someone who might keep the Closed Council he has, rather than selecting a new one.’

‘A King to make us all happy, eh?’

‘If you were to express a preference for one man or another, I could take that back to his Eminence.’ *More steps, more coaxing, more disappointments. Oh, to have a great office of my own, and to sit all day in comfort while cringing bastards slog up my stairs to smile at my insults, lap up my lies, beg for my poisonous support.*

‘Shall I tell you what would make me happy, Superior Glokta?’

Now for the musings of another power-mad old fart. ‘By all means, your Worship.’

Marovia tossed his cutlery onto his plate, sat back in his chair and gave a long, tired sigh. ‘I would like no King at all. I would like every man equal under the law, to have a say in the running of his own country and the choosing of his own leaders. I would like no King, and no nobles, and a Closed Council selected by, and answerable to, the citizens themselves. A Closed Council open to all, you might say. What do you think of that?’

I think some people would say that it sounds very much like treason. The rest would simply call it madness. ‘I think, your Worship, that your notion is a fantasy.’

‘Why so?’

‘Because the vast majority of men would far rather be told what to do than make their own choices. Obedience is easy.’

The High Justice laughed. ‘Perhaps you are right. But things will change. This rebellion has convinced me of it. Things will change, by small steps.’

‘I am sure Lord Brock on the throne is one small step none of us would like to see taken.’

‘Lord Brock does indeed have very strong opinions, mostly relating to himself. You make a convincing case, Superior.’ Marovia sat back in his chair, hands resting on his belly, staring at Glokta through narrowed eyes. ‘Very well. You may tell Arch Lector Sult that this once we have common cause. If a neutral candidate with sufficient support presents themselves, I will have my votes cast along with his. Who could have thought it? The Closed Council united.’ He slowly shook his head. ‘Strange times indeed.’

‘They certainly are, your Worship.’ Glokta struggled to his feet, wincing as he put his weight on his burning leg, and shuffled across the gloomy, echoing space towards the door. *Strange, though, that our High Justice is so philosophical on the subject of losing his position tomorrow. I have scarcely ever seen a man look calmer. He paused as he touched the handle of the door. One would almost suppose that he knows something we do not. One might almost suppose that he already has a plan in mind.*

He turned back. ‘Can I trust you, High Justice?’

Marovia looked sharply up, the carving knife poised in his hand. ‘What a beautifully quaint question from a man in your line of work. I suppose that you can trust me to act in my own interests. Just as far as I can trust you to do the same. Our deal goes no further than that. Nor should it. You are a clever man, Superior, you make me smile.’ And he turned back to his joint of meat, prodding at it with a fork and making the blood run. ‘You should find another master.’

Glokta shuffled out. *A charming suggestion. But I already have two more than I’d like.*

The prisoner was a scrawny, sinewy specimen, naked and bagged as usual, with hands manacled securely behind his back. Glokta watched as Frost dragged him into the domed room from the cells, his stumbling bare feet flapping against the cold floor.

‘He wasn’t too hard to get a hold of,’ Severard was saying. ‘He left the others a while ago, but he’s been hanging round the city like the smell of piss ever since. We picked him up yesterday night.’

Frost flung the prisoner down in the chair. *Where am I? Who has me? What do they want? A horrifying moment, just before the work begins. The terror and the helplessness, the sick tingling of anticipation. My own memory of it was sharply refreshed, only the other day, at the hands of the charming Magister Eider. I was set free unmolested, however.* The prisoner sat there, head tilted to one side, the canvas on the front of the bag moving back and forth with his hurried breath. I very much doubt that he will be so lucky.

Glokta's eyes crept reluctantly to the painting above the prisoner's bagged head. *Our old friend Kanedias.* The painted face stared grimly down from the domed ceiling, the arms spread wide, the colourful fire behind. *The Maker fell burning* . . . He weighed the heavy hammer reluctantly in his hand. 'Let's get on with it, then.' Severard snatched the canvas bag away with a showy flourish.

The Navigator squinted into the bright lamplight, a weather-beaten face, tanned and deeply lined, head shaved, like a priest. *Or a confessed traitor, of course.*

'Your name is Brother Longfoot?'

'Indeed! Of the noble Order of Navigators! I assure you that I am innocent of any crime!' The words came out in rush. 'I have done nothing unlawful, no. That would not be my way at all. I am a law-abiding man, and always have been. I can think of no possible reason why I should be manhandled in this way! None!' His eyes swivelled down and he saw the anvil, gleaming on the floor between him and Glokta, where the table would usually have been. His voice rose an entire octave higher. 'The Order of Navigators is well respected, and I am a member in good standing! Exceptional standing! Navigation is the foremost of my many remarkable talents, it is indeed, the foremost of—'

Glokta cracked his hammer against the top of the anvil with a clang to wake the dead. 'Stop! Talking!' The little man blinked, and gaped, but he shut up. Glokta sank back in his chair, kneading at his withered thigh, the pain prickling up his back. 'Do you have any notion of how tired I am? Of how much I have to do? The agony of getting out of bed each morning leaves me a broken man before the day even begins, and the present moment is an exceptionally stressful one. It is therefore a matter of the most supreme indifference to me whether you can walk for the rest of your life,

whether you can see for the rest of your life, whether you can hold your shit in for the rest of your intensely short, intensely painful life. Do you understand?'

The Navigator looked wide-eyed up at Frost, looming over him like an outsize shadow. 'I understand,' he whispered.

'Good,' said Severard.

'Ve' gooth,' said Frost.

'Very good indeed,' said Glokta. 'Tell me, Brother Longfoot, is one among your remarkable talents a superhuman resistance to pain?'

The prisoner swallowed. 'It is not.'

'Then the rules of this game are simple. I ask a question and you answer precisely, correctly, and, above all, briefly. Do I make myself clear?'

'I understand completely. I do not speak other than to—'

Frost's fist sunk into his gut and he folded up, eyes bulging. 'Do you see,' hissed Glokta, 'that your answer there should have been yes?' The albino seized the wheezing Navigator's leg and dragged his foot up onto the anvil. *Oh, cold metal on the sensitive sole. Quite unpleasant, but it could be so much worse. And something tells me it probably will be.* Frost snapped a manacle shut around Longfoot's ankle.

'I apologise for the lack of imagination.' Glokta sighed. 'In our defence, it's difficult to be always thinking of something new. I mean, smashing a man's feet with a lump hammer, it's so . . .'

'Pethethrian?' ventured Frost.

Glokta heard a sharp volley of laughter from behind Severard's mask, felt his own mouth grinning too. *He really should have been a comedian, rather than a torturer*. 'Pedestrian! Precisely so. But don't worry. If we haven't got what we need by the time we've crushed everything below your knees to pulp, we'll see if we can think of something more inventive for the rest of your legs. How does that sound?'

'But I have done nothing!' squealed Longfoot, just getting his breath back. 'I know nothing! I did—'

'Forget . . . about all that. It is meaningless now.' Glokta leaned slowly, painfully forwards, let the head of the hammer tap gently against the iron beside the Navigator's bare foot. 'What I want you to concentrate on . . . are my questions . . . and your toes . . . and this hammer. But don't worry if you

find that difficult now. Believe me when I say – once the hammer starts falling, you will find it easy to ignore everything else.'

Longfoot stared at the anvil, nostrils flaring as his breath snorted quickly in and out. *And the seriousness of the situation finally impresses itself upon him.*

'Questions, then,' said Glokta. 'You are familiar with the man who styles himself Bayaz, the First of the Magi?'

'Yes! Please! Yes! Until recently he was my employer.'

'Good.' Glokta shifted in his chair, trying to find a more comfortable position while bending forwards. 'Very good. You accompanied him on a journey?'

'I was the guide!'

'What was your destination?'

'The Island of Shabulyan, at the edge of the World.'

Glokta let the head of the hammer click against the anvil again. 'Oh come, come. The edge of the World? A fantasy, surely?'

'Truly! Truly! I have seen it! I stood upon that island with my own feet!'

'Who went with you?'

'There was . . . was Logen Ninefingers, from the distant North.' *Ah, yes, he of the scars and the tight lips.* 'Ferro Maljinn, a Kantic woman.' *The one that gave our friend Superior Goyle so much trouble.* 'Jezal dan Luthar, a . . . a Union officer.' A posturing dolt. 'Malacus Quai, Bayaz' apprentice.' *The skinny liar with the troglodyte's complexion*. 'And then Bayaz himself!'

'Six of you?'

'Only six!'

'A long and a difficult journey to undertake. What was at the edge of the World that demanded such an effort, besides water?'

Longfoot's lip trembled. 'Nothing!' Glokta frowned, and nudged at the Navigator's big toe with the head of the hammer. 'It was not there! The thing that Bayaz sought! It was not there! He said he had been tricked!'

'What was it that he thought would be there?'

'He said it was a stone!'

'A stone?'

'The woman asked him. He said it was a rock . . . a rock from the Other Side.' The Navigator shook his sweating head. 'An unholy notion! I am glad we found no such thing. Bayaz called it the Seed!'

Glokta felt the grin melting from his face. *The Seed. Is it my imagination, or has the room grown colder?* 'What else did he say about it?'

'Just myths and nonsense!'

'Try me.'

'Stories, about Glustrod, and ruined Aulcus, and taking forms, and stealing faces! About speaking to devils, and the summoning of them. About the Other Side.'

'What else?' Glokta dealt Longfoot's toe a firmer tap with the hammer.

'Ah! Ah! He said the Seed was the stuff of the world below! That it was left over from before the Old Time, when demons walked the earth! He said it was a great and powerful weapon! That he meant to use it, against the Gurkish! Against the Prophet!' *A weapon, from before the Old Time. The summoning of devils, the taking of forms.* Kanedias seemed to frown down from the wall more grimly than ever, and Glokta flinched. He remembered his nightmare trip into the House of the Maker, the patterns of light on the floor, the shifting rings in the darkness. He remembered stepping out onto the roof, standing high above the city without climbing a single stair.

'You did not find it?' he whispered, his mouth dry.

'No! It was not there!'

'And then?'

'That was all! We came back across the mountains. We made a raft and rode the great Aos back to the sea. We took a ship from Calcis and I sit before you now!'

Glokta narrowed his eyes, studying carefully his prisoner's face. *There is more. I see it.* 'What are you not telling me?'

'I have told you everything! I have no talent for dissembling!' *That, at least, is true. His lies are plain.*

'If your contract is ended, why are you still in the city?'

'Because . . . because . . .' The Navigator's eyes darted round the room.

'Oh, dear me, no.' The heavy hammer came down with all of Glokta's crippled strength and crushed Longfoot's big toe flat with a dull thud. The Navigator gaped at it, eyes bulging from his head. *Ah, that beautiful, horrible moment between stubbing your toe and feeling the hurt. Here it comes. Here it comes. Here it—* Longfoot let vent a great shriek, squirmed around in his chair, face contorted with agony.

‘I know the feeling,’ said Glokta, wincing as he wriggled his own remaining toes around in his sweaty boot. ‘I truly, truly do, and I sympathise. That blinding flash of pain, then up washes the sick and dizzy faintness of the shattered bone, then the slow pulsing up the leg that seems to drag the water from your eyes and make your whole body tremble.’ Longfoot gasped, and whimpered, tears glistening on his cheeks. ‘And what comes next? Weeks of limping? Months of hobbling, crippled? And if the next blow is to on your ankle?’ Glokta prodded at Longfoot’s shin with the end of the hammer. ‘Or square on your kneecap, what then? Will you ever walk again? I know the feelings well, believe me.’ *So how can I inflict them now, on someone else?* He shrugged his twisted shoulders. *One of life’s mysteries*. ‘Another?’ And he raised the hammer again.

‘No! No! Wait!’ wailed Longfoot. ‘The priest! God help me, a priest came to the Order! A Gurkish priest! He said that one day the First of the Magi might ask for a Navigator, and that he wished to be told of it! That he wished to be told what happened afterward! He made threats, terrible threats, we had no choice but to obey! I was waiting in the city for another Navigator, who will convey the news! Only this morning I told him everything I have told you! I was about to leave Adua, I swear!’

‘What was the name of this priest?’ Longfoot said nothing, his wet eyes wide, the breath hissing in his nose. *Oh, why must they test me?* Glokta looked down at the Navigator’s toe. It was already starting to swell and go blotchy, streaks of black blood-blisters down each side, the nail deep, brooding purple, edged with angry red. Glokta ground the end of the hammer’s handle savagely into it. ‘The name of the priest! His name! His name! His—’

‘Aargh! Mamun! God help me! His name was Mamun!’ *Mamun. Yulwei spoke of him, in Dagoska. The first apprentice of the Prophet himself. Together they broke the Second Law, together they ate the flesh of men.*

‘Mamun. I see. Now.’ Glokta craned further forward, ignoring an ugly tingling up his twisted spine. ‘What is Bayaz doing here?’

Longfoot gaped, a long string of drool hanging from his bottom lip. ‘I don’t know!’

‘What does he want with us? What does he want in the Union?’

‘I don’t know! I have told you everything!’

‘Leaning forwards is a considerable ordeal for me. One that I begin to tire of.’ Glokta frowned, and lifted the hammer, its polished head glinting.

‘I just find ways from here to there! I only navigate! Please! No!’ Longfoot squeezed his eyes shut, tongue wedged between his teeth. *Here it comes. Here it comes. Here it comes . . .*

Glokta tossed the hammer clattering down on the floor and leaned back, rocking his aching hips left and right to try and squeeze away the aches. ‘Very well,’ he sighed. ‘I am satisfied.’

The prisoner opened first one grimacing eye, and then the other. He looked up, face full of hope. ‘I can go?’

Severard chuckled softly behind his mask. Even Frost made a kind of hissing sound. ‘Of course you can go.’ Glokta smiled his empty smile. ‘You can go back in your bag.’

The Navigator’s face went slack with horror. ‘God take pity on me.’

If there is a God, he has no pity in him.

Fortunes of War

Lord Marshal Burr was in the midst of writing a letter, but he smiled up as West let the tent flap drop. ‘How are you, Colonel?’

‘Well enough, thank you, sir. The preparations are well underway. We should be ready to leave at first light.’

‘As efficient as ever. Where would I be without you?’ Burr gestured at the decanter. ‘Wine?’

‘Thank you, sir.’ West poured himself a glass. ‘Would you care for one?’

Burr indicated a battered canteen at his elbow. ‘I believe it would be prudent if I was to stick to water.’

West winced, guiltily. He hardly felt as if he had the right to ask, but there was no escaping it now. ‘How are you feeling, sir?’

‘Much better, thank you for asking. Much, much better.’ He grimaced, put one fist over his mouth, and burped. ‘Not entirely recovered, but well on the way.’ As though to prove the point he got up easily from his chair and strode to the map, hands clasped behind his back. His face had indeed regained much of its colour. He no longer stood hunched over, wobbling as though he were about to fall.

‘Lord Marshal . . . I wanted to speak to you . . . about the battle at Dunbrec.’

Burr looked round. ‘About what feature of it?’

‘When you were sick . . .’ West teetered on the brink of speaking, then let the words bubble out. ‘I didn’t send for a surgeon! I could have, but—’

‘I’m proud that you didn’t.’ West blinked. He had hardly dared to hope for that answer. ‘You did what I would have wanted you to do. It is important that an officer should care, but it is vital that he should not care too much. He must be able to place his men in harm’s way. He must be able to send them to their deaths, if he deems it necessary. He must be able to make sacrifices, and to weigh the greatest good, without emotion counting in his choice. That is why I like you, West. You have compassion in you, but you have iron too. One cannot be a great leader without a certain . . . ruthlessness.’

West found himself lost for words. The Lord Marshal chuckled, and slapped the table with his open hand. ‘But as it happens, no harm done, eh? The line held, the Northmen were turned out of Angland, and I tottered through alive, as you can see!’

‘I am truly glad to see you feeling better, sir.’

Burr grinned. ‘Things are looking up. We are free to move again, with our lines of supply secure and the weather finally dry. If your Dogman’s plan works then we have a chance of finishing Bethod within a couple of weeks! They’ve been a damn courageous and useful set of allies!’

‘They have, sir.’

‘But this trap must be carefully baited, and sprung at just the right moment.’ Burr peered at the map, rocking energetically back and forward on his heels. ‘If we’re too early Bethod may slip away. If we’re too late our Northern friends could be crushed before we can reach them. We have to make sure bloody Poulder and bloody Kroy don’t drag their bloody feet!’ He winced and put a hand on his stomach, reached for his canteen and took a swig of water.

‘I’d say you finally have them house-trained, Lord Marshal.’

‘Don’t you believe it. They’re only waiting for their chance to put the knife in me, the pair of them! And now the King is dead. Who knows who will replace him? Voting for a monarch! Have you ever heard of such a thing?’

West’s mouth felt unpleasantly dry. It was almost impossible to believe that the whole business had been partly his own doing. It would hardly have done to take credit for it however, given that his part had been to murder the heir to the throne in cold blood. ‘Who do you think they will choose, sir?’ he croaked.

‘I’m no courtier, West, for all I have a seat on the Closed Council. Brock, maybe, or Isher? I’ll tell you one thing for sure – if you think there’s violence going on up here, it’ll be twice as brutal back home in Midderland, with half the mercy shown.’ The Marshal burped, and swallowed, and laid a hand on his stomach. ‘Gah. No Northman’s anything like as ruthless as those vultures on the Closed Council when they get started. And what will change when they have their new man in his robes of state? Not much, I’m thinking. Not much.’

‘Very likely, sir.’

‘I daresay there’s nothing that we can do about it either way. A pair of blunt soldiers, eh, West?’ He stepped up close to the map again, and traced their route northwards towards the mountains, his thick forefinger hissing over the paper. ‘We must make sure we are ready to move at sunup. Every hour could be vital. Poulder and Kroy have had their orders?’

‘Signed and delivered, sir, and they understand the urgency. Don’t worry, Lord Marshal, we’ll be ready to go in the morning.’

‘Don’t worry?’ Burr snorted. ‘I’m the commander of his Majesty’s army. Worrying is what I do. But you should get some rest.’ He waved West out of the tent with one thick hand. ‘I’ll see you at first light.’

They played their cards by torchlight on the hillside, in the calm night under the stars, and by torchlight below them the Union army made its hurried preparations to advance. Lamps bobbed and moved, soldiers cursed in the darkness. Bangs, and clatters, and the ill-tempered calls of men and beasts floated through the still air.

‘There’ll be no sleep for anyone tonight.’ Brint finished dealing and scraped up his cards with his fingernails.

‘I wish I could remember the last time I got more than three good hours together,’ said West. Back in Adua, most likely, before his sister came to the city. Before the Marshal put him on his staff. Before he came back to Angland, before he met Prince Ladisla, before the freezing journey north and the things he had done on it. He hunched his shoulders and frowned down at his dog-eared cards.

‘How’s the Lord Marshal?’ asked Jalenhorm.

‘Much better, I’m pleased to say.’

‘Thank the fates for that.’ Kaspa raised his brows. ‘I don’t much fancy the idea of that pedant Kroy in charge.’

‘Or Poulder either,’ said Brint. ‘The man’s ruthless as a snake.’

West could only agree. Poulder and Kroy hated him almost as much as they hated each other. If one of them took command he’d be lucky if he found himself swabbing latrines the following day. Probably he’d be on a boat to Adua within the week. To swab latrines there.

‘Have you heard about Luthar?’ asked Jalenhorm.

‘What about him?’

‘He’s back in Adua.’ West looked up sharply. Ardee was in Adua, and the idea of the two of them together again was not exactly a heartening thought.

‘I had a letter from my cousin Ariss.’ Kaspa squinted as he clumsily fanned out his cards. ‘She says Jezal was far away somewhere, on some kind of mission for the king.’

‘A mission?’ West doubted anyone would have trusted Jezal with anything important enough to be called a mission.

‘All of Adua is buzzing with it, apparently.’

‘They say he led some charge or other,’ said Jalenhorm, ‘across some bridge.’

West raised his eyebrows. ‘Did he now?’

‘They say he killed a score of men on the battlefield.’

‘Only a score?’

‘They say he bedded the Emperor’s daughter,’ murmured Brint.

West snorted. ‘Somehow I find that the most believable of the three.’

Kaspa spluttered with laughter. ‘Well whatever the truth of it, he’s been made up to Colonel.’

‘Good for him,’ muttered West, ‘he always seems to fall on his feet, that boy.’

‘Did you hear about this revolt?’

‘My sister mentioned something about it in her last letter. Why?’

‘There was a full-scale rebellion, Ariss tells me. Thousands of peasants, roaming the countryside, burning and looting, hanging anyone with a ‘dan’ in their name. Guess who was given command of the force sent to stop them?’

West sighed. ‘Not our old friend Jezal dan Luthar, by any chance?’

‘The very same, and he persuaded them to go back to their homes, how about that?’

‘Jezal dan Luthar,’ murmured Brint, ‘with the common touch. Who could have thought it?’

‘Not me.’ Jalenhorm emptied his glass and poured himself another. ‘But they’re calling him a hero now, apparently.’

‘Toasting him in the taverns,’ said Brint.

‘Congratulating him in the Open Council,’ said Kaspa.

West scraped the jingling pile of coins towards him with the edge of his hand. ‘I wish I could say I was surprised, but I always guessed I’d be taking

my orders from Lord Marshal Luthar one of these days.' It could have been worse, he supposed. It could have been Poulder or Kroy.

The first pink glow of dawn was creeping across the tops of the hills as West walked up the slope towards the Lord Marshal's tent. It was past time to give the word to move. He saluted grimly to the guards beside the flap and pushed on through. One lamp was still burning in the corner beyond, casting a ruddy glow over the maps, over the folding chairs and the folding tables, filling the creases in the blankets on Burr's bed with black shadows. West crossed to it, thinking over all the tasks he had to get done that morning, checking that he had left nothing out.

'Lord Marshal, Poulder and Kroy are waiting for your word to move.' Burr lay upon his camp bed, his eyes closed, his mouth open, sleeping peacefully. West would have liked to leave him there, but time was already wasting. 'Lord Marshal!' he snapped, walking up close to the bed. Still he did not respond.

That was when West noticed that his chest was not moving.

He reached out with hesitant fingers and held them above Burr's open mouth. No warmth. No breath. West felt the horror slowly spreading out from his chest to the very tips of his fingers. There could be no doubt. Lord Marshal Burr was dead.

It was grey morning when the coffin was carried from the tent on the shoulders of six solemn guardsmen, the surgeon walking along behind with his hat in his hand. Poulder, Kroy, West, and a scattering of the army's most senior men lined the path to watch it go. Burr himself would no doubt have approved of the simple box in which his corpse would be shipped back to Adua. The same rough carpentry in which the Union's lowest levies were buried.

West stared at it, numb.

The man inside had been like a father to him, or the closest he had ever come to having one. A mentor and protector, a patron and a teacher. An actual father, rather than the bullying, drunken worm that nature had cursed him with. And yet he did not feel sorrow as he stared at that rough wooden box. He felt fear. For the army and for himself. His first instinct was not to

weep, it was to run. But there was nowhere to run to. Every man had to do his part, now more than ever.

Kroy lifted his sharp chin and stood up iron rigid as the shadow of the casket passed across them. ‘Marshal Burr will be much missed. He was a staunch soldier, and a brave leader.’

‘A patriot,’ chimed in Poulder, his lip trembling, one hand pressed against his chest as though it might burst open with emotion. ‘A patriot who gave his life for his country! It was my honour to serve under his orders.’

West wanted to vomit at their hypocrisy, but the fact was he desperately needed them. The Dogman and his people were out in the hills, moving north, trying to lure Bethod into a trap. If the Union army did not follow, and soon, they would have no help when the King of the Northmen finally caught up to them. They would only succeed in luring themselves into their graves.

‘A terrible loss,’ said West, watching the coffin carried slowly down the hillside, ‘but we will honour him best by fighting on.’

Kroy gave a regulation nod. ‘Well said, Colonel. We will make these Northmen pay!’

‘We must. To that end, we should make ready to advance. We are already behind schedule, and the plan relies on precise—’

‘What?’ Poulder stared at him as though he suspected West of having gone suddenly insane. ‘Move forward? Without orders? Without a clear chain of command?’

Kroy gave vent to an explosive snort. ‘Impossible.’

Poulder violently shook his head. ‘Out of the question, entirely out of the question.’

‘But Marshal Burr’s orders were quite specific—’

‘Circumstances have very plainly altered.’ Kroy’s face was an expressionless slab. ‘Until I receive explicit instructions from the Closed Council, no one will be moving my division so much as a hair’s breadth.’

‘General Poulder, surely you—’

‘In this particular circumstance, I cannot but agree with General Kroy. The army cannot move an inch until the Open Council has selected a new king, and the king has appointed a new Lord Marshal.’ And he and Kroy eyed each other with the deepest hatred and distrust.

West stood stock still, his mouth hanging slightly open, unable to believe his ears. It would take days for news of Burr's death to reach the Agriont, and even if the new king decided on a replacement immediately, days for the orders to come back. West pictured the long miles of forested track to Uffrith, the long leagues of salt water to Adua. A week, perhaps, if the decision was made at once, and with the government in chaos that hardly seemed likely.

In the meantime the army would sit there, doing nothing, the hills before them all but undefended, while Bethod was given ample time to march north, slaughter the Dogman and his friends, and return to his positions. Positions which, no doubt, untold numbers of their own men would be killed assaulting once the army finally had a new commander. All an utterly pointless, purposeless waste. Burr's coffin had only just passed out of sight but already, it seemed, it was quite as if the man had never lived. West felt the horror creeping up his throat, threatening to strangle him with rage and frustration. 'But the Dogman and his Northmen, our allies . . . they are counting on our help!'

'Unfortunate,' observed Kroy.

'Regrettable,' murmured Poulder, with a sharp intake of breath, 'but you must understand, Colonel West, that the entire business is quite out of our hands.'

Kroy nodded stiffly. 'Out of our hands. And that is all.'

West stared at the two of them, and a terrible wave of powerlessness swept over him. The same feeling that he had when Prince Ladisla decided to cross the river, when Prince Ladisla decided to order the charge. The same feeling that he had when he floundered up in the mist, blood in his eyes, and knew the day was lost. That feeling that he was nothing more than an observer. That feeling that he had promised himself he would never have again. His own fault, perhaps.

A man should only make such promises as he is sure he can keep.

The Kingmaker

It was a hot day outside, and sunlight poured in through the great stained-glass windows, throwing coloured patterns across the tiled floor of the Lords' Round. The great space usually felt airy and cool, even in the summer. Today it felt stuffy, suffocating, uncomfortably hot. Jezal tugged his sweaty collar back and forth, trying to let some breath of air into his uniform without moving from his attitude of stiff attention.

The last time he had stood in this spot, back to the curved wall, had been the day the Guild of Mercers was dissolved. It was hard to imagine that it was little more than a year ago, so much seemed to have happened since. He had thought then that the Lords' Round could not possibly have been more crowded, more tense, more excited. How wrong he had been.

The curved banks of benches that took up the majority of the chamber were crammed to bursting with the Union's most powerful noblemen, and the air was thick with their expectant, anxious, fearful whispering. The entire Open Council was in breathless attendance, wedged shoulder to fur-trimmed shoulder, each man with the glittering chain about his shoulders that marked him out in gold or silver as the head of his family. Jezal might have had little more understanding of politics than a mushroom, but even he had to be excited by the importance of the occasion. The selection of a new High King of the Union by open vote. He felt a flutter of nerves in his throat at the thought. As occasions went, it was difficult to imagine one bigger.

The people of Adua certainly knew it. Beyond the walls, in the streets and squares of the city, they were waiting eagerly for news of the Open Council's decision. Waiting to cheer their new monarch, or perhaps to jeer him, depending on the choice. Beyond the high doors of the Lords' Round, the Square of Marshals was a single swarming crowd, each man and woman in the Agriont desperate to be the first to hear word from inside. Futures would be decided, great debts would be settled, fortunes won and lost on the result. Only a lucky fraction had been permitted into the public gallery, but still enough that the spectators were crushed together around the

balcony, in imminent danger of being shoved over and plunging to the tiled floor below.

The inlaid doors at the far end of the hall opened with a ringing crash, the echoes rebounding from the distant ceiling and booming around the great space. There was a rustling as every one of the councillors swivelled in his seat to look towards the entrance, and then a clatter of feet as the Closed Council approached steadily down the aisle between the benches. A gaggle of secretaries, and clerks, and hangers-on hurried after, papers and ledgers clutched in their eager hands. Lord Chamberlain Hoff strode at their head, frowning grimly. Behind him walked Sult, all in white, and Marovia, all in black, their faces equally solemn. Next came Varuz, and Halleck, and . . . Jezal's face fell. Who else but the First of the Magi, attired once again in his outrageous wizard's mantle, his apprentice skulking at his elbow. Bayaz grinned as though he were doing nothing more than attending the theatre. Their eyes met, and the Magus had the gall to wink. Jezal was far from amused.

To a swelling chorus of mutterings, the old men took their high chairs behind a long, curved table, facing the noblemen on their banked benches. Their aides arranged themselves on smaller chairs and laid out their papers, opened their books, whispered to their masters in hushed voices. The tension in the hall rose yet another step towards outright hysteria.

Jezal felt a sweaty shiver run up his back. Glokta was there, beside the Arch Lector, and the familiar face was anything but a reassurance. Jezal had been at Ardee's house only that morning, and all night too. Needless to say, he had neither forsworn her nor proposed marriage. His head spun from going round and round the issue. The more time he spent with her, the more impossible any decision seemed to become.

Glokta's fever-bright eyes swivelled to his, held them, then flicked away. Jezal swallowed, with some difficulty. He had landed himself in a devil of a spot, alright. What ever was he to do?

Glokta gave Luthar one brief glare. *Just to remind him of where we stand.* Then he swivelled in his chair, grimacing as he stretched out his throbbing leg, pressing his tongue hard into his empty gums as he felt the knee click.

We have more important business than Jezal dan Luthar. Far more important business.

For this one day, the power lies with the Open Council, not the Closed. With the nobles, not the bureaucrats. With the many, not the few. Glokta looked down the table, at the faces of the great men who had guided the course of the Union for the last dozen years and more: Sult, Hoff, Marovia, Varuz, and all the rest. Only one member of the Closed Council was smiling. *Its newest and least welcome addition.*

Bayaz sat in his tall chair, his only companion his pallid apprentice, Malacus Quai. *And he looks scant companionship for anyone*. The First of the Magi seemed to revel in the bowel-loosening tension as much as his fellows were horrified by it, his smile absurdly out of place among the frowns. Worried faces. Sweaty brows. Nervous whispers to their cronies. *They perch on razors, all of them. And I too, of course. Let us not forget poor Sand dan Glokta, faithful public servant! We cling to power by our fingernails – slipping, slipping. We sit like the accused, at our own trials. We know the verdict is about to come down. Will it be an ill-deserved reprieve?* Glokta felt a smile twitch the corner of his mouth. Or an altogether bloodier sentence? *What say the gentlemen of the jury?*

His eyes flickered over the faces of the Open Council on their benches. *Three hundred and twenty faces.* Glokta pictured the papers nailed to the Arch Lector's wall, and he matched them to the men sitting before him. *The secrets, the lies, and the allegiances. The allegiances most of all. Which way will they vote?*

He saw some whose support he had made certain of. Or as certain as we can be in these uncertain times. He saw Ingelstad's pink face among the press, near to the back, and the man swallowed and looked away. As long as you vote our way, you can look where you like. He saw Wetterlant's slack features a few rows back, and the man gave him an almost imperceptible nod. *So our last offer was acceptable. Four more for the Arch lector? Enough to make the difference, and keep us in our jobs? To keep us all alive?* Glokta felt his empty grin widen. We shall soon see . . .

In the centre of the front row, among the oldest and best families of Midderland's nobility, Lord Brock sat, arms folded, with a look of hungry expectation. *Our front runner, keen to spring from the gate.* Not far from him was Lord Isher, old and stately. *The second favourite, still with every*

chance. Barezin and Heugen sat nearby, wedged uncomfortably together and occasionally looking sideways at each other with some distaste. *Who knows? A late spurt and the throne could be theirs.* Lord Governor Skald sat on the far left, at the front of the delegations from Angland and Starikland. *New men, from the provinces. But a vote is still a vote, however we might turn our noses up*. Over on the far right twelve Aldermen of Westport sat, marked as outsiders by the cut of their clothes and the tone of their skin. *Yet a dozen votes still, and undeclared.*

There were no representatives of Dagoska today. *There are none left at all, alas. Lord Governor Vurms was relieved of his post. His son lost his head and could not attend. As for the rest of the city – it was conquered by the Gurkish. Well. Some wastage is inevitable. We will struggle on without them. The board is set, the pieces ready to be moved. Who will be the winner of this sordid little game, do we suppose? We shall soon see . . .*

The Announcer stepped forwards into the centre of the circular floor, lifted his staff high above his head and brought it down with a series of mighty crashes that echoed from the polished marble walls. The chatter faded, the magnates shuffled round to face the floor, every face drawn with tension. A pregnant silence settled over the packed hall, and Glokta felt a flurry of twitches slink up the left side of his face and set his eyelid blinking.

'I call this meeting of the Open Council of the Union to order!' thundered the Announcer. Slowly, and with the grimmest of frowns, Lord Hoff rose to face the councillors.

'My friends! My colleagues! My Lords of Midderland, Angland, and Starikland, Aldermen of Westport! Guslav the Fifth, our King . . . is dead. His two heirs . . . are dead. One at the hands of our enemies in the north, the other, our enemies in the south. Truly, this is a time of troubles, and we are left without a leader.' He held his arms up imploringly to the councillors. 'You are now faced with a grave responsibility. The selection, from among your number, of a new High King of the Union. Any man who holds a chair on this Open Council is a potential candidate! Any of you . . . could be our next King.' A volley of near-hysterical whispers floated down from the public gallery, and Hoff was obliged to raise his voice to shout over them.

'Such a vote has only been taken once before in the long history of our great nation! After the civil war and the fall of Morlic the Mad, when

Arnault was raised to the throne by near-unanimous accord. He it was who sired the great dynasty that lasted until a few short days ago.' He let fall his arms and stared sadly down at the tiles. 'Wise was the choice your forebears made that day. We can only hope that the man elected here this morning, by and in full view of his peers, will found a dynasty just as noble, just as strong, just as even-handed, and just as long-lived!'

We can only hope for someone who will do as he's damn well told.

Ferro shoved a woman in a long gown out of her way. She elbowed past a fat man, his jowls trembling with outrage. She forced her way through to the balcony and glared down. The wide chamber below was crammed with fur-trimmed old men, crowded together on high banks of seating, each with a sparkling chain round his shoulders and a sparkling sheen of sweat across his pale face. Opposite them, behind a curved table, were another set of men, fewer in number. She scowled as she saw Bayaz sitting at one end of them, smiling as if he knew some secret that no one else could guess.

Just like always.

Beside him stood a fat pink with a face full of broken veins, shouting something about each man voting with his conscience. Ferro snorted. She would have been surprised if the few hundred men down there had five whole consciences between them. It seemed as if they were all attending carefully to the fat man's address, but Ferro saw differently.

The room was full of signals.

Men glanced sideways at one another and gave subtle nods. They winked with one eye or the other. They touched forefingers to noses and ears. They scratched in strange ways. A web of secrets, spreading out to every part of the chamber, and with Bayaz sitting grinning in the midst of it. Some way behind him, with his back to the wall, Jezal dan Luthar was standing in a uniform festooned with shiny thread. Ferro curled her lip. She could see it in the way he stood.

He had learned nothing.

The Announcer stabbed at the floor with his stick again. 'Voting will now begin!' There was a ragged groan and Ferro saw the woman she had pushed past earlier slide to the floor in a faint. Someone dragged her away, flapping a piece of paper in her face, and the ill-tempered press closed in tight

behind. ‘In the first round the field will be narrowed to three choices! There will be a show of hands for each candidate in order of the most extensive lands and holdings!’

Down below on their benches, the richly dressed sweated and trembled like men before a battle.

‘Firstly!’ shrieked a clerk, voice cracking as he consulted an enormous ledger, ‘Lord Brock!’

Up in the gallery people mopped their faces, muttering and gasping as if they were facing death. Perhaps some of them were. The whole place reeked of doubt, and excitement, and terror. So strong it was contagious. So strong that even Ferro, who did not care a shit for the pinks and their damn vote, felt her mouth dry, her fingers itching, her heart thumping fast.

The Announcer turned to face the chamber. ‘The first candidate will be Lord Brock! All those members of the Open Council who wish to vote for Lord Brock as the next High King of the Union, will you please raise your —’

‘One moment, my Lords!’

Glokta jerked his head round, but his neck-bones stuck halfway and he had to peer from the corner of one dewy eye. He need hardly have bothered. I could have guessed without looking who spoke. Bayaz had risen from his chair and was now smiling indulgently towards the Open Council. With perfect timing. A volley of outraged calls rose up from its members in response.

‘This is no time for interruptions!’

‘Lord Brock! I vote for Brock!’

‘A new dynasty!’

Bayaz’ smile did not slip a hair’s breadth. ‘But what if the old dynasty could continue? What if we could make a new beginning,’ and he glanced significantly across the faces of his colleagues on the Closed Council, ‘while keeping all that is good in our present government? What if there was a way to heal wounds, rather than to cause them?’

‘How?’ came the mocking calls.

‘What way?’

Bayaz’ smile grew broader yet, ‘Why, a royal bastard.’

There was a collective gasp. Lord Brock bounced from his seat. Quite as if he had a spring under his arse. ‘This is an insult to this house! A scandal! A slur on the memory of King Guslav!’ Indeed, he now seems not only a drooling vegetable, but a lecherous one. Other councillors rose to join him, faces red with outrage, white with fury, shaking fists and making angry calls. The whole sweep of benches seemed to honk and grunt and wriggle. *Just like the pig pens at the slaughterhouse, clamouring for any swill on offer.*

‘Wait!’ shrieked the Arch Lector, his white-gloved hands raised in entreaty. Sensing some faint glimmer of hope in the darkness, perhaps? ‘Wait, my Lords! There is nothing to be lost by listening! We shall have the truth here, even if it is painful! The truth should be our only concern!’ Glokta had to chomp his gums down on a splutter of laughter. *Oh, of course, your Eminence! The truth has ever been your only care!*

But the babble gradually subsided. Those councillors who were on their feet were shamed back into line. *Their habit of obedience to the Closed Council is not easily broken. But then habits never are. Especially of obedience. Only ask my mother’s dogs.* They grumbled their way back into their seats, and allowed Bayaz to continue.

‘Your Lordships have perhaps heard of Carmee dan Roth?’ A swell of noise from the gallery above confirmed that the name was not unfamiliar. ‘She was a great favourite with the King, when he was younger. A very great favourite. So much so that she became pregnant with a child.’ Another wave of muttering, louder. ‘I have always carried a sentimental regard for the Union. I have always had one eye on its welfare, despite the scant thanks I have received for it.’ And Bayaz gave the very briefest curl of his lip towards the members of the Closed Council. ‘So, when the lady died in childbirth, I took the King’s bastard into my care. I placed him with a noble family, to be well raised and well educated, in case the nation should one day find itself without an heir. My actions now seem prudent indeed.’

‘Lies!’ someone shrieked. ‘Lies!’ But few voices joined in. Their tone instead was one of curiosity.

‘A natural son?’

‘A bastard?’

‘Carmee dan Roth, did he say?’

They have heard this tale before. Rumours, perhaps, but familiar ones. Familiar enough to make them listen. To make them judge whether it will be in their interests to believe.

But Lord Brock was not convinced. 'A blatant fabrication! It will take more than rumour and conjecture to sway this house! Produce this bastard, if you can, so-called First of the Magi! Work your magic!'

'No magic is needful,' sneered Bayaz. 'The King's son is already with us in the chamber.' Gasps of consternation from the gallery, sighs of amazement from the councillors, stunned silence from the Closed Council and their aides, every eye fixed on Bayaz' pointing finger as he swept out his hand towards the wall. 'No other man than Colonel Jezal dan Luthar!'

The spasm began in Glokta's toeless foot, shot up his ruined leg, set his twisted spine shivering from his arse right to his skull, made his face twitch like an angry jelly, made his few teeth rattle in his empty gums, set his eyelid flickering fast as a fly's wings.

The echoes of Bayaz' last utterance whispered round the suddenly silent hall. 'Luthar, Luthar, Luthar . . .'

You must be fucking joking.

The pale faces of the councillors were frozen, hanging in wide-eyed shock, squashed up in narrow-eyed rage. The pale men behind the table gaped. The pale people at the balcony pressed their hands over their mouths. Jezal dan Luthar, who had wept with self-pity while Ferro had stitched his face. Jezal dan Luthar, that leaky piss-pot of selfishness, and arrogance, and vanity. Jezal dan Luthar, who she had called the princess of the Union, had a chance of ending the day as its King.

Ferro could not help herself.

She let her head drop back and she hacked, and coughed, and gurgled with amusement. Tears sprung up in her eyes, her chest shook and her knees trembled. She clung to the rail of the balcony, she gasped, blubbered, drooled. Ferro did not laugh often. She could scarcely remember the last time. But Jezal dan Luthar, a King?

This was funny.

High above, in the public gallery, someone had started laughing. A jagged cackling completely inappropriate to the solemnity of the moment. But Jezal's first impulse, when he realised that it was his name that Bayaz had called out, when he realised that it was him the outstretched finger was pointing to, was to join in. His second, as every face in the entire vast space turned instantly towards him, was to vomit. The result was an ungainly cough, a shame-faced grin, an unpleasant burning at the very back of the mouth, and an instant paling of the complexion.

'I . . .' he found himself croaking, but without the slightest idea of how he would continue his sentence. What words could possibly help at a time like this? All he could do was stand there, sweating profusely, trembling under his stiff uniform, as Bayaz continued in ringing tones, his voice cutting over the laughter bubbling down from above.

'I have the sworn statement of his adoptive father here, attesting that all I say is true, but does it matter? The truth of it is plain for any man to see!' His arm shot out towards Jezal again. 'He won a Contest before you all, and accompanied me on a journey full of peril with never a complaint! He charged the bridge at Darmium, without a thought for his own safety! He saved Adua from the revolt without a drop of blood spilled! His valour and his prowess, his wisdom and his selflessness are well known to all! Can it be doubted that the blood of kings flows in his veins?'

Jezal blinked. Odd facts began to bob to the surface of his sluggish mind. He was not much like his brothers. His father had always treated him differently. He had got all the looks in the family. His mouth was hanging open, but he found he could not close it. When his father had seen Bayaz, at the Contest, he had turned white as milk, as though he recognised him.

He had done, and he was not Jezal's father at all.

When the king had congratulated Jezal on his victory, he had mistaken him for his own son. Not such blinding folly, evidently, as everyone might have thought. The old fool had been closer to the mark than anyone. Suddenly, it all made horrible sense.

He was a bastard. Literally.

He was the natural son of a king. What was much more, he was slowly and with increasing terror beginning to realise, he was now being seriously considered as his replacement.

‘My Lords!’ shouted Bayaz over the disbelieving chatter gaining steadily in volume with every passing moment. ‘You sit amazed! It is a difficult fact to accept, I can understand. Especially with the suffocating heat in here!’ He signalled to the guards at both ends of the hall. ‘Open the gates, please, and let us have some air!’

The doors were heaved open and a gentle breeze washed into the Lords’ Round. A cooling breeze, and something else with it. Hard to make out at first, and then coming more clearly. Something like the noise of the crowd at the Contest. Soft, repetitive, and more than a little frightening.

‘Luthar! Luthar! Luthar!’ The sound of his own name, chanted over and over from a multitude of throats beyond the walls of the Agriont, was unmistakable.

Bayaz grinned. ‘It would seem that the people of the city have already chosen their favoured candidate.’

‘This is not their choice!’ roared Brock, still on his feet but only now regaining his composure. ‘Any more than it is yours!’

‘But it would be foolish to ignore their opinion. The support of the commoners cannot be lightly dismissed, especially in these restless times. If they were to be disappointed, in their current mood, who knows what might occur? Riots in the streets, or worse? None of us wants that, surely, Lord Brock?’

Several of the councillors shifted nervously on their benches, glancing towards the open doors, whispering to their neighbours. If the atmosphere in the Round had been confused before, it was flabbergasted now. But the worry and surprise of the Open Council was nothing compared to Jezal’s own.

A fascinating tale, but if he supposes that the Union’s greediest men will simply take his word for it and give the crown away he has made a staggering blunder, whether commoners wet themselves at the name of Luthar or not. Lord Isher rose from the front row for the first time, stately and magnificent, the jewels on his chain of office flashing. And so the furious objections, the outraged denials, the demands for punishment begin.

‘I wholeheartedly believe!’ called Isher in ringing tones, ‘that the man known as Colonel Jezal dan Luthar is none other than the natural child of

the recently deceased King Guslav the Fifth!' Glokta gawped. So, it seemed, did almost everyone else in the chamber. 'And that he is further fitted for rule on account of his exemplary character and extensive achievements, both within the Union and outside it!' Another peal of ugly laughter gurgled down from above, but Isher ignored it. 'My vote, and the votes of my supporters, are wholeheartedly for Luthar!'

If Luthar's eyes had gone any wider they might have dropped from his skull. And who can blame him? Now one of the Westport delegation was on his feet. 'The Aldermen of Westport vote as one man for Luthar!' he sang out in his Styrian accent. 'Natural son and heir to King Guslav the Fifth!'

A man jumped up a few rows back. He glanced quickly and somewhat nervously at Glokta. None other than Lord Ingelstad. *The lying little shit, what's he about?* 'I am for Luthar!' he shrieked.

'And I, for Luthar!' Wetterlant, his hooded eyes giving away no more emotion than they had when he fed the ducks. *Better offers, eh, gentlemen? Or better threats?* Glokta glanced at Bayaz. He had a faint smile on his face as he watched others spring from their benches to declare their support for the so-called natural son of Guslav the Fifth. Meanwhile, the chanting of the crowds out in the city could still be heard.

'Luthar! Luthar! Luthar!'

As the shock drained away, Glokta's mind began to turn. So that is *why our First of the Magi cheated in the Contest on Luthar's behalf. That is why he has kept him close, all this time. That is why he procured for him so notable a command. If he had presented some nobody as the King's son, he would have been laughed from the chamber. But Luthar, love him or hate him, is one of us. He is known, he is familiar, he is . . . acceptable.* Glokta looked at Bayaz with something close to admiration. *Pieces of a puzzle, patient years in the preparation, calmly slotted into place before our disbelieving eyes. And not a thing that we can do, except, perhaps, to dance along to his tune?*

Sult leaned sideways in his chair and hissed urgently in Glokta's ear. 'This boy, Luthar, what manner of a man is he?'

Glokta frowned over at him, standing dumbstruck by the wall. He looked at that moment as if he could scarcely be trusted to control his own bowels, let alone a country. *Still, you could have said much the same for our previous King, and he discharged his duties admirably. His duties of sitting*

and drooling, while we ran the country for him. 'Before his trip abroad, your Eminence, he was as empty-headed, spineless and vain a young fool as one might hope to find in the entire nation. The last time I spoke to him, though—'

'Perfect!'

'But, your Eminence, you must see that this is all according to Bayaz' plans—'

'We will deal with that old fool later. I am taking advice.' Sult turned to hiss at Marovia without waiting for a reply. Now the two old men looked out at the Open Council, now they gave their nods and their signals to the men they controlled. All the while, Bayaz smiled. *The way an engineer might smile as his new machine works for the first time, precisely according to his design.* The Magus caught Glokta's eye, and gave the faintest of nods. There was nothing for Glokta to do but shrug, and give a toothless grin of his own. *I wonder if the time may come when we all wish we had voted for Brock.*

Now Marovia was speaking hurriedly to Hoff. The Lord Chamberlain frowned, nodded, turned towards the house and signalled to the Announcer, who beat furiously on the floor for silence.

'My Lords of the Open Council!' Hoff roared, once something resembling quiet had been established. 'The discovery of a natural son plainly changes the complexion of this debate! Fate would appear to have gifted us the opportunity to continue the dynasty of Arnault without further doubt or conflict!' *Fate gifts us? I rather think we have a less disinterested benefactor.* 'In view of these exceptional circumstances, and the strong support already voiced by members of this house, the Closed Council judges that an exceptional vote should now be taken. A single vote, on whether the man previously known as Jezal dan Luthar should be declared High King of the Union forthwith!'

'No!' roared Brock, veins bulging from his neck. 'I strongly protest!' But he might as well have protested against the incoming tide. The arms were already shooting up in daunting numbers. The Aldermen of Westport, the supporters of Lord Isher, the votes that Sult and Marovia had bullied and bribed their way. Glokta saw many more, now, men he had thought undecided, or firmly declared for one man or another. *All lending their support to Luthar with a speed that strongly implies a previous*

arrangement. Bayaz sat back, arms folded, as he watched the hands shoot skywards. It was already becoming terribly clear that over half of the room was in favour.

'Yes!' hissed the Arch Lector, a smile of triumph on his face. 'Yes!'

Those who had not raised their arms, men committed to Brock, or Barezin, or Heugen, stared about them, stunned and not a little horrified at how quickly the world seemed to have passed them by. *How quickly the chance at power has slipped through their fingers. And who can blame them? It has been a surprising day for us all.*

Lord Brock made one last effort, raising a finger to stab at Luthar, still goggling by the wall. 'What proof have you that he is the son of anyone in particular, beside the word of this old liar?' and he gestured at Bayaz. 'What proof, my Lords? I demand proof!'

Angry mutterings swept up and down the benches, but no one made themselves conspicuous. *The second time Lord Brock has stood before this Council and demanded proof, and the second time no one has cared. What proof could there be, after all? A birthmark on Luthar's arse in the shape of a crown? Proof is boring. Proof is tiresome. Proof is an irrelevance. People would far rather be handed an easy lie than search for a difficult truth, especially if it suits their own purposes. And most of us would far rather have a King with no friends and no enemies, than a King with plenty of both. Most of us would rather have things stay as they are, than risk an uncertain future.*

More hands were raised, and more. Luthar's support had rolled too far for any one man to stop it. *Now it is like a great boulder hurtling down a slope. They dare not stand in its way in case they are squashed to gravy. So they crowd in behind, and add their own weight to it, and hope to snatch the scraps up afterward.*

Brock turned, a deadly frown across his face, and he stormed down the aisle and out of the chamber. Probably he had hoped that a good part of the Open Council would storm out with him. *But in that, as in so much else today, he must he harshly disappointed.* No more than a dozen of his most loyal followers accompanied him on the lonely march out of the Lords' Round. The others have better sense. Lord Isher exchanged a long look with Bayaz, then raised his pale hand. Lords Barezin and Heugen watched the best part of their support flocking to the cause of the young pretender,

glanced at each other, retreated back into their seats and stayed carefully silent. Skald opened his mouth to call out, looked about him, thought better of it, and with evident reluctance, slowly lifted his arm.

There were no further protests.

King Jezal the First was raised to the throne by near-unanimous accord.

The Trap

Coming up into the High Places again, and the air felt crisp and clear, sharp and familiar in Logen's throat. Their march had begun gently as they came up through the woods, a rise you'd hardly notice. Then the trees thinned out and their path took them up a valley between grassy fells, cracked with trickling streams, patched with sedge and gorse. Now the valley had narrowed to a gorge, hemmed in on both sides with slopes of bare rock and crumbling scree, getting always steeper. Above them, on either side of that gorge, two great crags rose up. Beyond, the hazy hints of mountain peaks – grey, and light grey, and even lighter grey, melted in the distance into the heavy grey sky.

The sun was out, and meaning business, and it was hot to walk in, bright to squint into. They were all weary from climbing, and worrying, and looking behind them for Bethod. Four hundred Carls, maybe, and as many painted-face hillmen, all spread out in a great long column, cursing and spitting, boots crunching and sliding in the dry dirt and the loose stones. Crummock's daughter was struggling up ahead of Logen, bent double under the weight of her father's hammer, hair round her face dark with sweat. Logen's own daughter would have been older than that, by now. If she hadn't been killed by the Shanka, along with her mother and her brothers. That thought gave Logen a hollow, guilty feeling. A bad one.

'You want a hand with that mallet, girl?'

'No I fucking don't!' she screamed at him, then dropped it off her shoulder and dragged it away up the slope by the handle, scowling at him all the way, the hammer's head clattering along and leaving a groove in the stony soil. Logen blinked after her. Seemed his touch with the women went all the way down to ones ten years old.

Crummock came up behind him, fingerbones swinging round his neck. 'Fierce, ah? Y'ave to be fierce, to get on in my family!' He leaned close and gave a wink. 'And she's the fiercest of the lot, that little bitch. If I'm honest, she's my favourite.' He shook his head as he watched her dragging at that hammer. 'She'll make some poor bastard one hell of a wife one day. We're here, in case you were wondering.'

‘Eh?’ Logen wiped sweat from his face, frowning as he stared about. ‘Where’s the—’

Then he realised. Crummock’s fortress, if you could call it that, was right ahead of them.

The valley was no more than a hundred strides now from one cliff to the other, and a wall was built across it. An ancient and crumbling wall of rough blocks, so full of cracks, so coated with creeper, brambles, seeding grass, that it seemed almost part of the mountains. It wasn’t a whole lot steeper than the valley itself, and as tall as three men on each other’s shoulders at its highest, sagging here and there as if it was about to fall down on its own. In the centre was a gate of weathered grey planks, splattered with lichen, managing to seem rotten and dried-out both at once.

To one side of the wall there was a tower, built up against the cliff. Or at least there was a great natural pillar sticking out from the rock with half-cut chunks of stone mortared to the top, making a wide platform on the cliff-side, overlooking the wall from high above. Logen looked at the Dogman as he trudged up, and the Dogman squinted at that wall as if he couldn’t believe what he was seeing.

‘This is it?’ growled Dow, coming up next to them, his lip curling. A few trees had taken root at one side, just under the tower, must have been fifty years ago at least. Now they loomed up over the wall. A man could have climbed them easily, and stepped inside the place without even stretching far.

Tul stared up at the ragged excuse for a fortress. ‘A strong place in the mountains, you said.’

‘Strong . . . ish.’ Crummock waved his hand. ‘We hillmen have never been much for building and so on. What were you expecting? Ten marble towers and a hall bigger’n Skarling’s?’

‘I was expecting a halfway decent wall, at least,’ growled Dow.

‘Bah! Walls? I heard you were cold as snow and hot as piss, Black Dow, and now you want walls to hide behind?’

‘We’ll be outnumbered ten to one if Bethod does turn up, you mad fuck! You’re damn right I want a wall, and you told us there’d be one!’

‘But you said it yourself friend.’ Crummock spoke soft and slow as though he was explaining it to a child, and he tapped at the side of his head with one thick finger. ‘I’m mad! Mad as a sack of owls, and everyone says

so! I can't remember the names of my own children. Who knows what I think a wall looks like? I hardly know what I'm talking of myself, most of the time, and you're fool enough to listen to me? You must be mad yourselves!'

Logen rubbed at the bridge of his nose and he gave a groan. The Dogman's Carls were gathering near them now, looking up at that mossy heap of stones and muttering to each other, far from happy. Logen could hardly blame them. It was a long, hot walk they'd had to find this at the end of it. But they had no choices, as far as he could see. 'It's a bit late to build a better one,' he grumbled. 'We'll have to do what we can with what we've got.'

'That's it Bloody-Nine, you need no wall and you know it!' Crummock clapped Logen on the arm with his great fat hand. 'You cannot die! You're beloved of the moon, my fine new friend, above all others! You cannot die, not with the moon looking over you! You cannot—'

'Shut up,' said Logen.

They crunched sourly across the slope towards the gate. Crummock called out and the old doors wobbled open. A pair of suspicious hillmen stood on the other side, watching them come in. They slogged up a steep ramp cut into the rock, all tired and grumbling, and came out into a flat space above. A saddle between the two crags, might have been a hundred strides wide and two hundred long, sheer cliffs of stone all round. There were a few wooden shacks and sheds scattered about the edges, all green with old moss, a slumping stone hall built against the rock face with smoke rising out of a squat chimney. Just next to it a narrow stair was cut into the cliff, climbing up to the platform at the top of the tower.

'Nowhere to run to,' Logen muttered, 'if things turn sour.'

Crummock only grinned the wider. 'Course not. That's the whole point, ain't it? Bethod'll think he's got us like beetles in a bottle.'

'He will have,' growled the Dogman.

'Aye, but then your friends will come up behind him and won't he get the father of all shocks, though? It'll almost be worth it for the look on his face, the shit-eating bastard!'

Logen worked his mouth and spat onto the stony ground. 'I wonder what the looks on our faces'll be by then? All slack and corpse-like would be my guess.' A herd of shaggy sheep were pressed in tight together in a pen,

staring around wide-eyed, bleating to each other. Hemmed in and helpless, and Logen knew exactly how they felt. From inside the fort, where the ground was a good deal higher, there was hardly a wall at all. You could've stepped up onto its walkway, if you'd got long legs, and stood at its crumbling, moss-ridden excuse for a parapet.

'Don't you worry your beautiful self about nothing, Bloody-Nine,' laughed Crummock. 'My fortress could be better built, I'll grant you, but the ground is with us, and the mountains, and the moon, all smiling on our bold endeavour. This is a strong place, with a strong history. Do you not know the story of Laffa the Brave?'

'Can't say that I do.' Logen wasn't altogether sure he wanted to hear it now, but he was in the long habit of not getting what he wanted.

'Laffa was a great bandit chief of the hillmen, a long time ago. He raided all the clans around for years, him and his brothers. One hot summer the clans had enough, so they banded together and hunted him in the mountains. Here's where he made his last stand. Right here in this fortress. Laffa and his brothers and all his people.'

'What happened?' asked Dogman.

'They all got killed, and their heads cut off and put in a sack, and the sack was buried in the pit they used to shit in.' Crummock beamed. 'Guess that's why they call it a last stand, eh?'

'That's it? That's the story?'

'That's all of it that I know, but I'm not right sure what else there could be. That was pretty much the end for Laffa, I'd say.'

'Thanks for the encouragement.'

'That's alright, that's alright! I've more stories, if you need more!'

'No, no, that's enough for me.' Logen turned and started walking off, the Dogman beside him. 'You can tell me more once we've won!'

'Ha ha, Bloody-Nine!' shouted Crummock after him, 'that'll be a story in itself, eh? You can't fool me! You're like I am, beloved of the moon! We fight hardest when our backs are to the mountains and there's no way out! Tell me it ain't so! We love it when we got no choices!'

'Oh aye,' Logen muttered to himself as he stalked off towards the gate. 'There's nothing better than no choices.'

Dogman stood at the foot o' the wall, staring up at it, and wondering what to do to give him and the rest a better chance at living out the week.

'It'd be a good thing to get all this creeper and grass cleared off it,' he said. 'Makes it a damn sight easier to climb.'

Tul raised an eyebrow. 'You sure it ain't all that plant that's holding it together?'

Grim tugged at a vine and a shower of dried-out mortar came with it.

'Might be you're right.' Dogman sighed. 'Cut off what we can, then, eh? Some work at the top would be time well spent and all. Be nice to have a decent stack o' stones to hide behind when Bethod starts shooting arrows at us.'

'That it would,' said Tul. 'And we could dig us a ditch down here in front, plant some stakes round the bottom, make it harder for 'em to get up close.'

'Then close that gate, nail it shut, and wedge a load of rocks in behind it.'

'We'll have trouble getting out,' said Tul.

Logen snorted. 'Us getting out won't be the pressing problem, I'm thinking.'

'You've a point right there,' laughed Crummock, ambling up with a lit pipe in his fat fist. 'It's Bethod's boys getting in that we should worry on.'

'Getting these walls patched up would be a good start at settling my mind.' Dogman pointed at the trees grown up over the wall. 'We need to get these cut down and cut up, carve us out some stone, mix us some mortar and all the rest. Crummock, you got people can do that? You got tools?'

He puffed at his pipe, frowning at Dogman all the long while, then blew brown smoke. 'I might have, but I won't take my orders from such as you, Dogman. The moon knows my talents, and they're for murder, not mortaring.' Grim rolled his eyes.

'Who will you take orders from?' asked Logen.

'I'll take 'em from you, Bloody-Nine, and from no other! The moon loves you, and I love the moon, and you're the man for—'

'Then get your people together and get to fucking cutting wood and stone. I'm bored o' your blather.'

Crummock knocked out his ashes sourly against the wall. 'You're no fun at all, you boys, you do nothing but worry. You need to think on the sunny side o' this. The worst that can happen is that Bethod don't show!'

‘The worst?’ Dogman stared at him. ‘You sure? What about if Bethod does come, and his Carls kick your wall over like a pile o’ turds and kill every last one of us?’

Crummock’s brow furrowed. He frowned down at the ground. He squinted up at the clouds. ‘True,’ he said, breaking out in a smile. ‘That is worse. You got a fast mind, lad.’

Dogman gave a long sigh, and stared down into the valley. The wall might not have been all they’d hoped for, but you couldn’t knock the position. Coming up that steep slope against a set of hard men, high above and with nothing to lose, ready and more’n able to kill you. That was no one’s idea o’ fun.

‘Tough to get organised down there,’ said Logen, speaking Dogman’s own thoughts. ‘Specially with arrows plunging on you from above and nothing to hide behind. Hard to make numbers count. I wouldn’t much fancy trying it myself. How are we going to work it, if they come?’

‘I reckon we’ll make three crews.’ Dogman nodded to the tower. ‘Me up there with five score or so o’ the best archers. Good spot to shoot from, that. Nice and high, and a good view of the front o’ the wall.’

‘Uh,’ said Grim.

‘Maybe some strong lads to throw a rock or two.’

‘I’ll lob a rock,’ said Tul.

‘Fair enough. Then the pick of our lads up on the wall, ready to take ’em on hand to hand, if they get up there. That’ll be your crew, I reckon, Logen. Dow and Shivers and Red Hat can be your seconds.’

Logen nodded, not looking all that happy. ‘Aye, alright.’

‘Then Crummock up behind with his hillmen, ready to charge if they make it through the gate. If we last more’n a day, maybe you can swap over. Hillmen on the wall, Logen and the rest behind.’

‘That’s quite the plan for a little man!’ Crummock clapped him on the shoulder with a huge hand and damn near knocked him on his face. ‘Like as not you had it from the moon while you slept! Ain’t one thing in it I’d change!’ He slapped his meaty fist into his palm. ‘I love a good charge! I hope the Southerners don’t come, and leave more for the rest of us! I want to charge now!’

‘Good for you,’ grunted Dogman. ‘Maybe we can find you a cliff to charge off.’ He squinted into the sun, taking another look up at the wall that

held all of their hopes. He wouldn't have cared to try and climb it, not from this side, but it wasn't halfway as high, or as thick, or as strong as he'd have liked. You don't always get things the way you like, Threetrees would have said. But just once would've been nice.

'The trap is ready,' said Crummock, grinning down into the valley.

The Dogman nodded. 'The only question is who'll get caught in it. Bethod? Or us?'

Logen walked through the night, between the fires. Some fires had Carls round them, drinking Crummock's beer, and smoking his chagga, and laughing at stories. Others had hillmen, looking like wolves in the shifting light with their rough furs, their tangled hair, their half-painted faces. One was singing, somewhere. Strange songs in a strange tongue that yapped and warbled like the animals in the forest, rose and fell like the valleys and the peaks. Logen had to admit he'd been smoking, for the first time in a while, and drinking too. Everything felt warm. The fires, and the men, and the cool wind, even. He wove his way through the dark, looking for the fire where the Dogman and the rest were sitting, and not having a clue which way to find it. He was lost, and in more ways than one.

'How many men you killed, Da?' Had to be Crummock's daughter. There weren't too many high voices round that camp, more was the pity. Logen saw the hillman's great shape in the darkness, his three children sitting near him, their outsize weapons propped up in easy reach.

'Oh, I've killed a legion of 'em, Isern.' Crummock's great deep voice rumbled out at Logen as he came closer. 'More'n I can remember. Your father might not have all his wits all the time, but he's a bad enemy to have. One of the worst. You'll see the truth of that close up, when Bethod and his arse-lickers come calling.' He looked up and saw Logen coming through the night. 'I swear, and I don't doubt Bethod would swear with me, there's only one bastard in all the North who's nastier, and bloodier, and harder than your father.'

'Who's that?' asked the boy with the shield. Logen felt his heart sinking as Crummock's arm lifted up to point towards him.

'Why, that's him there. The Bloody-Nine.'

The girl glared at Logen. 'He's nothing. You could have him, Da!'

‘By the dead, not me! Don’t even say it girl, in case I make a pisspuddle big enough to drown you in.’

‘He don’t look like much.’

‘And there’s a lesson for all three of you. Not looking much, not saying much, not seeming much, that’s a good first step in being dangerous, eh, Ninefingers? Then when you let the devil go free it’s twice the shock for whatever poor bastard’s on the end of it. Shock and surprise, my little beauties, and quickness to strike, and lack of pity. These are the things that make a killer. Size, and strength, and a big loud voice are alright in their place, but they’re nothing to that murderous, monstrous, merciless speed, eh, Bloody-Nine?’

It was a hard lesson for children, but Logen’s father had taught it to him young, and he’d kept it in mind all these years. ‘It’s a sorry fact. He who strikes first often strikes last.’

‘That he does!’ shouted Crummock, slapping his great thigh. ‘Well said! But it’s a happy fact, not a sorry one. You remember old Wilum, don’t you, my children?’

‘Thunder got him!’ shouted the boy with the shield, ‘in a storm, up in the High Places!’

‘That it did! One moment he’s standing there, the next there’s a noise like the world falling and a flash like the sun, and Wilum’s dead as my boots!’

‘His feet was on fire!’ laughed the girl.

‘That they were, Isern. You saw how fast he died, how much the shock, how little the mercy that the lightning showed, well.’ And Crummock’s eyes slid across to Logen. ‘That’s what it’d be to cross that man there. One moment you’d say your hard word, the next?’ He clapped his hands together with a crack and made the three children jump. ‘He’d send you back to the mud. Faster than the sky killed Wilum, and with no more regret. Your life hangs on a thread, every moment you stand within two strides of that nothing-looking bastard there, does it not, Bloody-Nine?’

‘Well . . .’ Logen wasn’t much enjoying this.

‘How many men you killed then?’ the girl shouted at him, sticking her chin out.

Crummock laughed and rubbed his hand in her hair. ‘The numbers aren’t made to count that high, Isern! He’s the king of killers! No man made more deadly, not anywhere under the moon.’

‘What about that Feared?’ asked the boy with the spear.

‘Ohhhhhh,’ cooed Crummock, smiling right across his face. ‘He’s not a man, Scofen. He’s something else. But I wonder. Fenris the Feared and the Bloody-Nine, setting to kill one another?’ He rubbed his hands together. ‘Now that is a thing I would like to see. That is a thing the moon would love to shine upon.’ His eyes rolled up towards the sky and Logen followed them with his own. The moon was up there, sitting in the black heavens, big and white, glowing like new fire.

Horrible Old Men

The tall windows stood open, allowing a merciful breeze to wash through the wide salon, to give the occasional cooling kiss to Jezal's sweating face, to make the vast, antique hangings flap and rustle. Everything in the chamber was outsized – the cavernous doorways were three times as high as a man, and the ceiling, painted with the peoples of the world bowing down before an enormous golden sun, was twice as high again. The immense canvases on the walls featured life-size figures in assorted majestic poses, whose warlike expressions would give Jezal uncomfortable shocks whenever he turned around.

It seemed a space for great men, for wise men, for epic heroes or mighty villains. A space for giants. Jezal felt a tiny, meagre, stupid fool in it.

'Your arm, if it please your Majesty,' murmured one of the tailors, managing to give Jezal orders while remaining crushingly sycophantic.

'Yes, of course . . . I'm sorry.' Jezal raised his arm a little higher, inwardly cursing at having apologised yet again. He was a king now, as Bayaz was constantly telling him. If he had shoved one of the tailors out of the window, no apology would have been necessary. The man would probably have thanked him profusely for the attention as he plummeted to the ground. As it was he merely gave a wooden smile, and smoothly unravelled his measuring tape. His colleague was crawling below, doing something similar around Jezal's knees. The third was punctiliously recording their observations in a marbled ledger.

Jezal took a long breath, and frowned into the mirror. An uncertain-seeming young idiot with a scar on his chin gazed back at him from the glass, draped with swatches of glittering cloth as though he were a tailor's dummy. He looked, and certainly felt, more like a clown than a king. He looked a joke, and undoubtedly would have laughed, had he not himself been the ridiculous punch-line.

'Perhaps something after the Osprian fashion, then?' The Royal Jeweller placed another wooden nonsense carefully on Jezal's head and examined the results. It was far from an improvement. The damn thing looked like nothing so much as an inverted chandelier.

‘No, no!’ snapped Bayaz, with some irritation. ‘Far too fancy, far too clever, far too big. He will scarcely be able to stand in the damn thing! It needs to be simple, to be honest, to be light. Something a man could fight in!’

The Royal Jeweller blinked. ‘He will be fighting in the crown?’

‘No, dolt! But he must look as if he might!’ Bayaz came up behind Jezal, snatched the wooden contraption from his head and tossed it rattling on the polished floor. Then he seized Jezal by the arms and stared grimly at his reflection from over his shoulder. ‘This is a warrior king in the finest tradition! The natural heir to the Kingdom of Harod the Great! A peerless swordsman, who has dealt wounds and received them, who has led armies to victory, who has killed men by the score!’

‘Score?’ murmured Jezal, uncertainly.

Bayaz ignored him. ‘A man as comfortable with saddle and sword as with throne and sceptre! His crown must go with armour. It must go with weapons. It must go with steel. Now do you understand?’

The Jeweller nodded slowly. ‘I believe so, my Lord.’

‘Good. And one more thing.’

‘My Lord has but to name it.’

‘Give it a big-arsed diamond.’

The Jeweller humbly inclined his head. ‘That goes without saying.’

‘Now out. Out, all of you! His Majesty has affairs of state to attend to.’

The ledger was snapped shut, the tapes were rolled up in a moment, the swatches of cloth were whisked away. The tailors and the Royal Jeweller bowed their way backwards from the room with a range of servile mutterings, whisking the huge, gilt-encrusted doors silently shut. Jezal had to stop himself from leaving with them. He kept forgetting that he was now his Majesty.

‘I have business?’ he asked, turning from the mirror and trying his best to sound offhand and masterful.

Bayaz ushered him out into the great hallway outside, its walls covered in beautifully rendered maps of the Union. ‘You have business with your Closed Council.’

Jezal swallowed. The very name of the institution was daunting. Standing in marble chambers, being measured for new clothes, being called your Majesty, all of this was bemusing, but hardly required a great effort on his

part. Now he was expected to sit at the very heart of government. Jezal dan Luthar, once widely celebrated for his towering ignorance, would be sharing a room with the twelve most powerful men in the Union. He would be expected to make decisions that would affect the lives of thousands. To hold his own in the arenas of politics, and law, and diplomacy, when his only areas of true expertise were fencing, drink, and women, and he was forced to concede that, in that last area at least, he did not seem to be quite the expert he had once reckoned himself.

'The Closed Council?' His voice shot up to a register more girlish than kingly, and he was forced to clear his throat. 'Is there some particular matter of importance?' he growled in an unconvincing bass.

'Some momentous news arrived from the North earlier today.'

'It did?'

'I am afraid that Lord Marshal Burr is dead. The army needs a new commander. Argument on that issue will probably take up a good few hours. Down here, your Majesty.'

'Hours?' muttered Jezal, his boot-heels clicking down a set of wide marble steps. Hours in the company of the Closed Council. He rubbed his hands nervously together.

Bayaz seemed to guess his thoughts. 'There is no need for you to fear those old wolves. You are their master, whatever they may have come to believe. At any time you can replace them, or have them dragged away in irons, for that matter, should you desire. Perhaps they have forgotten it. It might be that we will need to remind them, in due course.'

They stepped through a tall gateway flanked by Knights of the Body, their helmets clasped under their arms but their faces kept so carefully blank they might as well have had their visors down. A wide garden lay beyond, lined on all four sides by a shady colonnade, its white marble pillars carved in the likenesses of trees in leaf. Water splashed from fountains, sparkling in the bright sunlight. A pair of huge orange birds with legs as thin as twigs strutted self-importantly about a perfectly clipped lawn. They stared haughtily at Jezal down their curved beaks as he passed them, evidently in no more doubt than him that he was an utter impostor.

He gazed at the bright flowers, and the shimmering greenery, and the fine statues. He stared up at the ancient walls, coated with red, white, and green creeper. Could it really be that all this belonged to him? All this, and the

whole Agriont besides? Was he walking now in the mighty footsteps of the kings of old? Of Harod, and Casamir, and Arnault? It boggled the mind. Jezal had to blink and shake his head, as he had a hundred times already that day, simply to prevent himself from falling over. Was he not the same man as he had been last week? He rubbed at his beard, as if to check, and felt the scar beneath it. The same man who had been soaked out on the wide plain, who had been wounded among the stones, who had eaten half-cooked horsemeat and been glad to get it?

Jezal cleared his throat. 'I would like very much . . . I don't know whether it would be possible . . . to speak to my father?'

'Your father is dead.'

Jezal cursed silently to himself. 'Of course he is, I meant . . . the man I thought was my father.'

'What is it that you suppose he would tell you? That he made bad decisions? That he had debts? That he took money from me in return for raising you?'

'He took money?' muttered Jezal, feeling more forlorn than ever.

'Families rarely take in orphans out of good will, even those with a winning manner. The debts were cleared, and more than cleared. I left instructions that you should have fencing lessons as soon as you could hold a steel. That you should have a commission in the King's Own, and be encouraged to take part in the summer Contest. That you should be well prepared, in case this day should come. He carried out my instructions to the letter. But you can see that a meeting between the two of you would be an extremely awkward scene for you both. One best avoided.'

Jezal gave a ragged sigh. 'Of course. Best avoided.' An unpleasant thought crept across his mind. 'Is . . . is my name even Jezal?'

'It is now that you have been crowned.' Bayaz raised an eyebrow. 'Why, would you prefer another?'

'No. No, of course not.' He turned his head away and blinked back the tears. His old life had been a lie. His new one felt still more so. Even his own name was an invention. They walked in silence through the gardens for a moment, their feet crunching in the gravel, so fresh and perfect that Jezal wondered if every stone of it was daily cleaned by hand.

'Lord Isher will make many representations to your Majesty over the coming weeks and months.'

‘He will?’ Jezal coughed, and sniffed, and put on his bravest face. ‘Why?’

‘I promised him that his two brothers would be made Lords Chamberlain and Chancellor on the Closed Council. That his family would be preferred above all others. That was the price of his support in the vote.’

‘I see. Then I should honour the bargain?’

‘Absolutely not.’

Jezal frowned. ‘I am not sure that I—’

‘Upon achieving power, one should immediately distance oneself from all allies. They will feel they own your victory, and no rewards will ever satisfy them. You should elevate your enemies instead. They will gush over small tokens, knowing they do not deserve them. Heugen, Barezin, Skald, Meed, these are the men you should bring into your circle.’

‘Not Brock?’

‘Never Brock. He came too close to wearing the crown to ever feel himself beneath it. Sooner or later he must be kicked back into his place. But not until you are safe in your position, and have plentiful support.’

‘I see,’ Jezal puffed out his cheeks. Evidently there was more to being king than fine clothes, a haughty manner, and always getting the biggest chair.

‘This way.’ Out of the garden and into a shadowy hallway panelled with black wood and lined with an array of antique arms to boggle the mind. Assorted suits of full armour stood to glittering attention: plate and chain-mail, hauberk and cuirass, all stamped and emblazoned with the golden sun of the Union. Ceremonial greatswords as tall as a man, and halberds considerably taller, were bolted to the wall in an elaborate procession. Under them were mounted an army’s worth of axes, maces, morningstars and blades curved and straight, long and short, thick and thin. Weapons forged in the Union, weapons captured from the Gurkish, weapons stolen from Styrian dead on bloody battlefields. Victories and defeats, commemorated in steel. High above, the flags of forgotten regiments, gloriously slaughtered to a man in the wars of long ago, hung tattered and lifeless from charred pikestaffs.

A heavy double door loomed at the far end of this collection, black and unadorned, as inviting as a scaffold. Knights Herald stood on either side of it, solemn as executioners, winged helmets glittering. Men taxed not only with guarding the centre of government, but with carrying the King’s

Orders to whatever corner of the Union was necessary. His orders, Jezal realised with a sudden further lurch of nerves.

'His Majesty seeks audience with the Closed Council,' intoned Bayaz. The two men reached out and pulled the heavy doors open. An angry voice surged out into the corridor. 'There must be further concessions or there will only be further unrest! We cannot simply—'

'High Justice, I believe we have a visitor.'

The White Chamber was something of a disappointment after the magnificence of the rest of the palace. It was not that large. There was no decoration on the plain white walls. The windows were narrow, almost cell-like, making the place seem gloomy even in the sunshine. There was no draft and the air was uncomfortably close and stale. The only furniture was a long table of dark wood, piled high with papers, and six plain, hard chairs arranged down either side with another at the foot and one more, noticeably higher than the others, at the head. Jezal's own chair, he supposed.

The Closed Council rose as he ducked reluctantly into the room. As frightening a selection of old men as could ever have been collected in one place, and every man of them staring right at Jezal in expectant silence. He jumped as the door was heaved shut behind him, the latch dropping with an unnerving finality.

'Your Majesty,' and Lord Chamberlain Hoff bowed deep, 'may I and my colleagues first congratulate you on your well-deserved elevation to the throne. We all feel that we have in you a worthy replacement for King Guslav, and look forward to advising you, and carrying out your orders, over the coming months and years.' He bowed again, and the collection of formidable old men clapped their hands in polite applause.

'Why, thank you all,' said Jezal, pleasantly surprised, however little he might feel like a worthy replacement for anything. Perhaps this would not be so painful as he had feared. The old wolves seemed tame enough to him.

'Please allow me to make the introductions,' murmured Hoff. 'Arch Lector Sult, head of your Inquisition.'

'An honour to serve, your Majesty.'

'High Justice Marovia, chief Law Lord.'

'Likewise, your Majesty, an honour.'

'With Lord Marshal Varuz, I believe you are already well acquainted. '

The old soldier beamed. ‘It was a privilege to train you in the past, your Majesty, and will be a privilege to advise you now.’

So they went on, Jezal smiling and nodding to each man in turn. Halleck, the Lord Chancellor. Torlichorm, the High Consul. Reutzer, Lord Admiral of the Fleet, and so on, and so on. Finally Hoff ushered him to the high chair at the head of the table and Jezal enthroned himself while the Closed Council smiled on. He grinned gormlessly up at them for a moment, and then realised. ‘Oh, please be seated.’

The old men sat, a couple of them with evident winces of pain as old knees crunched and old backs clicked. Bayaz dropped carelessly into the chair at the foot of the table, opposite Jezal, as though he had been occupying it all his life. Robes rustled as old arses shifted on polished wood, and gradually the room went silent as a tomb. One chair was empty at Varuz’ elbow. The chair where Lord Marshal Burr would have sat, had he not been assigned to duty in the North. Had he not been dead. A dozen daunting old men waited politely for Jezal to speak. A dozen old men who he had thought of until recently as occupying the pinnacle of power, all now answerable to him. A situation he could never have imagined in his most self-indulgent daydreams. He cleared his throat.

‘Pray continue, my Lords. I will try and catch up as we go.’

Hoff flashed a humble smile. ‘Of course, your Majesty. If at any time you require explanation, you have but to ask.’

‘Thank you,’ said Jezal, ‘thank—’

Halleck’s grinding voice cut over him. ‘Back to the issue of discipline among the peasantry, therefore.’

‘We have already prepared concessions!’ snapped Sult. ‘Concessions which the peasants were happy to accept.’

‘A shred of bandage to bind a suppurating wound!’ returned Marovia. ‘It is only a matter of time before rebellion comes again. The only way we can avoid it is by giving the common man what he needs. No more than is fair! We must involve him in the process of government.’

‘Involve him!’ sneered Sult.

‘We must transfer the burden of tax to the landowners!’

Halleck’s eyes rolled to the ceiling. ‘Not this nonsense again.’

‘Our current system has stood for centuries,’ barked Sult.

‘It has failed for centuries!’ threw back Marovia.

Jezal cleared his throat and the heads of the old men snapped round to look at him. ‘Could each man not simply be taxed the same proportion of his income, regardless of whether he is a peasant or a nobleman . . . and then, perhaps . . .’ He trailed off. It had seemed a simple enough idea to him, but now all eleven bureaucrats were staring at him, shocked, quite as if a domestic pet had been ill-advisedly allowed into the room, and it had suddenly decided to speak up on the subject of taxation. At the far end of the table, Bayaz silently examined his fingernails. There was no help there.

‘Ah, your Majesty,’ ventured Torlichorm in soothing tones, ‘such a system would be almost impossible to administer.’ And he blinked in a manner that said, ‘How do you manage to dress yourself, given your incredible ignorance?’

Jezal flushed to the lips of his ears. ‘I see.’

‘The subject of taxation,’ droned Halleck, ‘is a stupendously complex one.’ And he gave Jezal a look that said, ‘It is far too complex a subject to fit inside your tiny fragment of a mind.’

‘It would perhaps be better, your Majesty, if you were to leave the tedious details to your humble servants.’ Marovia had an understanding smile that said, ‘It would perhaps be better if you kept your mouth shut and avoided embarrassing the grown-ups.’

‘Of course.’ Jezal retreated shame-facedly into his chair. ‘Of course.’

And so it went on, as the morning ground by, as the strips of light from the windows slunk slowly over the heaps of papers across the wide table. Gradually, Jezal began to work out the rules of this game. Horribly complex, and yet horribly simple. The aging players were split roughly into two teams. Arch Lector Sult and High Justice Marovia were the captains, fighting viciously over every subject, no matter how small, each with three supporters who agreed with their every utterance. Lord Hoff, meanwhile, ineffectually assisted by Lord Marshal Varuz, played the role of referee, and struggled to build bridges across the unbridgeable divide between these two entrenched camps.

Jezal’s mistake had not been to think that he would not know what to say, though of course, he did not. His mistake had been to think that anyone would want him to say anything. All they cared about was continuing their own profitless struggles. They had become used, perhaps, to conducting the affairs of state with a drooling halfwit at the head of the table. Jezal now

realised that they saw in him a like-for-like trade. He began to wonder if they were right.

'If your Majesty could sign here . . . and here . . . and here . . . and there . . .'

The pen scratched against paper after paper, the old voices droned on, and held forth, and bickered one with the other. The grey men smiled, and sighed, and shook their heads indulgently whenever he spoke, and so he spoke less and less. They bullied him with praise and blinded him with explanation. They bound him up in meaningless hours of law, and form, and tradition. He sagged slowly lower and lower into his uncomfortable chair. A servant brought wine, and he drank, and became drunk, and bored, and even more drunk and bored. Minute by stretched-out minute, Jezal began to realise: there was nothing so indescribably dull, once you got down to the nuts and bolts of it, as ultimate power.

'Now to a sad matter,' observed Hoff, once the most recent argument had sputtered to a reluctant compromise. 'Our colleague, Lord Marshal Burr, is dead. His body is on its way back to us from the North, and will be interred with full honours. In the meantime, however, it is our duty to recommend a replacement. The first chair to be filled in this room since the death of the esteemed Chancellor Feekt. Lord Marshal Varuz?'

The old soldier cleared his throat, wincing as though he realised he was about to open a floodgate that might very well drown them all. 'There are two clear contenders for the post. Both are men of undoubted bravery and experience, whose merits are well known to this council. I have no doubt that either General Poulder or General Kroy would—'

'There can be not the slightest doubt that Poulder is the better man!' snarled Sult, and Halleck immediately voiced his assent.

'On the contrary!' hissed Marovia, to angry murmurs from his camp, 'Kroy is transparently the better choice!'

It was an area in which, as an officer of some experience, Jezal felt he might have been of some minuscule value, but not one of the Closed Council seemed even to consider seeking his opinion. He sagged back sulkily into his chair, and took another slurp of wine from his goblet while the old wolves continued to snap viciously at one another.

'Perhaps we should discuss this matter at greater length later!' cut in Lord Hoff over the increasingly acrimonious debate. 'His Majesty is growing

fatigued with the fine points of the issue, and there is no particular urgency to the matter!' Sult and Marovia glared at each other, but did not speak. Hoff gave a sigh of relief. 'Very well. Our next point of business relates to the supply of our army in Angland. Colonel West writes in his dispatches—'

'West?' Jezal sat up sharply, his voice rough with wine. The name was like smelling salts to a fainting girl, a solid and dependable rock to cling to in the midst of all this chaos. If only West had been there now, to help him through, things would have made so much more sense . . . he blinked at the chair that Burr had left behind him, sitting empty at Varuz' shoulder. Jezal was drunk, perhaps, but he was king. He cleared his wet throat. 'Colonel West shall be my new Lord Marshal!'

There was a stunned silence. The twelve old men stared. Then Torlichorm chuckled indulgently, in a manner that said, 'How will we shut him up?'

'Your Majesty, Colonel West is known to you personally, and a brave man, of course . . .'

The entire Council, it seemed, had finally found one issue on which they could all agree. 'First through the breach at Ulrioch and so on,' muttered Varuz, shaking his head, 'but really—'

'. . . he is junior, and inexperienced, and . . .'

'He is a commoner,' said Hoff, eyebrows raised.

'An unseemly break with tradition,' lamented Halleck.

'Poulder would be far superior!' snarled Sult at Marovia.

'Kroy is the man!' Marovia barked back.

Torlichorm gave a syrupy smile, of the kind a wet-nurse might use while trying to calm a troublesome infant. 'So you see, your Majesty, we cannot possibly consider Colonel West as—'

Jezal's empty goblet bounced off Torlichorm's bald forehead with a loud crack and clattered away into the corner of the room. The old man gave a wail of shock and pain and slid from his chair, blood running from a long gash across his face.

'Cannot?' screamed Jezal, on his feet, eyes starting from his head. 'You dare to give me fucking "cannot", you old bastard? You belong to me, all of you!' His finger stabbed furiously at the air. 'You exist to advise me, not to dictate to me! I rule here! Me!' He snatched up the ink bottle and hurled it across the room. It burst apart against the wall, spraying a great black stain across the plaster and spattering the arm of Arch Lector Sult's perfect white

coat with black spots. ‘Me! Me! The tradition we need here is one of fucking obedience!’ He grabbed a sheaf of documents and flung them at Marovia, filling the air with fluttering paper. ‘Never again give me “cannot!” Never!’

Eleven sets of dumbstruck eyes stared at Jezal. One set smiled, down at the very end of the table. That made him angrier than ever. ‘Collem West shall be my new Lord Marshal!’ he screeched, and kicked his chair over in a fury. ‘At our next meeting I will be treated with the proper respect, or I’ll have the pack of you in chains! In fucking chains . . . and . . . and . . .’ His head was hurting, now, rather badly. He had thrown everything within easy reach, and was becoming desperately unsure of how to proceed.

Bayaz rose sternly from his chair. ‘My Lords, that will be all for today.’

The Closed Council needed no further encouragement. Papers flapped, robes rustled, chairs squealed as they scrambled to be first out of the room. Hoff made it into the corridor. Marovia followed close behind and Sult swept after him. Varuz helped Torlichorm up from the floor and guided him by his elbow. ‘I apologise,’ he was wheezing as he was hustled, bloody-faced, through the door, ‘your Majesty, I apologise profusely . . .’

Bayaz stood sternly at the end of the table, watching the councillors hurry from the room. Jezal lurked opposite, frozen somewhere between further anger and mortal embarrassment, but increasingly tending towards the latter. It seemed to take an age for the last member of the Closed Council to finally escape from the room, and for the great black doors to be dragged shut.

The First of the Magi turned towards Jezal, and a broad smile broke suddenly out across his face. ‘Richly done, your Majesty, richly done.’

‘What?’ Jezal had been sure that he had made an ass of himself to a degree from which he could never recover.

‘Your advisers will think twice before taking you lightly again, I think. Not a new strategy, but no less effective for that. Harod the Great was himself possessed of a fearsome temper, and made excellent use of it. After one of his tantrums no one would dare to question his decisions for weeks.’ Bayaz chuckled. ‘Though I suspect that even Harod would have balked at dealing a wound to his own High Consul.’

‘That was no tantrum!’ snarled Jezal, his temper flickering up again. If he was beset by horrible old men, then Bayaz was himself the worst culprit by

far. ‘If I am a king I will be treated like one! I refuse to be dictated to in my own palace! Not by anyone . . . not by . . . I mean . . .’

Bayaz glared back at him, his green eyes frighteningly hard, and spoke with frosty calm. ‘If your intention is to lose your temper with me, your Majesty, I would strongly advise against it.’

Jezal’s rage had been on the very verge of fading already, and now, under the icy gaze of the Magus, it wilted away entirely. ‘Of course . . . I’m sorry . . . I’m very sorry.’ He closed his eyes and stared numbly down at the polished tabletop. He never used to say sorry for anything. Now that he was a king, and needed to apologise to no man, he found he could not stop. ‘I did not ask for this,’ he muttered weakly, flopping down in his chair. ‘I don’t know how it happened. I did nothing to deserve it.’

‘Of course not.’ Bayaz came slowly around the table. ‘No man can ever deserve the throne. That is why you must strive to be worthy of it now. Every day. Just as your great predecessors did. Casamir. Arnault, Harod himself.’

Jezal took a long breath, and blew it out. ‘You’re right, of course. How can you always be right?’

Bayaz held up a humble hand. ‘Always right? Scarcely. But I have the benefit of long experience, and am here to guide you as best I can. You have made a fine start along a difficult road, and you should be proud, as I am. There are certain steps we cannot delay, however. Chief among them is your wedding.’

Jezal gaped. ‘Wedding?’

‘An unmarried king is like a chair with three legs, your Majesty. Apt to fall. Your rump has only just touched the throne, and it is far from settled there. You need a wife who brings you support, and you need heirs so that your subjects may feel secure. All that delay will bring is opportunities for your enemies to work against you.’

The blows fell so rapidly that Jezal had to grasp his head, hoping to stop it flying apart. ‘My enemies?’ Had he not always tried to get on with everyone?

‘Can you be so naïve? Lord Brock is doubtless already plotting against you. Lord Isher will not be put off indefinitely. Others on the Open Council supported you out of fear, or were paid to do so.’

‘Paid?’ gasped Jezal.

‘Such support does not last forever. You must marry, and your wife must bring you powerful allies.’

‘But I have . . .’ Jezal licked his lips, uncertain of how to broach the subject. ‘Some commitments . . . in that line.’

‘Ardee West?’ Jezal half opened his mouth to ask Bayaz how he knew so much about his romantic entanglements, but quickly thought better of it. The old man seemed to know far more about him than he did himself, after all. ‘I know how it is, Jezal. I have lived a long life. Of course you love her. Of course you would give up anything for her, now. But that feeling, trust me, will not last.’

Jezal shifted his weight uncomfortably. He tried to picture Ardee’s uneven smile, the softness of her hair, the sound of her laugh. The way that had given him such comfort, out on the plain. But it was hard to think of her now without remembering her teeth sinking into his lip, his face tingling from her slap, the sound of the table creaking back and forward underneath them. The shame, and the guilt, and the complexity. Bayaz’ voice continued: mercilessly calm, brutally realistic, ruthlessly reasonable.

‘It is only natural that you made commitments, but your past life is gone, and your commitments have gone with it. You are a king, now, and your people demand that you behave like one. They need something to look up to. Something effortlessly higher than themselves. We are talking of the High Queen of the Union. A mother to kings. A farmer’s daughter with a tendency towards unpredictable behaviour and a penchant for heavy drinking? I think not.’ Jezal flinched to hear Ardee described that way, but he could hardly argue the point.

‘You are a natural son. A wife of unimpeachable breeding would lend your line far greater weight. Far greater respect. There is a world full of eligible women, your Majesty, all born to high station. Dukes’ daughters, and kings’ sisters, beautiful and cultured. A world of princesses to choose from.’

Jezal felt his eyebrows rising. He loved Ardee, of course, but Bayaz made a devastating argument. There was so much more to think of now than his own needs. If the idea of himself as a king was absurd, the idea of Ardee as a queen was triply so. He loved her, of course. In a way. But a world of princesses to choose from? That was a phrase it was decidedly hard to find fault with.

‘You see it!’ The First of the Magi snapped his fingers in triumph. ‘I will send to Duke Orso of Talins, that his daughter Terez should be introduced to you.’ He held up a calming hand. ‘Just to begin with, you understand. Talins would make a powerful ally.’ He smiled, and leaned forward to murmur in Jezal’s ear. ‘But you need not leave everything behind, if you truly are attached to this girl. Kings often keep mistresses, you know.’

And that, of course, decided the matter.

Prepared for the Worst

Glokta sat in his dining room, staring down at his table, rubbing at his aching thigh with one hand. His other stirred absently at the fortune in jewels spread out on the black leather case.

Why do I do this? Why do I stay here, and ask questions? I could be gone on the next tide, and no one any worse off. Perhaps a tour of the beautiful cities of Styria? A cruise round the Thousand Isles? Finally to faraway Thond, or distant Suljuk, to live out my twisted days in peace among people who do not understand a word I say? Hurting no one? Keeping no secrets? Caring no more for innocence or guilt, for truth or for lies, than do these little lumps of rock.

The gems twinkled in the candlelight, clicking against each other, tickling at his fingers as he pushed them through one way, and back the other. *But his Eminence would weep and weep at my sudden disappearance. So, one imagines, would the banking house of Valint and Balk. Where in all the wide Circle of the World would I be safe from the tears of such powerful masters? And why? So I can sit on my crippled arse all the long day, waiting for the killers to come? So I can lie in bed, and ache, and think about all that I've lost?*

He frowned down at the jewels: clean, and hard, and beautiful. *I made my choices long ago. When I took Valint and Balk's money. When I kissed the ring of office. Before the Emperor's prisons, even, when I rode down to the bridge, sure that only magnificent Sand dan Glokta could save the world . . .*

A thumping knock echoed through the room and Glokta jerked his head up, toothless mouth hanging open. *As long as it is not the Arch Lector—*

'Open up, in the name of his Eminence!'

He grimaced at a spasm through his back as he dragged himself out of his chair, clawing the stones into a heap. Priceless, glittering handfuls of them. Sweat had broken out across his forehead.

What if the Arch Lector were to discover my little treasure trove? He giggled to himself as he snatched at the leather case. *I was going to mention all this, really I was, but the timing never seemed quite right. A small*

matter, after all – no more than a king's ransom. His fingers fumbled with the jewels, and in his haste he flicked one astray and it dropped sparkling to the floor with a sharp click, click.

Another knock, louder this time, the heavy lock shuddering from the force of it. 'Open up!'

'I'm just coming!' He forced himself down onto his hands and knees with a moan, casting about across the floor, his neck burning with pain. He saw it – a flat green one sitting on the boards, shining bright in the firelight.

Got you, you bastard! He snatched it up, pulled himself to his feet by the edge of the table, folded up the case, once, twice. *No time to hide it away*. He shoved it inside his shirt, right down so it was behind his belt, then he grabbed his cane and limped towards the front door, wiping his sweaty face, adjusting his clothes, doing his best to present an unruffled appearance.

'I'm coming! There's no need to—'

Four huge Practicals shoved past him into his apartments, almost knocking him over. Beyond them, in the corridor outside, stood his Eminence the Arch Lector, frowning balefully, two more vast Practicals at his back. *A surprising hour for such a gratifying visit.* Glokta could hear the four men stomping around his apartments, throwing open doors, pulling open cupboards. *Never mind me, gentlemen, make yourself at home*. After a moment they marched back in.

'Empty,' grunted one, from behind his mask.

'Huh,' sneered Sult, moving smoothly over the threshold, staring about him with a scowl of contempt. *My new lodgings, it would seem, are scarcely more impressive than my old ones.* His six Practicals took up positions around the walls of Glokta's dining room, arms folded across their chests, watching. *An awful lot of great big men, to keep an eye on one little cripple.*

Sult's shoes stabbed at the floor as he strode up and down, his blue eyes bulging, a furious frown twisting his face. *It does not take a masterful judge of character to see that he is not a happy man. Might one of my ugly secrets have come to his attention? One of my little disobediences?* Glokta felt a sweaty trembling slink up his bent spine. *The non-execution of Magister Eider, perhaps? My agreement with Practical Vitari to tell less than the whole truth?* The corner of the leather pouch dug gently into his ribs as he

shifted his hips. *Or merely the small matter of the large fortune with which I was purchased by a highly suspect banking house?*

An image sprang unbidden into Glokta's mind, of the jewel-case suddenly splitting behind his belt, gems spilling from his trouser legs in a priceless cascade while the Arch Lector and his Practicals stared in amazement. *I wonder how I'd try to explain that one?* He had to stifle a giggle at the thought.

'That bastard Bayaz!' snarled Sult, his white-gloved hands curling into shaking fists.

Glokta felt himself relax by the smallest hair. *I am not the problem, then. Not yet, at least.* 'Bayaz?'

'That bald liar, that smirking impostor, that ancient charlatan! He has stolen the Closed Council!' Stop, thief! 'He has that worm Luthar dictating to us! You told me he was a spineless nothing!' *I told you he used to be a spineless nothing, and you ignored me.* 'This cursed puppy-dog proves to have teeth, and is not afraid to use them, and that First of the bastard Magi is holding his leash! He is laughing at us! He is laughing at me! At me!' screamed Sult, stabbing at his chest with a clawing finger.

'I—'

'Damn your excuses, Glokta! I am drowning in a sea of damned excuses, when what I need are answers! What I need are solutions! What I need is to know more about this liar!'

Then perhaps this will impress you. 'I have already, in fact, taken the liberty of some steps in that direction.'

'What steps?'

'I was able to take his Navigator into custody,' said Glokta, allowing himself the smallest of smiles.

'The Navigator?' Sult gave no sign of being impressed. 'And what did that stargazing imbecile tell you?'

Glokta paused. 'That he journeyed across the Old Empire to the edge of the World with Bayaz and our new king, before his enthronement. ' He struggled for words that would fit cleanly into Sult's world of logic, and reasons, and neat explanations. 'That they were seeking for . . . a relic, of the Old Time—'

'Relics?' asked Sult, his frown deepening. 'Old Time?'

Glokta swallowed. 'Indeed, but they did not find it—'

‘So we now know one of a thousand things that Bayaz did not do? Bah!’ Sult ripped angrily at the air with his hand. ‘He is nobody, and told you less than nothing! More of your myths and rubbish!’

‘Of course, your Eminence,’ muttered Glokta. *There really is no pleasing some people.*

Sult frowned down at the squares board under the window, his white-gloved hand hovering over the pieces as if to make a move. ‘I lose track of how often you have failed me, but I will give you a final chance to redeem yourself. Look into this First of the Magi once more. Find some weakness, some weapon we can use against him. He is a disease, and we must burn him out.’ He prodded angrily at one of the white pieces. ‘I want him destroyed! I want him finished! I want him in the House of Questions, in chains!’

Glokta swallowed. ‘Your Eminence, Bayaz is ensconced in the palace, and well beyond my reach . . . his protégé is now our King . . .’ *Thanks in part to our own desperate efforts.* Glokta almost winced, but he could not stop himself from asking the question. ‘How am I to do it?’

‘How?’ shrieked Sult, ‘how, you crippled worm?’ He swept his hand furiously across the board and dashed the pieces spinning across the floor. *And I wonder who will have to bend down to pick those up?* The six Practicals, as though controlled by the pitch of the Arch Lector’s voice, detached themselves from the walls and loomed menacingly into the room. ‘If I wished to attend to every detail myself I would have no need of your worthless services! Get out there and get it done, you twisted slime!’

‘Your Eminence is too kind,’ muttered Glokta, humbly inclining his head once more. *But even the lowest dog needs a scratch behind the ears, from time to time, or he might go for his master’s throat . . .*

‘And look into his story while you’re about it.’

‘Story, Arch Lector?’

‘This fairytale of Carmee dan Roth!’ Sult’s eyes went narrower still, hard creases cutting into the bridge of his nose. ‘If we cannot take the leash ourselves, we must have the dog put down, do you understand?’

Glokta felt his eye twitching, in spite of his efforts to make it be still. *We find a way to bring King Jezal’s reign to an abrupt end. Dangerous. If the Union is a ship, it has but lately come through a storm, and is listing badly. We have lost one captain. Replace another now, and the boat might break*

apart entirely. We will all be swimming in some deep, cold, unknown waters then. Civil War, anyone? He frowned down at the squares pieces scattered across his floor. *But his Eminence has spoken. What is it that Shickel said? When your master gives you a task, you do your best at it. Even if the task is a dark one. And some of us are only suited to dark tasks . . .*

'Carmee dan Roth, and her bastard. I shall find the truth of it, your Eminence, you can depend on me.'

Sult's sneer curled to even greater heights of contempt. 'If only!'

The House of Questions was busy, for an evening. Glokta saw no one as he limped down the corridor, his excuses for teeth pressed into his lip, his hand clenched tight around the handle of his cane, slippery with sweat. He saw no one, but he heard them.

Voices bubbled from behind the iron-bound doors. Low and insistent. *Asking the questions*. High and desperate. *Spilling the answers.* From time to time a shriek, or a roar, or a howl of pain would cut through the heavy silence. *Those hardly need explaining*. Severard was leaning against the dirty wall as Glokta limped towards him, one foot up on the plaster, whistling tunelessly behind his mask.

'What's all this?' asked Glokta.

'Some of Lord Brock's people got drunk, then they got noisy. Fifty of 'em, made quite a mess up near the Four Corners. Moaning about rights, whining on how the people were cheated, mouthing off how Brock should've been king. They say it was a demonstration. We say it was treason.'

'Treason, eh?' *The definition is notoriously flexible*. 'Pick out some ringleaders and get some paper signed. Angland is back in Union hands. High time we started filling the place up with traitors.'

'They're already at it. Anything else?'

'Oh, of course.' *Juggling knives. One comes down, two go up. Always more blades spinning in the air, and each one with a deadly edge.* 'I had a visit from his Eminence earlier today. A brief visit, but too long for my taste.'

'Work for us?'

'Nothing that will make you a rich man, if that's what you're hoping for.'

‘I’m always hoping. I’m what you call an optimist.’

‘Lucky for you.’ I rather tend the other way. Glokta took a deep breath and let it out in a long sigh. ‘The First of the Magi and his bold companions.’

‘Again?’

‘His Eminence wants information.’

‘This Bayaz, though. Isn’t he tight with our new king?’

Glokta raised an eyebrow as a muffled roar of pain echoed down the corridor. *Tight? He might as well have made him out of clay.* ‘That is why we must keep our eyes upon him, Practical Severard. For his own protection. Powerful men have powerful enemies, as well as powerful friends.’

‘Think that Navigator knows anything else?’

‘Nothing that will do the trick.’

‘Shame. I was getting used to having the little bastard around. He tells a hell of a story about a huge fish.’

Glokta sucked at his empty gums. ‘Keep him where he is for now. Perhaps Practical Frost will appreciate his tall tales.’ He has a fine sense of humour.

‘If the Navigator’s no use, who do we squeeze?’

Who indeed? Ninefingers is gone. Bayaz himself is tucked up tight in the palace, and his apprentice hardly leaves his side. The erstwhile Jezal dan Luthar, we must concede, is now far beyond our reach . . . ‘What about that woman?’

Severard looked up. ‘What, that brown bitch?’

‘She’s still in the city, isn’t she?’

‘Last I heard.’

‘Follow her, then, and find out what she’s about.’

The Practical paused. ‘Do I have to?’

‘What? You scared?’

Severard lifted up his mask and scratched underneath it. ‘I can think of people I’d rather follow.’

‘Life is a series of things we would rather not do.’ Glokta looked up and down the corridor, making sure there was no one there. ‘We also need to ask some questions about Carmee dan Roth, supposed mother of our present king.’

‘What sort of questions?’

He leaned towards Severard and hissed quietly in his ear. ‘Questions like – did she really bear a child before she died? Was that child really the issue of the overactive loins of King Guslav? Is that child truly the same man that we now have on the throne? You know the kind of questions.’ *Questions that could land us in a great deal of trouble. Questions that some people might call treason. After all, the definition is notoriously flexible.*

Severard’s mask looked the same as ever, but the rest of his face was decidedly worried. ‘You sure we want to go digging there?’

‘Why don’t you ask the Arch Lector if he’s sure? He sounded sure to me. Get Frost to help you if you’re having trouble.’

‘But . . . what are we looking for? How will we—’

‘How?’ hissed Glokta. ‘If I wished to attend to every detail myself I would have no need of your services. Get out there and get it done!’

When Glokta had been young and beautiful, quick and promising, admired and envied, he had spent a great deal of time in the taverns of Adua. *Though I never remember falling this far, even in my darkest moods.*

He scarcely felt out of place now, as he hobbled among the customers. To be crippled was the norm here, and he had more teeth than average. Nearly everyone carried unsightly scars or debilitating injuries, sores or warts to make a toad blush. There were men with faces rough as the skin on a bowl of old porridge. Men who shook worse than leaves in a gale and stank of week-old piss. Men who looked as if they’d slit a child’s throat just to keep their knives sharp. A drunken whore slouched against a post in an attitude that could hardly have been arousing to the most desperate sailor. *That same reek of sour beer and hopelessness, sour sweat and early death that I remember from the sites of my worst excesses. Only stronger.*

There were some private booths at one end of the stinking common room, vaulted archways full of miserable shadows and even more miserable drunks. *And who might one expect to find in such surroundings?* Glokta shuffled to a stop beside the last of them.

‘Well, well, well. I never thought I’d see you alive again.’

Nicomo Cosca looked even worse than when Glokta first met him, if that was possible. He was spread out against the slimy wall, his hands dangling,

his head hanging over to one side, his eyes scarcely open as he watched Glokta work his painful way into a chair opposite. His skin was soapy pale in the flickering light from the single mean candle flame, dark pouches under his eyes, dark shadows shifting over his pinched and pointed face. The rash on his neck had grown angrier, and spread up the side of his jaw like ivy up a ruin. *With just a little more effort he might look nearly as ill as me.*

'Superior Glokta,' he wheezed, in a voice as rough as tree-bark, 'I am delighted that you received my message. What an honour to renew our acquaintance, against all the odds. Your masters did not reward your efforts in the South with a cut throat, eh?'

'I was as surprised as you are, but no.' *Though there is still ample time.* 'How was Dagoska after I left?'

The Styrian puffed out his hollow cheeks. 'Dagoska was a real mess, since you are asking. A lot of men dead. A lot of men made slaves. That's what happens when the Gurkish come to dinner, eh? Good men with bad endings, and the bad men did little better. Bad endings for everyone. Your friend General Vissbruck got one of them.'

'I understand he cut his own throat.' *To rapturous approval from the public.* 'How did you get away?'

The corner of Cosca's mouth curled up, as though he would have liked to smile but had not the energy. 'I disguised myself as a servant girl, and I fucked my way out.'

'Ingenious.' *But far more likely you were the one who opened the gates to the Gurkish, in return for your freedom. I wonder if I would have done the same, in that position? Probably.* 'And lucky for us both.'

'They say that luck is a woman. She's drawn to those that least deserve her.'

'Perhaps so.' *Though I appear to be both undeserving and unlucky.* 'It is certainly fortunate that you should appear in Adua at this moment. Things are . . . unsettled.'

Glokta heard a squeaking, rustling sound and a large rat dashed out from under his chair and paused for a moment in full view. Cosca delved a clumsy hand into his stained jacket and whipped it out. A throwing knife flew out with it, flashed through the air. It shuddered into the boards a good stride or two wide of the mark. The rat sat there for a moment longer, as

though to communicate its contempt, then scurried away between the table and chair legs, the scuffed boots of the patrons.

Cosca sucked at his stained teeth as he slithered from the booth to retrieve his blade. ‘I used to be dazzling with a throwing knife, you know.’

‘Beautiful women used to hang from my every word.’ Glokta sucked at his own empty gums. ‘Times change.’

‘So I hear. All kinds of changes. New rulers mean new worries. Worries mean business, for people in my trade.’

‘It might be that I will have a use for your particular talents, before too long.’

‘I cannot say that I would turn you down.’ Cosca tipped his bottle up and stuck his tongue into the neck, licking out the last trickle. ‘My purse is empty as a dry well. So empty, in fact, that I don’t even have a purse.’

There, at least, I am able to assist. Glokta checked that they were not observed, then tossed something across the rough table top and watched it bounce with a click and a spin to a halt in front of Cosca. The mercenary picked it up between finger and thumb, held it to the candle flame and stared at it through one bloodshot eye. ‘This seems to be a diamond.’

‘Consider yourself on retainer. I daresay you could find some like-minded men to assist you. Some reliable men, who tell no tales and ask no questions. Some good men, to help out.’

‘Some bad men, do you mean?’

Glokta grinned, displaying the gaps in his teeth. ‘Well. I suppose that all depends on whether you’re the employer, or you’re the job.’

‘I suppose it does at that.’ Cosca let his empty bottle drop to the ill-formed floorboards. ‘And what is the job, Superior?’

‘For now, just to wait, and stay out of sight.’ He leaned from the booth with a wince and snapped his fingers at a surly serving girl. ‘Another bottle of what my friend is drinking!’

‘And later?’

‘I’m sure I can find something for you to do.’ He shuffled painfully forward in his chair to whisper. ‘Between you and me, I heard a rumour that the Gurkish are coming.’

Cosca winced. ‘Them again? Must we? Those bastards don’t play by the rules. God, and righteousness, and belief.’ He shuddered. ‘Makes me nervous.’

‘Well, whoever it is banging on the door, I’m sure I can organise a heroic last stand, against the odds, without hope of relief.’ *I am not lacking for enemies, after all.*

The mercenary’s eyes glinted as the girl thumped a full bottle down on the warped table before him. ‘Ah, lost causes. My favourite.’

The Habit of Command

West sat in the Lord Marshal's tent and stared hopelessly into space. For the past year he had scarcely had an idle moment. Now, suddenly, there was nothing for him to do but wait. He kept expecting to see Burr push through the flap and walk to the maps, his fists clenched behind him. He kept expecting to feel his reassuring presence around the camp, to hear his booming voice call the wayward officers to order. But of course he would not. Not now and not ever again.

On the left sat General Kroy's staff, solemn and sinister in their black uniforms, as rigidly pressed as ever. On the right lounged Poulder's men, top buttons carelessly undone in an open affront to their opposite numbers, as puffed-up as peacocks displaying their tail feathers. The two great Generals themselves eyed each other with all the suspicion of rival armies across a battlefield, awaiting the edict that would raise one of them to the Closed Council and the heights of power, and dash the other's hopes for ever. The edict that would name the new King of the Union, and his new Lord Marshal.

It was to be Poulder or Kroy, of course, and both anticipated their final, glorious victory over the other. In the meantime the army, and West in particular, sat paralysed. Powerless. Far to the north the Dogman and his companions, who had saved West's life in the wilderness more times than he could remember, were no doubt fighting for survival, watching desperately for help that would never come.

For West, the entire business was very much like being at his own funeral, and one attended chiefly by sneering, grinning, posturing enemies. It was to be Poulder or Kroy, and whichever one it was, he was doomed. Poulder hated him with a flaming passion, Kroy with an icy scorn. The only fall swifter and more complete than his own would be that of Poulder, or of Kroy, whichever of them was finally overlooked by the Closed Council.

There was a dim commotion outside, and heads turned keenly to look. There was a scuffle of feet up to the tent, and several officers rose anxiously from their chairs. The flap was torn aside and the Knight Herald finally burst jingling through it. He was immensely tall, the wings on his helmet

almost poking a hole in the tent's ceiling as he straightened up. He had a leather case over one armoured shoulder, stamped with the golden sun of the Union. West stared at it, holding his breath.

'Present your message,' urged Kroy, holding out his hand.

'Present it to me!' snapped Poulder.

The two men jostled each other with scant dignity while the Knight Herald frowned down at them, impassive. 'Is Colonel West in attendance? ' he demanded, in a booming bass. Every eye, and most especially those of Poulder and Kroy, swivelled round.

West found himself rising hesitantly from his chair. 'Er . . . I am West.'

The Knight Herald stepped carelessly around General Kroy and advanced on West, spurs rattling. He opened his dispatch case, pulled out a roll of parchment and held it up. 'On the king's orders.'

The final irony of West's unpredictable career, it seemed, was that he would be the one to announce the name of the man who would dismiss him in dishonour moments later. But if he was to fall on his sword, delay would only increase the pain. He took the scroll from the Knight's gauntleted hand and broke the heavy seal. He unrolled it halfway, a block of flowing script coming into view. The room held its breath as he began to read.

West gave vent to a disbelieving giggle. Even with the tent as tense as a courtroom waiting for judgement, he could not help himself. He had to go over the first section twice more before he came close to taking it in.

'What is amusing?' demanded Kroy.

'The Open Council has elected Jezal dan Luthar as the new King of the Union, henceforth known as Jezal the First.' West had to stifle more laughter even though, if it was a joke, it was not a funny one.

'Luthar?' someone asked. 'Who the hell is Luthar?'

'That boy who won the Contest?'

It was all, somehow, awfully appropriate. Jezal had always behaved as though he was better than everyone else. Now, it seemed, he was. But all of that, momentous though it might have been, was a side-issue here.

'Who is the new Lord Marshal?' growled Kroy, and the two staffs shuffled forward, all on their feet now, forming a half-circle of expectation.

West took a deep breath, gathered himself like a child preparing to plunge into an icy pool. He pulled the scroll open and his eyes scanned quickly over the lower block of writing. He frowned. Neither Poulder's name nor

Kroy's appeared anywhere. He read it again, more carefully. His knees felt suddenly very weak.

'Who does it name?' Poulder nearly shrieked. West opened his mouth, but he could not find the words. He held the letter out, and Poulder snatched it from his hand while Kroy struggled unsuccessfully to look over his shoulder.

'No,' breathed Poulder, evidently having reached the end.

Kroy wrestled the dispatch away and his eyes flickered over it. 'This must be a mistake!'

But the Knight Herald did not think so. 'The Closed Council are not in the habit of making mistakes. You have the King's orders!' He turned to West and bowed. 'My Lord Marshal, I bid you farewell.'

The army's best and brightest all gawped at West, jaws dangling. 'Er . . . yes,' he managed to stammer. 'Yes, of course.'

An hour later, the tent was empty. West sat alone at Burr's writing desk, nervously arranging and rearranging the pen, ink, paper, and most of all the large letter he had just sealed with a blob of red wax. He frowned down at it, and up at the maps on the boards, and back down at his hands sitting idle on the scarred leather, and he tried to understand what the hell had happened.

As far as he could tell, he had been suddenly elevated to one of the highest positions in the Union. Lord Marshal West. With the possible exception of Bethod himself, he was the most powerful man on this side of the Circle Sea. Poulder and Kroy would be obliged to call him 'sir'. He had a chair on the Closed Council. Him! Collem West! A commoner, who had been scorned, and bullied, and patronised his entire life. How could it possibly have happened? Not through merit, certainly. Not through any action or inaction on his part. Through pure chance. A chance friendship with a man who, in many ways, he did not particularly like, and had certainly never expected to do him any favours. A man who, in a stroke of fortune that could only be described as a miracle, had now ascended to the throne of the Union.

His disbelieving laughter was short-lived. A most unpleasant image was forming in his head. Prince Ladisla, lying somewhere in the wilderness with

his head broken open, half-naked and unburied. West swallowed. If it had not been for him, Ladisla would now be king, and he would be swabbing latrines instead of preparing to take command of the army. His head was starting to hurt and he rubbed uncomfortably at his temples. Perhaps he had played a crucial part in his own advancement after all.

The tent flap rustled as Pike came through with his burned-out ruin of a grin. 'General Kroy is here.'

'Let him sweat a moment.' But it was West who was sweating. He wiped his moist palms together and tugged the jacket of his uniform smooth, his Colonel's insignia but recently cut from the shoulders. He had to appear to be in complete and effortless control, just as Marshal Burr had always done. Just as Marshal Varuz had used to, out in the dry wastelands of Gurkhul. He had to squash Poulder and Kroy while he had the chance. If he did not do it now, he would be forever at their mercy. A piece of meat, torn between two furious dogs. He reluctantly picked up the letter and held it out to Pike.

'Could we not just hang the pair of them, sir?' asked the convict as he took it.

'If only. But we cannot do without them, however troublesome they may be. A new King, a new Lord Marshal, both men that, by and large, no one has ever heard of. The soldiers need leaders they know.' He took a long breath through his nose, puffing out his chest. Each man had to do his part, and that was all. He let it hiss out. 'Show in General Kroy, please.'

'Yes, sir.' Pike held the tent flap open and roared out, 'General Kroy!'

Kroy's black uniform, chased about the collar with embroidered golden leaves, was so heavily starched that it was a surprise he could move at all. He drew himself up and stood to vibrating attention, eyes fixed on the middle distance. His salute was impeccable, every part of his body in regulation position, and yet he somehow managed to make his contempt and disappointment plain to see.

'May I first offer my congratulations,' he grated, 'Lord Marshal.'

'Thank you, General. Graciously said.'

'A considerable promotion, for one so young, so inexperienced—'

'I have been a professional soldier some dozen years, and fought in two wars and several battles. It would seem his Majesty the King deems me sufficiently seasoned.'

Kroy cleared his throat. ‘Of course, Lord Marshal. But you are new to high command. In my opinion you would be wise to seek the assistance of a more experienced man.’

‘I agree with you absolutely.’

Kroy lifted one eyebrow a fraction. ‘I am glad to hear that.’

‘That man should, without the slightest doubt, be General Poulder.’ To give him credit, Kroy’s face did not move. A small squeak issued from his nose. The only indication of what, West did not doubt, was his boundless dismay. He had been hurt when he arrived. Now he was reeling. The very best time to plunge the blade in to the hilt. ‘I have always been a great admirer of General Poulder’s approach to soldiering. His dash. His vigour. He is, to my mind, the very definition of what an officer should be.’

‘Quite so,’ hissed Kroy through gritted teeth.

‘I am taking his advice in a number of areas. There is only one major issue upon which we differed.’

‘Indeed?’

‘You, General Kroy.’ Kroy’s face had assumed the colour of a plucked chicken, the trace of scorn replaced quick-time by a definite tinge of horror. ‘Poulder was of the opinion that you should be dismissed immediately. I was for giving you one more chance. Sergeant Pike?’

‘Sir.’ The ex-convict stepped forward smartly and held out the letter. West took it from him and displayed it to the General.

‘This is a letter to the king. I begin by reminding him of the happy years we served together in Adua. I go on to lay out in detail the reasons for your immediate dismissal in dishonour. Your unrepentant stubbornness, General Kroy. Your tendency to steal the credit. Your bloodless inflexibility. Your insubordinate reluctance to work with other officers.’ If it was possible for Kroy’s face to grow yet more drawn and pale it did so, steadily, as he stared at the folded paper. ‘I earnestly hope that I will never have to send it. But I will, at the slightest provocation to myself or to General Poulder, am I understood?’

Kroy appeared to grope for words. ‘Perfectly understood,’ he croaked in the end, ‘my Lord Marshal.’

‘Excellent. We are extremely tardy in setting off for our rendezvous with our Northern allies and I hate to arrive late to a meeting. You will transfer

your cavalry to my command, for now. I will be taking them north with General Poulder, in pursuit of Bethod.'

'And I, sir?'

'A few Northmen still remain on the hills above us. It will be your task to sweep them away and clear the road to Carleon, giving our enemies the impression that our main body has not moved north. Succeed in that and I may be willing to trust you with more. You will make the arrangements before first light.' Kroy opened his mouth, as though about to complain at the impossibility of the request. 'You have something to add?'

The General quickly thought better of it. 'No, sir. Before first light, of course.' He even managed to force his face into a shape vaguely resembling a smile.

West did not have to try too hard to smile back. 'I am glad you are embracing this chance to redeem yourself, General. You are dismissed.' Kroy snapped to attention once more, spun on his heel, caught his leg up with his sabre and stumbled from the tent in some disarray.

West took a long breath. His head was pounding. He wanted nothing more than to lie down for a few moments, but there was no time. He tugged the jacket of his uniform smooth again. If he had survived that nightmare journey north through the snow, he could survive this. 'Send in General Poulder.'

Poulder swaggered into the tent as though he owned the place and stood to slapdash attention, his salute as flamboyant as Kroy's had been rigid. 'Lord Marshal West, I would like to extend to you my earnest congratulations on your unexpected advancement.' He grinned unconvincingly, but West did not join him. He sat there, frowning up at Poulder as if he was a problem that he was considering a harsh solution to. He sat there for some time, saying nothing. The General's eyes began to dart nervously around the tent. He gave an apologetic cough. 'Might I ask, Lord Marshal, what you had to discuss with General Kroy?'

'Why, all manner of things.' West kept his face stony hard. 'My respect for General Kroy on all matters military is boundless. We are much alike, he and I. His precision. His attention to detail. He is, to my mind, the very definition of what a soldier should be.'

'He is a most accomplished officer,' Poulder managed to hiss.

‘He is. I have been elevated with great rapidity to my position, and I feel I need a senior man, a man with a wealth of experience, to act as a . . . as a mentor, if you will, now that Marshal Burr is gone. General Kroy has been good enough to agree to serve in that capacity.’

‘Has he indeed?’ A sheen of sweat was forming across Poulder’s forehead.

‘He has made a number of excellent suggestions which I am already putting into practice. There was only one issue on which we could not agree.’ He steepled his fingers on the desk before him and looked sternly at Poulder over the top of them. ‘You were that issue, General Poulder. You.’

‘I, Lord Marshal?’

‘Kroy pressed for your immediate dismissal.’ Poulder’s fleshy face was rapidly turning pink. ‘But I have decided to extend to you one final opportunity.’

West picked up the very same paper that he had displayed to Kroy. ‘This is a letter to the king. I begin by thanking him for my promotion, by enquiring after his health, by reminding him of our close personal friendship. I go on to lay out in detail the reasons for your immediate cashiering in disgrace. Your unbecoming arrogance, General Poulder. Your tendency to steal the credit. Your reluctance to obey orders. Your stubborn inability to work with other officers. I earnestly hope that I will never have to send it. But I will, at the slightest provocation. The slightest provocation to myself or to General Kroy, am I understood?’

Poulder swallowed, sweat glistening all over his ruddy face. ‘You are, my Lord Marshal.’

‘Good. I am trusting General Kroy to seize control of the hills between us and Carleon. Until you prove yourself worthy of a separate command you will stay with me. I want your division ready to move north before first light, and the swiftest units to the fore. Our Northern allies are relying on us, and I do not mean to let them down. At first light, General, and with the greatest speed.’

‘The greatest speed, of course. You can rely on me . . . sir.’

‘I hope so, in spite of my reservations. Every man must do his part, General Poulder. Every man.’

Poulder blinked and worked his mouth, half turned to leave, remembered belatedly to salute, then strode from the tent. West watched the flap moving ever so gently in the wind outside, then he sighed, crumpled the letter up in

his hand and tossed it away into the corner. It was nothing but a blank sheet of paper, after all.

Pike raised one pink, mostly hairless brow. ‘Sweetly done, sir, if I may say. Even in the camps, I never saw better lying.’

‘Thank you, Sergeant. Now that I begin, I find I warm to the work. My father always warned me against untruths, but between you and me the man was a shit, a coward, and a failure. If he was here now I’d spit in his face.’

West rose and walked to the largest-scale of the maps, stood before it, his hands clasped behind his back. In just the way that Marshal Burr would have done, he realised. He examined the dirty finger-smudge in the mountains where Crummock-i-Phail had indicated the position of his fortress. He traced the route to the Union army’s own current position, far to the south, and frowned. It was hard to believe that a Union cartographer could ever have come close to surveying that terrain in person, and the flamboyant shapes of the hills and rivers had an undoubted flavour of make-believe about them.

‘How long do you think it will take to get there, sir?’ asked Pike.

‘Impossible to say.’ Even if they got started immediately, which was unlikely. Even if Poulder did as he was told, which was doubly so. Even if the map was halfway accurate, which he knew it was not. He shook his head grimly. ‘Impossible to say.’

The First Day

The eastern sky was just catching fire. Long strips of pink cloud and long strips of black cloud were stretched out across the pale blue, the hazy grey shapes of mountains notched and jagged as a butcher's knife underneath. The western sky was a mass of dark iron still – cold and comfortless.

'Nice day for it,' said Crummock.

'Aye.' But Logen wasn't sure there was any such a thing.

'Well, if Bethod don't show, and we get nothing killed at all, at least you lot will have done wonders for my wall, eh?'

It was amazing how well and how fast a man could patch a wall when it was the pile of stones that might save his own life. A few short days and they had the whole stretch of it built up and mortared, most of the ivy cut away. From inside the fort, where the ground was that much higher, it didn't look too fearsome. From outside it was three times the height of a tall man up to the walkway. They'd new made the parapet neck-high at the top, with plenty of good slots for shooting and throwing rocks from. Then they'd dug out a decent ditch in front, and lined it with sharp stakes.

They were still digging, over on the left where the wall met the cliff and it was easiest to climb over. That was Dow's stretch, and Logen could hear him shouting at his boys over the sound of shovels. 'Get digging, you lazy fucks! I'll not be killed for your lack of work! Put your back into it, you bastards!' and so on, all day long. One way of getting work out of a man, Logen reckoned.

They'd dug the ditch out especially deep right in front of the old gate. A nice reminder to everyone that there were no plans to leave. But it was still the weakest spot, and there was no missing it. That was where Logen would be, if Bethod came. Right in the middle, on Shivers' stretch of wall. He was standing above the archway now, not far from Logen and Crummock, his long hair flapping about in the breeze, pointing out some cracks that still needed mortaring.

'Wall's looking good!' Logen shouted at him.

Shivers looked round, worked his mouth, then spat over his shoulder. 'Aye,' he growled, and turned away.

Crummock leaned close. ‘If it comes to a battle you’ll have to watch your back with that one, Bloody-Nine.’

‘I reckon so.’ The middle of a fight was a good place to settle a score with a man on your own side. No one ever checked too carefully if the corpses got it in the back or the front once the fighting was done. Everyone too busy crying at their cuts, or digging, or running away. Logen gave the big hillman a long stare. ‘I’ll have a lot of men to watch if it comes to a battle. We ain’t so very friendly that you won’t be one of ’em.’

‘Likewise,’ said Crummock, grinning all the way across his big, bearded face. ‘We both got a reputation for being none too picky who gets killed, once the killing starts. But that’s no bad thing. Too much trust makes men sloppy.’

‘Too much trust?’ It had been a while since Logen had too much of anything except enemies. He jerked his thumb towards the tower. ‘I’m going up, check if they’ve seen anything.’

‘I hope they have!’ said Crummock, rubbing his fat palms together. ‘I hope that bastard comes today!’

Logen hopped down from the wall and walked out across the fort, if you could call it that, past Carls and hillmen, sat in groups eating, or talking, or cleaning weapons. A few who’d been on guard through the night wrapped up in blankets, asleep. He passed the pen where the sheep were huddled together, a good deal fewer than there had been. He passed the makeshift forge set up near the stone shed, a couple of soot-smeared men working a bellows, another pouring metal into moulds for arrow heads. They’d need a damn lot of arrow-heads if Bethod came calling. He came to the narrow steps cut into the rock-face and took them two at a time, up above the fort to the top of the tower.

There was a big pile of rocks for throwing up there, on that shelf on the mountainside, and six big barrels wedged full of shafts. The pick of the archers stood at the new-mortared parapets, the men with the best eyes and the best ears, keeping watch for Bethod. Logen saw the Dogman in amongst the rest, with Grim on one side of him and Tul on the other.

‘Chief!’ It still made Logen smile to say it. A long time, they’d done things the other way around, but it worked a lot better like this, to his mind. At least no one was scared all the time. Not of their own chief, anyway. ‘See anything?’

The Dogman grinned round, and offered him out a flask. ‘A lot, as it goes.’

‘Uh,’ said Grim. The sun was getting up above the mountains now, slitting the clouds with bright lines, eating into the shadows across the hard land, burning away the dawn haze. The great fells loomed up bold and careless on either side, smeared with yellow green grass and fern on the slopes, strips of bare rock breaking through the brown summits. Below, the bare valley was quiet and still. Spotted with thorn bushes and clumps of stunted trees, creased with the paths of dried-out streams. Just as empty as it had been the day before, and the day before that, and ever since they’d got there.

It reminded Logen of his youth, climbing up in the High Places, alone. Days at a time, testing himself against the mountains. Before his was a name that anyone had heard of. Before he married, or had children, and before his wife and his children went back to the mud. The happy valleys of the past. He sucked in a long, cold breath of the high air, and he blew it out. ‘It’s quite a spot for a view, alright, but I meant have we seen anything of our old friend.’

‘You mean Bethod, the right royal King of the Northmen? No, no sign of him. Not a hair.’

Tul shook his big head. ‘Would’ve expected there to be some sign by now, if he was coming.’

Logen sloshed some water round his mouth and spat it out over the side of the tower, watched it splatter on the rocks way down below. ‘Maybe he won’t fall for it.’ He could see the happy side of Bethod not coming. Vengeance is a nice enough notion at a distance, but the getting of it close up isn’t so very pretty. Especially when you’re outnumbered ten to one with nowhere to run to.

‘Maybe he won’t at that,’ said Dogman, wistful. ‘How’s the wall?’

‘Alright, long as they don’t bring such a thing as a ladder with ’em. How long do you reckon we wait, before we—’

‘Uh,’ grunted Grim, his long finger pointing down into the valley.

Logen saw a flicker of movement down there. And again. He swallowed. A couple of men, maybe, creeping through the boulders like beetles through gravel. He felt the men tense up all around him, heard them muttering.

‘Shit,’ he hissed. He looked sideways at the Dogman, and the Dogman looked back. ‘Seems like Crummock’s plan worked.’

‘Seems that way. Far as getting Bethod to follow us, at least.’

‘Aye. The rest is the tricky bit.’ The bit that was more than likely to get them all killed, but Logen knew they were all thinking it without him saying a word.

‘Now we just hope that the Union keeps their end of the deal,’ said Dogman.

‘We hope.’ Logen tried to smile, but it didn’t come out too good. Hoping had never turned out that well for him.

Once they’d started coming, the valley had filled up quick, right in front of Dogman’s eyes. Nice and clean, just the way Bethod had always done things. The standards were set out between the two rock faces, three times a good bowshot distant, and the Carls and the Thralls were pressed in tight around ’em, all looking up towards their wall. The sun was getting up high in a blue sky with just a few shreds of cloud to cast a shadow, and all that weight of steel flashed and sparked like the sea under the moon.

Their signs were all there, all Bethod’s best from way back – Whitesides, Goring, Pale-as-Snow, Littlebone. Then there were others – sharp and ragged marks from out past the Crinna. Wild men, made dark and bloody deals with Bethod. Dogman could hear them whooping and calling to each other, strange sounds like animals might make in the forest.

Quite a gathering, all in all, and the Dogman could smell the fear and the doubt thick as soup up on the wall. A lot of weapons being fingered, a lot of lips being chewed. He did his best to keep his face hard and careless, the way that Threetrees would’ve done. The way a chief should. However much his own knees wanted to tremble.

‘How many now, you reckon?’ asked Logen.

Dogman let his eyes wander over ’em, thinking about it. ‘Eight thousand do you think, or ten, maybe?’

A pause. ‘That’s about what I was thinking.’

‘A lot more’n us, anyway,’ Dogman said, keeping his voice low.

‘Aye. But fights aren’t always won by the bigger numbers.’

‘Course not.’ Dogman worked his lips as he looked at all them men. ‘Just mostly.’ There was plenty going on down there, up at the front, shovels

glinting, a ditch and an earth rampart taking shape, all across the valley.

'Doing some digging o' their own,' grunted Dow.

'Always was thorough, was Bethod,' said Dogman. 'Taking his time. Doing it right.'

Logen nodded. 'Make sure none of us get away.'

Dogman heard the sound of Crummock's laughter behind him. 'Getting away wasn't ever the purpose o' this, though, eh?'

Bethod's own standard was going up now, near to the back but still towering over the others. Huge great thing, red circle on black. Dogman frowned at it, flapping in the breeze. He remembered seeing it months ago, back in Angland. Back when Threetrees had still been alive, and Cathil too. He worked his tongue round his sour mouth.

'King o' the fucking Northmen,' he muttered.

A few men came out from the front, where they were digging, started walking up towards the wall. Five of 'em, all in good armour, the one at the front with his arms spread out wide.

'Jawing time,' muttered Dow, then gobbed down into the ditch. They came up close, the five, up in front of the patched-up gate, mail coats shining dull in the brightening sun. The first of 'em had long white hair and one white eye, and weren't too hard to remember. White-Eye Hansul. He looked older than he used to, but didn't they all? He'd been the one to ask Threetrees to surrender, at Uffrith, and been told to piss off. He'd had shit thrown down on him at Heonan. He'd offered duels to Black Dow, and to Tul Duru, and to Harding Grim. Duels against Bethod's champion. Duels against the Bloody-Nine. He'd done a lot of talking for Bethod, and he'd told a lot o' lies.

'That Shite-Eye Hansul down there?' jeered Black Daw at him. 'Still sucking on Bethod's cock, are you?'

The old warrior grinned up at them. 'Man's got to feed his family somehow, don't he, and one cock tastes pretty much like another, if you ask me! Don't pretend like your mouths ain't all tasted salty enough before!'

He had some kind of point there, the Dogman had to admit. They'd all fought for Bethod themselves, after all. 'What're you after, Hansul?' he shouted. 'Bethod want to surrender to us, does he?'

'You'd have thought so, wouldn't you, outnumbered like he is, but that's not why I'm here. He's ready to fight, just like always, but I'm more of a

talker than a fighter, and I talked him into giving you all a chance. I got two sons down there, in with the rest, and call me selfish but I'd rather not have 'em in harm's way. I'm hoping we can maybe talk our way clear of this.'

'Don't seem too likely!' shouted Dogman, 'but give it a go if you must, I've got nothing else pressing on today!'

'Here's the thing, then! Bethod don't particularly want to waste time, and sweat, and blood on climbing your little shit-pile of a wall. He's got business with the Southerners he wants to get settled. It's scarcely worth the breath of pointing out the bastard of a fix you're in. We've got the numbers more'n ten to one, I reckon. Much more, and you've no way out. Bethod says any man wants to give up now can go in peace. All he has to do is give over his weapons.'

'And his head soon afterwards, eh?' barked Dow.

Hansul took a big breath in, like he hardly expected to be believed. 'Bethod says any man wants to can go free. That's his word.'

'Fuck his word!' Dow sneered at him, and down the walls men jeered and spat their support. 'D'you think we ain't all seen him break it ten times before? I done shits worth more!'

'Lies, o' course,' chuckled Crummock, 'but it's traditional, no? To get a bit o' lying done, before we get started on the hard work. You'd feel insulted if he didn't give it some kind of a try at least. Any man, is it?' he called down. 'What about Crummock-i-Phail, can he go free? What about the Bloody-Nine?'

Hansul's face sagged at the name. 'It's true then? Ninefingers is up there, is he?'

Dogman felt Logen come up beside and show himself on the wall. White-Eye turned pale, and his shoulders slumped. 'Well,' Dogman heard him saying quiet, 'it has to be blood, then.'

Logen leaned lazily on the parapet, and he gave Hansul and his Carls a look. That hungry, empty look, like he was picking which one of a herd o' sheep to slaughter first. 'You can tell Bethod we'll come out.' He left a pause. 'Once we've killed the fucking lot o' you.'

A ripple of laughter went down the walls, and men jeered and shook their weapons in the air. Not funny words, particularly, but hard ones, which was what they all needed to hear, Dogman reckoned. Good way to get rid of their fear, for a moment. He even managed half a smile himself.

White-Eye just stood there, in front of their rickety gate, and he waited for the boys to go quiet. ‘I heard you was chief of this crowd now, Dogman. So you don’t have to take your orders from this blood-mad butcher no more. That your answer as well? That the way it is?’

Dogman shrugged. ‘Just what other way did you think it’d be? We didn’t come here to talk, Hansul. You can piss off back, now.’

Some more laughter, and some more cheers, and one lad down at Shivers’ end of the wall pulled his trousers down and stuck his bare arse over the parapet. So that was that for the negotiations.

White-Eye shook his head. ‘Alright, then. I’ll tell him. Back to the mud with the lot o’ you, I reckon, and well earned. You can tell the dead I tried, when you meet ’em!’ He started picking his way back down the valley, the four Carls behind him.

Logen loomed forward, all of a sudden. ‘I’ll be looking for your sons, Hansul!’ he screamed, spit flying out his snarling, grinning mouth and away into the wind, ‘When the work begins! You can tell Bethod I’m waiting! Tell ’em all I’ll be waiting!’

A strange stillness fell on the wall and the men upon it, on the valley and the men within it. That kind of stillness that comes sometimes, before a battle, when both sides know what to expect. The same stillness that Logen had felt at Carleon, before he drew his sword and roared for the charge. Before he lost his finger. Before he was the Bloody-Nine. Long ago, when things were simpler.

Bethod’s ditch was deep enough for him, and the Thralls had put away their shovels and moved behind it. The Dogman had climbed the steps back to the tower, no doubt taken up his bow beside Grim and Tul, and was waiting. Crummock was behind the wall with his Hillmen, lined up fierce and ready. Dow was with his lads on the left. Red Hat was with his boys on the right. Shivers wasn’t far from Logen, both of them stood above the gate, waiting.

The standards down in the valley flapped and rustled gently in the wind. A hammer clanged once, twice, three times in the fortress behind them. A bird called, high above. A man whispered, somewhere, then was still. Logen closed his eyes, and tipped his face back, and he felt the hot sun and the

cool breeze of the High Places on his skin. All as quiet as if he'd been alone, and there were no ten thousand men about him eager to set to killing one another. So still, and calm, he almost smiled. Was this what life would have been, if he'd never held a blade?

For the length of three breaths or so, Logen Ninefingers was a man of peace.

Then he heard the sound of men moving, and he opened his eyes. Bethod's Carls shuffled to the sides of the valley, rank after rank of them, with a crunching of feet and a rattling of gear. They left a rocky path, an open space through their midst. Out of that gap black shapes came, swarming over the ditch like angry ants from a broken nest, boiling up the slope towards the wall in a formless mass of twisted limbs, and snarling mouths and scraping claws.

Shanka, and even Logen had never seen half so many in one place. The valley crawled with them – a gibbering, clattering, squawking infestation.

'By the fucking dead,' someone whispered.

Logen wondered if he should shout something to the men on the walls around him. If he should cry, 'Steady!', or 'Hold!'. Something to help put some heart in his lads, the way a leader was meant to. But what would have been the point? Every one of them had fought before and knew his business. Every one of them knew that it was fight or die, and there was no better spur to a man's courage than that.

So Logen gritted his teeth, and he curled his fingers tight round the cold grip of the Maker's sword, and he slid the dull metal from its scarred sheath, and he watched the Flatheads come. A hundred strides away now, maybe, the front runners, and coming on fast.

'Ready your bows!' roared Logen.

'Bows!' echoed Shivers.

'Arrows!' came Dow's harsh scream from down the wall, and Red Hat's bellow from the other side. All around Logen the bows creaked as they were drawn, men taking their aim, jaws clenched, faces grim and dirty. The Flatheads came on, heedless, teeth shining, tongues lolling, bitter eyes bright with hate. Soon, now, very soon. Logen spun the grip of the sword round in his hand.

'Soon,' he whispered.

*

‘Start fucking shooting, then!’ And the Dogman loosed his shaft into the crowd of Shanka. Strings buzzed all round him and the first volley went hissing down. Arrows missed their marks, bounced off rock and spun away, arrows found their marks and brought Flatheads squealing down in a tangle of black limbs. Men reached for more, calm and solid, the best archers in the whole crew and knowing it.

Bows clicked and shafts twittered and Shanka died down in the valley, and the archers took aim, nice and easy, loosing ’em off and on to the next. Dogman heard the order from down below and he saw the twitch and flicker of shafts flying from the walls. More Flatheads dropped, thrashing and struggling in the dirt.

‘Easy as squashing ants in a bowl!’ someone shouted.

‘Aye!’ growled the Dogman, ‘except ants won’t climb up out of that bowl and cut your fucking head off! Less talk and more arrows!’ He watched the first Shanka come up to their fresh-dug ditch, start floundering in, trying to drag the stakes down, scrabbling about at the bottom of the wall.

Tul heaved a great stone up over his head, leaned out and flung it spinning down with a roar. Dogman saw it crash into a Shanka’s head below in the ditch and dash its brains out, red against the rocks, saw it bounce and tumble into others, send a couple reeling. More fell, screeching as shafts flitted down into them, but there were plenty behind, sliding into the ditch, swarming over each other. They crushed up to the wall, spreading out down its length, a few of them hurling spears up at the men on top, or shooting clumsy arrows.

Now they were starting to climb, claws digging into pitted stone, hauling themselves up, and up. Slow across most of the wall, and getting torn off by rocks and arrows from above. Quicker on the far side, over on the left, furthest from the Dogman and his boys, where Black Dow had the watch. Even quicker round the gate, where there was still some ivy stuck to the stone.

‘Damn it, but those bastards can climb!’ hissed the Dogman, fumbling out his next shaft.

‘Uh,’ grunted Grim.

The Shanka's hand slapped down on the top of the parapet, a twisted claw, scratching at the stones. Logen watched the arm come after, bent and ugly, patched with thick hair and squirming with thick sinew. Now came the flattened top of its bald head, a hulking lump of heavy brow, great jaw yawning wide, sharp teeth slick with spit. The deep set eyes met his. Logen's sword split its skull down to its flat stub of nose and popped one eye from its socket.

Men shot arrows and ducked down as arrows bounced from stone. A spear went twittering past over Logen's head. Down below he could hear the Shanka scratching and tearing at the gates, beating at them with clubs and hammers, could hear them shrieking with rage. Shanka hissed and squawked as they tried to pull themselves over the parapet and men hacked at them with sword and axe, poked them off the wall with spears.

He could hear Shivers roaring, 'Get 'em away from the gate! Away from the gate!' Men bellowed curses. One Carl who'd been leaning out over the parapet fell back, coughing. He had a Shanka's spear through him, just under his shoulder, the point making the shirt stick right up off his back. He blinked down at the warped shaft, opened his mouth to say something. He groaned, took a couple of wobbling steps, and a big Flathead started dragging itself over the parapet behind him, its arm stretched out on the stone.

The Maker's sword chopped deep into it just below the elbow, spattering sticky spots across Logen's face. The blade caught stone and made his hand sing, sent him stumbling long enough for the Shanka to drag itself over, its flopping arm only just held on by a flap of skin and sinew, dark blood drooling out in long spurts.

It came for Logen with its other claw but he caught its wrist, kicked its knee sideways and brought it down. Before it could get up he'd chopped a long gash out of its back, splinters of white bone showing in the great wound. It thrashed and struggled, splattering blood around, and Logen caught it tight under the throat, heaved it back over the wall and flung it off. It fell, and crashed into another just starting to climb. Both of them went sprawling in the ditch, one scrabbling around with a broken stake in its throat.

A young lad stood there, gawping, bow hanging limp from his hand.

'Did I tell you to stop fucking shooting?' Logen roared at him, and he blinked and nocked a shaft with a trembling hand, hurried back to the parapet. There were men everywhere fighting, and shouting, shooting arrows and swinging blades. He saw three Carls stabbing at a Flathead with their spears. He saw Shivers plant a blow in the small of another's back, blood leaping in the air in dark streaks. He saw a man smash a Flathead in the face with his shield, just as it got to the top of the wall, and knock it into the empty air. Logen slashed at a Shanka's hand, slipped in some blood and fell on his side, nearly stabbed himself. He crawled a stride or two and fumbled his way up. He hacked a Shanka's arm off that was already spitted thrashing on a Carl's spear, chopped halfway through another's neck as it showed itself over the parapet. He lurched after it and stared over.

One Shanka was still on the wall, and Logen was just pointing to it when an arrow from off the tower took it in the back. It crashed down into the ditch, stuck on a stake. The ones round the gate were all done, crushed with rocks and bristling with broken arrows. That was it for the centre, and Red Hat's side was already clear. Over on the left there were still a few up on the walls, but Dow's boys were getting well on top of them now. Even as Logen watched he saw a couple flung down bloody into the ditch.

In the valley they started wavering, edging away, squeaking and shrieking, arrows still falling among them from the Dogman's archers. Seemed that even Shanka could have enough. They started to turn, to scuttle back towards Bethod's ditch.

'We done 'em!' someone bellowed, and then everyone was cheering and screaming. The boy with the bow was waving it over his head now, grinning like he'd beaten Bethod all by himself.

Logen didn't celebrate. He frowned out at the great crowd of Carls beyond the ditch, the standards of Bethod's host flapping over them in the breeze. Brief and bloody, that one might have been, but the next time they came it was likely to be a lot less brief, and a lot more bloody. He made his aching fist uncurl from round the Maker's sword, leaned it up against the parapet, and he pressed one hand with the other to stop them shaking. He took a long breath.

'Still alive,' he whispered.

Logen sat sharpening his knives, the firelight flashing on the blades as he turned them this way and that, stroking them with the whetstone, licking his fingertip and wiping a smudge away, getting them nice and clean. You could never have too many, and that was a fact. He grinned as he remembered what Ferro's answer to that had been. Unless you fall into a river and drown for all that weight of iron. He wondered for an idle moment if he'd ever see her again, but it didn't look likely. You have to be realistic, after all, and getting through tomorrow seemed like quite the ambition.

Grim sat opposite, trimming some straight sticks to use as arrow shafts. There'd still been the slightest glimmer of dusk in the sky when they'd sat down together. Now it was dark as pitch but for the dusty stars, and neither one of them had said a word the whole time. That was Harding Grim for you, and it suited Logen well enough. A comfortable silence was much preferable to a worrisome conversation, but nothing lasts forever.

The sound of angry footsteps came out of the darkness and Black Dow stalked up to the fire, Tul and Crummock just behind him. He had a frown on his face black enough to have earned his name, and a dirty bandage round his forearm, a long streak of dark blood dried into it.

'Pick up a cut, did you?' asked Logen.

'Bah!' Dow dropped down beside the fire. 'Nothing but a scratch. Fucking Flatheads! I'll burn the lot of 'em!'

'How about the rest of you?'

Tul grinned. 'My palms are terrible chafed from hefting rocks, but I'm a tough bastard. I'll live through it.'

'And I still find myself miserably idle,' said Crummock, 'with my children looking to my weapons, and cutting arrows from the dead. Good work for children, that, gets 'em comfortable round a corpse. The moon's keen to see me fight, though, so she is, and so am I.'

Logen sucked at his teeth. 'You'll get your chance, Crummock, I'd not worry about that. Bethod's got plenty for everyone, I reckon.'

'I never seen Flatheads come on like that,' Dow was musing. 'Right at a well-manned wall with no ladders, no tools. It ain't too clever, your Flathead, but it ain't stupid either. They like ambushes. They like cover, and hiding, and creeping around. They can be mad fearless, when they have to be, but to come on like that, by choice? Not natural.'

Crummock chuckled, a great raspy rumbling. ‘Shanka fighting for one set of men against another ain’t natural either. These aren’t natural times. Might be Bethod’s witch has worked some charm to get ’em all stirred up. Cooked herself a chant and a ritual to fill those things with hate of us.’

‘Danced naked round a green fire and all the rest, I don’t doubt,’ said Tul.

‘The moon will see us right, my friends, don’t worry yourself on that score!’ Crummock rattled the bones around his neck. ‘The moon loves us all, and we cannot die while there’s—’

‘Tell it to those as went back to the mud today.’ Logen jerked his head over towards the fresh dug graves at the back of the fortress. There was no seeing them in the darkness, but they were there. A score or so long humps of turned and pressed-down earth.

But the big hillman only smiled. ‘I’d call them the happy ones, though, wouldn’t you? Least they all get their own beds, don’t they? We’ll be lucky if we don’t go in pits for a dozen each once the work gets hot. There’ll be nowhere for the living to sleep otherwise. Pits for a score! Don’t tell me you ain’t seen that before, or dug the holes your own sweet self.’

Logen got up. ‘Maybe I have, but I didn’t like it any.’

‘Course you did!’ Crummock roared after him. ‘Don’t give me that, Bloody-Nine!’

Logen didn’t look back. There were torches set on the wall, every ten paces or so, bright flames in the darkness, white specks of insects floating around them. Men stood in their light, leaning on their spears, bows clenched in their hands, swords drawn, watching the night for surprises. Bethod had always loved surprises, and Logen reckoned they’d have some before they were through, one way or another.

He came up to the parapet and set his hands on the clammy stone, frowned down at the fires burning in the blackness of the valley. Bethod’s fires, far away in the dark, and their own ones, bonfires built up and lit just below the wall to try and catch any clever bastards trying to sneak up. They cast flickering circles across the shadowy rocks, with here or there the twisted corpse of a Flathead, hacked and flung from the wall or stuck with arrows.

Logen felt someone move behind him and his back prickled, eyes sliding to the corners. Shivers, maybe, come to settle their score and shove him off the wall. Shivers, or one of a hundred others with some grudge that Logen

had forgotten but they never would. He made sure his hand was close to a blade, and he bared his teeth, and he made ready to spin and strike.

‘We did good today, though, eh?’ said the Dogman. ‘Lost less than twenty.’

Logen breathed easy again, and he let his hand drop. ‘We did alright. But Bethod’s just getting started. He’s prodding, to see where we’re weakest, see if he can wear us down. He knows that time’s the thing. Most valuable thing there is, in war. A day or two’s worth more to him than a load of Flatheads. If he can crush us quick he’ll take the losses, I reckon.’

‘Best thing might be to hold out, then, eh?’

Off in the darkness, far away and echoing, Logen could just hear the clang and clatter of smithing and carpentry. ‘They’re building down there. All the stuff they’ll need to climb our wall, fill in our ditch. Lots of ladders, and all the rest. He’ll take us quick if he can, Bethod, but he’ll take us slow if he has to.’

Dogman nodded. ‘Well, like I said. Best thing to do would be to hold out. If all goes to plan, the Union’ll be here soon.’

‘They’d better be. Plans have a way of coming apart when you lean on ’em.’

Such Sweet Sorrow

‘His Resplendence, the Grand Duke of Ospria, desires only the best of relations . . .’

Jezal could do little but sit and smile, as he had been sitting and smiling all the whole interminable day. His face, and his rump, were aching from it. The burbling of the ambassador continued unabated, accompanied by flamboyant hand gestures. Occasionally he would dam the river of blather for a moment, so that his translator could render his platitudes into the common tongue. He need scarcely have bothered.

‘. . . the great city of Ospria was always honoured to count herself among the closest friends of your illustrious father, King Guslav, and now seeks nothing more than the continuing friendship of the government and people of the Union . . .’

Jezal had sat and smiled through the long morning, in his bejewelled chair, on his high marble dais, as the ambassadors of the world came to pay their ingratiating respects. He had sat as the sun rose in the sky and poured mercilessly through the vast windows, glinting on the gilt mouldings that encrusted every inch of wall and ceiling, flashing from the great mirrors, and silver candlesticks, and grand vases, striking multi-coloured fire from the tinkling glass beads on the three monstrous chandeliers.

‘. . . the Grand Duke wishes once again to express his brotherly regret at the minor incident last spring, and assures you that nothing of the kind will happen again, provided the soldiers of Westport stay on their side of the border . . .’

He had sat through the endless afternoon as the room grew hotter and hotter, squirming as the representatives of the world’s great leaders bowed in and scraped out with identical bland congratulations in a dozen different languages. He had sat as the sun went down, and hundreds of candles were lit and hoisted up, twinkling at him from the mirrors, and the darkened windows, and the highly polished floor. He sat, smiling, and receiving praise from men whose countries he had scarcely even heard of before that endless day began.

‘. . . His Resplendence furthermore hopes and trusts that the hostilities between your great nation and the Empire of Gurkhul may soon come to an end, and that trade may once more flow freely around the Circle Sea.’

Both ambassador and translator paused politely for a rare instant and Jezal managed to stir himself into sluggish speech. ‘We have a similar hope. Please convey to the Grand Duke our thanks for the wonderful gift.’ Two lackeys, meanwhile, heaved the huge chest to one side and placed it with the rest of the gaudy rubbish Jezal had accumulated that day.

Further Styrian chatter flowed out into the room. ‘His Resplendence wishes to convey his heartfelt congratulations on your August Majesty’s forthcoming marriage to the Princess Terez, the Jewel of Talins, surely the greatest beauty alive in all the wide Circle of the World.’ Jezal could only fight to maintain his stretched grin. He had heard the match spoken of as a settled thing so often that day that he had lost the will to correct the misconception, and had in fact almost started to think of himself as engaged. All he cared about was that the audiences should finally be finished with, so he might steal a moment to drown himself in peace.

‘His Resplendence has further instructed us to wish your August Majesty a long and happy reign,’ explained the translator, ‘and many heirs, that your line may continue undiminished in glory.’ Jezal forced his smile a tooth wider, and inclined his head. ‘I bid you good evening!’

The Osprian ambassador bowed with a theatrical flourish, sweeping off his enormous hat, its multicoloured feathers thrashing with enthusiasm. Then he shuffled backwards, still bent over, across the gleaming floor. He somehow made it out into the corridor without pitching over on his back, and the great doors, festooned with gold leaf, were smoothly shut upon him.

Jezal snatched the crown from his head and tossed it onto the cushion beside the throne, rubbing at the chafe marks round his sweaty scalp with one hand while he tugged his embroidered collar open with the other. Nothing helped. He still felt dizzy, weak, oppressively hot.

Hoff was already ingratiating himself onto Jezal’s left side. ‘That was the last of the ambassadors, your Majesty. Tomorrow will be occupied by the nobility of Midderland. They are eager to pay homage—’

‘Lots of homage and little help, I’ll be bound!’

Hoff managed a chuckle of suffocating falseness. ‘Ha, ha, ha, your Majesty. They have sought audiences from dawn, and we would not wish to

offend them by—’

‘Damn it!’ hissed Jezal, jumping up and shaking his legs in a vain effort to unstick his trousers from his sweaty backside. He jerked his crimson sash over his head and flung it away, tore his gilded frock coat open and tried to rip it off, but in the end he got his hand caught in one cuff and had to turn the bloody thing inside out before he could finally get free of it.

‘Damn it!’ He hurled it down on the marble dais with half a mind to stamp it to rags. Then he remembered himself. Hoff had taken a cautious step back, and was frowning as if he had discovered his fine new mansion was afflicted with a terrible case of rot. The assorted servants, pages, and Knights, both Herald and of the Body, were all staring studiously ahead, doing their best to imitate statues. Over in the dark corner of the room, Bayaz was standing. His eyes were sunk in shadow, but his face was stony grim.

Jezal blushed like a naughty schoolboy called to account, and pressed one hand over his eyes, ‘A terribly trying day . . .’ He hurried down the steps of the dais and out of the audience chamber with his head down. The blaring of a belated and slightly off-key fanfare pursued him down the hallway. So, unfortunately, did the First of the Magi.

‘That was not gracious,’ said Bayaz. ‘Rare rages render a man frightening. Common ones render him ridiculous.’

‘I apologise,’ growled Jezal through gritted teeth. ‘The crown is a mighty burden.’

‘A mighty burden and a mighty honour both. We had a discussion, as I recall, about your striving to be worthy of it.’ The Magus left a significant pause. ‘Perhaps you might strive harder.’

Jezal rubbed at his aching temples. ‘I just need a moment to myself is all. Just a moment.’

‘Take all the time you need. But we have business in the morning, your Majesty, business we cannot avoid. The nobility of Midderland will not wait to congratulate you. I will see you at dawn, brimful with energy and enthusiasm, I am sure.’

‘Yes, yes!’ Jezal snapped over his shoulder. ‘Brimful!’

He burst out into a small courtyard, surrounded on three sides by a shadowy colonnade, and stood still in the cool evening. He shook himself, squeezed his eyes shut, let his head tip back and took a long, slow breath. A

minute alone. He wondered if, aside from pissing or sleeping, it was the first he had been permitted since that day of madness in the Lords' Round.

He was the victim, or perhaps the beneficiary, of the most almighty blunder. Somehow, everyone had mistaken him for a king, when he was very clearly a selfish, clueless idiot who had scarcely in his life thought more than a day ahead. Every time someone called him, 'your Majesty' he felt more of a fraud, and with each moment that passed he was more guiltily surprised not to have been found out.

He wandered across the perfect lawn, giving vent to a long, self-pitying sigh. It caught in his throat. There was a Knight of the Body beside a doorway opposite, standing to attention so rigidly that Jezal had hardly noticed him. He cursed under his breath. Could he not be left alone for five minutes together? He frowned as he walked closer. The man seemed somehow familiar. A great big fellow with a shaved head and a noticeable lack of neck . . .

'Bremer dan Gorst!'

'Your Majesty,' said Gorst, his armour rattling as he clashed his meaty fist against his polished breastplate.

'It is a pleasure to see you!' Jezal had disliked the man from the first moment he had laid eyes on him, and being bludgeoned round a fencing circle by him, whether Jezal had won in the end or no, had not improved his opinion of the neckless brute. Now, however, anything resembling a familiar face was like a glass of water in the desert. Jezal actually found himself reaching out and squeezing the man's heavy hand as though they were old friends, and had to make himself let go of it.

'Your Majesty does me too much honour.'

'Please, you need not call me that! How did you come to be part of the household? I thought that you served with Lord Brock's guard?'

'That post did not suit me,' said Gorst in his strangely high, piping voice. 'I was lucky enough to find a place with the Knights of the Body some months ago, your Maj—' He cut himself off.

An idea slunk into Jezal's head. He looked over his shoulder, but there was no one else nearby. The garden was still as a graveyard, its shadowy arcades as quiet as crypts. 'Bremer . . . I may call you Bremer, may I?'

'I suppose that my king may call me whatever he wishes.'

'I wonder . . . could I ask you for a favour?'

Gorst blinked. ‘Your Majesty has only to ask.’

Jezal spun around as he heard the door open. Gorst stepped out into the colonnade with the soft jingle of armour. A cloaked and hooded figure followed him, silently. The old excitement was still there as she pushed back her hood and a chink of light from a window above crept across the lower part of her face. He could see the bright curve of her cheek, one side of her mouth, the outline of a nostril, the gleam of her eyes in the shadows, and that was all.

‘Thank you, Gorst,’ said Jezal. ‘You may leave us.’ The big man thumped his chest and backed through the archway, pulling the door to behind him. Hardly the first time they had met in secret, of course, but things were different now. He wondered if it would end with kisses and soft words between them, or if it would simply end. The start was far from promising.

‘Your August Majesty,’ said Ardee with the very heaviest of irony. ‘What a towering honour. Should I grovel on my face? Or do I curtsey?’

However hard her words, the sound of her voice still made the breath catch in his throat. ‘Curtsey?’ he managed to say. ‘Do you even know how?’

‘In truth, not really. I have not had the training for polite society, and now the lack of it quite crushes me.’ She stepped forward, frowning into the darkened garden. ‘When I was a girl, in my wildest flights of fancy, I used to dream of being invited to the palace, a guest of the king himself. We would eat fine cakes, and drink fine wine, and talk fine talk of important things, deep into the night.’ Ardee pressed her hands to her chest and fluttered her eyelashes. ‘Thank you for making the pitiful dreams of one poor wretch come true, if only for the briefest moment. The other beggars will never believe me when I tell them!’

‘We are all more than a little shocked by the turn events have taken.’

‘Oh, we are indeed, your Majesty.’

Jezal flinched. ‘Don’t call me that. Not you.’

‘What should I call you?’

‘My name. Jezal, that is. The way you used to . . . please.’

‘If I must. You promised me, Jezal. You promised me you would not let me down.’

‘I know I did, and I meant to keep my promise . . . but the fact is . . .’ King or not, he fumbled with the words as much as he ever had, then blurted them out in an idiotic spurt. ‘I cannot marry you! I surely would have done, had not . . .’ He raised his arms and hopelessly let them drop. ‘Had not all this happened. But it has happened, and there is nothing that I can do. I cannot marry you.’

‘Of course not.’ Her mouth gave a bitter twist. ‘Promises are for children. I never thought it very likely, even before. Even in my most unrealistic moments. Now the notion seems ridiculous. The king and the peasant-girl. Absurd. The most hackneyed story-book would never dare suggest it.’

‘It need not mean that we never see each other again.’ He took a hesitant step towards her. ‘Things will be different, of course, but we can still find moments . . .’ He reached out, slowly, awkwardly. ‘Moments when we can be together.’ He touched her face, gently, and felt the same guilty thrill he always had. ‘We can be to each other just as we were. You would not need to worry. Everything would be taken care of . . .’

She looked him in the eye. ‘So . . . you’d like me to be your whore?’

He jerked his hand back. ‘No! Of course not! I mean . . . I would like you to be . . .’ What did he mean? He fumbled desperately for a better word. ‘My lover?’

‘Ah. I see. And when you take a wife, what will I be then? What word do you think your queen might use to describe me?’ Jezal swallowed, and looked at his shoes. ‘A whore is still a whore, whatever word you use. Easily tired of, and even more easily replaced. And when you tire of me, and you find other lovers? What will they call me then?’ She gave a bitter snort. ‘I’m scum, and I know it, but you must think even less of me than I do.’

‘It’s not my fault.’ He felt tears in his eyes. Pain, or relief, it was hard to tell. A bitter alloy of both, perhaps. ‘It’s not my fault.’

‘Of course it isn’t. I don’t blame you. I blame myself. I used to think I had bad luck, but my brother was right. I make bad choices.’ She looked at him with that same judging expression in her dark eyes that she had when they first met. ‘I could have found a good man, but I chose you. I should have known better.’ She reached up and touched his face, rubbed a tear from his cheek with her thumb. Just as she had when they parted before, in the park, in the rain. But then there had been the hope that they would meet again.

Now there was none. She sighed, and let her arm drop, and stared sulkily out into the garden.

Jezal blinked. Could that really be all? He yearned to say some last tender word, at least, some bitter-sweet farewell, but his mind was empty. What words could there possibly be that could make any difference? They were done, and more talk would only have been salt in the cuts. Wasted breath. He set his jaw, and wiped the last damp streaks from his face. She was right. The king and the peasant-girl. What could have been more ridiculous?

'Gorst!' he barked. The door squealed open and the muscle-bound guardsman emerged from the shadows, his head humbly bowed. 'You may escort the lady back to her home.'

He nodded, and stood away from the dark archway. Ardee turned and walked towards it, pulling up her hood, and Jezal watched her go. He wondered if she would pause on the threshold and look back, and their eyes would meet, and there would be one last moment between them. One last catching of his breath. One last tugging at his heart.

But she did not look back. Without the slightest pause she stepped through and was gone, and Gorst after her, and Jezal was left in the moonlit garden. Alone.

Picked Up A Shadow

Ferro sat on the warehouse roof, her eyes narrowed against the bright sun, her legs crossed underneath her. She watched the boats, and the people flowing off them. She watched for Yulwei. That was why she came here every day.

There was war between the Union and Gurkhul, a meaningless war with a lot of talk and no fighting, and so no ships went to Kanta. But Yulwei went where he pleased. He could take her back to the South, so she could have her vengeance on the Gurkish. Until he came, she was trapped with the pinks. She ground her teeth, and clenched her fists, and grimaced at her own uselessness. Her boredom. Her wasted time. She would have prayed to God for Yulwei to come.

But God never listened.

Jezal dan Luthar, fool that he was, for reasons she could not comprehend, had been given a crown and made king. Bayaz, who Ferro was sure had been behind the whole business, now spent every hour with him. Still trying to make him a leader of men, no doubt. Just as he had all the long way across the plain and back, with small results.

Jezal dan Luthar, the King of the Union. Ninefingers would have laughed long and hard at that, if he could have heard it. Ferro smiled to think of him laughing. Then she realised that she was smiling, and made herself stop. Bayaz had promised her vengeance, and given her nothing, and left her mired here, powerless. There was nothing to smile at.

She sat, and watched the boats for Yulwei.

She did not watch for Ninefingers. She did not hope to see him slouch onto the docks. That would have been a foolish, childish hope, belonging to the foolish child she had been when the Gurkish took her for a slave. He would not change his mind and come back. She had made sure of it. Strange, though, how she kept thinking that she saw him, in amongst the crowds.

The dockers had come to recognise her. They had shouted at her, for a while. ‘Come down here, my lovely, and give me a kiss!’ one of them had called, and his friends had laughed. Then Ferro had thrown half a brick at

his head and knocked him in the sea. He had nothing to say to her once they fished him out. None of them had, and that suited her well enough.

She sat, and watched the boats.

She sat until the sun was low, casting a bright glare across the bottoms of the clouds, making the shifting waves sparkle. Until the crowds thinned out, and the carts stopped moving, and the shouting and bustle of the docks faded to a dusty quiet. Until the breeze grew cool against her skin.

Yulwei was not coming today.

She climbed down from the roof of the warehouse and worked her way through the back streets towards the Middleway. It was as she was walking down that wide road, scowling at the people who passed her, that she realised. She was being followed.

He did it well, and carefully. Sometimes closer, sometimes further back. Staying out of plain sight, but never hiding. She took a few turns to make sure, and he always followed. He was dressed all in black, with long, lank hair and a mask covering part of his face. All in black, like a shadow. Like the men that had chased her and Ninefingers, before they left for the Old Empire. She watched him out of the corners of her eyes, never looking straight at him, never letting him know that she knew.

He would find out soon enough.

She took a turn down a dingy alley, stopped and waited behind the corner. Pressed up against the grimy stonework, holding her breath. Her bow and her sword might be far away, but shock was the only weapon she needed. That and her hands, and her feet, and her teeth.

She heard the footsteps coming. Careful footsteps, padding down the alley, so soft she could barely hear them. She found that she was smiling. It felt good to have an enemy, to have a purpose. Very good, after so long without one. It filled the empty space inside her, even if it was only for a moment. She gritted her teeth, feeling the fury swelling up in her chest. Hot and exciting. Safe and familiar. Like the kiss of an old lover, much missed.

When he rounded the corner her fist was already swinging. It crunched into his mask and sent him reeling. She pressed in close, cracking him in the face with each hand and knocking his head right and left. He fumbled for a knife, but he was slow and dizzy and the blade was barely out of its sheath before she had his wrist tight. Her elbow snapped his head back, jabbed into his throat and left him gurgling. She tore the knife out of his limp hand,

spun around and kicked him in the gut so he bent over. Her knee thudded into his mask and sent him onto his back in the dirt. She followed him down, her legs wrapping tight around his waist, her arm across his chest, his own knife pressed up against his throat.

'Look at this,' she whispered in his face. 'I have picked up a shadow.'

'Glugh,' came from behind his mask, his eyes still rolling.

'Hard to talk with that on, eh?' And she slashed the straps of his mask with a jerk of the knife, the blade leaving a long scratch down his cheek. He did not look so dangerous without it. Much younger than she had thought, with a rash of spots around his chin and a growth of downy hair on his top lip. He jerked his head and his eyes came back into focus. He snarled, tried to twist free, but she had him fast, and a touch of the knife against his neck soon calmed him.

'Why are you following me?'

'I'm not fucking—'

Ferro had never been a patient woman. Straddling her shadow as she was it was an easy thing to rear up and smash her elbow into his face. He did his best to ward her off, but all her weight was on his hips and he was helpless. Her arm crashed through his hands and into his mouth, his nose, his cheek, cracking his head back against the greasy cobbles. Four of those and the fight was out of him. His head lolled back, and she crouched down over him again and tucked the knife up under his neck. Blood bubbled out of his nose and his mouth and ran down the side of his face in dark streaks.

'Following me now?'

'I just watch.' His voice clicked in his bloody mouth. 'I just watch. I don't give the orders.'

The Gurkish soldiers did not give the orders to kill Ferro's people and make her a slave. That did not make them innocent. That did not make them safe from her. 'Who does?'

He coughed, and his face twitched, bubbles of blood blew out of his swollen nostrils. Nothing else. Ferro frowned.

'What?' She moved the knife down and pricked at his thigh with the point, 'you think I never cut a cock off before?'

'Glokta,' he mumbled, closing his eyes. 'I work . . . for Glokta.'

'Glokta.' The name meant nothing to her, but it was something to follow.

She slid the knife back up, up to his neck. The lump on his throat rose and fell, brushing against the edge of the blade. She clenched her jaw, and worked her fingers round the grip, frowning down. Tears had started to glitter in the corners of his eyes. Best to get it done, and away. Safest. But her hand was hard to move.

'Give me a reason not to do it.'

The tears welled up and ran down the sides of his bloody face. 'My birds,' he whispered.

'Birds?'

'There'll be no one to feed them. I deserve it, sure enough, but my birds . . . they've done nothing.' She narrowed her eyes at him.

Birds. Strange, the things that people have to live for.

Her father had kept a bird. She remembered it, in a cage, hanging from a pole. A useless thing, that could not even fly, only cling to a twig. He had taught it words. She remembered watching him feeding it, when she was a child. Long ago, before the Gurkish came.

'Ssssss,' she hissed in his face, pressing the knife up against his neck and making him cower. Then she pulled the blade away, got up and stood over him. 'The moment when I see you again will be your last. Back to your birds, shadow.'

He nodded, his wet eyes wide, and she turned and stalked off down the dark alleyway, into the dusk. When she crossed a bridge she tossed the knife away. It vanished with a splash, and ripples spread out in growing circles across the slimy water. A mistake, most likely, to have left that man alive. Mercy was always a mistake, in her experience.

But it seemed she was in a merciful mood today.

Questions

Colonel Glokta was a magnificent dancer, of course, but with his leg feeling as stiff as it did it was difficult for him to truly shine. The constant buzzing of flies was a further distraction, and his partner was not helping. Ardee West looked well enough, but her constant giggling was becoming quite the irritation.

'Stop that!' snapped the Colonel, whirling her around the laboratory of the Adeptus Physical, the specimens in the jars pulsing and wobbling in time to the music.

'Partially eaten,' grinned Kandelau, one eye enormously magnified through his eyeglass. He pointed downwards with his tongs. 'This is a foot.'

Glokta pushed the bushes aside, one hand pressed over his face. The butchered corpse lay there, glistening red, scarcely recognisable as human. Ardee laughed and laughed at the sight of it. 'Partially eaten!' she tittered at him. Colonel Glokta did not find the business in any way amusing. The sound of flies was growing louder and louder, threatening to drown out the music entirely. Worse yet, it was getting terribly cold in the park.

'Careless of me,' said a voice from behind.

'How do you mean?'

'Just to leave it there. But sometimes it is better to move quickly, than to move carefully, eh, cripple?'

'I remember this,' murmured Glokta. It had grown colder yet, and he was shivering like a leaf. 'I remember this!'

'Of course,' whispered the voice. A woman's voice, but not Ardee. A low and hissing voice, that made his eye twitch.

'What can I do?' The Colonel could feel his gorge rising. The wounds in the red meat yawned. The flies were so loud he could hardly hear the reply.

'Perhaps you should go to the University, and ask for advice.' Icy breath brushed his neck and made his back shiver. 'Perhaps while you are there . . . you could ask them about the Seed.'

*

Glokta lurched to the bottom of the steps and staggered sideways, falling back against the wall, the breath hissing over his wet tongue. His left leg trembled, his left eye twitched, as though the two were connected by a cord of pain that cut into his arse, guts, back, shoulder, neck, face, and tightened with every movement, however small.

He forced himself to be still. To breathe long and slow. He made his mind move off the pain and on to other things. *Like Bayaz, and his failed quest for this Seed. After all, his Eminence is waiting, and is not known for his patience.* He stretched his neck out to either side and felt the bones clicking between his twisted shoulder-blades. He pressed his tongue into his gums and shuffled away from the steps, into the cool darkness of the stacks.

They had not changed much in the past year. *Or probably in a few centuries before that*. The vaulted spaces smelled of fust and age, lit only by a couple of flickering, grimy lamps, sagging shelves stretching away into the shifting shadows. *Time to go digging once again through the dusty refuse of history.* The Adeptus Historical did not appear to have changed much either. He sat at his stained desk, poring over a mouldy-looking pile of papers in the light from a single squirming candle flame. He squinted up as Glokta hobbled closer.

'Who's there?'

'Glokta.' He peered up suspiciously towards the shadowy ceiling. 'What happened to your crow?'

'Dead,' grunted the ancient librarian sadly.

'History, you might say!' The old man did not laugh. 'Ah, well. It happens to us all.' *And some sooner than others*. 'I have questions for you.'

The Adeptus Historical craned forward over his desk, peering dewily up at Glokta as though he had never seen another human before. 'I remember you.' *Miracles do happen, then?* 'You asked me about Bayaz. First apprentice of great Juvens, first letter in the alphabet of the—'

'Yes, yes, we've been over this.'

The old man gave a sulky frown. 'Did you bring that scroll back?'

'The Maker fell burning, and so on? I'm afraid not. The Arch Lector has it.'

'Gah. I hear far too much about that man these days. Them upstairs are always carping on him. His Eminence this, and his Eminence that. I'm sick

of hearing it!' *I know very much how you feel.* 'Everyone's in a spin, these days. A spin and a ruckus.'

'Lots of changes upstairs. We have a new king.'

'I know that! Guslav, is it?'

Glokta gave a long sigh as he settled himself in the chair on the other side of the desk. 'Yes, yes, he's the one.' *Only thirty years out of date, or so. I'm surprised he didn't think Harod the Great was still on the throne.*

'What do you want this time?'

Oh, to fumble in the darkness for answers that are always just out of reach. 'I want to know about the Seed.'

The lined face did not move. 'The what?'

'It was mentioned in your precious scroll. That thing that Bayaz and his magical friends searched for in the House of the Maker, after the death of Kanedias. After the death of Juvens.'

'Bah!' The Adeptus waved his hand, the saggy flesh under his wrist wobbling. 'Secrets, power. It's all a metaphor.'

'Bayaz does not seem to think so.' Glokta shuffled his chair closer, and spoke lower. *Though there cannot be anyone to hear, or to care if they did.* 'I heard it was a piece of the Other Side, left over from the Old Time, when devils walked our earth. The stuff of magic, made solid.'

The old man wheezed with papery laughter, displaying a rotten cavern of a mouth with fewer teeth even than Glokta's own. 'I did not take you for a superstitious man, Superior.' *Nor was I one, when I last came here with questions. Before my visit to the House of the Maker, before my meeting with Yulwei, before I saw Shickel smile while they burned her. What happy times they were, before I had heard of Bayaz, when things still made sense*. The Adeptus wiped his runny eyes with his palsied mockery of a hand. 'Where did you hear that?'

Oh, from a Navigator with his foot on an anvil. 'Never you mind from where.'

'Well, you know more about it than me. I read once that rocks sometimes fall out of the sky. Some say they are fragments of the stars. Some say they are splinters, flung out from the chaos of hell. Dangerous to touch. Terribly cold.'

Cold? Glokta could almost feel that icy breath upon his neck, and he wriggled his shoulders at it, forcing himself not to glance behind him. 'Tell

me about hell.' *Though I think I already know more than most on the subject.*

'Eh?'

'Hell, old man. The Other Side.'

'They say it is where magic comes from, if you believe in such things.'

'I have learned to keep an open mind on the subject.'

'An open mind is like to an open wound, apt to—'

'So I have heard, but we are speaking of hell.'

The librarian licked at his sagging lips. 'Legend has it that there was a time when our world and the world below were one, and devils roamed the earth. Great Euz cast them out, and spoke the First Law – forbidding all to touch the Other Side, or to speak to devils, or to tamper with the gates between.'

'The First Law, eh?'

'His son Glustrod, hungry for power, ignored his father's warnings, and he sought out secrets, and summoned devils, and sent them against his enemies. It is said his folly led to the destruction of Aulcus and the fall of the Old Empire, and that when he destroyed himself, he left the gates ajar . . . but I am not the expert on all that.'

'Who is?'

The old man grimaced. 'There were books here. Very old. Beautiful books, from the time of the Master Maker. Books on the subject of the Other Side. The divide between. The gates and the locks. Books on the subject of the Tellers of Secrets, and of their summoning and sending. A load of invention if you ask me. Myth and fantasy.'

There were books?'

'They have been missing from my shelves for some years now.'

'Missing? Where are they?'

The old man frowned. 'Strange, that you of all people should ask that—'

'Enough!' Glokta turned as quickly as he could to look behind him. Silber, the University Administrator, stood at the foot of the steps, with a look of the strangest horror and surprise on his rigid face. *Quite as if he had seen a ghost. Or even a demon.* 'That will be quite enough, Superior! We thank you for your visit.'

'Enough?' Glokta gave a frown of his own. 'His Eminence will not be—'

‘I know what his Eminence will or will not be . . .’ *An unpleasantly familiar voice.* Superior Goyle worked his way slowly down the steps. He strolled around Silber, across the shadowy floor between the shelves. ‘And I say enough. We most heartily thank you for your visit.’ He leaned forwards, eyes popping furiously from his head. ‘Make it your last!’

There had been some startling changes in the dining hall since Glokta went downstairs. The evening had grown dark outside the dirty windows, the candles had been lit in their tarnished sconces. *And, of course, there is the matter of two dozen widely assorted Practicals of the Inquisition.*

Two narrow-eyed natives of Suljuk sat staring at Glokta over their masks, as like as if they had been twins, their black boots up on the ancient dining table, four curved swords lying sheathed on the wood before them. Three dark-skinned men stood near one dark window, heads shaved, each with an axe at his belt and a shield on his back. A great tall Practical loomed up by the fireplace, long and thin as a birch tree with blond hair hanging over his masked face. Beside was a short one, almost dwarfish, his belt bristling with knives.

Glokta recognised the huge Northman called the Stone-Splitter from his previous visit to the University. *But it looks as if he has been attempting to split stones with his face since we last met, and with great persistence.* His cheeks were uneven, his brows were wonky, the bridge of his nose pointed sharply to the left. His ruin of a face was almost as disturbing as the enormous mallet he had clenched in his massive fists. But not quite.

So it went on, as strange and worrying a collection of murderers as could ever have been collected together in one place, and all heavily armed. *And it seems that Superior Goyle has restocked his freak show.* In the midst of them, and seeming quite at home, stood Practical Vitari, pointing this way and that, giving orders. *You would never have thought she was the mothering type, seeing her now, but I suppose we all have our hidden talents.*

Glokta threw his right arm up in the air. ‘Who are we killing?’

All eyes turned towards him. Vitari stalked over, a frown across the freckled bridge of her nose. ‘What the hell are you doing here?’

‘I could ask you the same question.’

‘If you know what’s good for you, you’ll ask no questions at all.’

Glokta leered his empty smile at her. ‘If I knew what was good for me I’d never have lost my teeth, and questions are all I have left. What’s in this old pile of dust that’s of interest to you?’

‘That’s none of my business, and even less of yours. If you’re looking for traitors, maybe you should look in your own house first, eh?’

‘And what is that supposed to mean?’

Vitari leaned close to him and whispered through her mask. ‘You saved my life, so let me return the favour. Get away from here. Get away, and keep away.’

Glokta shuffled down the passageway and up to his heavy door. *As far as Bayaz goes, we are no further on. Nothing that will bring a rare smile to the face of his Eminence. Summonings and sendings. Gods and devils. Always more questions.* He turned his key impatiently in the lock, desperate to sit down and take the weight from his trembling leg. *What was Goyle doing at the university? Goyle, and Vitari, and two dozen Practicals, all armed as if they were going to war?* He took a wincing step over the threshold. *There must be some—*

‘Gah!’ He felt his cane snatched away and he lurched sideways, clutching at the air. Something crunched into his face and filled his head with blinding pain. The next moment the floor thumped him in the back and drove his wind out in a long sigh. He blinked and slobbered, mouth salty with blood, the dark room swaying madly around him. *Oh dear, oh dear. A fist in the face, unless I am much mistaken. It never loses its impact.*

A hand grabbed the collar of his coat and dragged him up, the cloth cutting into his throat and making him squawk like a strangled chicken. Another had him by the belt and he was hauled bodily along, his knees and the toes of his boots scraping limp over the boards. He struggled weakly on a reflex, but only managed to send a stab of pain through his own back.

The bathroom door cracked against his head and banged open on the wall, he was dragged powerless across the darkened room towards the bath, still full of dirty water from that morning. ‘Wait!’ he croaked as he was wrestled over the edge. ‘Who are—blurghhhh!’

The cold water closed around his head, the bubbles rushed around his face. He was held there, struggling, eyes bulging open with shock and

panic, until it seemed his lungs would burst. Then he was yanked up by the hair, water pouring from his face and splattering into the bath. *A simple technique, but undeniably effective. I am greatly discomfited.* He took in a gasping breath. ‘What do you—blarghhh!’

Back into the darkness, such air as he had managed to drag in gurgling out into the dirty water. *But whoever it is let me breathe. I am not being murdered. I am being softened up. Softened up for questions. I would laugh at the irony . . . were there any breath . . . left in my body . . .* He shoved at the bath and thrashed at the water. His legs kicked pointlessly, but the hand on the back of his neck was made of steel. His stomach clenched and his ribs heaved, desperate to drag in air. *Do not breathe . . . do not breathe . . . do not breathe!* He was just sucking in a great lungful of dirty water as he was snatched up from the bath and flung onto the boards, coughing, gasping, vomiting all at once.

‘You are Glokta?’ A woman’s voice, short and hard, with a rough Kantic accent.

She squatted down in front of him, balanced on the balls of her feet, her wrists resting on her knees, her long brown hands hanging limp. She wore a man’s shirt, loose around her scrawny shoulders, wet sleeves rolled up around her bony wrists. Her black hair was hacked off short and stuck from her head in greasy clumps. She had a thin, pale scar down her hard face, a scowl on her thin lips, but it was her eyes that were most off-putting, gleaming yellow in the half light from the corridor. *Small wonder that Severard was reluctant to follow her. I should have listened to him.*

‘You are Glokta?’

There was no point denying it. He wiped the bitter drool from his chin with a shaking hand. ‘I am Glokta.’

‘Why are you watching me?’

He pushed himself painfully up to sitting. ‘What makes you think I will have anything to say to—’

Her fist struck him on the point of his chin and snapped his head back, tore a gasp out of him. His jaws banged together and one tooth punched a hole in the bottom of his tongue. He sagged back against the wall, the dark room lurching, his eyes filling up with tears. When things came back into focus she was staring at him, yellow eyes narrowed. ‘I will keep hitting you until you give me answers, or you die.’

‘My thanks.’

‘Thanks?’

‘I think you might have loosened my neck up just a fraction.’ Glokta smiled, showing her his few bloody teeth. ‘For two years I was a captive of the Gurkish. Two years in the darkness of the Emperor’s prisons. Two years of cutting, and chiselling, and burning. Do you think the thought of a slap or two scares me?’ He chuckled bloody laughter in her face. ‘It hurts more when I piss! Do you think I’m scared to die?’ He grimaced at the stabbing through his spine as he leaned towards her. ‘Every morning . . . that I wake up alive . . . is a disappointment! If you want answers you’ll have to give me answers. Like for like.’

She stared at him for a long moment, not blinking. ‘You were a prisoner of the Gurkish?’

Glokta swept a hand over his twisted body. ‘They gave me all this.’

‘Huh. We have both lost something to the Gurkish, then.’ She slid down onto crossed legs. ‘Questions. Like for like. But if you try to lie to me—’

‘Questions, then. I would be failing in my duties as a host if I did not allow you to go first.’

She did not smile. *But then she does not seem the joking type*. ‘Why are you watching me?’

I could lie, but for what? I might as well die telling the truth. ‘I am watching Bayaz. The two of you seem friendly, and Bayaz is hard to watch these days. So I am watching you.’

She scowled. ‘He is no friend of mine. He promised me vengeance, that is all. He has yet to deliver.’

‘Life is full of disappointments.’

‘Life is made of disappointments. Ask your question, cripple.’

Once she has her answers, will it be bath-time again, and this time my last? Her flat yellow eyes gave nothing away. Empty, like the eyes of an animal. *But what are my choices?* He licked the blood from his lips, and leaned back against the wall. *I might as well die a little wiser*. ‘What is the Seed?’

Her frown deepened by the smallest fraction. ‘Bayaz said it is a weapon. A weapon of very great power. Great enough to turn Shaffa to dust. He thought it was hidden, at the edge of the World, but he was wrong. He was

not happy to be wrong.' She frowned at him for a silent moment. 'Why are you watching Bayaz?'

'Because he stole the crown and put it on a spineless worm.'

She snorted. 'There at least we can agree.'

'There are those in my government who worry about the direction in which he might take us. Who worry profoundly.' Glokta licked at one bloody tooth. 'Where is he taking us?'

'He tells me nothing. I do not trust him, and he does not trust me.'

'There too we can agree.'

'He planned to use the Seed as a weapon. He did not find it, so he must find other weapons. My guess is he is taking you to war. A war against Khalul, and his Eaters.'

Glokta felt a flurry of twitches run up the side of his face and set his eyelid fluttering. *Damn treacherous jelly!* Her head jerked to the side. 'You know of them?'

'A passing acquaintance.' *Well, where's the harm?* 'I caught one, in Dagoska. I asked it questions.'

'What did it tell you?'

'It talked of righteousness and justice.' *Two things that I have never seen.* 'It talked of war and sacrifice.' *Two things that I have seen too much of.* 'It said that your friend Bayaz killed his own master.' The woman did not move so much as an eyelash. 'It said that its father, the Prophet Khalul, still seeks vengeance.'

'Vengeance,' she hissed, her hands bunching into fists. 'I will show them vengeance!'

'What did they do to you?'

'They killed my people.' She uncrossed her legs. 'They made me a slave.' She rose smoothly to her feet, looming over him. 'They stole my life from me.'

Glokta felt the corner of his mouth twitch up. 'One more thing we have in common.' *And I sense my borrowed time is up.*

She reached down and grabbed two fistfuls of his wet coat. She dragged him from the floor with fearsome strength, his back sliding up the wall. Body found floating in the bath . . . ? He felt his nostrils opening wide, the air hissing fast in his bloody nose, his heart thumping in anticipation. *No doubt my ruined body will struggle, as best it can. An irresistible reaction to*

the lack of air. The unconquerable instinct to breathe. No doubt I will thrash and wriggle, just as Tulkis, the Gurkish ambassador, thrashed and wriggled when they hanged him, and dragged his guts out for nothing.

He did his twisted best to stay up under his own power, to stand as close to straight as he could manage. *After all, I was a proud man once, even if that is all far behind me. Hardly the end that Colonel Glokta would have hoped for. Drowned in the bath by a woman in a dirty shirt. Will they find me slumped over the rim, my arse in the air? But what does it matter? It is not how you die, but how you lived, that counts.*

She let go of his coat, flattened the front with a slap of her hand. *And what has my life been, these past years? What do I have that I might truly miss? Stairs? Soup? Pain? Lying in the darkness with the memories of the things I have done digging at me? Waking in the morning to the stink of my own shit? Will I miss tea with Ardee West? A little perhaps. But will I miss tea with the Arch Lector? It almost makes you wonder why I didn't do it myself, years ago*. He stared into his killer's eyes, as hard and bright as yellow glass, and he smiled. A smile of the purest relief. 'I am ready.'

'For what?' She pressed something into his limp hand. The handle of his cane. 'If you have more business with Bayaz, leave me out of it. I will not be so gentle next time.' She backed slowly towards the doorway, a bright rectangle against the shadowy wall. She turned, and the sound of her boots receded down the corridor. Aside from the soft tip-tap of water dripping from his wet coat, all fell silent.

And so, it seems, I survive. Again. Glokta raised his eyebrows. *Perhaps the trick is not wanting to.*

The Fourth Day

He was an ugly bastard, this Easterner. A huge big one, dressed all in stinking, half-tanned furs and a bit of rusted chain-mail, more ornament than protection. Greasy black hair, bound up here and there with rough-forged silver rings, dripped with the thin rain. He had a great scar down one cheek and another across his forehead, and the countless nicks and pittings of lesser wounds and boils as a lad, nose flattened and bent sideways like a dented spoon. His eyes were screwed up tight with effort, his yellow teeth were bared, the front two missing, his grey tongue pressed into the gap. A face that had seen war all its days. A face that had lived by sword, and axe, and spear, and counted every day alive a bonus.

For Logen, it was almost like looking in a mirror.

They held each other as tight as a pair of bad lovers, blind to everything around them. They lumbered back and forward, lurching like feuding drunkards. They plucked and tugged, bit and gouged, gripped and tore, strained in frozen fury, blasting sour breath in each other's faces. An ugly, and a wearying, and a fatal dance, and all the while the rain came down.

Logen took a painful dig in the gut and had to twist and wriggle to smother a second. He gave a half-hearted head-butt and did nothing more then scuff Ugly's face with his forehead. He nearly got tripped, stumbled, felt the Easterner shift his weight, trying to find a set to throw him. Logen managed to dig him in the fruits with his thigh before he could do it, enough to make his arms go weak for a moment, enough so he could slide his hand up onto Ugly's neck.

Logen forced that hand up, inch by painful inch, his stretched-out forefinger creeping over the Easterner's pitted face while he peered down at it, cross-eyed, trying to tip his head out of the way. His hand gripped painful tight round Logen's wrist, trying to haul it back, but Logen had his shoulder dipped, his weight set right. The finger edged past his grimacing mouth, over his top lip, into Ugly's bent nose, and Logen felt his broken nail digging at the flesh inside. He crooked his finger, and bared his teeth, and twisted it about as best he could.

The Easterner hissed and thrashed around, but he was hooked. He'd no choice but to grab at Logen's wrist with his other hand and try to drag that tearing finger out of his face. But that left Logen one hand free.

He snatched a knife out and grunted as he stabbed, his arm jerking in and out. Quick punches, but with steel on the end of them. The blade squelched in the Easterner's gut, and his thigh, and his arm, and his chest, blood coming out in long streaks, splattering them both and trickling into the puddles under their boots. Once he was stabbed enough Logen caught him by his coat, hauled him into the air with a jaw-clenched effort, and roared as he flung him over the battlements. He plummeted away, limp as a carcass and soon to be one, crashed to the ground in among his fellows.

Logen bent over the parapet, gasping at the wet air, the rain drops flitting down away from him. There were hundreds of them, it seemed like, milling around in the sea of mud at the base of the wall. Wild men, from out past the Crinna, where they hardly spoke right and cared nothing for the dead. They all were rain-soaked and filth-spattered, hiding under rough-made shields and waving rough-forged weapons, barbed and brutal. Their standards stood flapping in the rain behind them, bones and ragged hides, ghostly shadows in the downpour.

Some were carrying rickety ladders forwards, or lifting those that had been thrown down, trying to foot them near the wall and haul them up while rocks and spears and sodden arrows flapped and splattered into the mud. Others were climbing, shields held over their heads, two ladders up at Dow's side, one on Red Hat's side, one just to Logen's left. A pair of big savages were swinging great axes against the scarred gates, chopping wet splinters out with every blow. Logen pointed at them, screamed uselessly into the wet. No one heard him, or could have over the great noise of drumming rain, of crashing, thudding, scraping, blades on shields, shafts in flesh, battle cries and shrieks of pain.

He fumbled his sword up from the puddles on the walkway, dull metal glistening with beads of water. Just near him one of Shivers' Carls was facing off against an Easterner who'd scrambled from the top of a ladder. They traded a couple of blows, axe against shield then sword swishing at the empty air. The Easterner's axe-arm went up again and Logen hacked it off at the elbow, stumbled into his back and knocked him screaming on his

face. The Carl finished him with a chop to the back of the skull, pointed his bloody sword over Logen's shoulder.

'There!'

Another Easterner with a big hook nose just getting to the top of the ladder, leaning forward over the battlements, right arm going back with a spear ready. Logen bellowed as he came for him.

His eyes went wide and the spear wobbled, too late to throw. He tried to swing out of the way, clinging to the wet wood with his free hand, but only managed to drag the ladder grating across the battlements. Logen's sword stabbed him under the arm and he flailed back with a grunt, dropping his spear behind him. Logen stabbed at him again, slipped and lunged too far, near falling into his arms. Big-Nose clawed at him, trying to bundle him over the parapet. Logen smashed him in the face with the pommel of his sword and knocked his head back, took some teeth out with a second blow. The third one knocked him senseless and he fell back off the ladder, plummeting down and taking one of his friends into the mud with him.

'Bring that pole!' Logen roared at the Carl with the sword.

'What?'

'Pole, you fucker!'

The Carl snatched the wet length of wood up and threw it through the rain. Logen dropped his sword and wedged the branched end against one upright of the ladder, started pushing for all he was worth. The Carl came and added his weight to it, and the ladder creaked, wobbled, and started tipping back. An Easterner's face came up over the battlements, surprised-looking. He saw the pole. He saw Logen and the Carl growling at it. He tumbled off as the ladder dropped away, down on the heads of the bastards below.

Further along the wall another ladder had just been pushed back up and the Easterners were starting to climb it, shields up over their heads while Red Hat and his boys chucked rocks at them. Some had got to the top over on Dow's bit of the wall, and he could hear the shouting from there, the sounds of murder. Logen gnawed at his bloody lip, wondering whether to push on down there and give them some help, but he decided against. He'd be needed here before long.

So he took up the Maker's sword, and he nodded to the Carl who'd helped him, and he stood and caught his breath. He waited for the Easterners to

come again, and all around him men fought, and killed, and died.

Devils, in a cold, wet, bloody hell. Four days of it, now, and it felt as if he'd been there forever. As if he'd never left. Perhaps he never had.

Like the Dogman's life weren't difficult enough already, there had to be rain.

Wet was an archer's worst fear, alright. Apart from being ridden down by horsemen, maybe, but that weren't so likely up a tower. The bows were slippery, the strings were stretchy, the feathers were sodden, which all made for some ineffective shooting. Rain was costing them their advantage, and that was a worry, but it could cost them more than that before the day was out. There were three big wild bastards working at the gates, two swinging heavy axes at the softened wood, the third trying to get a pry-bar in the gaps they'd made and tear the timbers apart.

'If we don't deal with them, they'll have those gates in!' Dogman shouted hoarse into the wet air.

'Uh,' said Grim, nodding his head, water flicking off his shaggy thatch of hair.

Took a good bit of bellowing and pointing from him and Tul, but Dogman got a crowd of his lads lined up by the slick parapet. Three score wet bows, all lowered at once, all drawn back creaking, all pointing down towards that gate. Three score men, frowning and taking aim, all dripping with water and getting wetter every minute.

'Alright then, loose!'

The bows went more or less together, the sounds muffled. The shafts spun down, bouncing off the wet wall, sticking in the rough wood of the gate, prickling the ground all round where the ditch used to be, before it became just another load of mud. Not what you'd call accurate, but there were a lot of shafts, and if you can't get quality, then numbers will have to do the job for you. The Easterner on the right dropped his axe, three arrows sticking out his chest, one through his leg. The one on the left slipped and fell on his side, went floundering for cover, an arrow in his shoulder. The one with the bar went down on his knees, thrashing around and grabbing behind him, trying to get at a shaft in the small of his back.

‘Alright! Good!’ the Dogman shouted. None of the rest of ’em seemed keen to try the gate for the moment, which was something to be grateful for. There were still plenty trying the ladders, but that was a harder task to deal with from up here. They might just as easily shoot their own boys on the walls as the enemy in this weather. Dogman gritted his teeth, and loosed a harmless, looping wet arrow down into the milling crowd. Nothing they could do. The walls was Shivers job, and Dow’s, and Red Hat’s. The walls was Logen’s job.

There was a crack, loud as the sky falling. The world went reeling bright, and soupy slow, sounds all echoing. Logen stumbled through this dream-place, the sword clattering out of his stupid fingers, lurched against the wall and grappled with it as it swayed around, trying to understand what had happened and not getting there.

Two men were struggling with each other over a spear, wrestling and jerking round and round, and Logen couldn’t remember why. A man with long hair took a great slow blow with a club on his shield, a couple of splinters spinning, then he swept an axe round, teeth bared and shining, caught a wild-looking man in the legs and tore him off his feet. There were men everywhere, wet and furious, dirt and blood stained. A battle, maybe? Which side was he on?

Logen felt something warm tickling his eye, and he touched his hand to it. Frowned down at his red finger tips, turning pink as the rain pattered on them. Blood. Had someone hit him on the head, then? Or was he dreaming it? A memory, from long ago.

He spun round just before the club came down and crushed his skull like an egg, caught some hairy bastard’s wrists with both hands. The world was suddenly fast, noisy, pain pulsing in his head. He lurched against the parapet, staring into a dirty, bearded, angry face, pressed up tight against his.

Logen let go the club with one hand, started snatching at his belt for a knife. He couldn’t feel one. All that time spent sharpening all those blades, and now he needed one there was nothing to hand. Then he realised. The blade he was looking for was stuck in that ugly bastard, down in the mud somewhere at the base of the wall. He scrabbled round the other side of his

belt, still wrestling at the club, but losing that battle now, given that he only had the one hand to work with. Logen got bent back, slowly, over the battlements. His fingers found the grip of a knife. The hairy Easterner tore his club free and lifted it up, opening his mouth wide and giving a stinking yell.

Logen stabbed him right through the face, and the blade went through one cheek and out the other and took a couple of teeth with it. Hairy's bellow turned to a high-pitched howl and he dropped his club and stumbled away, eyes bulging. Logen slid down and snatched his sword from under the trampling feet of the two fighting over the spear, waited a moment for the Easterner to come round close to him, then chopped through the back of one thigh and brought him down with a scream where the Carl could see to him.

Hairy was still drooling blood, one hand on the grip of the knife through his face, trying to work it free. Logen's sword made a red gash through the wet furs on his side, brought him to his knees. The next swing split his head in half.

Not ten strides away Shivers was in bad trouble, backed up with three Easterners at him, another just getting to the top of a ladder, and all his boys kept busy behind. He winced as he took a hard blow from a hammer across his shield, stumbled back, his axe dropping from his hand and clattering on the stone. The thought did pass through Logen's mind that he'd be a deal better off if Shivers got his head flattened. But the odds were good that he'd be next.

So he took a great breath, and bellowed as he charged.

The first one turned just in time to get his face hacked open rather than the back of his skull. The second got his shield up, but Logen went low and chopped clean through his shin instead, sent him shrieking down on to his back, blood pumping out into the pools of water across the walkway. The third one was a big bastard, wild red hair sticking all ways off his head. He had Shivers stunned and on his knees by the parapet, his shield hanging down, blood running from a cut on his forehead. Red Hair raised a big hammer up to finish the job. Logen stabbed him through the back before he got the chance, the long blade sliding through him right to the hilt. Never take a man face to face if you can kill him from behind, Logen's father used to say, and that was one good piece of advice he'd always tried to follow. Red Hair thrashed and squealed, twisting madly with his last breaths,

dragging Logen around after him by the hilt of his sword, but it wasn't long before he dropped.

Logen grabbed Shivers under the arm and hauled him up. He frowned hard as his eyes came back into focus, saw who was helping him. He leaned down and snatched his fallen axe up from the stones. Logen wondered for a moment if he was about to get it buried in his skull, but Shivers only stood there, blood running down his wet face from the cut across his head.

'Behind you,' said Logen, nodding past his shoulder. Shivers turned, Logen did the same, and they stood with their backs to each other. There were three or four ladders up now, around the gate, and the battle on the walls had broken up into a few separate, bloody little fights. There were Easterners clambering over the parapet, screaming their meaningless jabber, hard faces and hard weapons glistening wet, coming at Logen along the wall while more dragged themselves up. Behind him he heard the clash and grunt of Shivers fighting, but he paid it no mind. He could only deal with what was in front of him. You have to be realistic about these things.

He shuffled back, showing weariness that was only half-feigned, then as the first of them came on he gritted his teeth and leaped forward, cut him across the face and sent him screaming, hand clasped to his eyes. Logen stumbled into another and got barged in the chest with a shield, its rim catching him under the chin and making him bite his tongue.

Logen nearly tripped over the sprawled-out corpse of a dead Carl, righted himself just in time, flailed with his sword and hit nothing, reeled after it and felt something cut into his leg as he went. He gasped, and hopped, waving the sword around, all off-balance. He lunged at some moving fur, his leg gave under him and he piled into someone. They fell together and Logen's head cracked against the stone. They rolled and Logen struggled up on top, shouting and drooling, tangled his fingers in an Easterner's greasy hair and smashed his face into the stone, again and again until his skull went soft. He dragged himself away, heard a blade clang against the walkway where he'd been, hauled himself up to his knees, sword loose in one sticky hand.

He knelt there, water running down his face, dragging in air. More of them coming at him, and nowhere to go. His leg was hurting, no strength in his arms. His head felt light, like it might float away. No strength left to fight with, hardly. More of them coming at him, one at the front with thick

leather gloves, a big maul in his hands, its heavy spiked head red with blood. Looked like he'd already broken one skull with it, and Logen's would be next. Then Bethod would've won, at last.

Logen felt a cold feeling stab at his gut. A hard, empty feeling. His knuckles clicked as the muscles in his hand went rigid, gripping the sword painful tight. 'No!' he hissed. 'No, no, no.' But he might as well have said no to the rain. That cold feeling spread out, up through Logen's face, tugging his mouth into a bloody smile. Gloves came closer, his maul scraping against the wet stone. He glanced over his shoulder.

His head came apart, spraying out blood. Crummock-i-Phail roared like an angry bear, fingerbones flying round his neck, his great hammer whirling round and round his head in huge circles. The next Easterner tried to back away, holding up his shield. Crummock's hammer swung two-handed, ripped his legs out from under him, sent him tumbling over and over and onto his face on the stone. The big hillman sprang up onto the walkway, nimble as a dancer for all his great bulk, caught the next man a blow in the stomach that hurled him through the air and left him crumpled against the battlements.

Logen watched one set of savages murdering another, breathing hard as Crummock's boys whooped and screamed, paint on their faces smeared in the rain. They flooded up onto the wall, hacking at the Easterners with their rough swords and their bright axes, driving them back and shoving their ladders away, flinging their bodies over the parapet and into the mud below.

He knelt there, in a puddle, leaning on the cold grip of Kanedias' sword, its point dug into the stone walkway. He bent over and breathed hard, his cold gut sucking in and out, his raw mouth salty, his nose full of the stink of blood. He hardly dared to look up. He clenched his teeth, and closed his eyes, and hawked sour spit up onto the stones. He forced that cold feeling in his stomach down and it slunk away, for now, at least, and left him with only pain and weariness to worry about.

'Looks like those bastards had enough,' came Crummock's laughing voice from out of the drizzle. The hillman tipped his head back, mouth open, stuck his tongue out into the rain, then licked his lips. 'That was some good work you put in today, Bloody-Nine. Not that it ain't my special pleasure to watch you at it, but I'm glad to get my share.' He hefted his great long hammer up in one hand and spun it round as if it was a willow switch,

peering at a great bloody stain on the head with a clump of hair stuck to it, then grinning wide.

Logen looked up at him, hardly enough strength left to lift his head. ‘Oh aye. Good work. We’ll go at the back tomorrow though, eh, since you’re that keen? You can take the fucking wall.’

The rain was slacking, down to a thin spit and drizzle. A glimmer of fading sunlight broke through the sagging clouds, bringing Bethod’s camp back into view, his muddy ditch and his standards, tents scattered across the valley. Dogman squinted, thought he could see a few men stood around the front watching the Easterners run back, a glint of sunlight on something. An eye-glass maybe, like the Union used, usually to look the wrong way. Dogman wondered if it was Bethod down there, watching it all happen. It would be just like Bethod to have got himself an eye-glass.

He felt a big hand clap him on the shoulder. ‘We gave ’em a slap, chief,’ rumbled Tul, ‘and a good ’un!’

There was small doubt o’ that. There were a lot of dead Easterners scattered in the mud round the base of that wall, a lot of wounded carried by their mates, or dragging themselves slow and painful back towards their lines. But there were a fair few killed on their side of the wall as well. Dogman could see a stack of muddy corpses over near the back of the fortress where they were doing the burying. He could hear someone screaming. Hard and nasty screams, the kind a man makes when he needs a limb taken off, or he’s had one off already.

‘We gave ’em a slap, aye,’ Dogman muttered, ‘but they gave us one as well. I’m not sure how many slaps we’ll stand.’ The barrels that carried their arrows were no more’n half full now, the rocks close to run out. ‘Best send some boys to pick over the dead!’ he shouted to the men over his shoulder. ‘Get what we can while we can!’

‘Can’t have too many arrows at a time like this,’ said Tul. ‘Number o’ those Crinna bastards we killed today, I reckon we’ll have more spears tonight than we had this morning.’

Dogman managed to put a grin on his face. ‘Nice of ’em to bring us something to fight with.’

‘Aye. Reckon they’d get bored right quick if we ran out of arrows.’ Tul laughed, and he clapped the Dogman on the back harder than ever, hard enough to make his teeth rattle. ‘We did well! You did well! We’re still alive, ain’t we?’

‘Some of us are.’ Dogman looked down at the corpse of the one man who’d died up on the tower. An old boy, hair mostly grey, a rough-made arrow in his neck. Bad luck, that had been, to catch a shaft on a day as wet as today, but you’re sure to get a measure of luck in a fight, both good and bad. He frowned down into the darkening valley. ‘Where the hell are the Union at?’

*

At least the rain had stopped. You have to be grateful for the small things in life, like some smoky kind of a fire after the wet. You have to be grateful for the small things, when any minute might be your last.

Logen sat alone beside his scrub of a flame, and rubbed gently at his right palm. It was sore, pink, stiff from gripping the rough hilt of the Maker’s sword all the long day, blistered round the joints of his fingers. His head was bruised all over. The cut on his leg was burning some, but he could still walk well enough. He could’ve ended up a lot worse. There were more than three score buried now, and they were putting them in pits for a dozen each, just as Crummock had said they would. Three score and more gone back to the mud, and twice that many hurt, a lot of them bad.

Over by the big fire, he could hear Dow growling about how he’d stabbed some Easterner in the fruits. He could hear Tul’s rumbling laughter. Logen hardly felt like a part of it, any more. Maybe he never had been. A set of men he’d fought and beaten. Lives he’d spared, for no reason that made sense. Men who’d hated him worse than death, but been bound to follow. Hardly more his friends than Shivers was. Perhaps the Dogman was his only true friend in all the wide Circle of the World, and even in his eyes, from time to time, Logen thought he could see that old trace of doubt, that old trace of fear. He wondered if he could see it now, as the Dogman came up out of the darkness.

‘You think they’ll come tonight?’ he asked.

‘He’ll give it a go in the dark sooner or later,’ said Logen, ‘but my guess is he’ll leave it ’til we’re a bit more worn down.’

‘You get more worn down than this?’

‘I guess we’ll find out.’ Logen grimaced as he stretched out his aching legs. ‘It really seems like this shit used to be easier.’

Dogman gave a snort. Not a laugh, really. More just letting Logen know he’d heard. ‘Memory can work some magic. You remember Carleon?’

‘Course I do.’ Logen looked down at his missing finger, and he bunched his fist, so it looked the same as it always had. ‘Strange, how it all seemed so simple back in them days. Who you fought for, and why. Can’t say it ever bothered me.’

‘It bothered me,’ said Dogman.

‘It did? You should’ve said something.’

‘Would you have listened?’

‘No. I guess not.’

They sat there for a minute, in silence.

‘You reckon we’ll live through this?’ asked the Dogman.

‘Maybe. If the Union turns up tomorrow, or the day after.’

‘You think they will?’

‘Maybe. We can hope.’

‘Hoping for a thing don’t make it happen.’

‘The opposite, usually. But every day we’re still alive is a chance. Maybe this time it’ll work.’

Dogman frowned at the shifting flames. ‘That’s a lot of maybes.’

‘That’s war.’

‘Who’d have thought we’d be relying on a bunch of Southerners to solve our problems for us, eh?’

‘I reckon you solve ’em any way you can. You have to be realistic.’

‘Being realistic, then. You reckon we’ll live through this?’

Logen thought about it for a while. ‘Maybe.’

Boots squelched in the soft earth, and Shivers walked up quiet towards the fire. There was a grey bandage wrapped round his head, where he’d taken that cut, and his hair hung down damp and greasy from under it.

‘Chief,’ he said.

Dogman smiled as he got up, and clapped him on the shoulder. ‘Alright, Shivers. That was good work, today. I’m glad you came over, lad. We all

are.' He gave Logen a long look. 'All of us. Think I might try and get a rest for a minute. I'll see you boys when they come again. Most likely it'll be soon enough.' He walked off into the night, and left Shivers and Logen staring one at the other.

Probably Logen should have got his hand near to a knife, watched for sudden moves and all the rest. But he was too tired and too sore for it. So he just sat there, and watched. Shivers pressed his lips together, squatting down beside the fire opposite, slow and reluctant, as if he was about to eat something he knew was rotten, but had no choice.

'If I'd have been in your place,' he said, after a while, 'I would've let those bastards kill me today.'

'Few years ago I'm sure I would've.'

'What changed?'

Logen frowned as he thought about it. Then he shrugged his aching shoulders. 'I'm trying to be better than I was.'

'You think that's enough?'

'What else can I do?'

Shivers frowned at the fire. 'I wanted to say . . .' He worked the words around in his mouth and spat them out. 'That I'm grateful, I guess. You saved my life today. I know it.' He wasn't happy about saying it, and Logen knew why. It's hard to be done a favour by a man you hate. It's hard to hate him so much afterwards. Losing an enemy can be worse than losing a friend, if you've had him for long enough.

So Logen shrugged again. 'It's nothing. What a man should do for his crew, that's all. I owe you a lot more. I know that. I can never pay what I owe you.'

'No. But it's some kind o' start at it, far as I'm concerned.' Shivers got up and took a step away. Then he stopped, and turned back, firelight shifting over one side of his hard, angry face. 'It ain't ever as simple, is it, as a man is just good or bad? Not even you. Not even Bethod. Not anybody.'

'No.' Logen sat and watched the flames moving. 'No, it ain't ever that simple. We all got our reasons. Good men and bad men. It's all a matter of where you stand.'

The Perfect Couple

One of Jezal's countless footmen perched on the stepladder, and lowered the crown with frowning precision onto his head, its single enormous diamond flashing pricelessly bright. He gave it the very slightest twist back and forth, the fur-trimmed rim gripping Jezal's skull. He climbed back down, whisked the stepladder away, and surveyed the result. So did half a dozen of his fellows. One of them stepped forward to tweak the precise positioning of Jezal's gold-embroidered sleeve. Another grimaced as he flicked an infinitesimal speck of dust from his pure white collar.

'Very good,' said Bayaz, nodding thoughtfully to himself. 'I believe that you are ready for your wedding.'

The peculiar thing, now that Jezal had a rare moment to think about it, was that he had not, in any way of which he was aware, agreed to get married. He had neither proposed nor accepted a proposal. He had never actually said 'yes' to anything. And yet here he was, preparing to be joined in matrimony in a few short hours, and to a woman he scarcely knew at all. It had not escaped his notice that in order to have been managed so quickly the arrangements must have been well underway before Bayaz had even suggested the notion. Perhaps before Jezal had even been crowned . . . but he supposed it was not so very surprising. Since his enthronement he had drifted helplessly through one incomprehensible event after another, like a man shipwrecked and struggling to keep his head above water, out of sight of land, dragged who knew where by unseen, irresistible currents. But considerably better dressed.

He was gradually starting to realise that the more powerful a man became, the fewer choices he really had. Captain Jezal dan Luthar had been able to eat what he liked, to sleep when he liked, to see who he liked. His August Majesty King Jezal the First, on the other hand, was bound by invisible chains of tradition, expectation, and responsibility, that prescribed every aspect of his existence, however small.

Bayaz took a discerning step forward. 'Perhaps the top button undone here—'

Jezal jerked away with some annoyance. The attention of the Magus to every tiny detail of his life was becoming more than tiresome. It seemed that he could scarcely use the latrine without the old bastard poking through the results. ‘I know how to button a coat!’ he snapped. ‘Should I expect to find you here tonight when I bring my new wife to our bed-chamber, ready to instruct me on how best to use my prick?’

The footmen coughed, and averted their eyes, and scraped away towards the corners of the room. Bayaz himself neither smiled nor frowned. ‘I stand always ready to advise your Majesty, but I had hoped that might be one item of business you could manage alone.’

‘I hope you’re well prepared for our little outing. I’ve been getting ready all morn—’ Ardee froze when she looked up and saw Glokta’s face. ‘What happened to you?’

‘What, this?’ He waved his hand at the mottled mass of bruises. ‘A Kantic woman broke into my apartments in the night, punched me repeatedly and near drowned me in the bath.’ An experience I would not recommend.

Evidently she did not believe him. ‘What really happened?’

‘I fell down the stairs.’

‘Ah. Stairs. They can be brutal bastards when you’re not that firm on your feet.’ She stared at her half-full glass, her eyes slightly misty.

‘Are you drunk?’

‘It’s the afternoon, isn’t it? I try always to be drunk by now. Once you start a job you should give it your best. Or so my father liked to tell me.’

Glokta narrowed his eyes at her, and she stared back evenly over the rim of her glass. *No trembling lip, no tragic face, no streaks of bitter tears down the cheek.* She seemed no less happy than usual. *Or no more unhappy, perhaps. But Jezal dan Luthar’s wedding day can be no joyous occasion for her. No one appreciates being jilted, whatever the circumstances. No one enjoys being abandoned.*

‘We need not go, you know.’ Glokta winced as he tried unsuccessfully to stretch some movement into his wasted leg, and the wince itself caused a ripple of pain through his split lips and across his battered face. ‘I certainly won’t complain if I do not have to walk another step today. We can sit here, and talk of rubbish and politics.’

‘And miss the king’s marriage?’ gasped Ardee, one hand pressed to her chest in fake horror. ‘But I really must see what the Princess Terez is wearing! They say she is the most beautiful woman in the world, and even scum like me must have someone to look up to.’ She tipped back her head and swilled down the last of her wine. ‘Having fucked the groom is really no excuse for missing a wedding, you know.’

*

The flagship of Grand Duke Orso of Talins ploughed slowly, deliberately, majestically forwards, under no more than quarter sail, a host of seabirds flapping and calling in the rich blue sky above. It was by far the largest ship that Jezal, or anyone among the vast crowds that lined the quay and crammed the roofs and windows of the buildings along the waterfront, had ever laid eyes upon.

It was decked out in its finest: coloured bunting fluttered from the rigging and its three towering masts were hung with bright flags, the sable cross of Talins and the golden sun of the Union, side by side in honour of the happy occasion. But it looked no less menacing for that. It looked as Logen Ninefingers might have in a dandy’s jacket. Unmistakably still a man of war, and appearing more savage rather than less for the gaudy finery in which it was plainly uncomfortable. As the means of bringing a single woman to Adua, and that woman Jezal’s bride-to-be, this mighty vessel was anything but reassuring. It implied that Grand Duke Orso might be an intimidating presence as a father-in-law.

Jezal saw sailors now, crawling among the myriad ropes like ants through a bush, bringing the acres of sailcloth in with well-practised speed. They let the mighty ship plough forward under its own momentum, its vast shadow falling over the quay and plunging half the welcoming party into darkness. It slowed, the air full of the creaking of timbers and hawsers. It came to a deliberate stop, dwarfing the now tiny-seeming boats meekly tethered to either side as a tiger might dwarf kittens. The golden figurehead, a woman twice life-size thrusting a spear towards the heavens, glittered menacingly far over Jezal’s head.

A huge wharf had been specially constructed in the middle of the quay where the draught was at its deepest. Down this gently sloping ramp the royal party of Talins descended into Adua, like visitors from a distant star where everyone was rich, beautiful, and obliviously happy.

To either side marched a row of bearded guardsmen, all dressed in identical black uniforms, their helmets polished to a painful pitch of mirror brightness. Between them, in two rows of six, came a dozen ladies-in-waiting, each one arrayed in red, or blue, or vivid purple silks, each one as splendid as a queen herself.

But not one of the awestruck multitude on the waterfront could have been in any doubt who was the centre of attention. The Princess Terez glided along at the fore: tall, slender, impossibly regal, as graceful as a circus dancer and as stately as an Empress of legend. Her pure white gown was stitched with glittering gold, her shimmering hair was the colour of polished bronze, a chain of daunting diamonds flashed and sparkled on her pale chest in the bright sunlight. The Jewel of Talins seemed at that moment an apt name indeed. Terez looked as pure and dazzling, as proud and brilliant, as hard and beautiful as a flawless gemstone.

As her feet touched the stones the crowds burst out into a tumultuous cheer, and flower petals began to fall in well-orchestrated cascades from the windows of the buildings high above. So it was that she advanced on Jezal with magnificent dignity, her head held imperiously high, her hands clasped proudly before her, over a soft carpet and through a sweet-smelling haze of fluttering pink and red.

To call it a breathtaking entrance would have been understatement of an epic order.

‘Your August Majesty,’ she murmured, somehow managing to make him feel like the humble one as she curtsied, and behind her the ladies followed suit, and the guardsmen bowed low, all with impeccable coordination. ‘My father, the Grand Duke Orso of Talins, sends his profound apologies,’ and she rose up perfectly erect again as though hoisted by invisible strings, ‘but urgent business in Styria prevents him from attending our wedding.’

‘You are all we need,’ croaked Jezal, cursing silently a moment later as he realised he had completely ignored the proper form of address. It was somewhat difficult to think clearly, under the circumstances. Terez was even more breathtaking now than when he had last seen her, a year or more ago,

arguing savagely with Prince Ladisla at the feast held in his honour. The memory of her vicious shrieking did little to encourage him, but then Jezal would hardly have been delighted by the prospect of marrying Ladisla himself. After all, the man had been a complete ass. Jezal was an entirely different sort of person and could no doubt expect a different response. So he hoped.

'Please, your Highness,' and he held out his hand to her. She rested hers on it, seeming to weigh less than a feather.

'Your Majesty does me too much honour.'

The hooves of the grey horses crackled on the paving, the carriage-wheels whirred smoothly. They set off up the Kingsway, a company of Knights of the Body riding in tight formation around them, arms and armour glinting, each stride of the great thoroughfare lined with appreciative commoners, each door and window filled with smiling subjects. All there to cheer for their new king, and for the woman soon to be their queen.

Jezal knew he must look an utter idiot next to her. A clumsy, low-born, ill-mannered oaf, who had not the slightest right to share her carriage, unless, perhaps, she was using him as a footrest. He had never in his life felt truly inferior before. He could scarcely believe that he was marrying this woman. Today. His hands were shaking. Positively shaking. Perhaps some heartfelt words might help them both relax.

'Terez . . .' She continued to wave imperiously to the crowds. 'I realise . . . that we do not know each other in the least, but . . . I would like to know you.' The slightest twitch of her mouth was the only sign that she had heard him. 'I know that this must have come as a terrible shock to you, just as it has to me. I hope, if there is anything I can do . . . to make it easier, that—'

'My father feels the interests of my country are best served by this marriage, and it is a daughter's place to obey. Those of us born to high station are long prepared to make sacrifices.'

Her perfect head turned smoothly on her perfect neck, and she smiled. A smile slightly forced, perhaps, but no less radiant for that. It was hard to believe that a face so smooth and flawless could be made of meat, like everybody else's. It seemed like porcelain, or polished stone. It was a constant, magical delight to see it move. He wondered if her lips were cool or warm. He would have liked very much to find out. She leaned close to him, and placed her hand gently on the back of his. Warm, undoubtedly

warm, and soft, and very much made of flesh. ‘You really should wave,’ she murmured, her voice full of Styrian song.

‘Er, yes,’ he croaked, his mouth very dry, ‘yes, of course.’

Glokta stood, Ardee beside him, and frowned at the doors of the Lords’ Round. Beyond those towering gates, in the great circular hall, the ceremony was taking place. *Oh, joyous, joyous day!* High Justice Marovia’s wise exhortations would be echoing from the gilded dome, the happy couple would be speaking their solemn vows with light hearts. Only the lucky few had been allowed within to bear witness. *The rest of us must worship from afar*. And quite a crowd had gathered to do just that. The wide Square of Marshals was choked with them. Glokta’s ears were stuffed with their excited babbling. *A sycophantic throng, all eager for their divine Majesties to emerge.*

He rocked impatiently back and forth, from side to side, grimacing and hissing, trying to get the blood to flow in his aching legs, the cramps to be still. *But standing in one place for this length of time is, to put it simply, torture.*

‘How long can a wedding take?’

Ardee raised one dark eyebrow. ‘Perhaps they couldn’t keep their hands off each other, and are busy consummating the marriage right there on the floor of the Lords’ Round.’

‘How bloody long can a consummation take?’

‘Lean on me if you need to,’ she said, holding out her elbow to him.

‘The cripple using the drunk for support?’ Glokta frowned. ‘We make quite the couple.’

‘Fall over if you prefer, and knock out the rest of your teeth. I’ll lose no sleep over it.’

Perhaps I should take her up on the offer, if only for a moment. After all, where’s the harm? But then the first shrill cheers began to float up, soon joined by more and more until a jubilant roar was making the air throb. The doors of the Lords’ Round were finally being heaved open, and the High King and Queen of the Union emerged into the bright sunlight, hand in hand.

Even Glokta was forced to admit that they made a dazzling pair. Like monarchs of myth they stood arrayed in brilliant white, trimmed with twinkling embroidery, matching golden suns across the back of her long gown and his long coat, glittering as they turned to the crowds. Each tall, and slender, and graceful, each crowned with shining gold and a single flashing diamond. *Both so very young, and so very beautiful, and with all their happy, rich, and powerful lives ahead of them. Hurrah! Hurrah for them! My shrivelled turd of a heart bursts open with joy!*

Glokta rested his hand on Ardee's elbow, and he leaned towards her, and he smiled his most twisted, toothless, grotesque grin. 'Is it really true that our King is more handsome than I?'

'Offensive nonsense!' She thrust out her chest and tossed her head, giving Glokta a withering sneer down her nose. 'And I sparkle more brightly than the Jewel of Talins!'

'Oh, you do, my dear, you absolutely do. We make them look like beggars!'

'Like scum.'

'Like cripples.'

They chuckled together as the royal pair swept majestically across the square, accompanied by a score of watchful Knights of the Body. The Closed Council followed behind at a respectful distance, eleven stately old men with Bayaz among them in his arcane vestments, smiling almost as wide as the glorious couple themselves.

'I didn't even like him,' muttered Ardee under her breath, 'to begin with. Not really.' *That certainly makes two of us.*

'No need to weep. You're far too sharp to have been satisfied with a dullard like him.'

She breathed in sharply. 'I'm sure you're right. But I was so bored, and lonely, and tired.' *And drunk, no doubt*. She shrugged her shoulders hopelessly. 'He made me feel like I was something more than a burden. He made me feel . . . wanted.'

And what makes you suppose that I want to know about it? 'Wanted, you say? How wonderful. And now?'

She looked miserably down at the ground, and Glokta felt just the smallest trace of guilt. *But guilt only really hurts when there's nothing else to worry about.*

‘It was hardly as if it was true love.’ He saw the thin sinews in her neck moving as she swallowed. ‘But somehow I always thought it would be me making a fool of him.’

‘Huh.’ *How rarely any of us get what we expect.*

The royal party processed gradually out of view, the last splendid courtiers and shining bodyguards tramping after them, the sound of rapturous applause creeping off towards the palace. *Towards their glorious futures, and we guilty secrets are by no means invited.*

‘Here we stand,’ murmured Ardee. ‘The off-cuts.’

‘The wretched leavings.’

‘The rotten stalks.’

‘I wouldn’t worry over much.’ Glokta gave a sigh. ‘You are still young, clever, and passably pretty.’

‘Epic praise indeed.’

‘You have all your teeth and both your legs. A marked advantage over some of us. I do not doubt that you will soon find some other high-born idiot to entrap, and no harm done.’

She turned away from him, and hunched her shoulders, and he guessed that she was biting her lip. He winced, and lifted his hand to lay it on her shoulder . . . *The same hand that cut Sepp dan Teufel’s fingers into slices, that pinched the nipples from Inquisitor Harker’s chest, that carved one Gurkish emissary into pieces and burned another, that sent innocent men to rot in Angland, and so on, and so on . . . He jerked it back, and let it fall. Better to cry all the tears in the world than be touched by that hand. Comfort comes from other sources, and flows to other destinations.* He frowned out across the square, and left Ardee to her misery.

The crowd cheered on.

It was a magnificent event, of course. No effort or expense had been spared. Jezal would not have been at all surprised if he had five hundred guests, and no more than a dozen of them known to himself in any significant degree. The Lords and Ladies of the Union. The great men of Closed and Open Councils. The richest and the most powerful, dressed in their best and on their best behaviour.

The Chamber of Mirrors was a fitting venue. The most spectacular room in the entire palace, as big as a battlefield and made to seem larger yet by the great mirrors which covered every wall, creating the disconcerting impression of dozens of other magnificent weddings, in dozens of other adjoining ballrooms. A multitude of candles flickered and waved on the tables, and in the sconces, and among the crystal chandeliers high above. Their soft light shone on the silverware, glittered on the jewels of the guests, and was reflected back from the dark walls, gleaming into the far, dim distance: a million points of light, like the stars in a dark night sky. A dozen of the Union's finest musicians played subtle and entrancing music, and it mingled with the swell of satisfied chatter, the clink and rattle of old money and new cutlery.

It was a joyous celebration. The evening of a lifetime. For the guests.

For Jezal it was something else, and he was not sure what. He sat at a gilded table with his queen beside him, the two of them outnumbered ten to one by fawning servants, displayed to the full view of the whole assembly as though they were a pair of prize exhibits in a zoo. Jezal sat in a haze of awkwardness, in a dreamlike silence, startling from time to time like a sick rabbit as a powdered footman blindsided him with vegetables. Terez sat on his right, occasionally spearing the slightest morsel with a discerning fork, lifting it, chewing it, swallowing it with elegant precision. Jezal had never thought that it was possible to eat beautifully. He now realised his mistake.

He could scarcely remember the ringing words of the High Justice that had, he supposed, bound the two of them irrevocably together. Something about love and the security of the nation, he vaguely recalled. But he could see the ring that he had handed numbly to Terez in the Lords' Round, its enormous blood-red stone glittering on her long middle finger. He chewed at a slice of the finest meat, and it tasted like mud in his mouth. They were man and wife.

He saw now that Bayaz had been right, as always. The people longed for something effortlessly higher than themselves. They might not all have had the king they would have asked for, but no one could possibly deny that Terez was all a queen should be and more. The mere idea of Ardee West sitting in that gilded chair was absurd. And yet Jezal felt a pang of guilt when the idea occurred, closely followed by a greater one of sadness. It would have been a comfort to have someone to talk to, then. He gave a

painful sigh. If he was to spend his life with this woman, they would have to speak. The sooner they began, he supposed, the better.

'I hear that Talins . . . is a most beautiful city.'

'Indeed,' she said with careful formality, 'but Adua has its sights also.' She paused, and looked down unhopefully at her plate.

Jezal cleared his throat. 'This is somewhat . . . difficult to adjust to.' He ventured a fraction of a smile.

She blinked, and looked out at the room. 'It is.'

'Do you dance?'

She turned her head smoothly to look at him without the slightest apparent movement of her shoulders. 'A little.'

He pushed back his chair and stood up. 'Then shall we, your Majesty?'

'As you wish, your Majesty.'

As they made their way towards the middle of the wide floor, the chatter gradually diminished. The Chamber of Mirrors grew deathly quiet aside from the clicking of his polished boots, and her polished shoes, on the glistening stone. Jezal swallowed as they took their places, surrounded on three sides by the long tables, and the legions of magnificent guests, all watching. He had rather that same feeling of breathless anticipation, of fear and excitement, that he had used to have when he stepped into the fencing circle against an unknown opponent, before the roaring crowd.

They stood still as statues, looking into each other's eyes. He held out his hand, palm up. She reached out, but instead of taking it she pressed the back of her hand firmly against the back of his and pushed it up so that their fingers were level. She lifted one eyebrow by the slightest margin. A silent challenge, that no one else in the hall could possibly have seen.

The first long drawn-out note sobbed from the strings and echoed around the chamber. They set off, circling each other with exaggerated slowness, the golden hem of Terez' dress swishing across the floor, her feet out of sight so that she appeared to glide rather than take steps, her chin held painfully high. They moved first one way and then the other, and in the mirrors around them a thousand other couples moved in time, stretching away into the shadowy distance, crowned and dressed in flawless white and gold.

As the second phrase began, and other instruments joined in, Jezal began to realise that he was utterly outclassed, worse than ever he had been by

Bremer dan Gorst. Terez moved with such immaculate poise that he was sure she could have balanced a glass of wine on her head without spilling a drop. The music grew louder, faster, bolder, and Terez' movements came faster and bolder with it. It seemed as if she somehow controlled the musicians with her outstretched hands, the two were linked so perfectly. He tried to steer her and she stepped effortlessly around him. She feinted one way and whirled the other and Jezal almost went over on his arse. She dodged and spun with masterful disguise and left him lunging at nothing.

The music grew faster yet, the musicians sawed and plucked with furious concentration. Jezal made a vain attempt to catch her but Terez twisted away, dazzling him with a flurry of skirts that he could barely follow. She almost tripped him with a foot which was gone before he knew it, tossed her head and almost stabbed him in the eye with her crown. The great and good of the Union looked on in enchanted silence. Even Jezal found himself a dumbstruck spectator. It was the most he could do to remain in roughly the right positions to be made an utter fool of.

He was not sure whether he was relieved or disappointed when the music slowed again and she offered out her hand as though it were a rare treasure. He pressed the back of his against it and they circled each other, drawing closer and closer. As the last refrain wept from the instruments she pressed herself against him, her back to his chest. Slowly they turned, and slower still, his nose full of the smell of her hair. At the last long note she sank back and he lowered her gently, her neck stretching out, her head dropping, her delicate crown almost brushing the floor. And there was silence.

The room broke into rapturous applause, but Jezal hardly heard them. He was too busy staring at his wife. There was a faint colour to her cheek now, her lips slightly parted exposing flawless front teeth, and the lines of her jaw, and stretched-out neck, and slender collar-bones were etched with shadow and ringed with sparkling diamonds. Lower down her chest rose and fell imperiously in her bodice with her rapid breathing, the slightest, fascinating sheen of sweat nestling in her cleavage. Jezal would have very much liked to nestle there himself. He blinked, his own breath sharp in his throat.

'If it please your Majesty,' she murmured.

'Eh? Oh . . . of course.' He whisked her back to her feet as the applause continued. 'You dance . . . magnificently.'

‘Your Majesty is too kind,’ she replied, with the barest fragment of a smile, but a smile nonetheless. He beamed gormlessly back at her. His fear and confusion had, in the space of a single dance, smoothly transformed into a most pleasurable excitement. He had been gifted a glimpse beneath the icy shell, and plainly his new Queen was a woman of rare and fiery passion. A hidden side to her that he was now greatly looking forward to investigating further. Looking forward so sharply, in fact, that he was forced to avert his eyes and stare off into the corner, frowning and trying desperately to think of other things, lest the tightness of his trousers caused him to embarrass himself in front of the assembled guests.

The sight of Bayaz grinning in the corner was for once just what he needed to see, the old man’s cold smile cooling his ardour as surely as a bucket of iced water.

Glokta had left Ardee in her over-furnished living room making every effort to get even more drunk, and ever since he had found himself in a black mood. *Even for me. There’s nothing like the company of someone even more wretched than yourself to make you feel better. Trouble is, take their misery away and your own presses in twice as cold and dreary behind it.*

He slurped another half mouthful of gritty soup from his spoon, grimaced as he forced the over-salty slop down his throat. *I wonder how wonderful a time King Jezal is enjoying now? Lauded and admired by all, gorging himself on the best food and the best company*. He dropped the spoon into the bowl, his left eye twitching, and winced at a ripple of pain through his back and down into his leg. *Eight years since the Gurkish released me, yet I am still their prisoner, and always will be. Trapped in a cell no bigger than my own crippled body.*

The door creaked open and Barnam shuffled in to collect the bowl. Glokta looked from the half-dead soup to the half-dead old man. The best food, and the best company. He would have laughed if his split lips had allowed it.

‘Finished, sir?’ asked the servant.

‘More than likely.’ *I have been unable to pull the means of destroying Bayaz out of my arse, and so, of course, his Eminence will not be pleased. How displeased can he get, do we suppose, before he loses patience entirely? But what can be done?*

Barnam carried the bowl from the room, pulled the door shut behind him, and left Glokta alone with his pain. *What is it that I did to deserve this? And what is it that Luthar did? Is he not just as I was? Arrogant, vain, and selfish as hell? Is he a better man? Then why has life punished me so harshly, and rewarded him so richly?*

But Glokta already knew the answer. *The same reason that innocent Sepp dan Teufel languishes in Angland with his fingers shortened. The same reason that loyal General Vissbruck died in Dagoska, while treacherous Magister Eider was let live. The same reason that Tulkis, the Gurkish Ambassador, was butchered in front of a howling crowd for a crime he did not commit.*

He pressed his sore tongue into one of his few remaining teeth. Life is not fair.

Jezal pranced down the hallway in a dream, but no longer the panicked nightmare of the morning. His head was spinning from praise, and applause, and approval. His body was glowing with dancing, and wine, and, increasingly, lust. With Terez beside him, for the first time in his brief reign, he truly felt like a king. Gems and metal, silk and embroidery, and pale, smooth skin all shone excitingly in the soft candlelight. The evening had turned out to be a delight, and the night promised only to be better yet. Terez might have seemed as hard as a jewel from a distance, but Jezal had held her in his arms, and he knew better.

The great panelled doors of the royal bedchamber were held open by a pair of cringing footmen, then shut silently as the King and Queen of the Union swept past. The mighty bed dominated the far side of the room, sprays of tall feathers at the corners of its canopy casting long shadows up onto the gilded ceiling. Its rich green curtains hung invitingly wide, the silken space beyond filled with soft and tantalising shadows.

Terez took a few slow steps into the chamber ahead of him, her head bowed, while Jezal turned the key in the lock with a long, smooth rattling of wards. His breath came fast as he stepped up behind his wife, lifted his hand and placed it gently on her bare shoulder. He felt the muscles stiffen under her smooth skin, smiled at her nervousness, matching his own so closely. He wondered if he should say something to try and calm her, but what

would have been the purpose? They both knew what had to happen now, and Jezal for one was impatient to begin.

He came closer, slipping his free hand around her waist, feeling his palm hiss over rough silk. He brushed the nape of her neck with his lips, once, twice, three times. He nuzzled against her hair, dragging in her fragrance and breathing it out softly against the side of her face. He felt her tremble at his breath upon her skin, but that only encouraged him. He slid his fingers over her shoulder and across her chest, her diamonds trailing over the back of his hand as he slipped it down into her bodice. He moved up closer yet, pressing himself against her, making a satisfied growl in his throat, his prick nudging pleasantly into her backside through their clothes—

In a moment she had torn away from him with a gasp, spun around and slapped him across the face with a smack that set his head ringing. 'You filthy bastard!' she shrieked in his face, spit flying from her twisted mouth. 'You son of a fucking whore! How dare you touch me? Ladisla was a cretin, but at least his blood was clean!'

Jezal gaped, one hand pressed against his burning face, his whole body rigid with shock. He reached out feebly with his other hand. 'But I—ooof!'

Her knee caught him between the legs with pitiless accuracy, driving the wind from his chest, making him teeter for a breathless moment, then bringing him down like a sledgehammer to a house of cards. As he slid groaning to the carpet in that special, shooting agony that only a blow to the fruits can produce, it was little consolation that he had been right.

His Queen was quite evidently a woman of rare and fiery passion.

The tears flowing so liberally from his eyes were not just of pain, and awful surprise, and temporary disappointment, they were, increasingly, of deepening horror. It seemed that he had misjudged Terez' feelings most seriously. She had smiled for the crowds, but now, in private, she gave every indication of despising him and all he stood for. The fact that he had been born a bastard was hardly something he could ever change. For all he knew his wedding night was about to be spent on the royal floor. The queen had already hurried across the room, and the curtains of the bed were tightly drawn against him.

The Seventh Day

The Easterners had come again last night. Crept up by darkness, found a spot to climb in and killed a sentry. Then they'd set a ladder and a crowd of 'em had sneaked inside by the time they were found out. The cries had woken the Dogman, hardly sleeping anyway, and he'd scrabbled awake in the black, all tangled with his blanket. Enemies inside the fortress, men running and shouting, shadows in the dark, everything reeking of panic and chaos. Men fighting by starlight, and by torchlight, and by no light at all, blades swung with hardly a notion of where they were headed, boots stumbling and kicking showers of bright sparks out of the guttering campfires.

They'd driven 'em back in the end. They'd herded them to the wall, and cut them down in numbers, and only three had lived to drop their weapons and give up. A bad mistake for them, as it turned out. There were a lot of men dead, these seven days. Every time the sun went down there were more graves. No one was in much of a merciful mood, providing they'd been suited that way in the first place, and not many had. So when they'd caught these three, Black Dow had trussed 'em up on the wall where Bethod and all the rest could see. Trussed 'em up in the hard blue dawn, first streaks of light just stabbing across the black sky, and he'd doused them all with oil and set a spark to them. One by one he'd done it. So the others could see what was coming and set to screaming before their turn.

Dogman didn't much take to seeing men on fire. He didn't like hearing their shrieks and their fat crackling. He didn't smile at a nose-full of the sick-sweet stink of their burning meat. But he didn't think of trying to stop it neither. There was a time for soft opinions, and this weren't it. Mercy and weakness are the same thing in war, and there's no prizes for nice behaviour. He'd learned that from Bethod, a long time ago. Maybe now those Easterners would give it a second thought before they came again at night and fucked up everyone's breakfast.

Might help to put some steel in the rest of the Dogman's crew besides, because more than a few were getting itchy. Some lads had tried to get away two nights before. Given up their places and crept over the wall in the

darkness, tried to get down into the valley. Bethod had their heads on spears out in front of his ditch now. A dozen battered lumps, hair blowing about in the breeze. You could hardly see their faces from the wall, but it seemed somehow they had an angry, upset sort of a look. Like they blamed the Dogman for leading them to this. As though he hadn't enough to worry about with the reproaches of the living.

He frowned down at Bethod's camp, the shapes of his tents and his signs just starting to come up black out of the mist and the darkness, and he wondered what he could do, except for stand there, and wait. All his boys were looking to him, hoping he'd pull some trick of magic to get them out of this alive. But Dogman didn't know any magic. A valley, and a wall, and no ways out. No ways out had been the whole point of the plan. He wondered if they could stand another day. But then he'd wondered that yesterday morning.

'What's Bethod planning for today, do we reckon?' he murmured to himself. 'What's he got planned?'

'A massacre?' grunted Grim.

Dogman gave him a hard look. 'Attack is the word I might've picked, but I wouldn't be surprised if we get it your way, before the day's out.' He narrowed his eyes and stared down into the shadowy valley, hoping to see what he'd been hoping for all the last seven long days. Some sign that the Union were coming. But there was nothing. Below Bethod's wide camp, his tents, and his standards, and his masses of men, there was nothing but the bare and empty land, mist clinging in the shady hollows.

Tul nudged him in the ribs with a great big elbow, and managed to make a grin. 'I don't know about this plan. Waiting for the Union, and all that. Sounds a bit risky, if you ask me. Any chance I can change my mind now?'

The Dogman didn't laugh. He hadn't any laughter left. 'Not much.'

'No.' The giant puffed out a weighty sigh. 'I don't suppose there is.'

Seven days, since the Shanka first came at the walls. Seven days, and it felt like seven months. Logen hardly had a muscle that didn't ache from hard use. He was covered in a legion of bruises, a host of scratches, an army of grazes, and knocks, and burns. He had the long cut down his leg bandaged, his ribs all bound up tight from getting kicked in them, a pair of good-sized

scabs under his hair, his shoulder stiff as wood from where he'd got battered with a shield, his knuckles scraped and swollen from punching at an Easterner and catching stone instead. He was one enormous sore spot.

The rest of the crowd were little better off. There was hardly a man in the whole fortress without some kind of an injury. Even Crummock's daughter had picked up a scratch from somewhere. One of Shivers' boys had lost himself a finger the day before yesterday. Little one, on his left hand. He was looking at it now, wrapped up tight in dirty, bloody cloth, wincing.

'Burns, don't it?' he said, looking up at Logen, bunching up the rest of his fingers and opening them again.

Logen should've felt sorry for him, probably. He remembered the pain, and the disappointment even worse. Hardly able to believe that you wouldn't have that finger any more, for the whole rest of your life. But he'd got no pity left for anyone beyond himself. 'It surely does,' he grunted.

'Feels like it's still there.'

'Aye.'

'Does that feeling go away?'

'In time.'

'How much time?'

'More than we've got, most likely.'

The man nodded, slow and grim. 'Aye.'

Seven days, and even the cold stone and wet wood of the fortress itself seemed to have had enough. The new parapets were crumbled and sagging, shored up as best they could be, and crumbled again. The gates were chopped to rotten firewood, daylight showing through the hacked-out gaps, boulders piled in behind. A firm knock might have brought them down. A firm knock might have brought Logen down, for that matter, the way he was feeling.

He took a mouthful of sour water from his flask. They were getting to the rank stuff at the bottom of the barrels. Low on food too, and on everything else. Hope, in particular, was in short and dwindling supply. 'Still alive,' he whispered to himself, but there wasn't much triumph in it. Even less than usual. Civilisation might not have been all to his taste, but a soft bed, a strange place to piss, and a bit of scorn from some skinny idiots didn't seem like such a bad option right then. He was busy asking himself for the

thousandth time why he came back at all when he heard Crummock-i-Phail's voice behind him.

'Well, well, Bloody-Nine. You look tired, man.'

Logen frowned up. The hillman's mad blather was starting to grate on him. 'It's been hard work these past days, in case you hadn't noticed.'

'I have, and I've had my part in it, haven't I, my beauties?' His three children looked at each other.

'Aye?' said the girl in a tiny voice.

Crummock frowned down at them. 'Don't like the way the game's played no more, eh? How about you, Bloody-Nine? The moon stopped smiling, has it? You scared, are you?'

Logen gave the fat bastard a long, hard look. 'Tired is what I am, Crummock. Tired o' your fortress, your food, and most of all I'm tired of your fucking talk. Not everyone loves the sound o' your fat lips flapping as much as you. Why don't you piss off and see if you can fit the moon up your arse.'

Crummock split a grin, a curve of yellow teeth standing out from his brown beard. 'That's the man I love, right there.' One of his sons, the one that carried the spear with him, was tugging at his shirt. 'What the hell is it, boy?'

'What happens if we lose, Da?'

'If we what?' growled Crummock, and he cuffed his son round the head with a great hand and knocked him on his face in the dirt. 'On your feet! There'll be no losing here, boy!'

'Not while the moon loves us,' muttered his sister, but not that loud.

Logen watched the lad struggling up, holding a hand to his bloody mouth and looking like he wanted to cry. He knew that feeling. Probably he should've said something about treating a child that way. Maybe he would've, on the first day, or the second even. Not now. He was too tired, and too sore, and too scared to care much about it.

Black Dow ambled up, something not too far from a smile across his face. The one man in the whole camp who might've been said to be in a better mood than usual, and you know you're in some sorry shit when Black Dow starts smiling.

'Ninefingers,' he grunted.

'Dow. Run out of men to burn, have you?'

‘Reckon Bethod’ll be sending me some more presently.’ He nodded towards the wall. ‘What d’you think he’ll send today?’

‘After what we gave ’em last night, I reckon those Crinna bastards are just about done.’

‘Bloody savages. I reckon they are at that.’

‘And there’ve been no Shanka for a few days now.’

‘Four days, since he sent the Flatheads at us.’

Logen squinted up at the sky, slowly getting lighter. ‘Looks like good weather today. Good weather for armour, and swords, and men walking shoulder to shoulder. Good weather to try and finish us. Wouldn’t be surprised if he sends the Carls today.’

‘Nor me.’

‘His best,’ said Logen, ‘from way back. Wouldn’t be surprised to see Whitesides, and Goring, and Pale-as-Snow, and fucking Littlebone and all the rest come strolling up to the gate after breakfast.’

Dow snorted. ‘His best? Right crowd o’ cunts, those.’ And he turned his head and spat onto the mud.

‘You’ll get no argument from me.’

‘That so? Didn’t you fight alongside ’em, all those hard and bloody years?’

‘I did. But I can’t say I ever much liked ’em.’

‘Well, if it’s any consolation, I doubt they think too much o’ you these days.’ Dow gave him a long look. ‘When did Bethod stop suiting you, eh, Ninefingers?’

Logen stared back at him. ‘Hard to say. Bit by bit, I reckon. Maybe he got to be more of a bastard as time went on. Or maybe I got to be less of one.’

‘Or maybe there ain’t room on one side for two bastards as big as the pair o’ you.’

‘Oh, I don’t know.’ Logen got up. ‘You and me work real sweet together.’ He stalked away from Dow, thinking about what easy work Malacus Quai, and Ferro Maljinn, and even Jezal dan Luthar had been.

Seven days, and they were all at each other’s throats. All angry, all tired. Seven days. The one consolation was that there couldn’t be many more.

‘They’re coming.’

Dogman's eyes flicked sideways. Like most of the few things Grim said, it hardly needed saying. They could all see it as clearly as the sun rising. Bethod's Carls were on the move.

They were in no hurry. They came on stiff and steady, painted shields held up in front, eyes to the gateway. Standards flapped over their heads. Signs the Dogman recognised from way back. He wondered how many of those men down there he'd fought alongside. How many of their faces he could put a name to. How many he'd drunk with, eaten with, laughed with, that he'd have to do his best to put back in the mud. He took a long breath. The battlefield's no place for sentiment, Threetrees had told him once, and he'd taken it right to heart.

'Alright!' He lifted up his hand as the men around him on the tower readied their bows, 'Hold on to 'em for a minute yet!'

The Carls stomped on through the churned-up mud and the broken rocks where the valley narrowed, past the bodies of Easterners, and Shanka, left twisted where they lay, hacked, or crushed, or stuck with broken arrows. They didn't falter, or lose a step, the wall of shields shifted as they came, but didn't break. Not the slightest gap.

'They march tight,' muttered Tul.

'Aye. Too tight, the bastards.'

They were getting close, now. Close enough that Dogman had to try some arrows. 'Alright, boys! Aim high and let 'em drop!' The first flight went hissing from the tower, arced up high and started to fall on that tight column. They shifted their shields to meet them and arrows thudded into painted wood, spun off helmets and glanced off mail. A couple found marks, a shriek went up. Holes showed, here or there, but the rest just stepped on over, trudging up towards the wall.

Dogman frowned at the barrels where the shafts were kept. Less than quarter full, now, and most of those dug out from dead men. 'Careful now! Pick your marks, lads!'

'Uh,' said Grim, pointing down below. A good-sized pack o' men were scurrying out from the ditch, dressed in stiff leather and steel capped. They formed up in a few neat rows, kneeling down, tending to their weapons. Flatbows, like the Union used.

'Get down!' shouted Dogman.

Those nasty little bows rattled and spat. Most of the boys on the tower were well behind their parapet by then, but one optimist who'd been leaning out got a bolt through his mouth, swayed and toppled, silent, off the tower. Another took one in his chest, breathing with a wheeze like wind through a split pine.

'Alright! Give 'em something back!' They all came up at once and sent down a volley, strings humming, peppering those bastards with plunging shafts. Their bows might not have had the same spit to 'em, but with the height the arrows still came hard, and Bethod's archers had nothing to hide behind. More than a few fell back or started crawling away, screaming and squealing, but the rank behind pushed through, slow and steady, knelt down and aimed their flatbows.

Another flight of bolts came hissing up. Men ducked and threw themselves down. One zipped right past the Dogman's head and clicked off the rock face behind. Pure luck he didn't get pinned with it. A couple of the others were less lucky. One lad was lying on his back, a pair of bolts stuck in his chest, peering down at 'em and whispering, 'shit', to himself, over and over.

'Bastards!'

'Let'em have it back!'

Shafts and bolts started flapping up both ways, men shouting and taking aim, all anger and gritted teeth. 'Steady!' shouted Dogman, 'steady!' but no one hardly heard him. With the extra poke from the height and the cover they had from the walls, didn't take long for Dogman's boys to get the upper hand. Bethod's archers started scrambling back, then a couple dropped their flatbows and made a run for it, one getting a shaft right through his back. The rest started to break for the ditch, leaving their wounded crawling in the mud.

'Uh,' said Grim again. While they'd been busy trading shafts the Carls had made it right to the gate, shields up over their heads against the rocks and arrows the hillmen were chucking down. They'd got the ditch filled in a day or two before, and now the column opened up in the middle and those mailed men moved like they were passing something to the front. Dogman caught a glimpse of it. A long, thin tree trunk, cut down to use as a ram, branches left on short so men could give it a firm swing. Dogman heard the first tearing crash of it working at their sorry excuse for a gate.

‘Shit,’ he muttered.

Knots of Thralls were charging forward now, light-armed and light-armoured, carrying ladders between ’em, counting on speed to make it to the walls. Plenty fell, pricked with spear or arrow, knocked with rocks. Some of their ladders were pushed back, but they were quick and full of bones, and stuck to their task. Soon there were a couple of groups on the walls while more pressed up the ladders behind, fighting with Crummock’s people and getting the better by pure freshness and weight of numbers.

Now there was a big crack and the gate went down. Dogman saw that tree-trunk swing one last time and cave one door right in. The Carls struggled with the other and heaved it open, a couple of stones bouncing from the shields and spinning away. The front few started pressing forwards through the gate.

‘Shit,’ said Grim.

‘They’re through,’ breathed the Dogman, and he watched Bethod’s Carls push on into that narrow gap in a mailed tide, trampling the shattered gates under their heavy boots, dragging the rocks behind out of the way, their bright-painted shields up, their bright-polished weapons ready. To either side the Thralls swarmed up their ladders and onto the wall, pressing Crummock’s hillmen back down the walkways. Like a high river bursting a dam, Bethod’s host flowed into the broken fortress, first in a trickle, and soon in a flood.

‘I’m going down!’ snarled Tul, dragging his great long sword out of its sheath.

Dogman thought about trying to stop him, but then he just nodded, tired, and watched the Thunderhead charge off down the steps, a few others following. There was no point getting in their way. Seemed like it was fast reaching that time.

Time for each man to choose where he’d die.

Logen saw them come through the gates, up the ramp and into the fortress. Time seemed to move slow. He saw each design on each shield picked out sharp in the morning sun – black tree, red bridge, two wolves on green, three horses on yellow. Metal glinted and flashed – shield’s rim, mail’s ring, spear’s point, sword’s edge. On they came, yelling their battle cries, high

and thin, the way they'd done for years. The breath crawled in and out of Logen's nose. The Thralls and the hillmen fought on the walls as if they were underwater, their sounds dull and muffled. His palms sweated, and tickled, and itched as he watched the Carls break in. Hardly seemed as if it could be true that he had to charge into those bastards and kill as many as he could. What a damn fool notion.

He felt that powerful need, as he always had at times like that, to turn and run. All around he felt the fear of the others, their uncertain shuffling, their edging backwards. A sensible enough instinct, except there was nowhere now to run to. Nowhere except forwards, into the teeth of the enemy, and hope to drive them out before they could get a foothold. There was nothing to think about. It was their only chance.

So Logen lifted the Maker's sword high, and he gave a meaningless scream, and he started running. He heard the shouts around him, felt the men moving with him, the jostling and rattling of weapons. The ground, and the wall, and the Carls he ran at jolted and wobbled. His boots pounded on the earth, his own quick breath hissed and rushed with the wind.

He saw the Carls hurrying to set their shields, to form a wall, to make ready their spears and their weapons, but they were in a mess after coming through that narrow gate, flustered by the screaming mass of men charging down on them. The war-cries died in their throats and their faces sagged from triumph to shock. A couple at the edges started to have doubts, and they faltered, and shuffled back, and then Logen and the rest were on them.

He managed to twist around a wobbling spear and land a good hard chop on a shield with all the force of his charge, knock his man sprawling in the mud. Logen hacked at his leg as he tried to get up and the blade cut through mail and left a long gash in flesh, brought him shrieking down again. Logen swung at another Carl, felt the Maker's sword squeal against the metal rim of a shield and slide into flesh. A man gurgled, vomited blood down the front of his mail coat.

Logen saw an axe thud into a helmet and leave a dent the size of a fist in it. He reeled out of the way of a spear thrust and it stuck in the ribs of a man beside him. A sword hacked into a shield and sent splinters flying into Logen's eyes. He blinked, and dodged, slid in the muck, chopped at an arm as it tore at his coat and felt it break, flapping in its mail sleeve. Eyes rolled

in a bloody face. Something shoved him in the back and nearly pushed him onto a sword.

There was hardly space to swing, then there was no space at all. Men crushed in from behind, crushed in through the gate, adding their straining, mindless weight to the press in the centre. Logen was squashed in tight, shoulder to shoulder. Men gasped and grunted, dug and elbowed at each other, stabbed with knives and gouged at faces with their fingers. He thought he saw Littlebone in the press, teeth bared in a snarl, long grey hair straggling out from under a helmet set with whirls of gold, spattered with streaks of red, shouting himself hoarse. Logen tried to press towards him but the blind currents of battle snatched him away and carried them far apart.

He stabbed at someone under a shield rim, winced as he felt something dig into his hip. A long, slow, burning, getting worse and worse. He growled as the blade cut, not swung, or thrust, just held there while he was squashed up against it. He thrashed with his elbows, with his head, managed to twist away from the pain, felt the wetness of blood down his leg. He found himself with room, got his sword-hand free, hacked at a shield, chopped a head open on the backswing then found himself shoved up against it, his face pressed into warm brains.

He saw a shield jerk up out of the corner of his eye. The edge caught him in the throat, under the chin, snapped his head back and filled his skull with blinding light. Before he knew it he was rolling, coughing, slithering in the filth down among the boots.

He dragged himself nowhere, clutching at dirt, spitting blood, boots squelching and straining in the mud all around him. Crawling through a dark, terrifying, shifting forest of legs, the screams of pain and rage filtering down from above with the flickering light. Feet kicked at him, stomped on him, battered at every part of him. He tried to struggle up and a boot in the mouth sent him limp again. He rolled over, gasping, saw a bearded Carl in the same state, impossible to say which side he was on, trying to push himself up out of the mud. Their eyes met, for a moment, then a glinting spear blade shot down from above and stabbed the Carl in the back, once, twice, three times. He went limp, blood gurgling down through his beard. There were bodies all around, on their faces and their sides, lying in

amongst the dropped and broken gear, kicked and knocked around like children's dolls, some of them still twitching, clutching, grunting.

Logen squawked as a boot squelched down hard on his hand, crushing his fingers into the muck. He fumbled a knife from his belt and started slashing weakly at the leg above it, bloody teeth gritted. Something cracked him in the top of the head and sent him sprawling on his face again.

The world was a noisy blur, a painful smear, a mass of feet and anger. He didn't know which way he was facing, which way was up or down. His mouth tasted of metal, thirsty. There was blood in his eyes, mud in his eyes, his head was pounding, he wanted to be sick.

Back to the North, and get some vengeance. What the fuck had he been thinking?

Someone screamed, stuck with a flatbow bolt, but the Dogman had no time to worry about him.

Whitesides' Thralls were up on the wall under the tower, and a few had got around and onto the stairway. They were charging up it now, or as close as they could get to a charge on those narrow steps. Dogman dropped his bow and fumbled his sword out from its sheath, got a knife ready in the other hand. A few of the others took up spears, gathered round the head of the stairway as the Thralls came up. Dogman swallowed. He'd never been much for fights like this, toe to toe, no more'n the length of an axe from your enemies. He'd rather have kept things to a polite distance, but that didn't seem to be what these bastards had in mind.

An awkward kind of a fight started up at the top of the steps, defenders poking with spears, trying to shove the Thralls off, them poking back, shoving with shields, trying to get a foothold on the platform at the top, everyone taking care in case they took the long drop right back to the mud.

One charged through with a spear, screaming at the top of his lungs, and Grim shot him in the face, cool as you like, no more'n a stride or two distant. He staggered a step or two, bent right over with the flights of the arrows sticking out his mouth and the point out the back of his neck, then Dogman took the top of his head off with his sword and sent his corpse sprawling.

A big Thrall with wild red hair leaped up the steps, swinging a big axe, roaring like a madman. He got round a spear and felled an archer with a blow that spattered blood across the rock face, charged on through, folk scattering out o' the way.

Dogman dithered, trying to look like he was an idiot, then when the axe came down he dodged left and the blade missed him by a whisker. The red-haired Thrall stumbled, tired from getting over the wall and up all them steps, most likely. A long way to climb, especially with nothing but your death at the end of it. Dogman kicked hard at the side of his knee and his leg buckled, he yelled as he lurched towards the edge of the stairs. Dogman chopped at him with his sword, caught him a slash across the back, hard enough to send him over the edge. He dropped his axe, screamed as he tumbled through the empty air.

Dogman felt something move, turned just in time to see another Thrall coming at him from the side. He twisted round and knocked the first sword-cut clear, gasped as he felt the second thud cold into his arm, heard his sword clatter out of his limp hand. He jerked away from another swing, tripped and went down on his back. The Thrall came at him, lifting up his sword to finish the job, but before he got more'n a stride Grim loomed up quick from the side, caught hold of his sword-arm and held it pinned. Dogman scrambled up, taking a hard grip on his knife with his good hand, and stabbed the Thrall right in his chest. They stayed there, the three of 'em, tangled up tight together, still in the midst of all that madness, for as long as it took for the man to die. Then Dogman pulled his knife free and Grim let him fall.

They'd got the best of it up on the tower, at least for now. There was just one Thrall left on his feet, and while the Dogman watched a couple of his lads herded him up to the parapet and poked him off with spears. There were corpses scattered all about the place. A couple of dozen Thralls, maybe half that many of the Dogman's boys. One of 'em was propped against the cliff face, chest heaving as he breathed, face pasty pale, bloody hands clutched to his slashed guts.

Dogman's hand wouldn't work right, the fingers dangled useless. He tugged his shirtsleeve up, saw a long gash oozing from his elbow almost all the way to his wrist. His guts gave a heave and he coughed a bit of burning

puke up and spat it out. Wounds on other people you can get used to. Cuts out of your own flesh always have a horror to 'em.

Down below, inside the wall, the fight was joined and nothing but a boiling, tight-pressed mass. Dogman could hardly tell which men were on which side. He stood frozen, bloody knife clutched in one bloody hand. There were no answers now, no plans. It was every man for himself. If they lived out the day it would be by luck alone, and he was starting to doubt he had that much luck left. He felt someone tugging at his sleeve. Grim. He followed his pointed finger with his eyes.

Beyond Bethod's camp, down in the valley, a great cloud of dust was coming up, a brown haze. Underneath, glittering in the morning sun, the armour of horsemen. His hand clamped tight round Grim's wrist, hope suddenly flickering alive again. 'Fucking Union!' he breathed, hardly daring to believe it.

West squinted through his eye-glass, lowered it and peered up the valley, squinted through it again. 'You're sure?'

'Yes, sir.' Jalenhorm's big, honest face was streaked with the dirt of eight days' hard riding. 'And it looks as if they're still holding out, just barely.'

'General Poulder!' snapped West.

'My Lord Marshal?' murmured Poulder with his newly acquired veneer of sycophancy.

'Are the cavalry ready to charge?'

The General blinked. 'They are not properly deployed, have been riding hard these past days, and would be charging uphill over broken ground and at a strong and determined enemy. They will do as you order, of course, Lord Marshal, but it might be prudent to wait for our infantry to—'

'Prudence is a luxury.' West frowned up towards that innocuous space between the two fells. Attack at once, while the Dogman and his Northmen still held out? They might enjoy the advantage of surprise, and crush Bethod between them, but the cavalry would be charging uphill, men and mounts disorganised and fatigued from hard marching. Or wait for the infantry to arrive, still some hours behind, and mount a well-planned assault? But by then would the Dogman and his friends have been slaughtered to a man,

their fortress taken and Bethod well prepared to meet an attack from one side only?

West chewed at his lip, trying to ignore the fact that thousands of lives hung upon his decision. To attack now was the greater risk, but might offer the greater rewards. A chance to finish this war within a bloody hour. They might never again catch the King of the Northmen off guard. What was it that Burr had said to him, the night before he died? One cannot be a great leader without a certain . . . ruthlessness.

'Prepare the charge, and deploy our infantry across the mouth of the valley as soon as they arrive. We must prevent Bethod and any of his forces from escaping. If sacrifices are to be made, I intend that they be meaningful.' Poulder looked anything but convinced. 'Will you force me to agree with General Kroy's assessment of your fighting qualities, General Poulder? Or do you intend to prove the two of us wrong?'

The General snapped to attention, his moustaches vibrating with new eagerness. 'Respectfully, sir, to prove you wrong! I will order the charge immediately!'

He gave his black charger the spurs and flew off up the valley, towards the place where the dusty cavalry were massing, pursued by several members of his staff. West shifted in his saddle, chewing worriedly at his lip. His head was beginning to hurt again. A charge, uphill, against a determined enemy.

Colonel Glokta would no doubt have grinned at the prospect of such a deadly gamble. Prince Ladisla would have approved of such cavalier carelessness with other men's lives. Lord Smund would have slapped backs, and talked of vim and vigour, and called for wine.

And only look what became of those three heroes.

Logen heard a great roar, faint, and far away. Light came at his half-closed eyes, as though the fight was opened up wide. Shadows flickered. A great boot squelched in the filth in front of his face. Voices bellowed, far above. He felt himself grabbed by the shirt, dragged through the mud, feet and legs thrashing all around him. He saw the sky, painful bright, blinked and dribbled at it. He lay still, limp as a rag.

'Logen! You alright? Where you hurt?'

‘I—’ he croaked, then started coughing.

‘D’you know me?’ Something slapped at Logen’s face, slapped some sluggish thought into his head. A shaggy shape loomed over him, dark against the bright sky. Logen squinted at it. Tul Duru Thunderhead, unless he was much mistaken. What the hell was he doing here? Thinking was painful. The more Logen thought, the more pain he was in. His jaw was on fire, feeling twice the size it usually did. His every breath was a shuddering, slavering gasp.

Above him the big man’s mouth moved, and the words boomed and rang against Logen’s ears, but they were nothing but noise. His leg prickled unpleasantly, far away, his own heartbeat leaped and jerked and pounded at his head. He heard sounds, clashing and rattling, coming at him from all sides, and the sounds themselves hurt him, made his jaw burn all the worse, unbearable.

‘Get . . .’ The air rasped and clicked, but no sound would come. It wasn’t his voice any longer. He reached out, with his last strength, and he put his palm against Tul’s chest, and he tried to push him away, but the big man only caught his hand and pressed it with his own.

‘It’s alright,’ he growled. ‘I’ve got you.’

‘Aye,’ whispered Logen, and the smile spread out across his bloody mouth. He gripped that great hand with a sudden, terrible strength, and with his other fist he found the handle of a knife, tucked down warm against his skin. The good blade darted out, swift as the snake and just as deadly, and sank into the big man’s thick neck to the hilt. He looked surprised, as the hot blood poured from his open throat, drooled from his open mouth, soaked his heavy beard, dribbled from his nose and down his chest, but he shouldn’t have.

To touch the Bloody-Nine was to touch death, and death has no favourites, and makes no exceptions.

The Bloody-Nine rose up, shoving the great corpse away from him, and his red fist closed tight around the giant’s sword, a heavy length of star-bright metal, dark and beautiful, a righteous tool for the work that awaited him. So much work.

But good work is the best of blessings. The Bloody-Nine opened his mouth, and shrieked out all his bottomless love and his endless hate in one long wail. The ground rushed underneath him, and the heaving, writhing,

beautiful battle reached out and took him in its soft embrace, and he was home.

The faces of the dead shifted, blurred around him, roaring their curses and bellowing their anger. But their hate of him only made him stronger. The long sword flung men out of his path and left them twisted and broken, hacked and drooling, howling with happiness. Who fought who was none of his concern. The living were on one side, and he was on the other, and he carved a red and righteous way through their ranks.

An axe flashed in the sun, a bright curve like the waning moon, and the Bloody-Nine slid below it, kicked a man away with a heavy boot. He lifted up a shield, but the great sword split the painted tree, and the wood beneath it, and the arm beneath that, and tore open the mail behind as though it was nothing but a cobweb, and split his belly like a sack of angry snakes.

A boy-child cowered, and slithered away on his back, clutching at a great shield and an axe too big for him to lift. The Bloody-Nine laughed at his fear, teeth bared bright and smiling. A tiny voice seemed to whisper for restraint, but the Bloody-Nine hardly heard it. His sword hard-swung split big shield and small body together and sprayed blood across the dirt and the stone and the stricken faces of the men watching.

'Good,' he said, and he showed his bloody smile. He was the Great Leveller. Man or woman, young or old, all were dealt with exactly alike. That was the brutal beauty of it, the awful symmetry of it, the perfect justice of it. There could be no escape and no excuses. He came forward, taller than the mountains, and the men shuffled, and muttered, and spread out from him. A circle of shields, of painted designs, of flowering trees, and rippling water, and snarling faces.

Their words tickled at his ears.

'It's him.'

'Ninefingers.'

'The Bloody-Nine!'

A circle of fear, with him at the centre, and they were wise to fear.

Their deaths were written in the shapes of sweet blood on the bitter ground. Their deaths were whispered in the buzzing of the flies on the corpses beyond the wall. Their deaths were stamped on their faces, carried on the wind, held in the crooked line between the mountains and the sky. Dead men, all.

‘Who’s next to the mud?’ he whispered.

A bold Carl stepped forward, a shield on his arm with a coiled serpent upon it. Before he could even lift his spear the Bloody-Nine’s sword had made a great circle, above the top of his shield and below the bottom of his helmet. The point of the blade stole the jawbone from his head, cleaved into the shoulder of the next man, ate deep into his chest and drove him into the earth, blood flying from his silent mouth. Another man loomed up and the sword fell on him like a falling star, crushed his helmet and the skull beneath it down to his mouth. The body dropped on its back and danced a merry jig in the dirt.

‘Dance!’ laughed the Bloody-Nine, and the sword reeled around him. He filled the air with blood, and broken weapons, and the parts of men, and these good things wrote secret letters, and described sacred patterns that only he could see and understand. Blades pricked and nicked and dug at him but they were nothing. He repaid each mark upon his burning skin one-hundred fold, and the Bloody-Nine laughed, and the wind, and the fire, and the faces on the shields laughed with him, and could not stop.

He was the storm in the High Places, his voice as terrible as the thunder, his arm as quick, as deadly, as pitiless as the lightning. He rammed the sword through a man’s guts, ripped it back and smashed a man’s mouth apart with the pommel, snatched his spear away with his free hand and flung it through the neck of a third, split a Carl’s side yawning open as he passed. He reeled, spun, rolled, drunken dizzy, spitting fire and laughter. He forged a new circle about him. A circle as wide as the giant’s sword. A circle in which the world belonged to him.

His enemies lurked beyond its limit now, shuffled back from it, full of fear. They knew him, he could see it in their faces. They had heard whispers of his work, and now he had given them a bloody lesson, and they knew the truth of it, and he smiled to see them enlightened. The foremost of them held up his open hand, bent forward and laid his axe down on the ground.

‘You are forgiven,’ whispered the Bloody-Nine, and let his own sword clatter to the dirt. Then he darted forward and seized the man by his throat, lifting him up into the air with both his hands. He thrashed and kicked and wrestled, but the Bloody-Nine’s red grip was the swelling ice that bursts the very bones of the earth apart.

‘You are forgiven!’ His hands were made of iron, and his thumbs sunk deeper and deeper into the man’s neck until blood welled up from under them, and he lifted the kicking corpse out to arm’s length and held it above him until it was still. He flung it away, and it fell upon the mud and flopped over and over in a manner that greatly pleased him.

‘Forgiven . . .’ He walked to the bright archway through a cringing crowd, shying away like sheep from the wolf, leaving a muddy path through their midst, strewn with their fallen shields and weapons. Beyond, in the sun, bright-armoured horsemen moved across the dusty valley, their swords twinkling as they rose and fell, herding running figures this way and that, riding between the high standards, rippling gently in the wind. He stood in that ragged gateway, with the splintered doors under his boots, and the corpses of his friends and of his enemies scattered about him, and he heard the sounds of men cheering victory.

And Logen closed his eyes, and breathed.

Too Many Masters

In spite of the hot summer day outside, the banking hall was a cool, dim, shadowy place. A place full of whispers, and quiet echoes, built of sharp, dark marble like a new tomb. Such thin shafts of sunlight as broke through the narrow windows were full of wriggling dust motes. There was no smell to speak of. *Except the stench of dishonesty, which even I find almost overpowering. The surroundings may be cleaner than the House of Questions, but I suspect there is more truth told among the criminals.*

There were no piles of shining gold ingots on display. There was not so much as a single coin in evidence. Only pens, and ink, and heaps of dull paper. Valint and Balk's employees were not swaddled in fabulous robes such as Magister Kault of the Mercers had worn. They did not sport flashing jewels as Magister Eider of the Spicers had. They were small, grey-dressed men with serious expressions. The only flashing was from the odd pair of studious eye-glasses.

So this is what true wealth looks like. This is how true power appears. The austere temple of the golden goddess. He watched the clerks working at their neat stacks of documents, at their neat desks arranged in neat rows. *There the acolytes, inducted into the lowest mysteries of the church.* His eyes flickered to those waiting. Merchants and moneylenders, shopkeepers and shysters, traders and tricksters in long queues, or waiting nervously on hard chairs around the hard walls. Fine clothes, perhaps, but anxious manners. *The fearful congregation, ready to cower should the deity of commerce show her vengeful streak.*

But I am not her creature. Glokta shouldered his way past the longest queue, the tip of his cane squealing loud against the tiles, snarling, 'I am crippled!' if one of the merchants dared to look his way.

The clerk blinked at him when he reached the front of the line. 'How may I—'

'Mauthis,' barked Glokta.

'And who shall I say is—'

'The cripple.' *Convey me to the high priest, that I might cleanse my crimes in banking notes.*

‘I cannot simply—’

‘You are expected!’ Another clerk, a few rows back, had stood up from his desk. ‘Please come with me.’

Glokta gave the unhappy queue a toothless leer as he limped out between the desks toward a door in the far, panelled wall, but his smile did not last. Beyond it, a set of high steps rose up, light filtering down from a narrow window at the top.

What is it about power, that it has to be higher up than everyone else? Can a man not be powerful on the ground floor? He cursed and struggled up after his impatient guide, then dragged his useless leg down a long hallway with many high doors on either side. The clerk leaned forward and humbly knocked at one, waited for a muffled ‘Yes?’ and opened it.

Mauthis sat behind a monumental desk watching Glokta hobble over the threshold. His face could have been carved from wood for all the warmth or welcome it displayed. On the expanse of blood-coloured leather before him pens, and ink, and neat piles of papers were arranged with all the merciless precision of recruits on a parade ground.

‘The visitor you were expecting, sir.’ The clerk hastened forward with a sheaf of documents. ‘And there are also these for your attention.’

Mauthis turned his emotionless eyes to them. ‘Yes . . . yes . . . yes . . . yes . . . all these to Talins . . .’ Glokta did not wait to be asked. And I’ve been in pain for far too long to pretend not to be. He took a lurching step and sagged into the nearest chair, stiff leather creaking uncomfortably under his aching arse. But it will serve.

The papers crackled as Mauthis leafed through them, his pen scratching his name at the bottom of each one. He paused at the last. ‘And no. This must be called in at once.’ He reached forward and took hold of a stamp, its wooden handle polished by long use, and rocked it carefully in its tray of red ink. It thumped down against the paper with a disturbing finality. *And is some merchant’s life squashed out under that stamp, do we suppose? Is that ruin and despair, so carelessly administered? Is that wives and children, out upon the street? There is no blood here, there are no screams, and yet men are destroyed as completely as they are in the House of Questions, and with a fraction of the effort.*

Glokta’s eyes followed the clerk as he hurried out with the documents. Or is it merely a receipt for ten bits, refused? Who can say? The door was

pulled softly and precisely shut with the gentlest of smooth clicks.

Mauthis paused only to align his pen precisely with the edge of his desk, then he looked up at Glokta. ‘I am truly grateful that you have answered promptly.’

Glokta snorted. ‘The tone of your note did not seem to allow for delay.’ He winced as he lifted his aching leg with both hands and heaved his dirty boot up onto the chair beside him. ‘I hope you will return the favour and come promptly to the point. I am extremely busy.’ *I have Magi to destroy, and Kings to bring down, and, if I cannot do one or the other, I have a pressing appointment to have my throat cut and be tossed in the sea.*

Mauthis’ face did not so much as flicker. ‘Once again, I find that my superiors are not best pleased with the direction of your investigations.’

Is that so? ‘Your superiors are people of deep pockets and shallow patience. What now offends their delicate sensibilities?’

‘Your investigation into the lineage of our new King, his August Majesty Jezal the First.’ Glokta felt his eye twitch, and he pressed his hand against it with a sour sucking of his gums. ‘In particular your enquiries into the person of Carmee dan Roth, the circumstances of her untimely demise, and the closeness of her friendship with our previous King, Guslav the Fifth. Do I come close enough to the point for your taste?’

A little closer than I would like, in fact. ‘Those enquiries have scarcely even begun. I find it surprising that your superiors are so very well informed. Do they acquire their information from a crystal ball, or a magic mirror?’ *Or from someone at the House of Questions who likes to talk? Or from someone closer to me even than that, perhaps?*

Mauthis sighed, or at least, he allowed some air to issue from his face. ‘I told you to assume that they know everything. You will discover it is no exaggeration, particularly if you choose to try and deceive them. I would advise you very strongly against that course of action.’

‘Believe me when I say,’ muttered Glokta through tight lips, ‘that I have no interest whatsoever in the King’s parentage, but his Eminence has demanded it, and keenly awaits a report of my progress. What am I to tell him?’

Mauthis stared back with a face full of sympathy. As much sympathy as one stone might have for another. ‘My employers do not care what you tell him, provided that you obey them. I see that you find yourself in a difficult

position, but speaking plainly, Superior, I do not see a choice for you. I suppose you could go to the Arch Lector, and lay before him the whole history of our involvement. The gift you took from my employers, the conditions under which it was given, the consideration you have already extended to us. Perhaps his Eminence is more forgiving of divided loyalties than he appears to be.'

'Huh,' snorted Glokta. *If I did not know better, I might have almost taken that for a joke. His Eminence is only slightly less forgiving than a scorpion, and we both know it.*

'Or you could honour your commitment to my employers, and do as they demand.'

'They asked for favours, when I signed the damn receipt. Now they make demands? Where does it end?'

'That is not for me to say, Superior. Or for you to ask.' Mauthis' eyes flickered towards the door. He leaned across his desk and spoke soft and low. 'But if my own experience is anything to go by . . . it will not end. My employers have paid. And they always get what they have paid for. Always.'

Glokta swallowed. *It would seem that, in this case, they have paid for my abject obedience. It would not normally be a difficulty, of course, I am every bit as abject as the next man, if not more so. But the Arch Lector demands the same. Two well-informed and merciless masters in direct opposition begins too late to seem like one too many. Two too many, some might say. But as Mauthis so kindly explains, I have no choice.* He slid his boot off the chair, leaving a long streak of dirt across the leather, and shifted his weight painfully as he began the long process of getting up. 'Is there anything else, or do your employers merely wish me to defy the most powerful man in the Union?'

'They wish you also to watch him.'

Glokta froze. 'They wish me to what?'

'There has been a great deal of change of late, Superior. Change means new opportunities, but too much change is bad for business. My employers feel a period of stability is in everyone's best interests. They are satisfied with the situation.' Mauthis clenched his pale hands together on the red leather. 'They are concerned that some figures within the government may not be satisfied. That they may seek further change. That their rash actions

might lead to chaos. His Eminence concerns them especially. They wish to know what he does. What he plans. They wish, in particular, to know what he is doing in the University.'

Glokta gave a splutter of disbelieving laughter. 'Is that all?'

The irony was wasted on Mauthis. 'For now. It might be best if you were to leave by the back entrance. My employers will expect news within the week.'

Glokta grimaced as he struggled down the narrow staircase at the back of the building, sideways on like a crab, the sweat standing out from his forehead, and not just from the effort. *How could they know? First that I was looking into Prince Raynault's death, against the Arch Lector's orders, and now that I am looking into our Majesty's mother, on the Arch Lector's behalf? Assume they know everything, of course, but no one knows anything without being told.*

Who . . . told?

Who asked the questions, about the Prince and about the King? Whose first loyalty is to money? Who has already given me up once to save his skin? Glokta paused for a moment, in the middle of the steps, and frowned. *Oh, dear, dear. Is it every man for himself, now? Has it always been?*

The pain shooting up his wasted leg was the only reply.

Sweet Victory

West sat, arms crossed upon his saddle-bow, staring numbly up the dusty valley. ‘We won,’ said Pike, in a voice without emotion. Just the same voice in which he might have said, ‘We lost.’

A couple of tattered standards still stood, hanging lifeless. Bethod’s own great banner had been torn down and trampled beneath horses’ hooves, and now its threadbare frame stuck up at a twisted angle, above the settling fog of dust, like clean-picked bones. A fitting symbol for the sudden fall of the King of the Northmen.

Poulder reined in his horse beside West, smiling primly at the carnage like a schoolmaster at an orderly classroom.

‘How did we fare, General?’

‘Casualties appear to have been heavy, sir, especially in our front ranks, but the enemy were largely taken by surprise. Most of their best troops were already committed to the attack on the fortress. Once our cavalry got them on the run, we drove them all the way to the walls! Picked their camp clean.’ Poulder wrinkled his nose, moustaches trembling with distaste. ‘Several hundred of those devilish Shanka we put to the sword, and a much greater number we drove off into the hills to the north, from whence, I do not doubt, they will be greatly reluctant to return. We wrought a slaughter among the Northmen to satisfy King Casamir himself, and the rest have laid down their arms. We guess at five thousand prisoners, sir. Bethod’s army has been quite crushed. Crushed!’ He gave a girlish chuckle. ‘No one could deny that you have well and truly avenged the death of Crown Prince Ladisla today, Lord Marshal!’

West swallowed. ‘Of course. Well and truly avenged.’

‘A master-stroke, to use our Northmen as a decoy. A bold and a decisive manoeuvre. I am, and will always be, honoured to have played my small part! A famous day for Union arms! Marshal Burr would have been proud to see it!’

West had never in his life expected to receive praise from General Poulder, but now the great moment had come he found that he could take no pleasure in it. He had performed no acts of bravery. He had taken no risks

with his own life. He had done nothing but say charge. He felt saddle-sore and bone-weary, his jaw ached from being constantly clenched with worry. Even speaking seemed an effort. ‘Is Bethod among the dead, or the captured?’

‘As to specific prisoners, sir, I could not say. It may be that our Northern allies have him.’ Poulder gave vent to a jagged chuckle. ‘In which case I doubt he’ll be with us much longer, eh, Marshal? Eh, Sergeant Pike?’ He grinned as he drew his finger sharply across his belly and clicked his tongue. ‘The bloody cross for him, I shouldn’t wonder! Isn’t that what they do, these savages? The bloody cross, isn’t it?’

West did not see the funny side. ‘Ensure that our prisoners are given food and water, and such assistance with their wounded as we are able to provide. We should be gracious in victory.’ It seemed like the sort of thing that a leader should say, after a battle.

‘Quite so, my Lord Marshal.’ And Poulder gave a smart salute, the very model of an obedient underling, then reined his mount sideways and spurred away.

West slid down from his own horse, gathered himself for a moment, and began to trudge on foot up the valley. Pike came after him, sword drawn.

‘Can’t be too careful, sir,’ he said.

‘No,’ murmured West. ‘I suppose not.’

The long slope was scattered with men, alive and dead. The corpses of Union horsemen lay where they had fallen. Surgeons tended to the wounded with bloody hands and grim faces. Some men sat and wept, perhaps by fallen comrades. Some stared numbly at their own wounds. Others howled and gurgled, screamed for help, or water. Still others rushed to bring it to them. Final kindnesses, for the dying. A long procession of sullen prisoners was winding down the valley alongside the rock wall, watched carefully by mounted Union soldiers. Nearby were tangled heaps of surrendered weapons, piles of mail coats, stacks of painted shields.

West picked his way slowly through what had been Bethod’s camp, rendered in one furious half-hour into a great expanse of rubbish, scattered across the bare rock and the hard earth. The twisted bodies of men and horses were mixed in with the trampled frames of tents, ripped and dragged-out canvas, burst barrels, broken boxes, gear for cooking, and

mending, and fighting. All trodden into the churned mud, stamped with the smeared prints of hooves and boots.

In the midst of all this chaos there were strange islands of calm, where all seemed undisturbed, just as it must have been before West ordered the charge. A pot still hung over a smouldering fire, stew bubbling inside. A set of spears were neatly stacked against each other, with stool and whetstone beside, ready to be sharpened. Three bedrolls formed a perfect triangle, blankets well folded at the head of each one, all neat and orderly, except that a man lay sprawled across them, the contents of his gaping skull splattered across the pale wool.

Not far beyond a Union officer knelt in the mud, cradling another in his arms. West felt a sick twinge of recognition. The one on his knees was his old friend Lieutenant Brint. The one lying limp was his old friend Lieutenant Kaspa. For some reason, West felt an almost overpowering urge to walk away, off up the slope without stopping, and pretend not to have seen them. He had to force himself to stride over, his mouth filling with sour spit.

Brint looked up, pale face streaked with tears. ‘An arrow,’ he whispered. ‘Just a stray. He never even drew his sword.’

‘Bad luck,’ grunted Pike. ‘Bad luck.’

West stared down. Bad luck indeed. He could just see, snapped off at the edge of Kaspa’s beard, under his jaw, the broken shaft of an arrow, but there was surprisingly little blood. Few marks of any kind. A splatter of mud down one sleeve of his uniform, and that was all. Despite the fact they were, in essence, staring cross-eyed at nothing, West could not help the feeling that Kaspa’s eyes were looking directly into his. There was a peevish twist to his lip, an accusatory wrinkling of his brows. West almost wanted to take him up on it, demand to know what he meant by it, then had to remind himself that the man was dead.

‘A letter, then,’ muttered West, his fingers fussing with each other, ‘to his family.’

Brint gave a miserable sniff which West found, for some reason, utterly infuriating. ‘Yes, a letter.’

‘Yes. Sergeant Pike, with me.’ West could not stand there a moment longer. He turned away from his friends, one living and one dead, and strode off up the valley. He did his very best not to dwell on the fact that,

had he not ordered the charge, one of the most pleasant and inoffensive men of his acquaintance would still be alive. One cannot be a leader without a certain ruthlessness, perhaps. But ruthlessness is not always easy.

He and Pike floundered over a crushed earth rampart and a trampled ditch, the valley growing steadily narrower, the high cliffs of stone pressing in on either side. More corpses here. Northmen, and wild men such as they found in Dunbrec, and Shanka too, all peppered liberally across the broken ground. West could see the wall of the fortress now, little more than a mossy hump in the landscape with more death scattered round its foot.

'They held out in there, for seven days?' muttered Pike.

'So it would seem.'

The one entrance was a rough archway in the centre of the wall, its gates torn off and lying ruined. There seemed to be three strange shapes within it. As he got closer, West realised with some discomfort what they were. Three men, hanging dead by their necks from ropes over the top of the wall, their limp boots swinging gently at about chest height. There were a lot of grim Northmen gathered around that gate, looking up at those dangling corpses with some satisfaction. One in particular turned a cruel grin on West and Pike as they came close.

'Well, well, well, if it ain't my old friend Furious,' said Black Dow. 'Turned up late to the party, eh? You always was a slow mover, lad.'

'There were some difficulties. Marshal Burr is dead.'

'Back to the mud, eh? Well, he's in good company, at least. Plenty of good men done that these past days. Who's your chief, now?'

West took a long breath. 'I am.'

Dow laughed, and West watched him laugh, feeling the slightest bit sick. 'Big chief Furious, what do you know?' and he stood up straight and made a mockery of a Union salute while the bodies turned slowly this way and that behind him. 'You should meet my friends. They're all big men too. This here is Crendel Goring, fought for Bethod from way back.' And he reached up and gave one of the bodies a shove, watched it sway back and forth.

'This here is Whitesides, and you couldn't have found a better man anywhere for killing folk and stealing their land.' And he gave the next a push and set it spinning round and round one way, then back the other, limbs all limp and floppy.

‘And this one here is Littlebone. As hard a bastard as I’ve ever hung.’ This last man was hacked near to meat, his gold-chased armour battered and dented, a great wound across his chest and his hanging grey hair thick with blood. One leg was off below his knee, and a pool of dry blood stained the ground underneath him.

‘What happened to him?’ asked West.

‘To Littlebone?’ The great fat hillman, Crummock-i-Phail, was one of the crowd. ‘He got cut down in the battle, fighting to the last man, over yonder.’

‘That he did,’ said Dow, and he gave West a grin even bigger than usual. ‘But that’s no kind of a reason not to hang him now, I reckon.’

Crummock laughed. ‘No kind of a reason!’ And he smiled at the three bodies turning round and round, the ropes creaking. ‘They make a pretty picture, don’t they, hanging there? They say you can see all the beauty in the world in the way a hanged man swings.’

‘Who does?’ asked West.

Crummock shrugged his great shoulders. ‘Them.’

‘Them, eh?’ West swallowed his nausea and pushed his way between the hanging bodies into the fortress. ‘They surely are a bloodthirsty crowd.’

Dogman took another pull at the flask. He was getting good and drunk now. ‘Alright. Let’s get it done then.’

He winced as Grim stuck the needle in, curled his lips back and hissed through his teeth. A nice pricking and niggling to add to the dull throb. The needle went through the skin and dragged the thread after, and Dogman’s arm started burning worse and worse. He took another swig, rocking back and forward, but it didn’t help.

‘Shit,’ he hissed. ‘Shit, shit!’

Grim looked up at him. ‘Don’t watch, then.’

Dogman turned his head. The Union uniform jumped out at him straight away. Red cloth in the midst of all that brown dirt. ‘Furious!’ shouted the Dogman, feeling a grin on his face even through the pain. ‘Glad you could make it! Real glad!’

‘Better to come late than not to come at all.’

‘You’ll get no trace of an argument from me. That is a fact.’

West frowned down at Grim sewing his arm up. ‘You alright?’

‘Well, you know. Tul’s dead.’

‘Dead?’ West stared at him. ‘How?’

‘It’s a battle, ain’t it? Dead men are the point o’ the fucking exercise.’ He waved the flask around. ‘I’ve been sat here, thinking about what I could’ve done differently. Stopped him going down them steps, or gone down with him to watch his back, or made the sky fall in, or all kind o’ stupid notions, none of ’em any help to the dead nor the living. Seems I can’t stop thinking, though.’

West frowned down at the rutted earth. ‘Might be’s a game with no winners.’

‘Ah, fuck!’ Dogman snarled as the needle jabbed into his arm again, and he flung the empty flask bouncing away. ‘The whole fucking business has no winners, though, does it! Shit on it all, I say.’

Grim pulled his knife out and cut the thread. ‘Move your fingers.’ It burned all the way up Dogman’s arm to make a fist, but he forced the fingers closed, growling at the pain as they bunched up tight.

‘Looks alright,’ said Grim. ‘You’re lucky.’

The Dogman stared round miserably at the carnage. ‘So this is what luck looks like, is it? I’ve often wondered.’ Grim shrugged his shoulders, ripped a piece of cloth for a bandage.

‘Do you have Bethod?’

Dogman looked up at West, his mouth open. ‘Don’t you?’

‘A lot of prisoners, but he wasn’t among them.’

Dogman turned his head and spat his disgust out into the mud. ‘Nor his witch, nor his Feared, nor neither one of his swollen up sons, I’ll be bound.’

‘I imagine they’ll be riding for Carleon as swiftly as possible.’

‘More’n likely.’

‘I imagine he’ll try to raise new forces, to find new allies, to prepare for a siege.’

‘I shouldn’t wonder.’

‘We should follow him as soon as the prisoners are secure.’

Dogman felt a sudden wave of hopelessness, enough almost to knock him over. ‘By the dead. Bethod got away.’ He laughed, and felt tears prickling his eyes the next moment. ‘Will there ever be an end to it?’

Grim finished wrapping the bandage and tied it up tight. ‘You’re done.’

Dogman stared back at him. ‘Done? I’m starting to think I won’t ever be done.’ He held his hand out. ‘Help me up, eh, Furious? I got a friend to bury.’

The sun was getting low when they put Tul in the ground, just peering over the tops of the mountains and touching the edges of the clouds with gold. Good weather, to bury a good man. They stood round the grave, all packed in tight. There were plenty of others being buried, the sad words for them wept and whispered all around, but Tul had been well-loved, no man more, so there was quite the crowd. Even so, all round Logen there was a gap. An empty space a man wide. That space he used to have around him in the old days, where no one would dare to stand. Logen hardly blamed them. He’d have run away himself, if he could.

‘Who wants to speak?’ asked the Dogman, looking at them, one by one. Logen stared down at his feet, not even able to meet his eye, let alone say a word. He wasn’t sure what had happened, in the battle, but he could guess. He could guess well enough, from the bits he did remember. He glanced around, licking at his split lips, but if anyone else guessed, they kept it to themselves.

‘No one going to say a word?’ asked Dogman again, his voice cracking.

‘Guess it best be fucking me, then, eh?’ And Black Dow stepped forward. He took a long look round at the gathering. Took a long look at Logen in particular, it seemed to him, but that was most likely just his own worries playing tricks.

‘Tul Duru Thunderhead,’ said Dow. ‘Back to the mud. The dead know, we didn’t always see things the same way, me and him. Didn’t often agree on nothing, but maybe that was my fault, as I’m a contrary bastard at the best o’ times. I regret it now, I reckon. Now it’s too late.’ He took a ragged breath.

‘Tul Duru. Every man in the North knew his name, and every man said it with respect, even his enemies. He was the sort o’ man . . . that gave you hope, I reckon. That gave you hope. You want strength, do you? You want courage? You want things done right and proper, the old way?’ He nodded down at the new-turned earth. ‘There you go. Tul Duru Thunderhead. Look no fucking further. I’m less, now that he’s gone, and so are all o’ you.’ And

Dow turned and stalked off away from the grave and into the dusk, his head down.

'We're all less,' muttered Dogman, staring down at the earth with the glimmer of a tear in his eye. 'Good words.' They all looked broken up, every one of them stood around the grave. West, and his man Pike, and Shivers, and even Grim. All broken up.

Logen wanted to feel as they did. He wanted to weep. For the death of a good man. For the fact that he might've been the one to cause it. But the tears wouldn't come. He frowned down at the fresh-turned earth, as the sun sank behind the mountains, and the fortress in the High Places grew dark, and he felt less than nothing.

If you want to be a new man you have to stay in new places, and do new things, with people who never knew you before. If you go back to the same old ways, what else can you be but the same old person? You have to be realistic. He'd played at being a different man, but it had all been lies. The hardest kind to see through. The kind you tell yourself. He was the Bloody-Nine. That was the fact, and however he twisted, and squirmed, and wished to be someone else, there was no escaping it. Logen wanted to care.

But the Bloody-Nine cares for nothing.

Rude Awakenings

Jezal was smiling when he began to wake. They were done with this madcap mission, and soon he would be back in Adua. Back in Ardee's arms. Warm and safe. He snuggled down into his blankets at the thought. Then he frowned. There was a knocking sound coming from somewhere. He opened his eyes a crack. Someone hissed at him from across the room, and he turned his head.

He saw Terez' face, pale in the darkness, glaring from between the bed curtains, and the last few weeks came back in a horrible rush. She looked just as she had the day he married her, surely, and yet the perfect face of his queen seemed now ugly and hateful to him.

The royal bedchamber had become a battlefield. The border, watched with iron determination, was an invisible line between door and fireplace which Jezal crossed at his peril. The far side of the room was Styrian territory, and the mighty bed itself was Terez' strongest citadel, its defences apparently impregnable. On the second night of their marriage, hoping perhaps that there had been some misunderstanding on the first, he had mounted a half-hearted assault which had left him with a bloody nose. Since then he had settled in hopelessly for a long and fruitless siege.

Terez was the very mistress of deception. He would sleep on the floor, or on some item of furniture never quite long enough, or wherever he pleased as long as it was not with her. Then at breakfast she would smile at him, and speak of nothing, sometimes even place her hand fondly on his when she knew they were being watched. Occasionally she would even have him believing that all was now well, but as soon as they were alone she would turn her back on him, and bludgeon him with silence, and stab him with looks of such epic scorn and disgust that he wanted to be sick.

Her ladies-in-waiting behaved towards him with scarcely less contempt whenever he had the misfortune to find himself in their whispering presence. One in particular, the Countess Shalere, apparently his wife's closest friend since a tender age, eyed him always with a murderous hatred. On one occasion he had blundered into the salon where all dozen of them were sitting arranged around Terez, muttering in Styrian. He had felt like a

peasant boy stumbling upon a coven of extremely well-presented witches, chanting some dark curse. Probably one directed towards himself. He was made to feel like the lowest, most repulsive animal alive. And he was a king, in his own palace.

For some reason he lived in inexplicable horror that somebody would realise the truth, but if any of the servants noticed they kept it to themselves. He wondered if he should have told someone, but who? And what? Lord Chamberlain, good day. My wife refuses to fuck me. Your Eminence, well met. My wife will not look at me. High Justice, how are you? The Queen despises me, by the way. Most of all, he feared telling Bayaz. He had warned the Magus away from his personal affairs in no uncertain terms, and could scarcely go crawling for his help now.

And so he went along with the fiction, miserable and confused, and with every day that he pretended at marital bliss it became more and more impossible to see his way clear of it. His whole life stretched away before him – loveless, friendless, and sleeping on the floor.

'Well?' hissed Terez.

'Well what?' he snarled back.

'The door!'

As if on cue there was a brutal banging at the door, making it rattle in its frame. 'Nothing good ever comes from Talins,' Jezal whispered under his breath, as he flung back his blankets and struggled up from the carpet, stumbled angrily across the room and turned the key in the lock.

Gorst stood in the hallway outside, clad in full armour and with his sword drawn, a lantern held up in one hand, harsh light across one side of his heavy, worried face. From somewhere down the hall came the sound of echoing footsteps, of confused shouting, the flickering of distant lamps. Jezal frowned, suddenly wide awake. He did not like the feel of this.

'Your Majesty,' said Gorst.

'What the hell is going on?'

'The Gurkish have invaded Midderland.'

Ferro's eyes snapped open. She sprang up from the settle, her feet planted wide in a fighting stance, the torn-off table leg gripped tight in her fist. She

cursed under her breath. She had fallen asleep, and nothing good ever happened when she did that. But there was no one in the room.

All dark and silent.

No sign of the cripple, or his black-masked servants. No sign of the armoured guards who watched her through narrowed eyes whenever she took a step down the tiled halls of this cursed place. Only the slightest chink of light under the panelled door that led through to Bayaz' room. That and a quiet murmuring of voices. She frowned, and padded over, kneeling silently beside the keyhole.

'Where have they landed?' Bayaz' voice, muffled through the wood.

'Their first boats came ashore in the grey dusk, on the empty beaches at the southwestern tip of Midderland, near to Keln.' Yulwei. Ferro felt a tingling thrill, her breath coming fast and cold in her nostrils. 'Are you prepared?'

Bayaz snorted. 'We could scarcely be less so. I was not expecting Khalul to move so soon, or so suddenly. They landed in the night, eh? Unannounced. Did Lord Brock not see them come?'

'My guess is that he saw them all too well, and welcomed them by previous arrangement. No doubt he has been promised the throne of the Union, once the Gurkish have crushed all resistance and hung your bastard from the gates of the Agriont. He will be king – subject to the might of Uthman-ul-Dosht, of course.'

'Treachery.'

'Of an unremarkable kind. It should hardly shock such as we, eh, brother? We have seen worse, I think, and done worse too, perhaps.'

'Some things must be done.'

She heard Yulwei sigh. 'I never denied it.'

'How many Gurkish?'

'They never come in ones and twos. Five legions, perhaps, so far, but they are only the vanguard. Many more are coming. Thousands. The whole South moves to war.'

'Is Khalul with them?'

'Why would he be? He stays in Sarkant, in his sunny gardens upon the mountain terraces, and waits for news of your destruction. Mamun leads them. Fruit of the desert, thrice blessed and thrice—'

'I know the names he calls himself, the arrogant worm!'

‘Whatever he calls himself, he is grown strong, and the Hundred Words are with him. They are here for you, brother. They are come. If I walked in your footsteps I would be away. Away to the cold North, while there is still time.’

‘And then what? Will they not follow me? Should I flee to the edge of the World? I was there, not long ago, and it holds little appeal. I have yet a few cards left to play.’

A long pause. ‘You found the Seed?’

‘No.’

Another pause. ‘I am not sorry. To tinker with those forces . . . to bend the First Law, if not to break it. The last time that thing was used it made a ruin of Aulcus and came near to making a ruin of the whole world. It is better left buried.’

‘Even if our hopes are buried with it?’

‘There are greater things at risk than my hopes, or yours.’

Ferro did not care a shit for Bayaz’ hopes, or Yulwei’s either if it came to that. They had both deceived her. She had swallowed a bellyful of their lies, and their secrets, and their promises. She had done nothing but talk, and wait, and talk again for far too long. She stood up, and lifted her leg, and gave a fighting scream. Her heel caught the lock and tore it from the frame, sent the door shuddering open. The two old men sat at a table nearby, a single lamp throwing light over the dark face, and the pale. A third figure sat in the shadows of the far corner. Quai, silent and sunk in darkness.

‘Could you not have knocked?’ asked Bayaz.

Yulwei’s smile was a bright curve in his dark skin. ‘Ferro! It is good to see you still—’

‘When are the Gurkish coming?’

His grin faded, and he gave a long sigh. ‘I see that you have not learned patience.’

‘I learnt it, then ran out of it. When are they coming?’

‘Soon. Their scouts are already moving through the countryside of Midderland, taking the villages and laying the fortresses under siege, making the country safe for the rest who will come behind.’

‘Someone should stop them,’ muttered Ferro, her nails digging into her palms.

Bayaz sat back in his chair, the shadows collecting in his craggy face. ‘You speak my very thoughts. Your luck has changed, eh, Ferro? I promised you vengeance, and now it drops ripe and bloody into your lap. Uthman’s army has landed. Thousands of Gurkish, and ready for war. They might be at the city gates within two weeks.’

‘Two weeks,’ whispered Ferro.

‘But I have no doubt some Union soldiers will be going out to greet them sooner. I could find you a place with them, if you cannot wait.’

She had waited long enough. Thousands of Gurkish, and ready for war. The smile tugged at one corner of Ferro’s mouth, then grew, and grew, until her cheeks were aching.

PART II

‘Last Argument of Kings’

Inscribed on his cannons by Louis XIV

The Number of the Dead

It was quiet in the village. The few houses, built from old stone with roofs of mossy slate, seemed deserted. The only life in the fields beyond, mostly fresh-harvested and ploughed over, were a handful of miserable crows. Next to Ferro the bell in the tower creaked softly. Some loose shutters on a window swung and tapped. A few curled-up leaves fell on a gust of wind and fluttered gently to the empty square. On the horizon three columns of dark smoke rose up just as gently into the heavy sky.

The Gurkish were coming, and they always had loved to burn.

'Maljinn!' Major Vallimir was below, framed by the trapdoor, and Ferro scowled down. He reminded her of Jezal dan Luthar when she had first met him. A plump, pale face stuffed with that infuriating mixture of panic and arrogance. It was plain enough that he had never set an ambush for a goat before, let alone for Gurkish scouts. But still he pretended he knew best. 'Do you see anything?' he hissed at her, for the fifth time in an hour.

'I see them coming,' Ferro growled back.

'How many?'

'Still a dozen.'

'How far off?'

'Perhaps quarter of an hour's ride, now, and your asking will not make them come quicker.'

'When they are in the square, I will give the signal with two claps.'

'Make sure you do not miss one hand with the other, pink.'

'I told you not to call me that!' A brief pause. 'We must take one of them alive, to question.'

Ferro wrinkled her nose. Her taste did not lean towards taking Gurkish alive. 'We will see.'

She turned back to the horizon, and soon enough she heard the sound of Vallimir whispering orders to some of his men. The rest were scattered around the other buildings, hiding. An odd crowd of left-over soldiers. A few were veterans, but most of them were even younger and more twitchy than Vallimir himself. Ferro wished, and not for the first time, that they had Ninefingers with them. Like him or not, no one could have denied that the

man knew his business. With him, Ferro had known what she would get. Solid experience or, on occasion, murderous fury. Either one would have been useful.

But Ninefingers was not there.

So Ferro stood in the wide window of the bell tower, alone, frowning out across the rolling fields of Midderland, and watched the riders come closer. A dozen Gurkish scouts, trotting in a loose group down a track. Wriggling specks on a pale streak between patchworks of dark earth.

They slowed as they passed the first wood-built barn, spreading out. A great Gurkish host would number soldiers from all across the Empire, fighters from a score of different conquered provinces. These twelve scouts were Kadiris, by their long faces and narrow eyes, their saddle-bags of patterned cloth, lightly armed with bows and spears. Killing them would not be much vengeance, but it would be some. It would fill the space for now. A space that had been empty far too long.

One of them startled as a crow flapped up from a scraggy tree. Ferro held her breath, sure that Vallimir or one of his blundering pinks would choose that moment to trip over one another. But there was only silence as the horsemen eased carefully into the village square, their leader with one hand raised for caution. He looked right up at her, but saw nothing. Arrogant fools. They saw only what they wanted to see. A village from which everyone had fled, crushed with fear of the Emperor's matchless army. Her fist clenched tight around her bow. They would learn.

She would teach them.

The leader had a square of floppy paper out in his hands, peering at it as though it was a message in a language he did not understand. A map, maybe. One of his men reined his horse in and slid from the saddle, took its bridle and led it towards a mossy trough. Two more sat loose on their mounts, talking and grinning, moving their hands, telling jokes. A fourth cleaned his fingernails with a knife. Another rode slowly round the edge of the square, leaning from his saddle and peering in through the windows of the houses. Looking for something to steal. One of the joke-tellers burst into a deep peal of laughter.

Then two sharp claps echoed from the buildings.

The scout by the trough was just filling his flask when Ferro's shaft sank into his chest. The canteen tumbled from his hand, shining drops spilling

from the neck. Flatbows rattled in the windows. Scouts yelled and stared. One horse stumbled sideways and fell, puffs of dust rising from its flailing hooves, crushing its rider screaming underneath it.

Union soldiers charged from the buildings, shouting, spears ready. One of the riders had his sword half-drawn when he was nailed with a flatbow bolt, fell lolling from the saddle. Ferro's second arrow took another in the back. The one who had been picking his fingernails was dumped from his horse, stumbled up in time to see a Union soldier coming at him with a spear. He threw down his knife and held his arms up too late, was run through anyway, the spear point sticking bloody out of his back as he fell.

Two of them made a dash the way they had come. Ferro took aim at one, but as they reached the narrow lane a rope was pulled tight across the gap. The pair of them were snatched from their saddles, dragging a Union soldier yelping from a building, bouncing along a few strides on his face, rope stuck tight round his arm. One of Ferro's arrows caught a scout between his shoulder-blades as he tried to push himself up from the dust. The other dragged himself a groggy few strides before a Union soldier hit him in the head with a sword and left the back of his skull hanging off.

Of the dozen, only the leader got away from the village. He spurred his horse for a narrow fence between two buildings, jumping it with hooves clattering against the top rail. He galloped off across the coarse stubble of a harvested field, pressed low into his saddle, jerking his heels into his horse's flanks.

Ferro took a long, slow aim, feeling the smile tugging at the corners of her face. All in a moment she judged the way he was sitting the saddle, the speed of the horse, the height of the tower, felt the wind on her face, the weight of the shaft, the tension in the wood, the string biting into her lip. She watched the arrow fly, a spinning black splinter against the grey sky, and the horse rushed forwards to meet it.

Sometimes, God is generous.

The leader arched his back and tumbled from the saddle, rolling over and over on the dusty earth, specks of mud and cut stalks flying up around him. His cry of agony came to Ferro's ear a moment later. Her lips curled back further from her teeth.

'Hah!' She threw the bow over her shoulder, slid down the ladder, vaulted through the back window and dashed out across the field. Her boots

thudded in the soft soil between the clumps of stubble, her hand tightened around the grip of her sword.

The man mewled in the dirt as he tried to drag himself towards his horse. He got one desperate finger hooked over the stirrup as he heard Ferro's quick footsteps behind, but fell back with a squeal when he tried to lift himself. He lay on his side as she ran up, the blade hissing angry from its wooden sheath. His eyes rolled towards her, wild with pain and fear.

A dark face, like her own.

An unexceptional face of forty years old, with a patchy beard and a pale birth-mark on one cheek, dust caked to the other, beads of shining sweat across his forehead. She stood over him, and sunlight glinted on the edge of the curved sword.

'Give me a reason not to do it,' she found she had said. Strange, that she had said it, and to a soldier in the Emperor's army, of all people. In the heat and dust of the Badlands of Kanta she had not been in the habit of offering chances. Perhaps something had changed in her, out there in the wet and ruined west of the world.

He stared up for a moment, his lip trembling. 'I . . .' he croaked, 'my daughters! I have two daughters. I pray to see them married . . .'

Ferro frowned. She should not have let him start talking. A father, with daughters. Just as she had once had a father, been a daughter. This man had done her no harm. He was no more Gurkish than she was. He had not chosen to fight, most likely, or had any choice but to do as the mighty Uthman-ul-Dosht commanded.

'I will go . . . I swear to God . . . I will go back to my wife and my daughters . . .'

The arrow had taken him just under the shoulder and gone clean through, snapped off when he hit the ground. She could see the splintered shaft under his arm. It had missed his lung, by the way he was talking. It would not kill him. Not right away, at least. Ferro could help him onto his horse and he would be gone, with a chance to live.

The scout held up a trembling hand, a spatter of blood on his long thumb. 'Please . . . this is not my war I—'

The sword carved a deep wound out of his face, through his mouth, splitting his lower jaw apart. He made a hissing moan. The next blow cut his head half off. He rolled over, dark blood pouring out into the dark earth,

clutching at the stubble of the shorn crop. The sword broke the back of his skull open and he was still.

It seemed that Ferro was not in a merciful mood that day.

The butchered scout's horse stared dumbly at her. 'What?' she snapped. Perhaps she had changed, out there in the west, but no one changes that much. One less soldier in Uthman's army was a good thing, wherever he came from. She had no need to make excuses for herself. Especially not to a horse. She grabbed at its bridle and gave it a yank.

Vallimir might have been a pink fool, but Ferro had to admit that he had managed the ambush well. Ten scouts lay dead in the village square, their torn clothes flapping in the breeze, their blood smeared across the dusty ground. The only Union casualty was the idiot who had been jerked over by his own rope, covered in dust and scratches.

A good day's work, so far.

A soldier poked at one of the corpses with his boot. 'So this is what the Gurkish look like, eh? Not so fearsome now.'

'These are not Gurkish,' said Ferro. 'Kadiri scouts, pressed into service. They did not want to be here any more than you wanted them here.' The man stared back at her, puzzled and annoyed. 'Kanta is full of people. Not everyone with a brown face is Gurkish, or prays to their God, or bows to their Emperor.'

'Most do.'

'Most have no choice.'

'They're still the enemy,' he sneered.

'I did not say we should spare them.' She shouldered past, back through the door into the building with the bell tower. It seemed Vallimir had managed to take a prisoner after all. He and some others were clustered nervously around one of the scouts, on his knees with his arms bound tightly behind him. He had a bloody graze down one side of his face, staring up with that look that prisoners tend to have.

Scared.

'Where . . . is . . . your . . . main . . . body?' Vallimir was demanding.

'He does not speak your tongue, pink,' snapped Ferro, 'and shouting it will not help.'

Vallimir looked angrily round at her. 'Perhaps we should have brought someone with us who speaks Kantic,' he said with heavy irony.

‘Perhaps.’

There was a long pause, while Vallimir waited for her to say more, but she said nothing. Eventually, he gave a long sigh. ‘Do you speak Kantic?’

‘Of course.’

‘Then would you be so kind as to ask him some questions for us?’

Ferro sucked her teeth. A waste of her time, but if it had to be done, it was best done quickly. ‘What shall I ask him?’

‘Well . . . how far away the Gurkish army is, how many are in it, what route they are taking, you know—’

‘Huh.’ Ferro squatted down in front of the prisoner and looked him squarely in the eyes. He stared back, helpless and frightened, no doubt wondering what she was doing with these pinks. She wondered herself.

‘Who are you?’ he whispered.

She drew her knife and held it up. ‘You will answer my questions, or I will kill you with this knife. That is who I am. Where is the Gurkish army?’

He licked his lips. ‘Perhaps . . . two days march away, to the south.’

‘How many?’

‘More than I could count. Many thousands. People of the deserts, and the plains, and the—’

‘What route are they taking?’

‘I do not know. We were only told to ride to this village, and see whether it was empty.’ He swallowed, the lump on the front of his sweaty throat bobbing up and down. ‘Perhaps my Captain knows more—’

‘Ssss,’ hissed Ferro. His Captain would be telling nobody anything now she had carved up his head. ‘A lot of them,’ she snapped at Vallimir, in common, ‘and many more to come, two days’ march behind. He does not know their route. What now?’

Vallimir rubbed at the light stubble on his jaw. ‘I suppose . . . we should take him back to the Agriont. Deliver him to the Inquisition.’

‘He knows nothing. He will only slow us down. We should kill him.’

‘He surrendered! To kill him would be no better than murder, war or no war.’ Vallimir beckoned to one of the soldiers. ‘I won’t have that on my conscience.’

‘I will.’ Ferro’s knife slid smoothly into the scout’s heart, and out. His mouth and his eyes opened up very wide. Blood bubbled through the split

cloth on his chest, spread out quickly in a dark ring. He gawped at it, making a long sucking sound.

'Glugh . . .' His head dropped back, his body sagged. She turned to see the soldiers staring at her, pale faces puffed up with shock. A busy day for them, maybe. A lot to learn, but they would soon get used to it.

That, or the Gurkish would kill them.

'They want to burn your farms, and your towns, and your cities. They want to make slaves of your children. They want everyone in the world to pray to God in the same way they do, with the same words they use, and for your land to be a province of their Empire. I know this.' Ferro wiped the blade of her knife on the sleeve of the dead man's tunic. 'The only difference between war and murder is the number of the dead.'

Vallimir stared down at the corpse of his prisoner for a moment, his lips thoughtfully pursed. Ferro wondered if he had more backbone than she had given him credit for. Finally, he turned towards her. 'What do you suggest?'

'We could wait for more here. Perhaps even get some real Gurkish this time. But that might mean too many for we few.'

'So?'

'East, or north, and set another trap like this one.'

'And defeat the Emperor's army a dozen men at a time? Small steps.'

Ferro shrugged. 'Small steps in the right direction. Unless you've seen enough, and want to go back to your walls.'

Vallimir gave her a long frown, then he turned to one of his men, a heavy-built veteran with a scar on his cheek. 'There is a village just east of here, is there not, Sergeant Forest?'

'Yes, sir. Marlhof is no more than ten miles distant.'

'Will that suit you?' asked Vallimir, raising one eyebrow at Ferro.

'Dead Gurkish suit me. That is all.'

Leaves on the Water

‘Carleon,’ said Logen. ‘Aye,’ said Dogman. It squatted there, in the fork of the river, under the brooding clouds. Hard shapes of tall walls and towers on the sheer bluff above the fast-flowing water, up where Skarling’s hall used to stand. Slate roofs and stone buildings squashed in tight on the long downward slope, clustered in round the foot of the hill and with another wall outside, everything leant a cold, sharp shine from the rain just finished falling. Dogman couldn’t say he was glad to see the place again. Every visit yet had turned out badly.

‘It’s changed some, since the battle, all them years ago.’ Logen was looking down at his spread-out hand, waggling the stump of his missing finger.

‘There weren’t no walls like that round it then.’

‘No. But there weren’t no Union army round it neither.’

Dogman couldn’t deny it was a comforting fact. The Union pickets worked their way through the empty fields about the city, a wobbly line of earthworks, and stakes, and fences, with men moving behind ’em, dull sunlight catching metal now and then. Thousands of men, well-armed and vengeful, keeping Bethod penned up.

‘You sure he’s in there?’

‘Don’t see where else he’s got to go. He lost most of his best boys up in the mountains. No friends left, I reckon.’

‘We’ve all got less than we used to,’ Dogman muttered. ‘I guess we just sit here. We got time, after all. Lots of it. We sit here and watch the grass grow, and we wait for Bethod to give up.’

‘Aye.’ But Logen didn’t look like he believed it.

‘Aye,’ said Dogman. But just giving up didn’t sound much like the Bethod he knew.

He turned his head at the sound of hooves fast on the road, saw one of those messengers with a helmet like an angry chicken race from the trees and towards West’s tent, horse well-lathered from hard riding. He reined up in a fumbling hurry, near fell out of his saddle in his rush to get down,

wobbled past a few staring officers and in through the flap. Dogman felt that familiar weight of worry in his gut. ‘That’s got the taste o’ bad news.’

‘What other kind is there?’

There was some flutter down there now, soldiers shouting, throwing their arms around. ‘Best go and see what’s happened,’ muttered Dogman, though he’d much rather have walked the other way. Crummock was stood near the tent, frowning at the commotion.

‘Something’s up,’ said the hillman. ‘But I don’t understand a thing these Southerners say or do. I swear, they’re all mad.’

Mad chatter came surging out of that tent alright, when Dogman pushed back the flap. There were Union officers all around the place and in a bastard of a muddle. West was in the midst of it, face pale as fresh milk, his fists clenched tight around nothing.

‘Furious!’ Dogman grabbed him by the arm. ‘What the hell’s happening?’

‘The Gurkish have invaded Midderland.’ West pulled his arm free and took to shouting.

‘The who have done what now?’ muttered Crummock.

‘The Gurkish.’ Logen was frowning deep. ‘Brown folk, from way down south. Hard folk, by all accounts.’

Pike had come up now, his burned face grim. ‘They landed an army by sea. They might have reached Adua already.’

‘Hold on, now.’ Dogman didn’t know a thing about Gurkish, or Adua, or Midderland, but his bad feeling was getting worse every moment. ‘What’re you telling us, exactly?’

‘We’ve been ordered home. Now.’

Dogman stared. He should’ve known all along it couldn’t be this simple. He grabbed West by the arm again, stabbing down towards Carleon with his dirty finger. ‘We’ve nothing like the men we need to carry on a siege o’ this place without you!’

‘I know,’ said West, ‘and I’m sorry. But there’s nothing I can do. Get over to General Poulder!’ he snapped at a young lad with a squint. ‘Tell him to get his division ready to march for the coast at once!’

Dogman blinked, feeling sick to his stomach. ‘So we fought seven days in the High Places for nothing? Tul died, and the dead know how many more, for nothing?’ It always took him by surprise, how fast something could fall

apart once you were leaning on it. ‘That’s it, then. Back to woods, and cold, and running, and killing. No end to it.’

‘Might be another way,’ said Crummock.

‘What way?’

The chief of the hillmen had a sly grin. ‘You know, don’t you Bloody-Nine?’

‘Aye. I know.’ Logen had a look like a man who knows he’s about to hang, and he’s staring at the tree they’re going to do it from. ‘When have you got to leave, Furious?’

West frowned. ‘We have a lot of men and not a lot of road. Poulder’s division tomorrow, I imagine, and Kroy’s the day after.’

Crummock’s grin got a shade wider. ‘So all day tomorrow, there’ll be piles o’ men sat here, dug in round Bethod, looking like they’re never going nowhere, eh?’

‘I suppose there could be.’

‘Give me tomorrow,’ said Logen. ‘Give me just that and maybe I can settle things. Then I’ll come south with you if I’m still alive, and bring who I can. That’s my word. We’ll help you with the Gurkish.’

‘What difference can one day make?’ asked West.

‘Aye,’ muttered Dogman, ‘what’s one day?’ Trouble was, he could already guess the answer.

Water trickled under the old bridge, past the trees and off down the green hillside. Down towards Carleon. Logen watched a few yellow leaves carried on it, turning round and round, dragged past the mossy stones. He wished that he could just float away, but it didn’t seem likely.

‘We fought here,’ said the Dogman. ‘Threetrees and Tul, Dow and Grim, and me. Forley’s buried in them woods somewhere.’

‘You want to go up there?’ asked Logen. ‘Give him a visit, see if—’

‘What for? I doubt a visit’ll do me any good, and I’m damn sure it won’t do him any. Nothing will. That’s what it is to be dead. You sure about this, Logen?’

‘You see another way? The Union won’t stick. Might be our last chance to finish with Bethod. Not that much to lose, is there?’

‘There’s your life.’

Logen took a long breath. ‘Can’t think of too many people who place much value on that. You coming down?’

Dogman shook his head. ‘Reckon I’ll stay up here. I had a belly full o’ Bethod.’

‘Alright then. Alright.’ It was as if all the moments of Logen’s life, things said and things done, choices he hardly remembered making, had led him to this. Now there was no choice at all. Maybe there never had been. He was like the leaves on the water – carried along, down towards Carleon, and nothing he could do about it. He gave his heels to his horse and off down the slope alone, down the dirt track, beside the gurgling stream.

Everything seemed picked out clearer than usual, as the day wore down. He rode past trees, damp leaves getting ready to fall – golden yellow, burning orange, vivid purple, all the colours of fire. Down towards the valley bottom through the heavy air, just a trace of autumn mist to it, sharp in his throat. The sounds of saddle creaking, harness rattling, hoofbeats in the soft ground all came muffled. He trotted through the empty fields, turned mud pocked with weeds, past the Union pickets, a ditch and a line of sharpened stakes, three times bowshot from the walls. Soldiers there, in studded jackets and steel caps, watched him pass with frowns on their faces.

He pulled on the reins and slowed his horse to a walk. He clattered over a wooden bridge, one of Bethod’s new ones, the river underneath surging with the autumn rain. Up the gentle rise, the wall looming over him. High, sheer, dark and solid looking. A threatening piece of wall if ever there’d been one. He couldn’t see men at the slots in the battlements, but he guessed they had to be there. He swallowed, spit moving awkward in his throat, then made himself sit up tall, pretending he wasn’t cut and aching all over from seven days of battle in the mountains. He wondered if he was about to hear a flatbow click, feel the stab of pain then drop into the mud, dead. Some kind of an embarrassing song that would make.

‘Well, well, well!’ came a deep voice, and Logen knew it right away. Who else would it be but Bethod?

The strange thing was that he was glad to hear it, for the quickest moment. Until he remembered all the blood between them. Until he remembered they hated each other. You can have enemies you never really meet, Logen had plenty. You can kill men you don’t know, he’d done it

often. But you can't truly hate a man without loving him first, and there's always a trace of that love left over.

'I'm taking a look down from my gates and who should ride up out of the past?' Bethod called to him. 'The Bloody-Nine! Would you believe it? I'd organise a feast, but we've no food to spare in here!' He stood there, at the parapet, high up above the doors, fists on the stone. He didn't sneer. He didn't smile. He didn't do much of anything.

'If it ain't the King o' the Northmen!' Logen shouted up. 'Still got your golden hat, then?'

Bethod touched the ring round his head, the big jewel on his brow glittering with the setting sun. 'Why wouldn't I have?'

'Let me see . . .' Logen looked left and right, up and down the bare walls. 'Just that you've got shit all left to be King of, far as I can tell.'

'Huh. I reckon we're both feeling lonely. Where are your friends, Bloody-Nine? Those killers you liked around you. Where's the Thunderhead, and Grim, and the Dogman, and that bastard Black Dow?'

'All done with, Bethod. Dead, up in the mountains. Dead as Skarling. Them and Littlebone, and Goring, and Whitesides, and plenty more besides.'

Bethod looked grim at that. 'Not much to cheer about, if you're asking me. That's some useful men gone back to the mud, one way or another. Some friends of mine, and some of yours. There never is a happy outcome with we two, is there? Bad as friends, and worse as enemies. What did you come here for, Ninefingers?'

Logen sat there, for a moment, thinking of all the other times he'd done what he had to do now. The challenges he'd made, and their outcomes, and there were no happy memories among that lot. Say one thing for Logen Ninefingers, say he's reluctant. But there was no other way. 'I'm here to make a challenge!' he bellowed, and the sound of it echoed back from the damp, dark walls and died a slow death in the misty air.

Bethod tipped back his head and laughed. A laugh without much joy in it, Logen reckoned. 'By the dead, Ninefingers, but you never change. You're like some old dog no one can stop from barking. Challenge? What have we got left to fight over?'

'I win, you open the gates and belong to me. My prisoner. I lose, the Union pack up and sail for home, and you're free.'

Bethod's smile slowly faded and his eyes narrowed, suspicious. Logen knew that look from way back. Turning over the chances, sorting through the reasons why. 'That sounds like a golden offer, considering the fix I'm in. Hard to believe it. What's in it for your Southern friends up there?'

Logen snorted. 'They'll wait, if they have to, but they don't much care about you, Bethod. You're nothing to them, for all your bluster. They kicked your arse across the North already and they reckon you'll not be bothering them again either way. If I win, they get your head. If I lose, they can go home early.'

'I'm nothing to them, eh?' Bethod split a sad smile. 'Is that what it's come to, after all my work, and sweat, and pain? Are you happy, Ninefingers? To see all I've fought for put in the dust?'

'Why shouldn't I be? You've no one but yourself to blame for it. It was you brought us to this. Take my challenge, Bethod, then maybe one of us can have peace!'

The King of the Northmen gaped down, eyes wide. 'No one else to blame? Me? How soon we all forget!' He grabbed the chain round his shoulders and rattled it. 'You think I wanted this? You think I asked for any of it? All I wanted was a strip more land to feed my people, to stop the big clans squeezing me. All I wanted was to win a few victories to be proud of, to pass on something better to my sons than I got from my father.' He leaned forward, his hands clutching at the battlements. 'Who was it always had to push a step further? Who was it would never let me stop? Who was it had to taste blood, and once he'd tasted it got drunk on it, went mad with it, could never get enough?' His finger stabbed down. 'Who else but the Bloody-Nine?'

'That's not how it was,' growled Logen.

Bethod's laughter echoed harsh on the wind. 'Is it not? I wanted to talk with Shama Heartless, but you had to kill him! I tried to strike a deal at Heonan, but you had to climb up and settle your score, and start a dozen more! Peace, you say? I begged you to let me make peace at Uffrith, but you had to fight Threetrees! On my knees I begged you, but you had to have the biggest name in all the North! Then once you'd beaten him, you broke your word to me and let him live, as though there was nothing bigger to think about than your damn pride!'

'That's not how it was,' said Logen.

‘There’s not a man in the North that doesn’t know the truth of it! Peace? Hah! What about Rattleneck, eh? I would have ransomed his son back to him, and we could all have gone home happy, but no! What did you say to me? Easier to stop the Whiteflow than to stop the Bloody-Nine! Then you had to nail his head to my standard for the whole world to see, so the vengeance would never find an end! Every time I tried to stop, you dragged me on, deeper and deeper into the mire! Until there could be no stopping any longer! Until it was kill or be killed! Until I had to put down the whole North! You made me King, Ninefingers. What other choices did you leave me?’

‘That’s not how it was,’ whispered Logen. But he knew it had been.

‘Tell yourself that I’m the cause of all your woes if it makes you happy! Tell yourself I’m the merciless one, the murderous one, the bloodthirsty one, but ask yourself who I learned it from. I had the best master! Play at being the good man if you please, the man with no choices, but we both know what you really are. Peace? You’ll never have peace, Bloody-Nine. You’re made of death!’

Logen would’ve liked to deny it, but it would just have been more lies. Bethod truly knew him. Bethod truly understood him. Better than anyone. His worst enemy, and still his best friend. ‘Then why not kill me, when you had the chance?’

The King of the Northmen frowned, as though he couldn’t understand something. Then he started to laugh again. He shrieked with it. ‘You don’t know why? You stood right beside him and you don’t know? You learned nothing from me, Ninefingers! After all these years, you still let the rain wash you any way it pleases!’

‘What’re you saying?’ snarled Logen.

‘Bayaz!’

‘Bayaz? What of him?’

‘I was ready to put the bloody cross in you, sink your carcass in a bog with all the rest of your misfit idiots and was happy to do it, until that old liar came calling!’

‘And?’

‘I owed him, and he wanted you let go. It was that meddling old fuck that saved your worthless hide, and nothing else!’

‘Why?’ growled Logen, not knowing what to make of it, but not liking that he was learning about it so long after everyone else.

But Bethod only chuckled. ‘Maybe I didn’t grovel low enough for his taste. You’re the one he saved, you ask him the whys, if you live long enough. But I don’t think you will. I take your challenge! Here. Tomorrow. At sunrise.’ He rubbed his palms together. ‘Man against man, with the future of the North hanging bloody on the outcome! Just as it used to be, eh, Logen? In the old days? In the sunny valleys of the past? Roll the dice together one more time, shall we?’ The King of the Northmen stepped slowly back, away from the battlements. ‘Some things have changed, though. I’ve a new champion now! If I was you, I’d say your goodbyes tonight, and get ready for the mud! After all . . . what was it you used to tell me . . . ?’ His laughter faded slowly into the dusk. ‘You have to be realistic!’

‘Good piece o’ meat,’ said Grim.

A warm fire and a good piece of meat were two things to be thankful for, and there’d been times enough when Dogman had a lot less, but watching the blood drip from that chunk of mutton was making him feel sick. Reminded him of the blood that came out of Shama Heartless when Logen split him open. Years ago, maybe, but the Dogman could see it fresh as yesterday. He could hear the roars from the men, the shields crashing together. He could smell the sour sweat and the fresh blood on the snow.

‘By the dead,’ grunted Dogman, mouth watering like he was about to puke. ‘How can you think about eating now?’

Dow gave a toothy grin. ‘Us going hungry ain’t going to help Ninefingers any. Nothing is. That’s the point of a duel, ain’t it? All about one man.’ He poked at the meat with his knife and made the blood run sizzling into the fire. Then he sat back, thoughtful. ‘You reckon he can do it? Really? You remember that thing?’ Dogman felt a ghost of the sick fear he’d had in the mist, and he shuddered to his boots. He weren’t likely ever to forget the sight of that giant coming through the murk, the sight of his painted fist rising, the sound of it crunching into Threetrees’ ribs and crushing the life out of him.

‘If anyone can do it,’ he growled through his gritted teeth, ‘I reckon Logen can.’

‘Uh,’ grunted Grim.

‘Aye, but do you think he will? That’s my question. That, and what happens if he don’t?’ It was a question that Dogman could hardly bear to think up an answer to. Logen would be dead, for a first thing. Then there’d be no siege of Carleon anymore. Dogman had too few men left after the mountains to keep a piss-pot surrounded, let alone the best walled city in the North. Bethod could do as he pleased – seek out help, and find new friends, and set to fighting again. There was no one tougher in a tight corner.

‘Logen can do it,’ he whispered, bunching his fists and feeling the long cut down his arm burning. ‘He has to.’

He nearly fell in the fire when a great fat hand thumped him on the back. ‘By the dead but I never seen such a fire-full o’ long faces!’ Dogman winced. The crazy hillman was hardly what he needed to lift his mood, grinning out of the night with his children behind him, great big weapons over their shoulders.

Crummock was down to just the two now, since one of his sons got killed up in the mountains, but he didn’t seem so upset about it. He’d lost his spear too, snapped off in some Easterner, as he was fond of saying, so he still didn’t have to carry aught himself. Neither one of the children had said much since the battle, or not in the Dogman’s hearing, anyway. No more talk about how many men folk might’ve killed. The seeing of it close up could be a woeful drain on your enthusiasm for the business of war. Dogman knew well enough how that went.

But Crummock himself had no trouble keeping cheerful. ‘Where’s Ninefingers got himself off to?’

‘Gone off on his own. Always liked to do that, before a duel.’

‘Mmm.’ Crummock stroked at the fingerbones round his neck. ‘Speaking to the moon, I’ll be bound.’

‘Shitting himself is closer to it, I reckon.’

‘Well, as long as you get the shitting done before the fight, I don’t reckon anyone could grumble.’ He grinned all across his face. ‘No one’s loved of the moon like the Bloody-Nine, I tell you! No one in all the wide Circle of the World. He’s got some kind of chance at winning a fair fight, and that’s the best a man could hope for against that devil-thing. There’s only one problem.’

‘Just one?’

‘There’ll be no fair fight as long as that damn witch is alive.’

The Dogman felt his shoulders slump even further. ‘How d’you mean?’

Crummock spun one of the wooden signs on his necklace round and around. ‘I can’t see her letting Bethod lose, and herself along with him, can you? A witch as clever as that one? There’s all kinds of magic she could mix. All kinds of blessings and curses. All kinds of ways that bitch could tilt the outcome, as though the chances weren’t tilted enough already.’

‘Eh?’

‘My point is this. Someone needs to stop her.’

Dogman hadn’t thought he could feel any lower. Now he knew better. ‘Good luck with that,’ he muttered.

‘Ha ha, my lad, ha ha. I’d love to do it, too, but they’ve got an awful stretch of walls down there, and I’m not much for climbing over ’em.’ Crummock slapped one fat hand against his fat belly. ‘Twice too much meat for that. No, what we need for this task is a small man, but with great big fruits on him. No doubt we do, and the moon knows it. A man with a talent for creeping about, sharp-eyed and sure-footed. We need someone with a quick hand and a quick mind.’ He looked at the Dogman, and he grinned. ‘Now where is it that we’d find a man like that, do you reckon?’

‘You know what?’ Dogman put his face in his hands. ‘I’ve no fucking idea.’

Logen lifted the battered flask to his lips and took a mouthful. He felt the sharp liquor tingling on his tongue, tickling at his throat, that old need to swallow. He leaned forward, pursed his lips, and blew it out in a fine spray. A gout of fire went up into the cold night. He peered into the darkness, saw nothing but the black outlines of tree-trunks, the shifting black shadows that his fire cast between them.

He shook the flask back and forth, heard the last measure sloshing inside. He shrugged his shoulders, put it to his mouth and tipped it all the way, felt it burn down to his stomach. The spirits could share with him tonight. Chances were good that, after tomorrow, he wouldn’t be calling on them again.

‘Ninefingers.’ The voice rustled at him like the leaves falling.

One spirit slid out from the shadows, came up into the light from the fire. There was no trace of recognition about it, and Logen found he was relieved. There was no accusation either, no fear and no distrust. It didn't care what he was, or what he'd done.

Logen tossed the empty flask down beside him. 'On your own?'

'Yes.'

'Well, you're never alone if you bring laughter with you.' The spirit said nothing. 'Reckon laughter's a thing for men, not for spirits.'

'Yes.'

'Don't speak much, do you?'

'I did not call on you.'

'True.' Logen stared into the fire. 'I have to fight a man tomorrow. A man called Fenris the Feared.'

'He is not a man.'

'You know of him, then?'

'He is old.'

'By your reckoning?'

'Nothing is old by my reckoning, but he goes back to the Old Time and beyond. He had another master, then.'

'What master?'

'Glustrod.'

The name was like a knife in the ear. No name could've been less expected, or less welcome. The wind blew cold through the trees, and memories of the towering ruins of Aulcus crowded in on Logen, and made his back shiver. 'No chance it's some different Glustrod than the one came close to destroying half the world?'

'There is no other. He it was that wrote the signs upon the Feared's skin. Signs in the Old Tongue, the language of devils, across his left side. That flesh is of the world below. Where the word of Glustrod is written, the Feared cannot be harmed.'

'Cannot be harmed? Not at all?' Logen thought about it a moment. 'Why not write on both sides?'

'Ask Glustrod.'

'I don't think that's likely.'

'No.' A long pause. 'What will you do, Ninefingers?'

Logen peered off sideways into the trees. The notion of setting off running, and never looking back, seemed a pretty one, right then. Sometimes it can be better to live with the fear of it, than to die doing it, whatever Logen's father had told him.

'I ran before,' he muttered, 'and I only ran a circle. For me, Bethod's at the end of every path.'

'Then that is all our talk.' The spirit stood up from the fire.

'Perhaps I'll see you again.'

'I do not think so. The magic leaks from the world, and my kind sleep. I do not think so. Even if you beat the Feared, and I do not think you will.'

'Message o' hope then, eh?' Logen snorted. 'Luck go with you.'

The spirit faded back into the darkness, and was gone. It did not wish Logen luck. It did not care.

Authority

It was a dour and depressing meeting, even for the Closed Council. The weather beyond the narrow windows was sullen and overcast, promising storms but never delivering, casting the White Chamber into a chill gloom. From time to time heavy gusts of wind would rattle the old window panes, making Jezal start and shiver in his fur-trimmed robe.

The grim expressions of the dozen old faces did little to warm his bones. Lord Marshal Varuz was all clenched jaw and harsh determination. Lord Chamberlain Hoff clutched his goblet like a drowning man clinging to the last fragment of his boat. High Justice Marovia frowned as though he were about to pronounce the death sentence on the entire gathering, himself among them. Arch Lector Sult's thin lip was permanently curled as his cold eyes slid from Bayaz, to Jezal, to Marovia, and back.

The First of the Magi himself glared down the table. 'The situation, please, Lord Marshal Varuz.'

'The situation, honestly, is grim. Adua is in uproar. Perhaps one third of the population has already fled. The Gurkish blockade means that few supplies are making it to the markets. Curfews are in place but some citizens are still seizing the opportunity to rob, steal and riot while the authorities are occupied elsewhere.'

Marovia shook his head, grey beard swaying gently. 'And we can only expect the situation to deteriorate as the Gurkish come closer to the city.'

'Which they are,' said Varuz, 'at the rate of several miles a day. We are doing all we can to frustrate them, but with our resources so limited . . . they may well be outside the gates within the week.'

There were a few shocked gasps, breathed oaths, nervous sideways glances. 'So soon?' Jezal's voice cracked slightly as he said it.

'I am afraid so, your Majesty.'

'What is the Gurkish strength?' asked Marovia.

'Estimates vary wildly. At present however . . .' and Varuz sucked worriedly at his teeth, 'it appears they field at least fifty thousand.'

There were further sharp intakes of breath, not least from Jezal's own throat. 'So many?' muttered Halleck.

‘And thousands more landing every day near Keln,’ put in Admiral Reutzer, doing nothing to lift the mood. ‘With the best part of our navy on its way to retrieve the army after its northern adventure, we are powerless to stop them.’

Jezal licked his lips. The walls of the wide room seemed to close in further with every moment. ‘What of our troops?’

Varuz and Reutzer exchanged a brief glance. ‘We have two regiments of the King’s Own, one of foot and one of horse, some six thousand men in all. The Grey Watch, tasked with the defence of the Agriont itself, numbers four thousand. The Knights Herald and of the Body form an elite of some five hundred. In addition, there are non-combat soldiers – cooks, grooms, smiths, and so forth – who could be armed in an emergency—’

‘I believe this qualifies,’ observed Bayaz.

‘—perhaps some few thousand more. The city watch might be of some use, but they are hardly professional soldiers.’

‘What of the nobles?’ asked Marovia. ‘Where is their aid?’

‘Some few have sent men,’ said Varuz grimly, ‘others only their regrets. Most . . . not even that.’

‘Hedging their bets.’ Hoff shook his head. ‘Brock has let it be known there will be Gurkish gold for those who help him, and Gurkish mercy for those who stand with us.’

‘It has ever been so,’ lamented Torlichorm. ‘The nobles are interested only in their own welfare!’

‘Then we must open the armouries,’ said Bayaz, ‘and we must not be shy with their contents. We must arm every citizen who can hold a weapon. We must arm the labourers’ guilds, and the craftsmens’ guilds, and the veterans’ associations. Even the beggars in the gutters must be ready to fight.’

All well and good, Jezal supposed, but he hardly cared to trust his life to a legion of beggars. ‘When will Lord Marshal West return with the army?’

‘If he received his orders yesterday, it will be a month at the very least before he is disembarked and ready to come to our aid.’

‘Which means we must withstand several weeks of siege,’ muttered Hoff, shaking his head. He leaned close to Jezal’s ear and spoke softly, quite as if they were schoolgirls trading secrets. ‘Your Majesty, it might be prudent for you and your Closed Council to leave the city. To relocate your government

further north, outside the path of the Gurkish advance, where the campaign can be conducted in greater safety. To Holsthorm, perhaps, or—'

'Absolutely not,' said Bayaz sternly.

Jezal could scarcely deny that the notion held its attractions. The island of Shabulyan at that moment seemed an ideal place to relocate his government to – but Bayaz was right. Harod the Great would hardly have entertained the idea of retreat, and neither, unfortunately, could Jezal.

'We will fight the Gurkish here,' he said.

'Merely a suggestion,' muttered Hoff, 'merely prudence.'

Bayaz spoke over him. 'How do the defences of the city stand?'

'We have, in essence, three concentric lines of defence. The Agriont itself is, of course, our last bastion.'

'It will not come to that, though, eh?' chuckled Hoff, with far from total conviction.

Varuz decided not to answer. 'Arnault's Wall is beyond it, enclosing the oldest and most crucial parts of the city – the Agriont, the Middleway, the main docks and the Four Corners among them. Casamir's Wall is our outermost line of defence – weaker, lower, and a great deal longer than Arnault's. Smaller walls run between these two, like the spokes of a wheel, dividing the outer ring of the city into five boroughs, each of which can be sealed off, should it be captured by the enemy. There are some built-up areas beyond Casamir's Wall, but those must be immediately abandoned.'

Bayaz planted his elbows on the edge of the table, his meaty fists clasped together. 'Given the number and quality of our troops, we would be best served by evacuating the outer quarters of the city and concentrating our efforts around the much shorter and stronger length of Arnault's wall. We can continue to fight a rear-guard action in the outer boroughs, where our superior knowledge of the streets and buildings stands in our favour—'

'No,' said Jezal.

Bayaz fixed him with a brooding stare. 'Your Majesty?'

But Jezal refused to be overawed. It had been becoming clear for some time that if he allowed the Magus to rule him on every issue then he would never escape from under his boot. He might have seen Bayaz make a man explode with a thought, but he was hardly likely to do it to the King of the Union before his own Closed Council. Not with the Gurkish breathing down all their necks.

‘I do not intend to give up the greater part of my capital to the Union’s oldest enemy without giving battle. We will defend Casamir’s Wall, and fight for every stride of ground.’

Varuz glanced across at Hoff, and the Chamberlain raised his eyebrows by the tiniest fraction. ‘Er . . . of course, your Majesty. Every stride.’ There was an uncomfortable silence, the displeasure of the First of the Magi hanging over the group as heavily as the storm clouds hung over the city.

‘Does my Inquisition have anything to contribute?’ croaked Jezal, doing his best to mount a diversion.

Sult’s eyes darted coldly up to his. ‘Of course, your Majesty. The Gurkish love of intrigue is well known. We have no doubt that there are already spies within the walls of Adua. Perhaps within the Agriont itself. All citizens of Kantic origin are now being interned. My Inquisitors are working day and night in the House of Questions. Several spies have already confessed.’

Marovia snorted. ‘So we are expected to suppose that the Gurkish love of intrigue does not extend to the hiring of white-skinned agents?’

‘We are at war!’ hissed Sult, giving the High Justice a deadly glare. ‘The very sovereignty of our nation is at risk! This is no time for your blather about freedom, Marovia!’

‘On the contrary, this is precisely the time!’

The two old men bickered on, straining everyone’s frayed nerves to breaking point. Bayaz, meanwhile, had sunk back into his chair and folded his arms, watching Jezal with an expression of calm consideration which was, if anything, even more fearsome than his frown. Jezal felt the worry weighing ever heavier upon him. However you looked at things, he was teetering on the verge of having the briefest and most disastrous reign in Union history.

‘I am sorry that I had to send for your Majesty,’ piped Gorst, in his girlish little voice.

‘Of course, of course.’ The clicking of Jezal’s polished boot-heels echoed angrily around them.

‘There is only so much that I can do.’

‘Of course.’

Jezal shoved open the double doors with both hands. Terez sat bolt upright in the midst of the gilded chamber beyond, glaring at him down her nose in that manner with which he had become so infuriatingly familiar. As though he were an insect in her salad. Several Styrian ladies looked up, and then back to their tasks. Chests and boxes cluttered the room, clothes were being neatly packed within. Every impression was given that the Queen of the Union was planning to leave the capital, and without so much as informing her husband.

Jezal ground his already aching teeth. He was tormented by a disloyal Closed Council, a disloyal Open Council, and a disloyal populace. The poisonous disloyalty of his wife was almost too much to bear. 'What the hell is this?'

'I and my ladies can hardly assist you in your war with the Emperor.' Terez turned her flawless head smoothly away from him. 'We are returning to Talins.'

'Impossible!' hissed Jezal. 'A Gurkish army of many thousands is bearing down upon the city! My people are fleeing Adua in droves and those that remain are a whisker from sliding into outright panic! Your leaving now would send entirely the wrong message! I cannot allow it!'

'Her Majesty is in no way involved!' snapped the Countess Shalere, gliding across the polished floor towards him.

As though Jezal had not enough to worry about with the Queen herself, he was now obliged to bandy words with her companions. 'You forget yourself,' he snarled at her.

'It is you who forgets!' She took a step towards him, her face twisted. 'You forget that you are a bastard son, and a scarred one at—'

The back of Jezal's hand cracked sharply into her sneering mouth and sent her reeling back with an ungainly gurgle. She tripped over her dress and collapsed on the floor, one shoe flying from her flailing foot and off into the corner of the room.

'I am a King, and in my own palace. I refuse to be spoken to in this manner by a glorified lady's maid.' The voice came out, flat, cold, and frighteningly commanding. It scarcely sounded like his own, but who else's could it be? He was the only man in the room. 'I see that I have been far too generous with you, and that you have mistaken my generosity for weakness.' The eleven ladies stared at him, and at their fallen comrade,

crumpled on the ground with one hand to her bloody mouth. ‘If any of your witches should desire to depart these troubled shores, I will arrange passage for them, and even pull an oar myself with a light heart. But you, your Majesty, will be going nowhere.’

Terez had leaped up from her seat and was glowering at him, body rigid. ‘You heartless brute—’ she began to hiss.

‘We may both wholeheartedly wish it were otherwise!’ he roared over her, ‘but we are married! The time to raise objections to my parentage, or my person, or to any other facet of our situation, was before you became Queen of the Union! Despise me all you wish, Terez, but you . . . go . . . nowhere.’ And Jezal swept the dumbstruck ladies with a baleful glare, turned on his polished heel and stalked from the airy salon.

Damn it but his hand hurt.

The Circle

Dawn was coming, a grey rumour, the faintest touch of brightness around the solemn outline of the walls of Carleon. The stars had all faded into a stony sky, but the moon still hung there, just above the tree-tops, seeming almost close enough to try an arrow at.

West had not closed his eyes all night, and had passed into that strange realm of twitchy, dreamlike wakefulness that comes beyond exhaustion. Some time in the silent darkness, after all the orders had been given, he had sat by the light of a single lamp to write a letter to his sister. To vomit up excuses. To demand forgiveness. He had sat, he could not have said for how long, with the pen over the paper, but the words had simply not come. He had wanted to say all that he felt, but when it came to it, he felt nothing. The warm taverns of Adua, cards in the sunny courtyard. Ardee's one-sided smile. It all seemed a thousand years ago.

The Northmen were already busy, clipping at the grass in the shadow of the walls, the clicking of their shears a strange echo of the gardeners in the Agriont, shaving a circle a dozen strides across down to the roots. The ground, he supposed, on which the duel would take place. The ground where, in no more than an hour or two, the fate of the North would be decided. Very much like a fencing circle, except that it might soon be sprayed with blood.

'A barbaric custom,' muttered Jalenhorm, his thoughts evidently taking a similar course.

'Really?' growled Pike. 'I was just now thinking what a civilised one it is.'

'Civilised? Two men butchering each other before a crowd?'

'Better than a whole crowd butchering each other. A problem solved with only one man killed? That's a war ended well, to my mind.'

Jalenhorm shivered and blew into his cupped hands. 'Still. A lot to hang on two men fighting one another. What if Ninefingers loses?'

'Then I suppose that Bethod will go free,' said West, unhappily.

'But he invaded the Union! He caused the deaths of thousands! He deserves to be punished!'

‘People rarely get what they deserve.’ West thought of Prince Ladisla’s bones rotting out in the wasteland. Some terrible crimes go unpunished, and a few, for no reason beyond the fickle movements of chance, are richly rewarded. He stopped in his tracks.

A man was sitting on his own on the long slope, his back to the city. A man hunched over in a battered coat, so still and quiet in the half-light that West had almost missed him. ‘I’ll catch you up,’ he said as he left the path. The grass, coated with a pale fur of frost, crunched gently under his boots with each step.

‘Pull up a chair.’ Breath smoked gently round Ninefingers’ darkened face.

West squatted down on the cold earth beside him. ‘Are you ready?’

‘Ten times before I’ve done this. Can’t say I’ve ever yet been ready. Don’t know that there is a way to get ready for a thing like this. The best I’ve worked out is just to sit, and let the time crawl past, and try not to piss yourself.’

‘I imagine a wet crotch could be an embarrassment in the circle.’

‘Aye. Better than a split head, though, I reckon.’

Undeniably true. West had heard tales of these Northern duels before, of course. Growing up in Angland, children whispered lurid stories of them to each other. But he had little idea how they were really conducted. ‘How does this business work?’

‘They mark out a circle. Round the edge men stand with shields, half from one side, half from the other, and they make sure no one leaves before it’s settled. Two men go into the circle. The one that dies there is the loser. Unless someone has it in mind to be merciful. Can’t see that happening today, though, somehow.’

Also undeniable. ‘What do you fight with?’

‘Each one of us brings something. Could be anything. Then there’s a spin of a shield, and the winner picks the weapon he wants.’

‘So you might end up fighting with what your enemy brought?’

‘It can happen. I killed Shama Heartless with his own sword, and got stuck through with the spear I brought to fight Harding Grim.’ He rubbed at his stomach, as though the memory ached there. ‘Still, don’t hurt any worse, getting stuck with your own spear instead of someone else’s.’

West laid a hand thoughtfully on his own gut. ‘No.’ They sat in silence for a while longer.

‘There’s a favour I’d like to ask you.’

‘Name it.’

‘Would you and your friends hold shields for me?’

‘Us?’ West blinked towards the Carls in the shadow of the wall. Their great round shields looked hard enough to lift, let alone to use well. ‘Are you sure? I’ve never held one in my life.’

‘Maybe, but you know whose side you’re on. There ain’t many folk among these that I can trust. Most of ’em are still trying to work out who they hate more, me or Bethod. It only takes one to give me a shove when I need a push, or let me fall when I need catching. Then we’re all done. Me especially.’

West puffed out his cheeks. ‘We’ll do what we can.’

‘Good. Good.’

The cold silence dragged out. Over the black hills, the black trees, the moon sank and grew dimmer.

‘Tell me, Furious. Do you reckon a man has to pay for the things he’s done?’

West looked up sharply, the irrational and sickly thought flashing through his mind that Ninefingers was talking of Ardee, or of Ladisla, or both. Certainly, the Northman’s eyes seemed to glint with accusation in the half-light – then West felt the surge of fear subside. Ninefingers was talking of himself, of course, as everyone always does, given the chance. It was guilt in his eyes, not accusation. Each man has his own mistakes to follow him.

‘Maybe.’ West cleared his dry throat. ‘Sometimes. I don’t know. I suppose we’ve all done things we regret.’

‘Aye,’ said Ninefingers. ‘I reckon.’

They sat together in silence, and watched the light leak across the sky.

‘Let’s go, chief!’ hissed Dow. ‘Let’s fucking go!’

‘I’ll say when!’ Dogman spat back, holding the dewy branches out of the way and peering towards the walls, a hundred strides off, maybe, across a damp meadow. ‘Too much light, now. We’ll wait for that bloody moon to drop a touch further, then we’ll make a run at it.’

‘It ain’t going to get any darker! Bethod can’t have too many men left after all the ones we killed up in the mountains, and that’s a lot o’ walls.

They'll be spread thin as cobwebs up there.'

'It only takes one to—'

And Dow was off across that field and running, as plain on the flat grass as a turd on a snow-field.

'Shit!' hissed Dogman, helpless.

'Uh,' said Grim.

There was nothing to do but stare, and wait for Dow to get stuck full of arrows. Wait for the shouts, and torches lit, and the alarm to go up, and the whole thing dumped right in the shit-hole. Then Dow dashed up the last bit of slope and was gone into the shadows by the wall.

'He made it,' said Dogman.

'Uh,' said Grim.

That ought to have been a good thing, but Dogman didn't feel too much like laughing. He had to make the run himself now, and he didn't have Dow's luck. He looked at Grim, and Grim shrugged. They burst out from the trees together, feet pounding across the soft meadow. Grim had the longer legs, started pulling away. The ground was a good deal softer than Dogman had—

'Gah!' His foot squelched to the ankle and he went flying over, splashed down in the mire and slid along on his face. He floundered up, cold and gasping, ran the rest of the way with his wet shirt plastered against his skin. He stumbled up the slope to the foot of the walls and bent over, hands to his knees, blowing hard and spitting out grass.

'Looks like you took a tumble there, chief.' Dow's grin was a white curve in the shadows.

'You mad bastard!' hissed Dogman, his temper flaring up hot in his cold chest. 'You could've been the deaths of all of us!'

'Oh, there's still time.'

'Shhhh.' Grim flailed one hand at them to say keep quiet. Dogman pressed himself tight to the wall, worry snuffing his anger out quick-time. He heard men moving up above, saw the glimmer of a lamp pass slow down the walls. He waited, still, no sound but Dow's quiet breath beside him and his own heart pounding, 'til the men above moved on and all was quiet again.

'Tell me that ain't got your blood flowing quick, chief,' whispered Dow.

'We're lucky it ain't flowing right out of us.'

‘What now?’

Dogman gritted his teeth as he tried to scrape the mud out of his face. ‘Now we wait.’

Logen stood up, brushed the dew from his trousers, took a long breath of the chill air. There could be no denying any longer that the sun was well and truly up. It might’ve been hidden in the east behind Skarling’s Hill, but the tall black towers up there had bright golden edges, the thin, high clouds were pinking underneath, the cold sky between turning pale blue.

‘Better to do it,’ Logen whispered under his breath, ‘than live with the fear of it.’ He remembered his father telling him that. Saying it in the smoky hall, light from the fire shifting on his lined face, long finger wagging. Logen remembered telling it to his own son, smiling by the river, teaching him to tickle fish, Father and son, both dead now, earth and ashes. No one would learn it after Logen, once he was gone. No one would miss him much at all, he reckoned. But then who cared? There’s nothing worth less than what men think of you after you’re back in the mud.

He wrapped his fingers round the grip of the Maker’s sword, felt the scored lines tickling at his palm. He slid it from the sheath and let it hang, worked his shoulders round in circles, jerked his head from side to side. One more cold breath in, and out, then he started walking, up through the crowd that had gathered in a wide arc around the gate. A mix of the Dogman’s Carls and Crummock’s hillmen, and a few Union soldiers given leave to watch the crazy Northerners kill each other. Some called to him as he came through, all knowing there were a lot more lives hanging on this than Logen’s own.

‘It’s Ninefingers!’

‘The Bloody-Nine.’

‘Put an end to this!’

‘Kill that bastard!’

They had their shields, all the men that Logen had picked to hold them, standing in a solemn knot near the walls. West was one, and Pike, and Red Hat, and Shivers too. Logen wondered if he’d made a mistake with the last of them, but he’d saved the man’s life in the mountains and that ought to count for something. Ought to was a thin thread to hang your life on, but

there it was. His life had been dangling from a thin thread ever since he could remember.

Crummock-i-Phail fell into step beside him, big shield looking small on one big arm, the other hand resting light on his fat belly. ‘You looking forward to this then, Bloody-Nine? I am, I can tell you that!’

Hands slapped at his shoulders, voices called encouragement, but Logen said nothing. He didn’t look left or right as he pushed past into the shaven circle. He felt men close in behind him, heard them set their shields in a half-ring round the edge of the short grass, facing the gates of Carleon. Further back the crowd pressed in tight. Whispering to each other. Straining to see. No way back now, that was a fact. But then there never had been. He’d been heading here all his days. Logen stopped, in the centre of the circle, and he turned his face up towards the battlements.

‘It’s sunrise!’ he roared. ‘Let’s get to it!’

There was silence, while the echoes died, and the wind pushed some loose leaves around the grass. A silence long enough for Logen to start hoping no one would answer. To start hoping they’d all somehow slipped away in the night, and there’d be no duel after all.

Then faces appeared on the walls. One here, one there, then a whole crowd, lining the parapet far as Logen could see in both directions. Hundreds of folk – fighting men, women, children even, up on shoulders. Everyone in the city, it looked like. Metal squealed, and wood creaked, and the tall gates ever so slowly swung apart, the glare of the rising sun spilling out the crack between, then pouring bright through the open archway. Two lines of men came tramping out. Carls, all hard faces and tangled hair, heavy mail jingling, painted shields on their arms.

Logen knew a few of them. Some of Bethod’s closest, who’d been with him since the beginning. Hard men all, who’d held the shields for Logen more than once, back in the old days. They formed up in their own half-ring, closing the circle tight. A wall of shields – animal faces, trees and towers, flowing water, crossed axes, all of them scarred and scuffed from a hundred old fights. All of them turned in towards Logen. A cage of men and wood, and the only way out was to kill. Or to die, of course.

A black shape formed in the bright archway. Like a man, but taller, seeming to fill it all the way to the high keystone. Logen heard footsteps. Thumping footsteps, heavy as falling anvils. A strange kind of fear tugged

at him. A mindless panic, as if he'd woken trapped under the snow again. He forced himself not to look over his shoulder at Crummock, forced himself to look ahead as Bethod's champion stepped out into the dawn.

'By the fucking dead,' breathed Logen.

He thought at first it must be some trick of the light that made him look the size he did. Tul Duru Thunderhead had been a big bastard, no doubt, big enough that some had called him a giant. But he'd still looked like a man. Fenris the Feared was built on such a scale that he seemed something else. A race apart. A giant indeed, stepped out from old stories and made flesh. A lot of flesh.

His face squirmed as he walked, great bald head jerking from side to side. His mouth sneered and grinned, his eyes winked and bulged by turns. One half of him was blue. No other way to put it. A neat line down his face divided blue skin from pale. His huge right arm was white. His left was blue all the long way from shoulder to the tips of his great fingers. In that hand he carried a sack, swinging back and forward with each step, bulging as if it was stuffed with hammers.

A couple of Bethod's shield-carriers cringed out of his way, looking like children beside him, grimacing as if death itself was breathing on their necks. The Feared stepped through into the circle, and Logen saw the blue marks were writing, just as the spirit had told him. Twisted symbols, scrawled over every part of his left side – hand, arm, face, lips even. The words of Glustrod, written in the Old Time.

The Feared stopped a few strides distant, and a sickly horror seemed to wash out from him and over the silent crowd, as if a great weight was pressing on Logen's chest, squeezing out his courage. But the task was simple enough, in its way. If the Feared's painted side couldn't be harmed, Logen would just have to carve the rest of him, and carve it deep. He'd beaten some hard men in the circle. Ten of the hardest bastards in all the North. This was just one more. Or so he tried to tell himself.

'Where's Bethod?' He'd meant to bellow it, all defiance, but it came out a tame, dry squawk.

'I can watch you die just as well from up here!' The King of the Northmen stood on the battlements above the open gate, well-groomed and happy, Pale-as-Snow and a few guards stood about him. If he'd had any trouble sleeping, Logen would never have known it. The morning breeze

stirred his hair and the thick fur round his shoulders, the morning sun shone on the golden chain, struck sparks from the diamond on his brow. ‘Glad you came! I was worried you’d make a run for it!’ He gave a carefree sigh and it smoked on the sharp air. ‘It’s morning, like you said. Let’s get started.’

Logen looked into the Feared’s bulging, twitching, crazy eyes, and swallowed.

‘We’re gathered here to witness a challenge!’ roared Crummock. ‘A challenge to put an end to this war, and settle the blood between Bethod, who’s taken to calling himself King of the Northmen, and Furious, who speaks for the Union. Bethod wins, the siege is lifted, and the Union leaves the North. Furious wins, then the gates of Carleon are opened, and Bethod stands at his mercy. Do I speak true?’

‘You do,’ said West, his voice sounding small in all that space.

‘Aye.’ Up on his walls, Bethod waved a lazy hand. ‘Get to it, fat man.’

‘Then name yourselves, champions!’ shouted Crummock, ‘and list your pedigree!’

Logen took a step forward. It was a hard step to take, as if he was pushing against a great wind, but he took it anyway, tilted his head back and looked the Feared full in his writhing face. ‘I’m the Bloody-Nine, and there’s no number on the men I’ve killed.’ The words came out soft and dead. No pride in his empty voice, but no fear either. A cold fact. Cold as the winter. ‘Ten challenges I’ve given, and I won ’em all. In this circle I beat Shama Heartless, Rudd Threetrees, Harding Grim, Tul Duru Thunderhead, Black Dow, and more besides. If I listed the Named Men I’ve put back in the mud we’d be here at sunrise tomorrow. There’s not a man in the North don’t know my work.’

Nothing changed in the giant’s face. Nothing more than usual, at least. ‘My name is Fenris the Feared. My achievements are all in the past.’ He held up his painted hand, and squeezed the great fingers, and the sinews in his huge blue arm bulged like knotted tree roots. ‘With these signs great Glustrod marked me out his chosen. With this hand I tore down the statues of Aulcus. Now I kill little men, in little wars.’ Logen could just make out a tiny shrug of his massive shoulders. ‘Such is the way of things.’

Crummock looked at Logen, and he raised his brows. ‘Alright then. What weapons have you carried to the fight?’

Logen lifted the heavy sword, forged by Kanedias for his war against the Magi, and held it up to the light. A stride of dull metal, the edge glittered faintly in the pale sunrise. ‘This blade.’ He stabbed it down into the earth between them and left it standing there.

The Feared threw his sack rattling down and it sagged open. Inside were great black plates, spiked and studded, scarred and battered. ‘This armour.’ Logen looked at that vast weight of dark iron, and licked his teeth. If the Feared won the spin he could take the sword and leave Logen with a pile of useless armour way too big for him. What would he do then? Hide under it? He only had to hope his luck stuck out a few minutes longer.

‘Alright, my beauties.’ Crummock set his shield down on its rim and took hold of the edge. ‘Painted or plain, Ninefingers?’

‘Painted.’ Crummock ripped the shield round and set it spinning. Round and round, it went – painted, plain, painted, plain. Hope and despair swapped with every turn. The wood started to slow, to wobble on its rim. It dropped down flat, plain side up, the straps flopping.

So much for luck.

Crummock winced. He looked up at the giant. ‘You’ve got the choice, big lad.’

The Feared took hold of the Maker’s blade and slid it from the earth. It looked like a toy in his monstrous hand. His bulging eyes rolled up to Logen’s, and his great mouth twisted into a smile. He tossed the sword down at Logen’s feet and it dropped in the dirt.

‘Take your knife, little man.’

The sound of raised voices floated thin on the breeze. ‘Alright,’ hissed Dow, much too loud for the Dogman’s nerves, ‘they’re getting started!’

‘I can hear that!’ Dogman snapped, coiling the rope round and round into easy circles, ready to throw.

‘You know what you’re doing with that? I could do without it dropping on me.’

‘That so?’ Dogman swung the grapple back and forward a touch, feeling the weight. ‘I was just thinking that, after it sticking in that wall, it sticking in your fat head was the second best outcome.’ He spun it round in a circle, then a wider one, letting some rope slip through his hand, then he hefted it

all the way and let it fly. It sailed up, real neat, the rope uncoiling after it, and over the battlements. Dogman winced as he heard it clatter on the walkway, but no one came. He pulled on the rope. A stride or two slid down, and then it caught. Felt firm as a rock.

'First time,' said Grim.

Dogman nodded, hardly able to believe it himself. 'What are the odds? Who's first?'

Dow grinned at him. 'Whoever's got hold o' the rope now, I reckon.'

As the Dogman started climbing, he found he was going over all the ways a man could get killed going up this wall. Grapple slipped, and he fell. Rope frayed, and snapped, and he fell. Someone had seen the grapple, was waiting for him to get to the top before they cut the rope. Or they were waiting for him to get to the top before they cut his throat. Or they were just now calling for a dozen big men to take prisoner whatever idiot it was trying to climb into a city on his own.

His boots scuffled at the rough stone, the hemp bit at his hands, his arms burned at the work, and all the while he did his best to keep his rasping breath quiet. The battlements edged closer, then closer, then he was there. He hooked his fingers onto the stone and peered over. The walkway was empty, both ways. He slipped over the parapet, sliding a knife out, just in case. You can never have too many knives, and all that. He checked the grapple was caught firm, then he leaned over, saw Dow at the bottom looking up, Grim with the rope in his hands, one foot on the wall, ready to climb. Dogman beckoned to him to say come, watched him start up, hand over hand, Dow holding to the bottom of the rope to stop it flapping. Soon enough he was halfway—

'What the fuck—'

Dogman jerked his head left. There were a pair of Thralls not far off, just stepped out from a door to the nearest tower and onto the wall. They stared at him, and he stared back, seemed like the longest time.

'There's a rope here!' he shouted, brandishing his knife around and making like he was trying to cut it away from the grapple. 'Some bastard's trying to climb in!'

'By the dead!' One came running, gawped down at Grim swinging around. 'He's coming up now!'

The other one pulled his sword out. ‘Don’t worry ’bout that.’ He lifted it, grinning, ready to chop through the rope. Then he stopped. ‘Here – why you all muddy?’

Dogman stabbed him in the chest, hard as he could, and again. ‘Eeeeee!’ wailed the Thrall, face screwed up, lurching back against the battlements and dropping his sword over the side. His mate came charging up, swinging a big mace. Dogman ducked under it, but the Thrall barrelled into him and brought him down on his back, head cracking on stone.

The mace clattered away and they wrestled around, the Thrall kicking and punching while Dogman tried to get his hands round his throat, stop him from calling out. They rolled over one way, then back the other, struggled up to standing and tottered about down the walkway. The Thrall got his shoulder in Dogman’s armpit and shoved him back up against the battlements, trying to bundle him over.

‘Shit,’ gasped the Dogman as his feet left the ground. He could feel his arse scraping the stone, but still he clung on, hands tight round the Thrall’s neck, stopping him getting a good breath. He went up another inch, felt his head forced back, almost more weight on the wrong side of the parapet than the right.

‘Over you go, you fucker!’ croaked the Thrall, working his chin away from Dogman’s hands and pushing him a touch further, ‘over you—’ His eyes went wide. He stumbled back, a shaft sticking out of his side. ‘Oh, I don’t—’ Another thumped into his neck and he lurched a step, would’ve fallen off the back of the wall if the Dogman hadn’t grabbed his arm and dragged him down onto the walkway, held him there while he slobbered his last breaths.

When he was finished, Dogman rolled up and stood bent over the corpse, breathing. Grim hurried over, taking a good look around to make sure no one else was likely to happen by. ‘Alright?’

‘Just once. Just once I’d like to get the help before I’m at the point o’ getting killed.’

‘Better’n after.’ The Dogman had to admit there was some truth to that. He watched Dow pull himself over the battlements and roll down onto the walkway. The Thrall Dogman had stabbed was still breathing, just about, sat near the grapple. Dow chopped a piece out of his skull with his axe as he walked past, careless as if he was chopping logs.

He shook his head. ‘I leave the two o’ you alone for ten breaths together and look what happens. Two dead men, eh?’ Dow leaned down, stuck two fingers in one of the holes Dogman’s knife had made, pulled them out and smeared blood across one side of his face. He grinned up. ‘What do you reckon we can do with two dead men?’

The Feared seemed to fill the circle, one half bare and blue, the other cased in black iron, a monster torn free from legends. There was nowhere to hide from his great fists, nowhere to hide from the fear of him. Shields rattled and clashed, men roared and bellowed, a sea of blurred faces twisted with mad fury.

Logen crept around the edge of the short grass, trying to keep light on his feet. He might’ve been smaller, but he was quicker, cleverer. At least he hoped he was. He had to be, or he was mud. Keep moving, rolling, ducking, stay out of the way and pick his moment. Above all, don’t get hit. Not getting hit was the first thing.

The giant came at him out of nowhere, his great tattooed fist a blue blur. Logen threw himself out of the way but it still grazed his cheek and caught his shoulder, sent him stumbling. So much for not getting hit. A shield, and not a friendly one, shoved him in the back and he lurched the other way, head whipping forward. He pitched on his face, nearly cut himself on his own sword, rolled desperately to the side and saw the Feared’s huge boot thud into the ground, soil flying where his skull had been a moment before.

Logen scrabbled up in time to see the blue hand coming at him again. He ducked underneath it, hacked at the Feared’s tattooed flesh as he reeled past. The Maker’s sword thudded deep into the giant’s thigh like a spade into turf. The huge leg buckled and he dropped forward onto his armoured knee. It should have been a killing blow, right through the big veins, but there was hardly more blood than from a shaving-scratch.

Still, if one thing fails you try another. Logen roared as he chopped at the Feared’s bald head. The blade clanged against the armour on the giant’s right arm, raised just in time. It scraped down that black steel and slid off, harmless, chopping into the earth and leaving Logen’s hands buzzing.

‘Ooof!’ The Feared’s knee sank into his gut, folded him up and sent him staggering, needing to cough but not having the air to do it. The giant had

already found his feet again, armoured hand swinging back, a lump of black iron the size of a man's head. Logen dived sideways, rolling across the short grass, felt the wind of the great arm ripping past him. It crashed into the shield where he'd been standing, broke it into splintered pieces, flung the man holding it wailing into the earth.

It seemed the spirit had been right. The painted side couldn't be hurt. Logen crouched, waiting for the clawing pain in his stomach to fade enough for him to breathe, trying to think of some trick to use and coming up with nothing. The Feared turned his writhing face towards Logen. Behind him on the ground the felled man whimpered under the wreckage of his shield. The Carls either side of him shuffled in to close the gap with some reluctance.

The giant took a slow step forwards, and Logen took a painful step back.

'Still alive,' he whispered to himself. But how long for, it was hard to say.

West had never in his life felt so scared, so exhilarated, so very much alive. Not even when he won the Contest with all the wide Square of Marshals cheering for him. Not even when he stormed the walls of Ulrioch, and burst out from the dust and chaos into the warm sunlight.

His skin tingled with hope and horror. His hands jerked helplessly with Ninefingers' movements. His lips murmured pointless advice, silent encouragement. Beside him Pike and Jalenhorm jostled, shoved, shouted themselves hoarse. Behind them the wide crowd roared, straining to see. On the walls they leaned out, screaming and shaking their fists in the air. The circle of men flexed with the movements of the fighters, never still, bowing out and sucking in as the champions came forward or fell back.

And almost always, so far, the one falling back was Ninefingers. A great brute of a man by most standards, he seemed tiny, weak and brittle in that terrifying company. To make matters a great deal worse, there was something very strange at work here. Something West could only have called magic. Great wounds, deadly wounds, closed in the Feared's blue skin before his very eyes. This thing was not a man. It could only be a devil, and whenever it towered over him West felt a fear as though he was standing at the very verge of hell.

West grimaced as Ninefingers lurched helplessly against the shields on the far side of the circle. The Feared raised his armoured fist to deliver a blow

that could surely crush a skull to jelly. But it hit nothing but air. Ninefingers jerked away at the last moment and let the iron miss his jaw by a hair. His heavy sword slashed down, bounced off the Feared's armoured shoulder with a resounding clang. The giant stumbled back and Ninefingers came after him, pale scars stretched on his rigid face.

'Yes!' hissed West, the men around him bellowing their approval.

The next blow shrieked down the giant's armoured side, leaving a long, bright scratch and digging up a great sod of earth. The last chopped deep into his painted ribs and spat out a misty spray of blood, knocked him flailing off balance. West's mouth opened wide as the great shadow fell across him. The Feared toppled against his shield like a falling tree and drove him trembling to his knees, wilting under the great weight, his stomach rolling with horror and disgust.

Then he saw it. One of the buckles on the spiked and studded armour, just below the giant's knee, was inches from the fingers of West's free hand. All he could think of, in that moment, was that Bethod might escape, after all the dead men he had left, scattered up and down the length of Angland. He gritted his teeth and snatched hold of the end of the leather strap, thick as a man's belt. He dragged at it as the Feared shoved his huge bulk up. The buckle came jingling open, the armour on the mighty calf flapped loose as his foot thumped down again, as his arm lashed out and knocked Ninefingers stumbling away.

West struggled from the dirt, already greatly regretting his impulsiveness. He glanced around the circle, searching for any sign that someone had seen him, but all eyes were fixed on the fighters. It seemed now a tiny, petulant sort of sabotage that could never make the slightest difference. Beyond getting him killed, of course. It was a fact he had known from childhood. Catch you cheating in a Northern duel, and they'll cut the bloody cross in you and pull your guts out.

*

'Gah!' Logen jerked away from the armoured fist, tottered to his right as the blue one rushed past his face, dived to his left as the iron hand lashed at him again, slid and nearly fell. Any one of those blows had been hard enough to

take his head off. He saw the painted arm go back, gritted his teeth as he dodged around another of the Feared's mighty punches, already swinging the sword up and over.

The blade sheared neatly through the blue arm, just below the elbow, sent it tumbling away across the circle along with a gout of blood. Logen heaved air into his burning lungs and raised the Maker's sword high, setting himself for one last effort. The Feared's eyes rolled up towards the dull grey blade. He jerked his head to one side and it chopped deep into his painted skull, showering out specks of dark blood and splitting his head down to the eyebrow.

The giant's armoured elbow crunched into Logen's ribs, half-lifted him off his feet and flung him kicking across the circle. He bounced from a shield and sprawled on his face, lay there spitting out dirt while the blurry world spun around him.

He winced as he pushed himself up, blinked the tears out of his eyes, and froze. The Feared stepped forward, sword still buried deep in his skull, and picked up his severed arm. He pressed it against the bloodless stump, twisted it to the right, then back to the left, and let it go. The great forearm was whole again, the letters ran from shoulder to wrist unbroken.

The men around the circle fell silent. The giant worked his blue fingers for a moment, then he reached up and closed his hand around the hilt of the Maker's sword. He turned it one way, then the other, his skull crunching as bone shifted. He dragged the blade free, shook his head as if to clear a touch of dizziness. Then he tossed the sword across the circle and it clattered down in front of Logen for the second time that day.

Logen stared at it, his chest heaving. It was getting heavier with each exchange. The wounds he'd taken in the mountains ached, the blows he'd taken in the circle throbbed. The air was still cold but his shirt was sticky with sweat.

The Feared showed no sign of tiring, even with half a ton of iron strapped to his body. There wasn't so much as a bead of sweat on his twisting face. Not so much as a scratch on his tattooed scalp.

Logen felt the fear pressing hard on him again. He knew now how the mouse felt, when the cat had him between his paws. He should've run. He should've run and never looked back, but instead he'd chosen this. Say one

thing for Logen Ninefingers, say that bastard never learns. The giant's mouth crawled up into a wriggling smile.

'More,' he said.

*

Dogman needed to piss as he walked up to the gate of Carleon's inner wall. Always needed to piss at times like this.

He had one of the dead Thrall's clothes on, big enough that he'd had to pull the belt too tight, cloak hanging over the bloody knife hole in the shirt. Grim was wearing the other's gear, bow over one shoulder, the big mace hanging from his free hand. Dow slumped between them, wrists tied at his back, feet scraping stupidly at the cobbles, bloody head hanging like they'd given him quite the beating.

Seemed a pitiful kind of a ruse, if the Dogman was being honest. There were fifty things he'd counted since they climbed off the walls that could've given them away. But there was no time for anything cleverer. Talk well, and smile, and no one would notice the clues. That's what he hoped anyway.

A guard stood each side of the wide archway, a pair of Carls in long mail coats and helmets, both with spears in their hands.

'What's this?' one asked, frowning as they walked up close.

'Found this bastard trying to creep in.' Dogman gave Dow a punch in the side of the head, just to make things look good. 'We're taking him down below, lock him up 'til after they're done.' He made to walk on past.

One of the guards stopped him cold with a hand on his chest, and the Dogman swallowed. The Carl nodded towards the city's gates. 'How's it going, down there?'

'Alright, I guess.' Dogman shrugged. 'It's going, anyway. Bethod'll come out on top, eh? He always does, don't he?'

'I don't know.' The Carl shook his head. 'That Feared puts the fucking wind up me. Him and that bloody witch. Can't say I'll cry too hard if the Bloody-Nine kills the pair of 'em.'

The other one chuckled, pushed his helmet onto the back of his scalp, bringing up a cloth to wipe the sweat underneath. 'You got a—'

Dow sprang forward, loose bits of rope flapping round his wrists, and buried a knife all the way up to the hilt in the Carl's forehead. Dropped him like a chair with the legs kicked away. Same moment almost, Grim's borrowed mace clonked into the top of the other's helmet and left a great dent in it, jammed the rim right down almost to the tip of his nose. He dribbled some, stumbling back like he was drunk. Then blood came bubbling out of his ears and he fell down on his back.

Dogman turned round, trying to hold his stolen cloak out so no one would see Dow and Grim dragging the two corpses away, but the town seemed empty. Everyone watching the fight, no doubt. He wondered for a moment what was happening, out there in the circle. Long enough to get a nasty feeling in his gut.

'Come on.' He turned to see Dow grinning all across his bloody face. The two bodies he'd just wedged behind the gates, one of 'em staring cross-eyed at the knife hole in his head.

'That good enough?' asked Dogman.

'What, you want to say a few words for the dead, do you?'

'You know what I mean, if someone—'

'No time for clever, now.' Dow grabbed him by the arm and pulled him through the gate. 'Let's kill us a witch.'

The sole of the Feared's metal boot thudded into Logen's chest, ripped his breath out and rammed him into the earth, the sword tumbling from his clawing hand, puke burning at the back of his throat. Before he knew where he was a great shadow fell across him. Metal snapped shut round his wrist, tight as a vice. His legs were kicked away and he was on his face, arm twisted behind him and a mouthful of dirt to think about. Something pressed against his cheek. Cold at first, then painful. The Feared's great foot. His wrist was wrenched round, dragged up. His head was crushed further into the damp ground, short grass prickling up his nose.

The tearing pain in his shoulder was awful. Soon it was a lot worse. He was caught fast and helpless, stretched out like a rabbit for skinning. The crowd had fallen breathlessly silent, the only sound the battered flesh round Logen's mouth squelching, the air squeaking in one squashed nostril. He would've screamed if his face hadn't been so squeezed that he could

scarcely wheeze in half a breath. Say one thing for Logen Ninefingers, say that he's finished. Back to the mud, and no one could've said he hadn't earned it. A fitting end for the Bloody-Nine, torn apart in the circle.

But the great arms didn't pull any further. Out the corner of one flickering eye, Logen could just see Bethod leaning against the battlements. The King of the Northmen waved his hand, round and round, in a slow wheel. Logen remembered what it meant.

Take your time. Make it last. Show them all a lesson they'll never forget.

The Feared's great boot slid off his jaw and Logen felt himself dragged into the air, limbs flopping like a puppet with the strings cut. The tattooed hand went up, black against the sun, and slapped Logen across the face. Open-handed, as a father might cuff a troublesome child. It was like being hit with a pan. Light burst open in Logen's skull, his mouth filled with blood. Things drew into focus just in time for him to see the painted hand swing back the other way. It came down with a terrible inevitability and cracked him a backhand blow, as a jealous husband might crack his helpless wife.

'Gurgh—' he heard himself say, and he was flying. Blue sky, blinding sun, yellow grass, staring faces, all meaningless smears. He crashed into the shields at the edge of the circle, flopped half-senseless to the earth. Far away men were shouting, screaming, hissing, but he couldn't hear the words, and hardly cared. All he could think about was the cold feeling in his stomach. As if his guts were stuffed with swelling ice.

He saw a pale hand, smeared with pink blood, white tendons starting from the scratched skin. His hand, of course. There was the stump. But when he tried to make the fingers open they only clutched tighter at the brown earth.

'Yes,' he whispered, and blood drooled out of his numb mouth and trickled into the grass. The ice spread out from his stomach, out to the very tips of his fingers and turned every part of him numb. It was well that it did. It was high time.

'Yes,' he said. Up, up onto one knee, his bloody lips curling back from his teeth, his bloody right hand snaking through the grass, seeking out the hilt of the Maker's sword, closing tight around it.

'Yes!' he hissed, and Logen laughed, and the Bloody-Nine laughed, together.

West had not expected Ninefingers to get up, not ever again, but he did, and when he did, he was laughing. It sounded almost like weeping at first, a slobbering giggle, shrill and strange, but it grew louder, sharper, colder as he rose. As if at a cruel joke that no one else could see. A fatal joke. His head fell sideways like a hanged man's, livid face all slack around a hacked-out grin.

Blood stained his teeth pink, trickled from the cuts on his face, seeped from his torn lips. The laughter gurgled up louder, and louder, ripping at West's ears, jagged as a saw-blade. More agonised than any scream, more furious than any war-cry. Awfully, sickeningly wrong. Chuckling at a massacre. Slaughterhouse giggling.

Ninefingers lurched forwards like a drunken man, swaying, wild, sword dangling from his bloody fist. His dead eyes glittered, wet and staring, pupils swollen to two black pits. His mad laughter cut, and grated, and hacked around the circle. West felt himself edging back, mouth dry. All the crowd edged back. They no longer knew who scared them more: Fenris the Feared, or the Bloody-Nine.

The world burned.

His skin was on fire. His breath was scalding steam. The sword was a brand of molten metal in his fist.

The sun stamped white-hot patterns into his prickling eyes, and the cold grey shapes of men, and shields, and walls, and of a giant made from blue words and black iron. Fear washed out from him in sickly waves, but the Bloody-Nine only smiled the wider. Fear and pain were fuel on the fire, and the flames surged high, and higher yet.

The world burned, and at its centre the Bloody-Nine burned hottest of all. He held out his hand, and he curled the three fingers, and he beckoned.

'I am waiting,' he said.

The great fists lashed at the Bloody-Nine's face, the great hands snatched at his body. But all the giant caught was laughter. Easier to strike the flickering fire. Easier to catch the rolling smoke.

The circle was an oven. The blades of yellow grass were tongues of yellow flame beneath it. The sweat, spit, blood dripped onto it like gravy from cooking meat.

The Bloody-Nine made a hiss, water on coals. The hiss became a growl, iron spattering from the forge. The growl became a great roar, the dry forest in flames, and he let the sword go free.

The grey metal made searing circles, hacked bloodless holes in blue flesh, rang on black iron. The giant faded away and the blade bit into the face of one of the men holding the shields. His head burst apart and sprayed blood across another, a hole torn from the wall around the circle. The others shuffled back, shields wavering, the circle swelling with their fear. They feared him more even than the giant, and they were wise to. Everything that lived was his enemy, and when the Bloody-Nine had made pieces of this devil-thing, he would set to work on them.

The circle was a cauldron. On the walls above the crowd surged like angry steam. The ground shifted and swelled under the Bloody-Nine's feet like boiling oil.

His roar became a scalding scream, the sword flashed down and clashed from spiked armour like a hammer on the anvil. The giant pressed his blue hand to the pale side of his head, face squirming like a nest of maggots. The blade had missed his skull, but stolen away the top half of his ear. Blood bubbled out from the wound, ran down the side of his great neck in two thin lines, and did not stop.

The great eyes went wide and the giant sprang forward with a thundering bellow. The Bloody-Nine rolled under his flailing fist and slid round behind him, saw the black iron on his leg flap away, the bright buckle dangling. The sword snaked out and slid into the gap, ate deep into the great pale calf inside it. The giant roared in pain, spun, lurched on his wounded leg and fell to his knees.

The circle was a crucible. The screaming faces of the men around its edge danced like smoke, swam like molten metal, their shields melting together.

Now was the time. The morning sun blazed down, glinted bright on the heavy chest-plate, marking the spot. Now was the beautiful moment.

The world burned, and like a leaping flame the Bloody-Nine reared up, arching back, raising high the sword. The work of Kanedias, the Master Maker, no blade forged sharper. Its bitter edge scored a long gash in the black armour, through the iron and into the soft flesh beneath, striking sparks and spattering blood, the shriek of tortured metal mingling with the

wail of pain torn from the Feared's twisted mouth. The wound it left in him was deep.

But not deep enough.

The giant's great arms slid round the Bloody-Nine's back, folding him in a smothering embrace. The edges of the black metal pierced his flesh in a dozen places. Closer the giant drew him, and closer, and a ragged spike slid into the Bloody-Nine's face, cut through his cheek and scraped against his teeth, bit into the side of his tongue and filled his mouth with salt blood.

The Feared's grip was the weight of mountains. No matter how hot the Bloody-Nine's rage, no matter how he squirmed, and thrashed, and screamed in fury, he was held as tightly as the cold earth holds the buried dead. The blood trickling from his face, and from his back, and from the great gash in the Feared's armour soaked into his clothes and spread out blazing hot over his skin.

The world burned. Above the oven, the cauldron, the crucible, Bethod nodded, and the giant's cold arms squeezed tighter.

Dogman followed his nose. It rarely led him wrong, his nose, and he hoped to hell that it didn't fail him now. It was a sickly kind of a smell – like sweet cakes left too long in the oven. He led the others along an empty hallway, down a shadowy stair, creeping through the damp darkness in the knotty bowels of Skarling's Hill. He could hear something now, as well as smell it, and it sounded as bad as it smelled. A woman's voice, singing soft and low. A strange kind of singing, in no tongue the Dogman could understand.

'That must be her,' muttered Dow.

'Don't like the sound o' that one bit,' Dogman whispered back. 'Sounds like magic.'

'What d'you expect? She's a fucking witch ain't she? I'll go round behind.'

'No, wait on—' But Dow was already creeping off the other way, boots padding soft and silent.

'Shit.' Dogman followed the smell, creeping down the passageway with Grim at his back, the chanting coming louder and louder. A streak of light slunk out from an archway and he eased towards it, pressed his side to the wall and took a peer round the corner.

The room on the other side had about as witchy a look as a room could ever have. Dark and windowless, three other black doorways round the walls. It was lit just by one smoky brazier up at the far end, sizzling coals shedding a dirty red light on it all, giving off a sick sweet stink. There were jars and pots scattered all round, bundles of twigs, and grass, and dried-out flowers hanging from the greasy rafters, casting strange shadows into the corners, like the shapes of hanged men swinging.

There was a woman standing over the brazier with her back to the Dogman. Her long, white arms were spread out wide, shining with sweat. Gold glinted round her thin wrists, black hair straggled down her back. The Dogman might not have known the words she was singing but he could guess it was some dark work she was up to.

Grim held up his bow, one eyebrow raised. Dogman shook his head, silently drew his knife. Tricky to kill her right off with a shaft, and who knew what she might do once she was shot? Cold steel in the neck left nothing to chance.

Together they crept into the room. The air was hot in there, thick as swamp water. Dogman sneaked forward, trying not to breathe, sure the reek would throttle him if he did. He sweated, or the room did, leastways his skin was beaded up with dew in no time. He picked his steps, finding a path between all the rubbish strewn across the floor – boxes, bundles, bottles. He worked his damp palm round the grip of his knife, fixed his eyes on the point between her shoulders, the point he'd stab it into—

His foot caught a jar and sent it clattering. The woman's head jerked round, the chant stopped dead on her lips. A gaunt, white face, pale as a drowned man's, black paint round her narrow eyes – blue eyes, cold as the ocean.

The circle was silent. The men around its edge were still, their faces and their shields hanging limp. The crowd at their backs, the people pressed to the parapet above, all held motionless, all quiet as the dead.

For all of Ninefingers' mad rage, for all his twisting and his struggling, the giant had him fast. Thick muscles squirmed under blue skin as the Feared's great arms tightened and slowly crushed the life from him. West's

mouth was bitter with helpless disappointment. All that he had done, all that he had suffered, all those lives lost, for nothing. Bethod would go free.

Then Ninefingers gave an animal growl. The Feared held him still, but his blue arm was trembling with the effort. As if he was suddenly weakened, and could squeeze no further. Every sinew of West's own body was rigid as he watched. The thick strap of the shield bit into his palm. His jaw was clenched so tight that his teeth ached. The two fighters were locked together, straining against each other with every fibre and yet entirely still, frozen in the centre of the circle.

The Dogman sprang forward, knife raised and ready.

'Stop.'

He froze solid in a moment. He'd never heard a voice like it. One word and there was no thought in his head. He stared at the pale woman, his mouth open, his breath hardly moving, wishing that she'd say another.

'You too,' she said, glancing over at Grim, and his face went slack, and he grinned, halfway through drawing his bow.

She looked Dogman up and down, then pouted as if she was all disappointment. 'Is that any way for guests to behave?'

Dogman blinked. What the hell had he been thinking barging in here with a drawn blade? He couldn't believe he'd done such a thing. He blushed to the roots of his hair. 'Oh . . . I'm sorry . . . by the dead . . .'

'Gugh!' said Grim, throwing his bow into the corner of the room as if he'd suddenly realised he had a turd in his hand, then staring down at the arrow, baffled.

'That's better.' She smiled, and the Dogman found he was grinning like an idiot. Some spit might've come out of his mouth maybe, just a bit, but he weren't that bothered. As long as she kept talking nothing else seemed o' too much importance. She beckoned to them, long white fingers stroking at the thick air. 'No need to stand so far away from me. Come closer.'

Him and Grim stumbled towards her like eager children, Dogman near tripping over his feet in his hurry to please, Grim barging into a table on the way and coming close to falling on his face.

'My name is Caurib.'

‘Oh,’ said Dogman. Most beautiful name ever, no doubt about it. Amazing, that a single word could be so beautiful.

‘Harding Grim’s my name!’

‘Dogman, they call me, ’count of a sharp sense o’ smell, and . . . er . . .’ By the dead, but it was hard to think straight. There’d been something important he was meant to be doing, but for the life of him he couldn’t think what.

‘Dogman . . . perfect.’ Her voice was soothing as a warm bath, as a soft kiss, as milk and honey . . . ‘Don’t sleep yet!’ Dogman’s head rolled, Caurib’s painted face a black and white blur, swimming in front of him.

‘Sorry!’ he gurgled, blushing again and trying to hide the knife behind his back. ‘Right sorry about the blade . . . no idea what—’

‘Don’t worry. I am glad that you brought it. I think it would be best if you used it to stab your friend.’

‘Him?’ Dogman squinted at Grim.

Grim grinned and nodded back at him. ‘Aye, definitely!’

‘Right, right, good idea.’ Dogman lifted up the knife, seeming to weigh a ton. ‘Er . . . anywhere you’d like him stabbed, in particular?’

‘In the heart will do nicely.’

‘Right you are. Right. The heart it is.’ Grim turned front on to give him a better go at it. Dogman blinked, wiped some sweat from his forehead. ‘Here we go, then.’ Damn it but he was dizzy. He squinted at Grim’s chest, wanting to make sure he got it right first time, and didn’t embarrass himself again. ‘Here we go . . .’

‘Now!’ she hissed at him. ‘Just get it—’

The axe blade made a clicking sound as it split her head neatly down the middle, all the way to her chin. Blood sprayed out and spattered in Dogman’s gawping face, and the witch’s thin body slumped down on the stones like it was made of nothing but rags.

Dow frowned as he twisted the haft of his axe this way and that, until the blade came free of Caurib’s ruined skull with a faint sucking sound. ‘That bitch talks too much,’ he grunted.

The Bloody-Nine felt the change. Like the first green shoot of spring. Like the first warmth on the wind as the summer comes. There was a message in

the way the Feared held him. His bones were no longer groaning, threatening to burst apart. The giant's strength was less, and his was more.

The Bloody-Nine sucked in the air and his rage burned hot as ever. Slowly, slowly, he dragged his face away from the giant's shoulder, felt the metal slide out from his mouth. He twisted, twisted until his neck was free. Until he was staring into the giant's writhing face. The Bloody-Nine smiled, then he darted forward, fast as a shower of sparks, and sank his teeth deep into that big lower lip.

The giant grunted, shifted his arms, tried to drag the Bloody-Nine's head away, tear the biting teeth out of his mouth. But he could more easily have shaken off the plague. His arms loosened and the Bloody-Nine twisted the hand that held the Maker's sword. He twisted it, as the snake twists in its nest, and slowly he began to work it free.

The giant's blue left arm uncoiled from the Bloody-Nine's body, his blue hand seized hold of the Bloody-Nine's wrist, but there could be no stopping it. When the sapling seed finds a crack in the mountain, over long years its deep roots will burst the very rock apart. So the Bloody-Nine strained with every muscle and let the slow time pass, hissing out his hatred into the Feared's twitching mouth. The blade crept onwards, slowly, slowly, and its very point bit into painted flesh, just below the giant's bottom rib.

The Bloody-Nine felt the hot blood trickling down the grip and over his bunched fist, trickling out of the Feared's mouth and into his, running down his neck, leaking from the wounds across his back, dripping to the ground, just as it should be. Softly, gently, the blade slid into the Feared's tattooed body, sideways, upwards, onwards.

The great hands clawed at the Bloody-Nine's arm, at his back, seeking desperately for some hold that might stop the terrible easing forward of that blade. But with every moment the giant's strength melted away, like ice before a furnace. Easier to stop the Whiteflow than to stop the Bloody-Nine. The movement of his hands was the growing of a mighty tree, one hair's breadth at a time, but no flesh, no stone, no metal could stop it.

The giant's painted side could not be harmed. Great Glustrod had made it so, long years ago, in the Old Time, when the words were written upon the Feared's skin. But Glustrod wrote on one half only. Slowly, now, softly, gently, the point of the Maker's sword crossed the divide and into the

unmarked half of him, dug into his innards, spitted him like meat made ready for the fire.

The giant made a great, high shriek, and the last strength melted from his hands. The Bloody-Nine opened his jaws and let him free, one arm holding tight to his back while the other drove the sword on into him. The Bloody-Nine hissed laughter through his clenched teeth, dribbled laughter through the ragged hole in his face. He rammed the blade as far as it would go, and its point slid out between the plates of armour just beneath the giant's armpit and glinted red in the sun.

Fenris the Feared tottered backwards, still making his long squeal, his mouth hanging open and a string of red spit dangling from his lip, the painted half already healed over, the pale half tattered as mince-meat. The circle of men watched him, frozen, gaping over the tops of their shields. His feet shuffled in the dirt, one hand fumbling for the red hilt of the Maker's sword, buried to the cross-piece in his side, blood dripping from the pommel and leaving red spots scattered across the ground. His squeal became a rattling groan, one foot tripped the other and he toppled like a felled tree and crashed over on his back, in the centre of the circle, great arms and legs spread wide. The twitching of his face was finally still, and there was a long silence.

'By the dead.' It was spoken softly, thoughtfully. Logen squinted into the morning sun, saw the black shape of a man looking down at him from the high gatehouse. 'By the dead, I never thought you'd do it.' The world tipped from side to side as Logen began to walk, the breath hissing cold through the wound in his face, scraping in his raw throat. The men who'd made the circle moved out of his way, now, their voices fallen silent, their shields hanging from their hands.

'Never thought you could do it, but when it comes to killing, there's no man better! No man worse! I've always said so!'

Logen tottered through the open gates, found an archway and began to climb the lurching steps, round and round, his boots hissing against the stone and leaving dark smears behind. The blood dripped, tap, tap, tap from the dangling fingers of his left hand. Every muscle ached. Bethod's voice dug at him.

'But I get the last laugh, eh, Bloody-Nine? You're nothing but leaves on the water! Any way the rain washes you!'

Logen stumbled on, ribs burning, jaws locked tight together, shoulder scraping against the curved wall. Up, and up, and round, and round, his crackling breath echoing after.

'You'll never have anything! You'll never be anything! You'll never make anything but corpses!'

Out onto the roof, blinking in the morning brightness, spitting a mouthful of blood over his shoulder. Bethod stood at the battlements. The Named Men stumbled out of Logen's way as he strode towards him.

'You're made of death, Bloody-Nine! You're made of—'

Logen's fist crunched into his jaw and he took a flopping step back. Logen's other hand smashed into his cheek and he reeled against the parapet, a long string of bloody drool running from his split mouth. Logen caught the back of his head and jerked his knee up into Bethod's face, felt his nose crunch flat against it. Logen tangled his fingers in Bethod's hair, gripped it tight, pulled his head up high, and rammed it down into the stones.

'Die!' he hissed.

Bethod jerked, gurgled, Logen lifted his head and drove it down again, and again. The golden ring flew off his broken skull, bounced across the rooftop with a merry jingling.

'Die!'

Bone crunched, and blood shot out over the stone in fat drops and thin spatters. Pale-as-Snow and his Named Men stared, white-faced, helpless and fearful, horrified and delighted.

'Die, you fucker!'

And Logen hauled Bethod's ruined corpse into the air with one last effort and flung it tumbling over the battlements. He watched it fall. He watched it crunch to the ground and lie, on its side, arms and legs stuck out awkwardly, fingers curled as if they were grasping at something, the head no more than a dark smear on the hard earth. All the faces of the crowds of men standing below were turned towards that corpse, then slowly, eyes and mouths wide open, they lifted up to stare at Logen.

Crummock-i-Phail, standing in their midst, in the centre of the shaved circle beside the great body of the Feared, slowly raised his long arm, the fat forefinger on the end of it pointing upwards. 'The Bloody-Nine! ' he screamed. 'King o' the Northmen!'

Logen gaped down at him, panting for breath, legs wobbling, trying to understand. The fury was gone and left nothing but terrible tiredness behind it. Tiredness and pain.

'King o' the Northmen!' someone shrieked, way back in the crowd.

'No,' croaked Logen, but no one heard him. They were all too drunk with blood and fury, or busy thinking what was easiest, or too scared to say any different. The chants broke out all over, first a trickle of them, then a flow, and then a flood, and all Logen could do was watch, clinging to the bloody stone and trying not to fall.

'The Bloody-Nine! King o' the Northmen!'

Pale-as-Snow was down on one knee beside him, spots of Bethod's blood sprayed across the white fur on his coat. He always had been one to lick whatever arse was nearest, but he wasn't alone. They were all kneeling, up on the walls and down on the grass. The Dogman's Carls and Bethod's. The men who'd held the shields for Logen and the ones who'd held the shields for the Feared. Maybe Bethod had taught them a lesson. Maybe they'd forgotten how to be their own men, and now they needed someone else to tell them what to do.

'No,' whispered Logen, but all that came out was a dull slurp. He had no more power to stop it than he had to make the sky fall in. Seemed to him then that men do pay for the things they've done, alright. But sometimes the payment isn't what they expected.

'The Bloody-Nine!' roared Crummock again, as he sank down on his knees and lifted up his arms towards the sky, 'King o' the Northmen!'

Greater Good

The room was another over-bright box. It had the same off-white walls, spotted with brown stains. *Mould, or blood, or both*. The same battered table and chairs. *Virtually instruments of torture in themselves*. The same burning pains in Glokta's foot, and leg, and back. Some things never change. The same prisoner, as far as anyone could have told, with the same canvas bag over their head. J*ust like the dozens who have been through this room over the past few days, and just like the dozens more crammed into the cells beyond the door, waiting on our pleasure.*

'Very well.' Glokta waved a tired hand, 'let us begin.'

Frost dragged the bag from the prisoner's head. A long, lean Kantic face with deep creases around the mouth and a neatly trimmed black beard, streaked with grey. A wise, dignified face, deep-set eyes even now adjusting to the glare.

Glokta burst out laughing. Each chuckle stabbed at the base of his stiff spine and rattled his stiff neck, but he could not help himself. *Even after all these years, fate can still play jokes on me.*

'Wath futhy?' grunted Frost.

Glokta wiped his runny eye. 'Practical Frost, we are truly honoured. Our latest prisoner is none other than Master Farrad, formerly of Yashtavit in Kanta, and more recently of a magnificent address at the top of the Kingsway. We are in the presence of the finest dentist in the Circle of the World.' *And one must appreciate the irony.*

Farrad blinked into the glaring lamplight. 'I know you.'

'Yes.'

'You are the one who was a prisoner of the Gurkish.'

'Yes.'

'The one they tortured. I remember . . . you were brought to me.'

'Yes.'

Farrad swallowed. *As though the memory alone is enough to make him vomit.* He glanced up at Frost and the pink eyes glowered back, unblinking. He glanced round the grubby, bloodstained room, at the cracked tiles, at the

scarred table-top. His eyes lingered on the paper of confession lying upon it. ‘After what they did to you – how can you do this, now?’

Glokta showed Farrad his toothless grin. ‘After what they did to me, how could I do anything else?’

‘Why am I here?’

‘For the same reason as everyone else who comes here.’ Glokta watched Frost plant the heavy tips of his fingers on the paper of confession and slide it deliberately across the table towards the prisoner. ‘To confess.’

‘Confess to what?’

‘Why, to spying for the Gurkish.’

Farrad’s face creased up with disbelief. ‘I am no spy! The Gurkish took everything from me! I fled my home when they came! I am innocent, you must know this!’

Of course. As have been all the spies who confessed in this room over the last few days. But they all confessed, without exception. ‘Will you sign the paper?’

‘I have nothing to confess to!’

‘Why is it that no one can answer the questions I ask?’ Glokta stretched out his aching back, worked his creaking neck from side to side, rubbed at the bridge of his nose with finger and thumb. Nothing helped. *But then nothing ever does. Why must they always make it so very difficult, for me and for themselves?* ‘Practical Frost, would you show the good master our work so far?’

The albino slid a dented tin bucket out from under the table and dumped the contents without ceremony in front of the prisoner. Teeth clattered, and slid, and spun across the wood. Hundreds of them. Teeth of all shapes and sizes, from white, through all the shades of yellow, to brown. Teeth with bloody roots and with shreds of flesh attached. A couple tumbled from the far end of the table and bounced from the grimy tiles, clicked away into the corners of the narrow room.

Farrad gaped down in horror at the bloody mess of dentistry before him. *And even the very Prince of Teeth can never have seen such a thing.* Glokta leaned forwards. ‘I daresay you’ve pulled a tooth or two before yourself.’ The prisoner nodded dumbly. ‘Then you can probably imagine how tired I am after this lot. That’s why I’d really like to be done with you as quickly as

possible. I don't want you here, and you certainly don't want to be here. We can help each other.'

'What must I do?' muttered Farrad, his tongue moving nervously around his own mouth.

'It is not complicated. First you sign your confession.'

'Thorry,' mumbled Frost, leaning forward and brushing a couple of teeth off the document, one of them leaving a long, pink streak across the paper.

'Then you name two others.'

'Two other what?'

'Why, two other spies for the Gurkish, of course, from among your people.'

'But . . . I know no spies!'

'Then some other names will have to serve. You have been named already, several times.'

The dentist swallowed, then shook his head, and pushed the paper away. *A brave man, and a righteous one. But bravery and righteousness are bad virtues to have in this room.* 'I will sign. But I will not name innocent men. God have mercy on me, I will not.'

'God might have mercy on you. But he doesn't hold the pliers down here. Clamp him.'

Frost gripped Farrad's head from behind with one great white hand, tendons standing from the pale skin as he forced his mouth open. Then he shoved the clamp between Farrad's jaws and spun the nut round nimbly between finger and thumb until they were held wide open.

'Ah!' gurgled the dentist. 'Ayrh!'

'I know. And we're just getting started.' Glokta pushed back the lid of his case, watched the polished wood, the sharpened steel, the shining glass spread outwards. *What the* . . . There was a disconcerting gap in the tools. 'For pity's sake! Have you had the pliers out of here, Frost?'

'Nuh,' grunted the albino, shaking his head angrily.

'Damn it! Can none of these bastards keep their own instruments? Go next door and see if we can borrow some, at least.'

The Practical lumbered from the room, the heavy door hanging ajar behind him. Glokta winced as he rubbed at his leg. Farrad stared at him, spit running from one corner of his forced-open mouth. His bulging eyes rolled sideways as a howl of pain came muffled from the corridor outside.

‘I do apologise for this,’ said Glokta. ‘We’re usually a great deal more organised, but it’s been busy as hell here the last few days. Such a lot to get through, you see.’

Frost pulled the door shut and handed Glokta a pair of rusty pliers, handles first. There was some dry blood and a couple of curly hairs caked to the jaws.

‘Is this the best they could do? These are dirty!’

Frost shrugged. ‘Whath a ifferenth?’

A fair point, I suppose. Glokta gave a long sigh, struggled up from his chair and leaned forwards to peer into Farrad’s mouth. *And a sweet set he has, too. A pearly white complement. I suppose you’d expect prize-winning teeth from a prize-winning dentist. Anything else would be a poor advertisement for his trade.*

‘I applaud your cleanliness. It’s a rare privilege to question a man who appreciates the importance of washing the mouth out. I can’t say I’ve ever seen a better set of teeth.’ Glokta tapped at them happily with the pliers. ‘It seems a shame to tear them all out, just so that you can confess in ten minutes time instead of now, but there we are.’ He closed the jaws around the nearest tooth, worked his hand around the handles.

‘Gurlgh,’ gurgled Farrad. ‘Glaigh!’

Glokta pursed his lips, as though considering, then released the pliers. ‘Let us give the good master one further chance to talk.’ Frost unscrewed the clamp and pulled it from Farrad’s mouth along with a string of drool. ‘Is there something you wish to say?’

‘I will sign!’ gasped Farrad, a long tear running down one cheek. ‘God help me, I will sign!’

‘And you will name two accomplices?’

‘Whatever you wish . . . please . . . whatever you wish.’

‘Excellent,’ said Glokta, as he watched the pen scratching against the paper of confession. ‘Who’s next?’

Glokta heard the lock behind him rattle. He scowled as he turned his head, preparing to scream at his presumptuous visitor.

‘Your Eminence,’ he whispered, with barely concealed dismay, grimacing as he struggled to get up from his chair.

‘No need to rise, I do not have all day.’ Glokta found himself frozen in the most painful possible position, bent somewhere between sitting and

standing, and had to sag back into his chair with little grace as Sult swept into the room, three of his huge Practicals looming silently in the doorway behind him. ‘You may ask your freak of nature to leave us.’

Frost’s eyes narrowed, flickered over the other Practicals, then back to Sult. ‘Very good, Practical Frost,’ said Glokta hastily. ‘You may remove our prisoner.’

The albino unlocked Farrad’s manacles and dragged the dentist from his chair with one white fist, hauled him gasping by his collar to the door at the back of the room and ripped back the bolt with his free hand. He gave one pink glare over his shoulder and Sult glared back. Then he slammed the door behind him.

His Eminence slid into the chair opposite Glokta. *No doubt still warm from the sweating arse of the brave and righteous Master Farrad*. He brushed some of the teeth from the table-top before him with the side of one gloved hand and sent them clicking onto the floor. *And he could not have seemed to care less had they been breadcrumbs.* ‘There is a deadly conspiracy afoot within the Agriont. Have we made progress in unmasking it?’

‘I have interviewed most of the Kantic prisoners, extracted a suitable number of confessions, there should not be—’

Sult gave an angry wave of his hand. ‘Not that, halfwit. I refer to that bastard Marovia and his pawns, the so-called First of the Magi and our so-called King.’

Even now, with the Gurkish knocking at the gates? ‘Your Eminence, I had assumed the war would take precedence—’

‘You have not the wit to assume,’ sneered Sult. ‘What evidence have you collected against Bayaz?’

I stumbled upon something I shouldn’t have at the University, then was almost drowned in my bath. ‘So far . . . nothing.’

‘What of the parentage of King Jezal the First?’

‘That avenue too appears . . . a dead end.’ *Or an avenue with my own death at the end, if my owners at Valint and Balk were to hear of it. And they hear of everything.*

The Arch Lector’s lips twisted. ‘Then what the hell have you been doing lately?’

For the last three days I have been busy tearing meaningless confessions from the mouths of innocent men, so that we could appear effective. When was I supposed to find time to bring down the state, precisely? 'I have been occupied with seeking Gurkish spies—'

'Why do I never get anything from you but excuses? I have begun to wonder, since your effectiveness has so sharply declined, how you were able to keep Dagoska out of Gurkish hands so long. You must have needed a tremendous sum of money to strengthen the city's defences.'

It took all of Glokta's self-control to prevent his eye from twitching straight out of his head. *Still, now, you twitching jelly, or we are done.* 'The Guild of Spicers were persuaded to contribute when their own livelihoods were on the line.'

'How uncharacteristically generous of them. Now that I think of it, I find the whole business of Dagoska has a strange flavour. It has always struck me as odd that you chose to dispose of Magister Eider so privately, rather than sending her back to me.'

From very bad to an awful lot worse. 'A miscalculation on my part, your Eminence. I thought that I would spare you the trouble of—'

'Disposing of traitors is no trouble for me. You know that.' Angry creases spread out around Sult's hard blue eyes. 'Could it be, after all we have been through together, you might take me for a fool?'

Glokta's voice rasped uncomfortably in his dry throat. 'Absolutely not, Arch Lector.' *Merely a lethal megalomaniac. He knows. He knows that I am not entirely the dutiful slave. But how much does he know? And from whom did he learn it?*

'I gave you an impossible task, and so I have allowed you the benefit of the doubt. But your benefit will only last as long as your successes. I grow tired of putting the spur to you. If you do not solve my problems with our new King in the next two weeks, I will have Superior Goyle dig out the answers to my questions about Dagoska. I will have him dig them from your twisted flesh, if I must. Do I make myself clear?'

As Visserine glass. Two weeks to find the answers, or . . . fragments of a butchered corpse found floating by the docks. But if I even ask the questions, Valint and Balk will inform his Eminence of our arrangement and . . . bloated by seawater, horribly mutilated, far beyond recognition. Alas for

poor Superior Glokta. A comely and a well-loved man, but such bad luck. Wherever will he turn?

'I understand, Arch Lector.'

'Then why ever are you still sitting here?'

It was Ardee West herself who opened the door, a half-full wine glass in one hand. 'Ah! Superior Glokta, what a delightful surprise. Do come in!'

'You sound almost pleased to see me.' *A rare response indeed to my arrival.*

'Why wouldn't I be?' She stepped graciously aside to allow him past. 'How many girls are lucky enough to have a torturer for a chaperone? There's nothing like it for encouraging the suitors.'

He hobbled over the threshold. 'Where is your maid?'

'She got herself all worked up about some Gurkish army or other, so I let her go. Went to her mother in Martenhorm.'

'And you are yourself ready to leave, I hope?' He followed her into the warm living room, shutters and curtains closed, illuminated by the shifting glow from the coals on the fire.

'In fact, I have decided to stay in the city.'

'Really? The tragic princess, pining in her empty castle? Abandoned by her faithless servants, wringing her helpless hands while her enemies surround the moat?' Glokta snorted. 'Are you sure you fit the role?'

'Better than you fit that of the knight on the white charger, come to rescue the damsel with blade a-flashing.' She looked him scornfully up and down. 'I'd hoped for a hero with at least half his teeth.'

'I thought you'd be used to getting less than you hoped for by now.' *I know that I am.*

'What can I say? I'm a romantic. Have you come here only to puncture my dreams?'

'No. I do that without trying. I had in mind a drink and a conversation which did not include the subtext of my mutilated corpse.'

'It is hard to say at this stage what direction our conversation might take, but the drink I can promise you.' She poured him a glass and he tossed it back in four long swallows. He held it out again, sucking his sweet gums.

‘In all seriousness, the Gurkish are no more than a week from taking Adua under siege. You should leave as soon as possible.’

She filled his glass again, and then her own. ‘Haven’t you noticed that half the city has had the same idea? Such flea-bitten nags not requisitioned by the army are changing hands at five hundred marks a piece. Nervous citizens are pouring out to every corner of Midderland. Columns of defenceless refugees, wandering through a mass of mud at a mile a day as the weather turns cold, laden down with everything of value they possess, easy prey for every brigand within a hundred miles.’

‘True,’ Glokta had to admit as he wriggled his painful way into a chair near the fire.

‘And where would I go to anyway? I swear I have not a single friend or relative anywhere in Midderland. Would you have me hide in the woods, lighting fires by rubbing sticks together and hunting down squirrels with my bare hands? How the hell would I stay drunk in those circumstances? No, thank you, I will be safer here, and considerably more comfortable. I have coal for the fire and the cellar is full to capacity. I can hold out for months.’ She waved a floppy hand towards the wall. ‘The Gurkish are coming from the west, and we are on the eastern side of town. I could not be safer in the palace itself, I daresay.’

Perhaps she is right. Here, at least, I can keep some kind of watch over her. ‘Very well, I bow to your reasoning. Or I would, if my back allowed it.’

She settled herself opposite. ‘And how is life in the corridors of power?’

‘Chilly. As corridors often are.’ Glokta stroked his lips with a finger. ‘I find myself in a difficult situation.’

‘I have some experience with those.’

‘This one is . . . complicated.’

‘Well then, in terms a dull wench like me might understand.’

Where’s the harm? I stare death in the face already. ‘In the terms of a dull wench, then, imagine this . . . desperately needing certain favours, you have promised your hand in marriage to two very rich and powerful men.’

‘Huh. One would be a fine thing.’

‘None would be a fine thing, in this particular case. They are both old and of surpassing ugliness.’

She shrugged. ‘Ugliness is easily forgiven in the rich and powerful.’

‘But both these suitors are prone to violent displays of jealousy. Dangerous displays, if your wanton faithlessness were to become common knowledge. You had hoped to extricate yourself from one promise or the other at some stage, but now the date of the weddings draws near, and you find that you are . . . still considerably entangled with both. More so than ever, in fact. Your response?’

She pursed her lips and took a long breath, considering it, then tossed a strand of hair theatrically over her shoulder. ‘I would drive them both near madness with my matchless wit and smouldering beauty, then engineer a duel between the two. Whichever won would be rewarded with the ultimate prize of my hand in marriage, never suspecting I was once promised also to his rival. Since he is old, I would earnestly hope for his imminent death, leaving me a wealthy and respected widow.’ She grinned at him down her nose. ‘What say you to that, sir?’

Glokta blinked. ‘I fear the metaphor has lost its relevance.’

‘Or . . .’ Ardee squinted at the ceiling, then snapped her fingers. ‘I might use my subtle feminine wiles . . .’ thrusting back her shoulders and hitching up her bust, ‘to entrap a third man, still more powerful and wealthy. Young, and handsome, and smooth of limb as well, I suppose, since this is a metaphor. I would marry him and with his help destroy those other two, and abandon them penniless and disappointed. Ha! What think you?’

Glokta felt his eyelid twitching, and he pressed one hand against it. *Interesting.* ‘A third suitor,’ he murmured. ‘The idea had never even occurred.’

Skarling's Chair

Far below, the water frothed and surged. It had rained hard in the night, and now the river ran high with it, an angry flood chewing mindlessly at the base of the cliff. Cold black water and cold white spray against the cold black rock. Tiny shapes – golden yellow, burning orange, vivid purple, all the colours of fire, whisked and wandered with the mad currents, whatever way the rain washed them.

Leaves on the water, just like him.

And now it looked as if the rain would wash him south. To fight some more. To kill men who'd never heard of him. The idea of it made him want to be sick. But he'd given his word, and a man who doesn't keep his word isn't much of a man at all. That's what Logen's father used to tell him.

He'd spent a lot of long years not keeping to much of anything. His word, and the words of his father, and other men's lives, all meaning less than nothing. All the promises he'd made to his wife and to his children he'd let rot. He'd broken his word to his people, and his friends, and himself, more times than he could count. The Bloody-Nine. The most feared man in the North. A man who'd walked all his days in a circle of blood. A man who'd done nothing in all his life but evil. And all the while he'd looked at the sky and shrugged his shoulders. Blamed whoever was nearest, and told himself he'd had no choices.

Bethod was gone. Logen had vengeance, at last, but the world wasn't suddenly a better place. The world was the same, and so was he. He spread out the fingers of his left hand on the damp stone, bent and wonky from a dozen old breaks, knuckles scratched and scabbing, nails cracked and wedged under with dirt. He stared down at the familiar stump for a moment.

'Still alive,' he whispered, hardly able to believe it.

He winced at the pain in his battered ribs, groaned as he turned away from the window and back into the great hall. Bethod's throne room, and now his. The thought tugged a meagre belch of laughter out of his gut, but even that stabbed at the mass of stitches through his cheek and up the side of his face. He limped out across the wide floor, every step an ordeal. The sound of his scraping boots echoed in the high rafters, over the whispering of the

river down below. Shafts of blurred light, heavy with floating dust, shone down and made criss-cross patterns across the boards. Near to Logen, on a raised-up dais, stood Skarling's Chair.

The hall, and the city, and the land around it had all changed far beyond recognition, but Logen reckoned the chair itself was much the same as it had been when Skarling lived. Skarling Hoodless, greatest hero of the North. The man who'd united the clans to fight against the Union, long ago. The man who'd drawn the North together with words and gestures, for a few brief years, at least.

A simple seat for a simple man – big, honest chunks of old wood, faded paint around the edges, polished smooth by Skarling's sons, and grandsons, and the men who'd led his clan since. Until the Bloody-Nine came knocking at the gates of Carleon. Until Bethod took the chair for his own, and pretended that he was all that Skarling had been, while he forced the North together with fire, and fear, and steel.

'Well then?' Logen jerked his head round, saw Black Dow leaning in the doorway, arms folded across his chest. 'Ain't you going to sit in it?'

Logen shook his head, even though his legs were aching so bad he could hardly bear to stand a moment longer. 'Mud always did for me to sit on. I'm no hero, and Skarling was no king.'

'Turned down a crown, as I heard it told.'

'Crowns.' Logen spat onto the straw, spit still pink from the cuts in his mouth. 'Kings. The whole notion's shit, and me the worst choice there could be.'

'You ain't saying no, though, eh?'

Logen frowned up at him. 'So some other bastard even worse'n Bethod can sit in that chair, make the North bleed some more? Maybe I can do some good with it.'

'Maybe.' Dow looked straight back. 'But some men aren't made for doing good.'

'You talking 'bout me again?' chuckled Crummock, striding in through the doorway, Dogman and Grim at his shoulder.

'Not all talk's about you, Crummock,' said Dogman. 'You sleep alright, Logen?'

'Aye,' he lied. 'Like the dead.'

'What now?'

Logen stared at that chair. ‘South, I reckon.’

‘South,’ grunted Grim, giving no clue whether he thought it was a good idea or a bad.

Logen licked at the ragged flesh at the side of his mouth, checking again, for no reason that made any sense, just how much it hurt. ‘Calder and Scale are still out there, somewhere. No doubt Bethod sent ’em to find some help. From out past the Crinna, or up in the high valleys, or wherever.’

Crummock chuckled softly. ‘Ah, the good work’s never done.’

‘They’ll be causing mischief sooner or later,’ said Dogman, ‘small doubt o’ that.’

‘Someone needs to stay back here and keep a watch on things. Hunt those two bastards out if they can.’

‘I’ll do it,’ said Black Dow.

‘You sure?’

Dow shrugged. ‘I don’t like boats and I don’t like the Union. Don’t need to take no voyage to work that out. And I’ve got scores enough to settle with Calder and Scale. I’ll pick me some Carls out o’ what’s left, and I’ll pay ’em a visit.’ He flashed his nasty grin, and clapped Dogman on the arm. ‘Good luck to the rest o’ you down there with the Southerners, eh? Try not to get yourselves killed.’ He narrowed his eyes at Logen. ‘You especially, eh, Bloody-Nine? Wouldn’t want to lose us another King o’ the Northmen, now, would we?’ And he sauntered out, arms folded.

‘How many men we got left over?’

‘Might be three hundred, now, if Dow takes a few.’

Logen gave a long sigh. ‘Best get ’em ready to leave then. Wouldn’t want Furious to go without us.’

‘Who’ll want to go?’ asked Dogman. ‘After what they been through these past months? Who’ll want more killing now?’

‘Men who don’t know how to do much else, I guess.’ Logen shrugged. ‘Bethod had gold down there, didn’t he?’

‘Aye, some.’

‘Then share it out. Plenty for each man comes with us. Some now, some when we get back. Reckon a good few’ll take the offer.’

‘Maybe. Men’ll talk hard for gold. Not sure they’ll fight hard for it, when the time comes.’

‘I reckon we’ll see.’

Dogman stared at him for a long moment. Stared him right in the eye. ‘Why?’

‘Because I gave my word.’

‘And? Never bothered you before, did it?’

‘Can’t say it did, and there’s the problem.’ Logen swallowed, and his mouth tasted bad. ‘What else can you do, but try and do better?’

Dogman nodded, slow, his eyes not leaving Logen’s face. ‘Right you are then, chief. South it is.’

‘Uh,’ said Grim, and the two of them walked out the doorway, leaving just Crummock behind.

‘Off to the Union for you is it, your Majesty? South and kill you some brown men in the sun?’

‘South.’ Logen worked one sore shoulder beside his sore neck, and then the other. ‘You coming?’

Crummock pushed himself away from the wall and walked forward, finger bones clicking round his thick neck. ‘No, no, no, not me. I’ve relished our time together, so I have, but everything’s got an end, don’t it. I’ve been away from my mountains for far too long, and my wives’ll be missing me.’ The chief of the hillmen held his arms out wide, took a step forward, and hugged Logen tight. A little too tight for comfort, if he was being honest.

‘They can have a king if they want one,’ whispered Crummock in his ear, ‘but I can’t say I do. Especially not the man who killed my son, eh?’ Logen felt himself go cold, from the roots of his hair to the tips of his fingers. ‘What did you think? That I wouldn’t know?’ The hillman leaned back to look Logen in the eye. ‘You slaughtered him before the whole world, now, didn’t you? You butchered little Rond like a sheep for the pot, and him just as helpless as one.’

They were alone in that wide hall, just the two of them, and the shadows, and Skarling’s chair. Logen winced as Crummock’s arms squeezed tighter, round the bruises and the wounds the Feared’s arms had left him. Logen hadn’t the strength left now to fight a cat, and they both knew it. The hillman could’ve crushed him flat, and finished the job the Feared had started. But he only smiled.

‘Don’t you worry, now, Bloody-Nine. I’ve got what I wanted, haven’t I? Bethod’s dead and gone, and his Feared, and his witch, and his whole

bastard notion of clans united, all back to the mud where they belong. With you in charge, I daresay it'll be a hundred years before folk in the North stop killing each other. Meantime maybe we up in the hills can have some peace, eh?'

'Course you can,' croaked Logen, through his gritted teeth, grimacing as Crummock pressed him even tighter.

'You killed my son, that's true, but I've got plenty more. You have to weed the weak ones out, don't you know? The weak and the unlucky. You don't put a wolf amongst your sheep then cry when you find one eaten, do you?'

Logen could only stare. 'You really are mad.'

'Maybe I am, but there's worse than me out there.' He leaned close again, soft breath in Logen's ear. 'I'm not the one killed the boy, am I?' He let Logen free, and he slapped him on the shoulder. The way a friend might, but there was no friendship in it. 'Don't ever come up in the High Places again, Ninefingers, that's my advice. I might not be able to give you another friendly reception.' He turned and walked away, slowly, waving one fat finger over his shoulder. 'Don't come up in the High Places again, Bloody-Nine! You're beloved o' the moon just a little too much for my taste!'

Leadership

Jezal clattered through the cobbled streets astride a magnificent grey, Bayaz and Marshal Varuz just behind him, a score of Knights of the Body, led by Bremer dan Gorst, following in full war gear. It was strangely unsettling to see the city, usually so brimful with humanity, close to deserted. Only a scattering of threadbare urchins, of nervous city watchmen, of suspicious commoners remained to hurry out of the way of the royal party as they passed. Most of those citizens who had stayed in Adua were well barricaded in their bedrooms, Jezal imagined. He would have been tempted to do the same, had Queen Terez not beaten him to it.

'When did they arrive?' Bayaz was demanding over the clatter of hooves.

'The vanguard appeared before dawn,' Jezal heard Varuz shout back. 'And more Gurkish troops have been pouring in down the Keln road all morning. There were a few skirmishes in the districts beyond Casamir's Wall, but nothing to slow them significantly. They are already halfway to encircling the city.'

Jezal jerked his head round. 'Already?'

'The Gurkish always liked to come prepared, your Majesty.' The old soldier urged his horse up beside him. 'They have started to construct a palisade around Adua, and have brought three great catapults with them. The same ones that proved so effective in their siege of Dagoska. By noon we will be entirely surrounded.' Jezal swallowed. There was something about the word 'surrounded' that caused an uncomfortable tightening in his throat.

The column slowed to a stately walk as they approached the city's westernmost gate. It was, in an irony that gave Jezal little pleasure, the very same gate through which he had entered the city in triumph before he was crowned High King of the Union. A crowd had gathered in the shadow of Casamir's Wall, larger even than the one that had greeted him after his strange victory over the peasants. Today, however, there was hardly a mood of celebration. Smiling girls had been replaced by frowning men, fresh flowers with old weapons. Polearms stuck up above the press at all angles in an unruly forest, points and edges glinting. Pikes and pitch forks, bill

hooks and boat hooks, brooms with the twigs removed and knives nailed in their places.

There was a smattering of King's Own padded out by some squinting members of the city watch, a few puffed-up tradesmen with leather jerkins and polished swords, some slouching labourers with antique flatbows and tough expressions. These were the very best of what was on offer. They were accompanied by a random assortment of citizens of both sexes and all ages, equipped with a bewildering range of mismatched armour and weapons. Or nothing at all. It was difficult to tell who was supposed to be a soldier and who a citizen, if, indeed, there was still a difference. Every one of them was looking at Jezal as he smartly dismounted, his golden spurs jingling. Looking to him, he realised, as he began to walk out among them, his well-armoured bodyguard clanking behind.

'These are the defenders of this borough?' murmured Jezal to Lord Marshal Varuz, following at his shoulder.

'Some of them, your Majesty. Accompanied by some enthusiastic townsfolk. A touching spectacle.'

Jezal would happily have traded a touching crowd for an effective one, but he supposed a leader had always to appear indomitable before his followers. Bayaz had told him so often. How doubly, how triply true of a king before his subjects? Especially a king whose grip on his recently won crown might be thought of as slippery at best.

So he stood tall, pointed his scarred chin as high as he dared, flicked out his gilt-edged cloak with one gauntleted hand. He strode through the crowd with the confident swagger he had always used to have, one hand resting on the jewelled pommel of his sword, hoping with every step that no one caught an inkling of the cauldron of fear and doubt behind his eyes. The crowd muttered as he swept past, Varuz and Bayaz hurrying behind. Some made attempts at bows, others did not bother.

'The king!'

'I thought he'd be taller . . .'

'Jezal the Bastard.' Jezal snapped his head round, but there was no way of telling who spoke.

'That's Luthar!'

'A cheer for 'is Majesty!' Followed by a half-hearted murmur.

‘This way,’ said a pale-looking officer before the gate, indicating a staircase with one apologetic hand. Jezal climbed manfully, two stone steps at a time, spurs jingling. He came out onto the roof of the gatehouse and froze, his lip curling with distaste. Who should be standing there but his old friend Superior Glokta, bent over on his cane, his repulsive toothless smile on his face?

‘Your Majesty,’ he leered, voice heavy with irony. ‘What an almost overwhelming honour.’ He lifted his cane to point towards the far parapet. ‘The Gurkish are that way.’

Jezal was attempting to frame a suitably acidic reply as his eyes followed Glokta’s stick. He blinked, the muscles of his face going slack. He stepped past the cripple without saying a word. His scarred jaw crept gradually open, and stayed there.

‘The enemy,’ growled Varuz. Jezal tried to imagine what Logen Ninefingers would have said faced with the sight below him now.

‘Shit.’

In the patchwork of damp fields, over the roads and through the hedgerows, between the farms and villages and the few coppices of old trees beyond the city walls, Gurkish troops swarmed in their thousands. The wide paved road towards Keln, curving away southwards through the flat farmland, was a single crawling, glittering, heaving river of marching men. Gurkish soldiers, in column, flooding up and flowing smoothly out to encircle the city in a giant ring of men, wood, and steel. Tall standards stood out above the boiling throng, golden symbols flashing in the watery autumn sunlight. The standards of the Emperor’s legions. Jezal counted ten at his first glance.

‘A considerable body of men,’ said Bayaz, with awesome understatement.

Glokta grinned. ‘The Gurkish hate to travel alone.’

The fence that Marshal Varuz had referred to earlier was already rising, a dark line winding through the muddy fields a few hundred strides from the walls, a shallow ditch in front of it. More than adequate to prevent supplies or reinforcements reaching the city from outside. Further away several camps were taking shape: vast bodies of white tents erected in neatly ordered squares, several with tall columns of dark smoke already floating up into the white sky from cook-fires and forges. There was a deeply worrying feeling of permanence about the whole arrangement. Adua might

still have been in Union hands, but even the most patriotic liar could not have denied that the city's hinterland already belonged firmly to the Emperor of Gurkhul.

'You have to admire their organisation,' said Varuz grimly.

'Yes . . . their organisation . . .' Jezal's voice was suddenly creaky as old floorboards. Putting a brave face on this seemed more like insanity than courage.

A dozen horsemen had detached themselves from the Gurkish lines and now rode forward at a steady trot. Two long flags streamed above their heads, red and yellow silk, worked with Kantic characters in golden thread. There was a white flag too, so small as to be barely noticeable.

'Parleys,' growled the First of the Magi, slowly shaking his head. 'What are they but an excuse for old fools who love to hear their own voices to prattle about fair treatment before they start on the butchery?'

'I suppose on the subject of old fools who love to hear their own voices, you are the absolute expert.' That was what Jezal thought but he kept it to himself, watching the Gurkish party approach in brooding silence. A tall man came at their head, gold shining on his sharply pointed helmet and his polished armour, riding with that upright arrogance that shouts, even from a distance, of high command.

Marshal Varuz frowned. 'General Malzagurt.'

'You know him?'

'He commanded the Emperor's forces, during the last war. We grappled with each other for months. We parleyed more than once. A most cunning opponent.'

'You got the better of him though, eh?'

'In the end, your Majesty.' Varuz looked far from happy. 'But I had an army then.'

The Gurkish commander clattered up the road, through the jumble of deserted buildings scattered beyond Casamir's wall. He reined in his horse before the gate, staring proudly upwards, one hand resting casually on his hip.

'I am General Malzagurt,' he called in a sharp Kantic accent, 'the chosen representative of his magnificence, Uthman-ul-Dosht, Emperor of Gurkhul.'

'I am King Jezal the First.'

'Of course. The bastard.'

It was pointless to deny it. ‘That’s right. The bastard. Why don’t you come in, General? Then we can speak face to face, like civilised men.’

Malzagurt’s eyes flickered across to Glokta. ‘Forgive me, but the response of your government to unarmed emissaries of the Emperor has not always been . . . civilised. I think I will remain outside the walls. For now.’

‘As you wish. I believe you are already acquainted with Lord Marshal Varuz?’

‘Of course. It seems an age since we tussled in the dry wastelands. I would say that I have missed you . . . but I have not. How are you, my old friend, my old enemy?’

‘Well enough,’ grunted Varuz.

Malzagurt gestured towards the vast array of manpower deploying behind him. ‘Under the circumstances, eh? I do not know your other—’

‘He is Bayaz. First of the Magi.’ A smooth, even voice. It came from one of Malzagurt’s companions. A man dressed all in simple white, somewhat in the manner of a priest. He seemed hardly older than Jezal, and very handsome, with a dark face, perfectly smooth. He wore no armour, carried no weapon. There was no adornment on his clothes or his simple saddle. And yet the others in the party, even Malzagurt himself, seemed to look at him with great respect. With fear, almost.

‘Ah.’ The General peered up, stroking thoughtfully at his short grey beard. ‘So this is Bayaz.’

The young man nodded. ‘This is he. It has been a long time.’

‘Not long enough, Mamun, you damned snake!’ Bayaz clung to the parapet, teeth bared. The old Magus was so good at playing the kindly uncle that Jezal had forgotten how terrifying his sudden fury could be. He took a shocked step away, half raising a hand to shield his face. The Gurkish aides and flag-carriers cringed, one going so far as to be noisily sick. Even Malzagurt lost a sizeable chunk of his heroic bearing.

But Mamun gazed up just as levelly as before. ‘Some among my brothers thought that you would run, but I knew better. Khalul always said your pride would be the end of you, and here is the proof. It seems strange to me, now, that I once thought you a great man. You look old, Bayaz. You have dwindled.’

‘Things seem smaller when they are far above you!’ growled the First of the Magi. He ground the toe of his staff into the stones under his feet, his

voice carrying now a terrible menace. ‘Come closer, Eater, and you can judge my weakness while you burn!’

‘The time was you could have crushed me with a word, I do not doubt it. But now your words are only empty air. Your power has leaked away with the slow years, while mine has never been greater. I have a hundred brothers and sisters behind me. What allies have you, Bayaz?’ He swept the battlements with a mocking smile. ‘Only such as you deserve.’

‘I may yet find allies to surprise you.’

‘I doubt it. Long ago, Khalul told me what your final, desperate hope would be. Time proved him right, as it always has. So you went to the very edge of the World, chasing shadows. Dark shadows indeed, for one who calls himself righteous. I know that you failed.’ The priest showed two rows of perfect white teeth. ‘The Seed passed out of history, long ago. Interred, dark leagues beneath the earth. Sunk, far below the bottomless ocean. Your hopes are sunk with it. You have only one choice left to you. Will you come with us willingly, and be judged by Khalul for your betrayal? Or must we come in and take you?’

‘You dare to speak to me of betrayal? You who betrayed the highest principals of our order, and broke the sacred law of Euz? How many have you murdered, so that you could be powerful?’

Mamun only shrugged. ‘Very many. I am not proud. You left us a choice of dark paths, Bayaz, and we made the sacrifices we had to. There is no purpose in our arguing over the past. After these long centuries, standing on opposite sides of a great divide, I think neither one of us will convince the other. The victors can decide who was right, just as they always have, since long before the Old Time. I know your answer already, but the Prophet would have me ask the question. Will you come to Sarkant, and answer for your great crimes? Will you be judged by Khalul?’

‘Judged?’ snarled Bayaz. ‘He will judge me, the swollen-headed old murderer?’ He barked harsh laughter down from the walls. ‘Come and take me if you dare, Mamun, I will be waiting!’

‘Then we will come,’ murmured Khalul’s first apprentice, frowning up from under his fine black brows. ‘We have been preparing long years to do it.’

The two men fell to sullen glaring, and Jezal frowned with them. He resented the sudden feeling that the whole business was somehow an

argument between Bayaz and this priest and that he, although a king, was like a child eavesdropping on his parents' conversation, and with just as little say in the outcome.

'Speak your terms, General!' he bellowed down.

Malzagurt cleared his throat. 'Firstly, if you surrender the city of Adua to the Emperor, he is prepared to allow you to retain your throne, as his subject, of course, paying regular tribute.'

'How generous of him. What of the traitor, Lord Brock? We understood that you have promised him the crown of the Union.'

'We are not altogether committed to Lord Brock. He does not hold the city, after all. You do.'

'And we have scant respect for those who turn on their own masters,' added Mamun, with a dark look up at Bayaz.

'Secondly, the citizens of the Union will be permitted to continue to live according to their own laws and customs. They will continue to live in freedom. Or as close to it as they have ever really been, at least.'

'Your generosity is astonishing.' Jezal had meant to sneer it, but in the end it escaped without much irony.

'Thirdly,' shouted the General, with a nervous glance sideways towards Mamun, 'the man known as Bayaz, the First of the Magi, be delivered over to us, bound and in chains, that he may be conveyed to the Temple of Sarkant, for judgement by the Prophet Khalul. Those are our terms. Refuse them, and the Emperor has decreed that Midderland shall be treated as any other conquered province. Many will be killed, and many more made slaves, Gurkish governors will be installed, your Agriont will be made a temple, and your current rulers . . . conveyed to cells beneath the Emperor's palace.'

Jezal half opened his mouth to refuse on an instinct. Then he paused. Harod the Great, no doubt, would have spat his defiance at any odds, and probably pissed on the emissary to boot. The slightest notion of negotiating with the Gurkish was against every long-held belief he possessed.

But, thinking about it, the terms were far more generous than he had ever expected. Jezal would probably have enjoyed more authority as a subject of Uthman-ul-Dosht than he did with Bayaz staring over his shoulder every moment of every day. He could save lives by saying a word. Real lives, of real people. He reached up and rubbed gently at his scarred lips with a

fingertip. He had experienced enough suffering on the endless plains of the Old Empire to think long and hard about risking so much pain to so many, and himself in particular. The notion of cells beneath the Emperor's palace caused him some pause.

It was bizarre that such a vital decision should fall to him. A man who, no more than a year ago, had proudly confessed to knowing nothing about anything, and caring still less. But then Jezal was beginning to doubt that anyone in a position of high authority ever really knew what they were doing. The best one could hope for was to maintain some shred of an illusion that one might. And occasionally, perhaps, try to give the mindless flood of events the slightest push in one direction or another, hoping desperately that it would turn out to be the right one.

But what was the right one?

'Give me your answer!' shouted Malzagurt. 'I have preparations to make!'

Jezal frowned. He was sick of being dictated to by Bayaz, but at least the old bastard had played some role in his ascension to the throne. He was sick of being slighted by Terez, but at least she was his wife. Quite aside from any other consideration, his patience was stretched very thin. He simply refused to be ordered around at sword-point by some posturing Gurkish General and his damn fool priest.

'I reject your terms!' he called airily down from the walls. 'I reject them utterly and completely. I am not in the habit of surrendering my advisers, or my cities, or my sovereignty simply when asked. Particularly not to a pack of Gurkish curs with small manners and even smaller wits. You are not in Gurkhul now, General, and here your arrogance becomes you even less than that absurd helmet. I suspect that you will learn a harsh lesson before you leave these shores. Might I add, before you scuttle off, that I encourage you and your priest to fuck each other? Who knows? Perhaps you could persuade the great Uthman-ul-Dosht – and the all-knowing Prophet Khalul too for that matter – to join you!'

General Malzagurt frowned. He conferred quickly with an aide, evidently having not entirely understood the finer points of that last utterance. Once he had finally taken them in he gave an angry slash of his dark hand and barked an order in Kantic. Jezal saw men moving among the buildings scattered outside the walls, torches in their hands. The Gurkish General took

one last look up at the gatehouse. ‘Damn pinks!’ he snarled. ‘Animals!’ And he tore at the reins of his horse and sprang away, his officers clattering after him.

The priest Mamun sat there a moment longer, a sadness on his perfect face. ‘So be it. We will put on our armour. May God forgive you, Bayaz.’

‘You need forgiveness more than I, Mamun! Pray for yourself!’

‘So I do. Every day. But I have seen no sign in all my long life that God is the forgiving kind.’ Mamun turned his horse away from the gates and rode slowly back towards the Gurkish lines, through the abandoned buildings, flames already licking hungrily at their walls.

Jezal took a long, ragged breath as his eyes flicked up to the mass of men moving through the fields. Damn his mouth, it got him in all kinds of trouble. But it was a little late now for second thoughts. He felt Bayaz’ fatherly touch on his shoulder, that steering touch that had become so very annoying to him over the past few weeks. He had to grit his teeth to keep from shaking free.

‘You should address your people,’ said the Magus.

‘What?’

‘The right words could make all the difference. Harod the Great could speak at a moment’s notice. Did I tell you of the time he—’

‘Very well!’ snapped Jezal, ‘I am going.’

He walked towards the opposite parapet with all the enthusiasm of a condemned man to his scaffold. The crowd was spread out below in all its disturbing variety. Jezal had to stop himself fussing with his belt-buckle. He kept worrying for some reason that his trousers would fall down in front of all those people. A ridiculous notion. He cleared his throat. Someone saw him, pointed.

‘The king!’

‘King Jezal!’

‘The king speaks!’

The crowd shifted and stretched, drawn towards the gatehouse, a sea of hopeful, fearful, needy faces. The noise in the square slowly died and a breathless silence fell.

‘My friends . . . my countrymen . . . my subjects!’ His voice rang out with pleasing authority. A good beginning, very . . . rhetorical. ‘Our enemies may be many . . . very many . . .’ Jezal cursed to himself. That was hardly an

admission to give courage to the masses. ‘But I urge you to take heart! Our defences are strong!’ He slapped at the firm stones under his hand. ‘Our courage is indomitable!’ He thumped at his polished breastplate. ‘We will hold firm!’ This was better! He had discovered a natural talent for speaking. The crowd was warming to him now, he could feel it. ‘We need not hold out forever! Lord Marshal West is even now bringing his army to our assistance —’

‘When?’ someone screamed out. There was a wave of angry muttering.

‘Er . . .’ Jezal, wrong-footed, glanced nervously across at Bayaz, ‘er . . .’

‘When will they come? When?’ The First of the Magi hissed at Glokta, and the cripple made a sharp gesture to someone below.

‘Soon! You may depend upon it!’ Curse Bayaz, this had been an awful notion. Jezal did not have the ghost of an idea of how to put heart into a rabble.

‘What about our children? What about our homes? Will your house burn? Will it?’ A swell of unhappy calls went up.

‘Do not fear! I beg of you . . . please . . .’ Damn it! He had no business pleading, he was a king. ‘The army is on its way!’ Jezal noticed black figures forcing through the press. Practicals of the Inquisition. They converged, somewhat to his relief, on the point where the heckles were coming from. ‘They are even now leaving the North! Any day they will come to our aid, and teach these Gurkish dogs a—’

‘When? When will—’ Black sticks rose and fell in the midst of the crowd and the question was cut off in a high-pitched shriek.

Jezal did his best to shout over it. ‘In the meantime, will we let these Gurkish scum ride free over our fields? Over the fields of our fathers?’

‘No!’ someone roared, to Jezal’s great relief.

‘No! We will show these Kantic slaves how a free Union citizen can fight!’ A volley of lukewarm agreements. ‘We will fight as bravely as lions! As fiercely as tigers!’ He was warming to his work, now, the words were spilling out as if he really meant them. Perhaps he did. ‘We will fight as we did in the days of Harod! Of Arnault! Of Casamir!’ A rousing cheer went up. ‘We will not rest until these Gurkish devils are driven back across the Circle Sea! There will be no negotiation!’

‘No negotiation!’ someone called.

‘Damn the Gurkish!’

‘We will never surrender!’ Jezal bellowed, striking the parapet with his fist. ‘We will fight for every street! For every house! For every room!’

‘For every house!’ someone squealed with rabid excitement, and the citizens of Adua bellowed their approval.

Feeling the moment upon him, Jezal slid his sword from its sheath with a suitably warlike ringing and held it high above his head. ‘And I will be proud to draw my sword beside you! We will fight for each other! We will fight for the Union! Every man . . . every woman . . . a hero!’

There was a deafening cheer. Jezal waved his sword and a glittering wave surged out among the spears as they were shaken in the air, thumped against armoured chests, hammered down against the stone. Jezal smiled wide. The people loved him, and were more than willing to fight for him. Together they would be victorious, he felt it. He had made the right decision.

‘Nicely done,’ murmured Bayaz in his ear. ‘Nicely—’ Jezal’s patience was worn out. He rounded on the Magus with his teeth bared. ‘I know how it was done! I have no need of your constant—’

‘Your Majesty.’ It was Gorst’s piping voice.

‘How dare you interrupt me? What the hell is—’

Jezal’s tirade was cut off by a ruddy glare at the corner of his eye, followed a moment later by a roaring detonation. He jerked his head round to see flames springing up above the jumble of roofs some distance away on his right. Below in the square there was a collective gasp, a wave of nervous movement through the crowd.

‘The Gurkish bombardment has begun,’ said Varuz.

A streak of fire shot up into the white sky above the Gurkish lines. Jezal watched it open-mouthed as it plummeted down towards the city. It crashed into the buildings, this time on Jezal’s left, bright fire shooting high into the air. The terrifying boom assaulted his ears an instant afterward.

Shouts came from below. Orders, perhaps, or screams of panic. The crowd began to move in every direction at once. People rushed for the walls, or for their homes, or nowhere in particular, a chaotic tangle of pressing bodies and waving polearms.

‘Water!’ someone shouted.

‘Fire!’

‘Your Majesty.’ Gorst was already leading Jezal back towards the stairway. ‘You should return to the Agriont at once.’

Jezal started at another thunderous explosion, this one even closer. Smoke was already rising in oily smudges over the city. ‘Yes,’ he muttered, allowing himself to be led to safety. He realised that he still had his sword drawn, and sheathed it somewhat guiltily. ‘Yes of course.’

Fearlessness, as Logen Ninefingers had once observed, is a fool’s boast.

A Rock and a Hard Place

Glokta shook with laughter, wheezing gurgles slobbering through his empty gums, the hard chair creaking under his bony arse. His coughs and his whimpers echoed dully from the bare walls of his dim living room. In a way, it sounded very much like weeping. *And perhaps it is, just a little.*

Every shake of his twisted shoulders drove nails into his neck. Every jerk of his rib-cage sent flashes of pain down to the very tips of such toes as he had left. He laughed, and the laughter hurt, and the pain made him laugh all the more. *Oh, the irony! I titter with hopelessness. I chuckle with despair.*

Bubbles of spit blew from his lips as he gave one last long whine. *Like a sheep's death rattle, but less dignified.* Then he swallowed, and wiped his running eyes. *I have not laughed so hard in years. Since before the Emperor's torturers did their work, I shouldn't wonder. And yet it is not so very difficult to stop. After all, nothing is really very funny here, is it?* He lifted the letter, and read it again.

Superior Glokta,

My employers at the banking house of Valint and Balk are more than disappointed with your progress. It is some time now since I asked you, in person, to inform us of Arch Lector Sult's plans. In particular, the reasons for his continuing interest in the University. Since then we have received no communication from you.

It may be that you believe the sudden arrival of the Gurkish beyond the city walls has altered the expectations of my employers.

It has not, in any way whatsoever. Nothing will.

You will report to us within the week, or his Eminence will be informed of your divided loyalties.

I need hardly add that it would be wise for you to destroy this letter.

Mauthis.

Glokta stared at the paper for a long while by the light of the single candle, his ruined mouth hanging open. *For this, I lived through months of agony in*

the darkness of the Emperor's prisons? Tortured my savage way through the Guild of Mercers? Slaughtered my bloody path through the city of Dagoska? To end my days in ignominy, trapped between a bitter old bureaucrat and a bankful of treacherous swindlers? All my twisting, my lying, my bargains, and my pain. All those corpses left beside the road . . . for this?

A new wave of laughter rocked his body, twisted him up and made his aching back rattle. *His Eminence and these bankers deserve each other! Even with the city burning down around them, their games cannot stop for an instant. Games which may very well prove fatal to poor Superior Glokta, who only tried to do his crippled best.* He had to wipe a little snot from under his nose he laughed so hard at that last thought.

It almost seems a shame to burn such a horribly hilarious document. Perhaps I should take it to the Arch Lector instead? Would he see the funny side, I wonder? Would we chuckle over it together? He reached out and held the corner of the letter to the twisting candle flame, watched fire flicker up the side, creep out through the writing, white paper curling up into black ashes.

Burn, as my hopes, and my dreams, and my glorious future burned beneath the Emperor's palace! Burn, as Dagoska did and Adua surely will before the Emperor's fury! Burn, as I would love to burn King Jezal the Bastard, and the First of the Magi, and Arch Lector Sult, and Valint and Balk, and the whole damned—

'Gah!' Glokta flailed his singed fingertips in the air then stuck them in his toothless mouth, his laughter quickly cut off. *Strange. However much pain we experience, we never become used to it. We always scramble to escape it. We never become resigned to more.* The corner of the letter was still smouldering on the floor. He frowned, and ground it out with a savage poke of his cane.

The air was heavy with the sharp tang of wood smoke. *Like a hundred thousand burnt dinners.* Even here in the Agriont, there was the slightest grey haze of it, a messy blending together of the buildings at the end of each street. Fires had been raging in the outer districts for several days now, and the Gurkish bombardment had not let up a hair, night or day. Even as Glokta

walked, the breath wheezing through the gaps in his teeth with the effort of putting one foot in front of the other, there came the muffled boom of an incendiary landing somewhere in the city, the tiniest murmur of vibration through the soles of his boots.

The people in the lane froze, staring up in alarm. *Those few unlucky folk who found themselves without excuses to flee the city when the Gurkish came. Those unlucky folk who were too important, or not important enough. An optimistic handful who thought the Gurkish siege would be another passing fad – like a rain storm or short trousers. Too late they discover their grave error*.

Glokta kept hobbling, head lowered. He had not lost a wink of sleep for the explosions rocking the city in the darkness the past week. *I was too busy losing sleep for my mind spinning round and round like a cat in a sack, trying to find some way clear of this trap. I became well-used to explosions during my holiday in charming Dagoska.* For him, the pain lancing through his arse and up his spine was considerably more worrisome.

Oh, arrogance! Who would ever have dared suggest that Gurkish boots would one day trample across the fertile fields of Midderland? That the pretty farms and sleepy villages of the Union would dance with Gurkish fire? Who could ever have expected that beautiful, thriving Adua would turn from a little piece of heaven into a little piece of hell? Glokta felt himself smiling. Welcome, everyone! Welcome! I've been here all along. How nice of you to join me.

He heard armoured boots tramping down the road behind him, shuffled too late out of the way of a hurrying column of soldiers and was barged roughly onto the grassy verge, left foot sliding in the mud and sending a stab of agony up his leg. The column clattered past, heedless, and Glokta grimaced after them. *People no longer have the proper level of fear for the Inquisition. They are all a great deal too afraid of the Gurkish for that.* He stepped away from the wall with a wince and a curse, stretched his neck out and carried on limping.

High Justice Marovia was framed in the largest window of his echoing office, hands clasped behind his back. His windows faced west. *The direction of the main Gurkish assault*. Above the rooftops in the distance,

columns of dark smoke rose into the pale sky, blending together into a gritty pall that rendered the autumn half-light still more funereal. Marovia turned when he heard Glokta's toeless foot creaking on the dark boards, his lined old face alive with a welcoming smile.

'Ah, Superior Glokta! You cannot imagine my delight to hear you announced! I have missed you since your last visit. I do so enjoy your . . . forthright style. I do so admire your . . . commitment to your work.' He flapped one lazy hand towards the window. 'The law, I must admit, tends to be sleepy in times of war. But even with the Gurkish at the gates the noble business of his Majesty's Inquisition continues, eh? I assume you have come once again on behalf of his Eminence?'

Glokta paused. *But only out of habit. I must turn my twisted back on the Inquisition. What would Sult call me? A traitor? No doubt, and worse besides. But every man's first loyalty must be to himself. I have made my sacrifices.* 'No, your Worship. I have come on behalf of Sand dan Glokta.' He limped up to a chair, slid it out and dumped himself into it without being asked. *I am far past the niceties, now.* 'Frankly, I need your help.' *Frankly, you are my last hope.*

'My help? Surely you are not without powerful friends of your own?'

'It is my regrettable experience that powerful men can afford no friends.'

'All too unfortunately true. You do not reach my position, or even yours, without understanding that each man stands alone, in the end.' Marovia gazed down beneficently as he settled into his own tall chair. *Though I am far from put at ease. His smiles are every bit as deadly as Sult's frowns, I think.* 'Our friends must be those that can make themselves useful to us. With that in mind, what help can I offer you? And more importantly, what can you offer me in return?'

'That may take some explaining.' Glokta winced at a cramp in his leg and forced it out straight under the table. 'May I speak entirely honestly with you, your Worship?'

Marovia stroked thoughtfully at his beard. 'The truth is a very rare and valuable commodity. I am astonished that a man of your experience would simply give it away. Especially to someone on the other side of the fence, so to speak.'

'I was once told that a man lost in the desert must take such water as he is offered, regardless of the source.'

‘Lost, are you? Speak honestly, then, Superior, and we will see if I can spare something from my canteen.’

Hardly a promise of succour, but the best I might have hoped for from a man so recently a bitter enemy. And so . . . my confession. Glokta turned over the memories of the last couple of years in his mind. *And a filthy, a shameful, an ugly set they are. Where to begin?* ‘It is some time ago, now, that I began to examine irregularities in the business of the Honourable Guild of Mercers.’

‘I well remember the unfortunate affair.’

‘During my investigations I discovered that the Mercers were financed by a bank. A very wealthy and powerful bank. Valint and Balk.’

Glokta watched carefully for a reaction, but Marovia’s eyes did not so much as flicker. ‘I am aware of the existence of such an institution.’

‘I suspected that they were implicated in the Mercers’ crimes. Magister Kault told me as much before his unfortunate demise. But his Eminence did not wish me to investigate further. Too many complications at a complicated time.’ Glokta’s left eye twitched and he felt it beginning to run. ‘My apologies,’ he muttered as he wiped it with a finger. ‘Shortly afterwards I was dispatched to Dagoska, to take charge of the defence of the city.’

‘Your particular diligence in that matter was a source of some discomfort to me.’ Marovia worked his mouth sourly. ‘My congratulations. You did an extraordinary job.’

‘I cannot entirely take the credit. The task the Arch Lector had given me was impossible. Dagoska was riddled with treason and surrounded by the Gurkish.’

Marovia snorted. ‘One sympathises.’

‘If only anyone had sympathised then, but they were busy here, trying to get the better of each other, as they always are. Dagoska’s defences were in a state entirely inadequate for the task. I could not strengthen them without money—’

‘His Eminence was not forthcoming.’

‘His Eminence would not part with a single mark. But an unlikely benefactor stepped forward in my time of need.’

‘A rich uncle? What a happy chance.’

‘Not entirely.’ Glokta licked at the salty space where his front teeth had once been. *And the secrets begin to spill like turds from a draining latrine-pit*. ‘My rich uncle was none other than the banking house of Valint and Balk.’

Marovia frowned. ‘They advanced you money?’

‘It was thanks to their generosity that I was able to keep the Gurkish out as long as I did.’

‘Bearing in mind that powerful people have no friends, what did Valint and Balk get in return?’

‘In essence?’ Glokta gave the High Justice an even stare. ‘Whatever they wanted. Shortly after returning from Dagoska I was investigating the death of Crown Prince Raynault.’

‘A terrible crime.’

‘Of which the Gurkish ambassador who hung for it was innocent.’

Marovia registered the tiniest hint of surprise. ‘You say so?’

‘Undoubtedly. But the death of the heir to the throne created other problems, problems relating to votes in the Open Council, and his Eminence was happy with the easy answer. I tried to pursue the matter, but was prevented. By Valint and Balk.’

‘You suspect that these bankers were involved in the death of the Crown Prince, then?’

‘I suspect them of all manner of things, but proof is in short supply.’ *Always too many suspicions, and not enough proof.*

‘Banks,’ grunted Marovia. ‘They are made of air. They spin money out of guesses, and lies, and promises. Secrets are their currency, even more than gold.’

‘So I have discovered. But men lost in the desert—’

‘Yes, yes! Please continue.’

Glokta found, to his surprise, that he was greatly enjoying himself. He was almost tripping over his own tongue in his eagerness to blurt it all out. *Now I begin throwing away the secrets I have hoarded for so long, I find I cannot stop. I feel like a miser on a spending spree. Horrified, yet liberated. Agonised, yet delighted. Something like cutting your own throat, I imagine – a glorious release, but one you can enjoy only once. And like cutting my own throat, it will very likely end in my ugly death. Ah well. It has been*

coming some time, has it not? And not even I could claim I don't deserve it ten times over.

Glokta leaned forwards. *Even here, even now, I somehow need to speak it softly.* 'Arch Lector Sult is not happy with our new king. Most particularly, he is not happy with the influence that Bayaz exerts over him. Sult finds his powers much curtailed. He believes, in fact, that you are somehow behind the whole business.'

Marovia frowned. 'Does he now?'

He does, and I am not entirely sure that I discount the possibility. 'He has asked me to find some means of removing Bayaz . . .' His voice dropped almost to a whisper. 'Or removing the king. I suspect, should I fail, that he has other plans. Plans which somehow involve the University.'

'You would seem to be accusing his Eminence the Arch Lector of high treason against the state.' Marovia's eyes were bright and hard as a pair of new nails. *Suspicious, and yet terribly eager.* 'Have you uncovered anything to use against the king?'

'Before I could even consider doing so, Valint and Balk quite forcibly dissuaded me.'

'They knew so quickly?'

'I am forced to concede that someone close to me may not be as reliable as I have always hoped. The bankers not only demanded that I disobey his Eminence, they also insisted that I investigate him. They want to know his plans. I have only a few days to satisfy them, and Sult no longer trusts me enough to share the contents of his latrine with me, let alone the contents of his mind.'

'Oh dear, dear.' Marovia slowly shook his head. 'Oh dear, dear.'

'To add to my woes, I believe that the Arch Lector is considerably less ignorant of what occurred in Dagoska than he at first appeared. If somebody is talking, it may well be that they are talking to both sides.' *If you can betray a man once, after all, it is not so very difficult to do it twice.* Glokta gave a long sigh. *And there we are. The secrets are all spilled. The turd-pit is emptied. My throat is slashed from ear to ear.* 'That is the whole story, your Worship.'

'Well, Superior, you certainly find yourself in quite a pickle.' *Quite a fatal one, in fact.* Marovia got up and wandered slowly around the room. 'Let us suppose, for the moment, that you truly have come for my help, and not to

lead me into some manner of embarrassment. Arch Lector Sult has the means to cause a most serious problem. And the towering self-obsession necessary to try it at a time like this.' *You'll get no argument from me there*. 'If you could obtain compelling evidence, I would, of course, be willing to present it to the king. But I cannot move against a member of the Closed Council, and the Arch Lector in particular, without firm proof. A signed confession would be best.'

'Sult's signed confession?' murmured Glokta.

'Such a document would seem to solve some problems for both of us. Sult would be gone, and the bankers would have lost their hold over you. The Gurkish would still be camped outside our walls of course, but one can't have everything.'

'The Arch Lector's signed confession.' *And shall I pluck the moon from the sky while I'm about it?*

'Or a big enough stone to start the landslide – perhaps the confession of someone suitably close to him. I understand that you are expert at obtaining them.' The High Justice peered at Glokta from under his heavy brows. 'Was I misinformed?'

'I cannot conjure evidence from thin air, your Worship.'

'Those lost in the desert must take the chances they are offered, however slender. Find evidence, and bring it to me. Then I can act, and not one moment before. You understand that I cannot take any risks for you. It is difficult to trust a man who chose his master, and now chooses another.'

'Chose?' Glokta felt his eyelid twitching again. 'If you believe that I chose any part of the pitiful shadow of a life you see before you, you are very much mistaken. I chose glory and success. The box did not contain what was written on the lid.'

'The world is full of tragic tales.' Marovia walked to the window, turning his back and staring out at the darkening sky. 'Especially now. You can hardly expect them to make any difference to a man of my experience. I wish you good day.'

Further comment seems pointless. Glokta rocked forwards, pushed himself painfully up to standing with the aid of his cane, and limped for the door. *But the tiniest glimmer of hope has come creeping into the dank cellar of my despair . . . I need only obtain a confession to High Treason from the head of his Majesty's Inquisition—*

‘And Superior!’ *Why can no one ever finish talking before I get up?* Glokta turned back into the room, his spine burning. ‘If someone close to you is talking, you need to shut them up. Now. Only a fool would consider uprooting treason from the Closed Council before he had cut the weeds from his own lawn.’

‘Oh, you need not worry about my garden, your Worship.’ Glokta treated the High Justice to his most repulsive grin. ‘I am even now sharpening my shears.’

Charity

Adua burned. The two westernmost districts – the Three Farms, at the south-western corner of the city, and the Arches, further north – were hacked with black wounds. Smoke was still pouring up from some of them, great columns lit in faint orange near the base. They spread out in oily smears, dragged away to the west by a stiff wind, drawing a muddy curtain across the setting sun.

Jezal watched in solemn silence, his hands bunched into numb fists on the parapet of the Tower of Chains. There was no sound up here but for the wind fumbling at his ears and, just occasionally, the slightest hint of distant battle. A war cry, or the screams of the wounded. Or perhaps only a sea-bird calling, high on the breeze. Jezal wished for a maudlin moment that he were a bird, and could simply fly from the tower and off over the Gurkish pickets, away from this nightmare. But escape would not be so easy.

'Casamir's Wall was first breached three days ago,' Marshal Varuz was explaining in a monotonous drone. 'We drove back the first two assaults, and held the Three Farms that night, but the next day there was another breach, and another. This damn fire-powder has changed all the bloody rules. A wall that would have stood a week they can bring down in an hour.'

'Khalul always loved to tinker with his dust and his bottles,' muttered Bayaz, unhelpfully.

'They were in the Three Farms in force that night, and carried the gates into the Arches soon afterwards. Ever since, the whole western part of the city has been one running battle.' The tavern where Jezal had celebrated his victory over Filio in the Contest was in that district. The tavern where he had sat with West and Jalenhorm, Kaspa and Brint, before they went away to the North, and he to the Old Empire. Was that building now burning? Was it already a blackened shell?

'We're fighting them hand to hand in the streets by daylight. We're mounting raids in the darkness, every night. Not a stride of ground is given up without it being soaked with Gurkish blood.' Perhaps Varuz hoped to be inspiring, but he was only succeeding in making Jezal feel sick. The streets of his capital soaked in blood, whoever's blood it might have been, was

hardly his first aim as king of the Union. ‘Arnault’s Wall still stands firm, though there are fires burning in the centre of town. The flames almost reached the Four Corners last night, but the rain doused them down, at least for now. We’re fighting for every street, every house, every room. Just as you said we should, your Majesty.’

‘Good,’ Jezal managed to croak, but he almost choked on the word.

When he so blithely turned down General Malzagurt’s terms, he was not sure what he had been expecting. He had dimly imagined that someone would soon come to the rescue. That something heroic would occur. Only now the bloody business was well underway, and there was no sign of instant deliverance. Probably there was heroism going on down there in the smoke. Soldiers hauling injured comrades to safety through the sooty darkness. Nurses stitching wounds by screaming candlelight. Townsfolk plunging into burning buildings to drag out coughing children. Heroism of an everyday and unglamorous kind. A kind that made no difference to the overall outcome.

‘Are those our ships in the bay?’ he asked quietly, already afraid of the answer.

‘I wish they were, your Majesty. I never thought I’d say it, but they have the best of us by sea. You never saw so many damn ships. Even if most of our navy weren’t ferrying the army back from Angland, I’m not sure what they could do. As it is, the men will have to be landed outside the city. It’s a damned inconvenience, and it could get to be a great deal more than that. The docks are a weak spot. Sooner or later they may try to land men there.’

Jezal looked nervously towards the water. Armies of Gurkish, pouring from their ships and into the heart of the city. The Middleway cut straight through the centre of Adua from the bay to the Agriont. A road invitingly wide enough to march an entire Gurkish legion straight down in a twinkling. He shut his eyes and tried to breathe evenly.

Before the arrival of the Gurkish he had hardly been able to have a moment’s silence for the opinions of his councillors. Now that he actually needed advice, the torrent had suddenly run dry. Sult rarely appeared in the Closed Council, and then only to glare at Marovia. The High Justice himself had little to offer beyond bemoaning the fix they were all in. Even Bayaz’ stock of historical examples seemed finally to be exhausted. Jezal was left to carry the responsibility alone, and he was finding it quite a weight. He

supposed it was a good deal more unpleasant for those that were actually wounded, or homeless, or killed, but that was slender consolation.

'How many are dead already?' he found himself asking, like a child picking at a scab. 'How many have we lost?'

'The fighting along Casamir's Wall was fierce. The fighting throughout the occupied districts has been fiercer yet. Casualties on both sides are heavy. I would guess at a thousand dead at least on our side.'

Jezal swallowed sour spit. He thought about the mismatched defenders he had seen near the western gate, in a square now presumably overrun by Gurkish legions. Ordinary people, who had looked to him with hope and pride. Then he tried to picture what a thousand corpses might look like. He imagined a hundred of them, side by side, in a row. Then ten such rows, one above the other. A thousand. He gnawed at his thumbnail, already down to the painful quick.

'And many more wounded, of course,' added Varuz, in a sudden twist of the knife. 'We are very short of space for them, in fact. Two districts are at least partly occupied by the Gurkish and the enemy are landing incendiaries almost in the heart of the city.' Jezal's tongue sought out the still sore gap in his teeth. He remembered his own pain, out on the endless plain under the merciless sky, the stabs through his face as the cartwheels squeaked and jolted.

'Open the Agriont to the wounded, to the homeless. With the army away there is room to spare. Barracks for thousands, and ample provisions. '

Bayaz was shaking his bald head. 'A risk. We have no way of knowing who we would be letting in. Gurkish agents. Spies of Khalul. Not all of them are what they appear.'

Jezal ground his teeth. 'I am prepared to take the risk. Am I king here, or not?'

'You are,' growled Bayaz, 'and you would be well advised to act like it. This is no time for sentiment. The enemy are closing on Arnault's Wall. In places they might be within two miles of where we stand.'

'Two miles?' murmured Jezal, his eyes flickering nervously towards the west again. Arnault's Wall was a fine grey line through the buildings, looking a terribly frail sort of a barrier from up here, and worryingly close. A sudden fear gripped him. Not the guilty concern he felt for the theoretical people down there in the smoke, but a real and very personal fear for his

own life. Like the one he had felt among the stones, when the two warriors advanced on him with murder in mind. Perhaps he had made a mistake not leaving the city when he had the chance. Perhaps it was not too late to—

'I will stand or fall alongside the people of the Union!' he shouted, as angry at his own cowardice as he was at the Magus. 'If they are willing to die for me, then I am willing to die for them!' He turned his shoulder towards Bayaz and quickly looked away. 'Open the Agriont, Marshal Varuz. You can fill the palace with wounded too, if you have to.'

Varuz glanced nervously sideways at Bayaz, then gave a stiff bow. 'Hospitals will be set up in the Agriont, then, your Majesty. The barracks will be opened to the people. The palace we had probably better leave sealed, at least until things get worse.'

Jezal could hardly bear to imagine what worse might look like. 'Good, good. See it done.' He had to wipe a tear from under his eye as he turned away from the smouldering city and made for the long stair. The smoke, of course. Nothing but the smoke.

Queen Terez sat alone, framed in the window of their vast bedchamber.

The Countess Shalere was still lurking around the palace somewhere, but it seemed she had learned to keep her scorn well out of Jezal's way. The rest of Terez' ladies she had sent back to Styria before the Gurkish blockaded the harbour. Jezal rather wished that he could have returned the queen herself along with the rest but that, unfortunately, was not an option.

Terez did not so much as glance in his direction as Jezal shut the door. He had to stifle a heavy sigh as he trudged across the room, his boots muddy from the spitting rain, his skin greasy from the soot in the air outside.

'You are treading dirt with you,' said Terez, without looking round, her voice as icy as ever.

'War is a dirty business, my love.' He saw the side of her face twitch with disgust when he said the last two words, and hardly knew whether he wanted to laugh or cry at it. He dropped down heavily in the chair opposite her without touching his boots, knowing all the while that it would infuriate her. There was nothing he could do that would not.

'Must you come to me in this manner?' she snapped.

'Oh, but I could not stay away! You are my wife, after all.'

‘Not by choice.’

‘It was not my choice either, but I am willing to make the best of things! Believe it or not I would rather have married someone who did not hate me!’ Jezal shoved one hand through his hair and pressed his anger down with some difficulty. ‘But let us not fight, please. I have enough fighting to do out there. More than I can stand! Can we not, at least . . . be civil to one another?’

She looked at him for a long moment, a thoughtful frown on her face. ‘How can you?’

‘How can I what?’

‘Keep trying.’

Jezal ventured a fragment of a grin. ‘I had hoped that you might come to admire my persistence, if nothing else.’ She did not smile, but he sensed, perhaps, the slightest softening of the hard line of her mouth. He hardly dared suppose that she might have finally begun to thaw, but he was willing to seize on the slightest shred of hope. Hope was in short supply, these days. He leaned towards her, staring earnestly into her eyes. ‘You have made it clear that you think very little of me, and I suppose that I hardly blame you. I do not think so very much of myself, believe me. But I am trying . . . I am trying very hard . . . to be a better man.’

The corner of Terez’ mouth twitched up in a sad kind of smile, but a kind of smile nonetheless. To his great surprise she reached out, and placed one hand tenderly on his face. His breath caught in his throat, skin tingling where her fingertips rested.

‘Why can you not understand that I despise you?’ she asked. He felt himself go very cold. ‘I despise the look of you, the feel of you, the sound of your voice. I despise this place and its people. The sooner the Gurkish burn it all to the ground the happier I’ll be.’ She took her hand away and turned back to the window, a glimmering of light down her perfect profile.

Jezal slowly stood up. ‘I think I will find another room to sleep in tonight. This one is altogether too cold.’

‘At last.’

It can be a terrible curse for a man to get everything he ever dreamed of. If the shining prizes turn out somehow to be empty baubles, he is left without even his dreams for comfort. All the things that Jezal had thought he wanted – power, fame, the beautiful trappings of greatness – they were

nothing but dust. All he wanted now was for things to be as they had been, before he got them. But there was no way back. Not ever.

He really had nothing further to say. He turned stiffly and trudged for the door.

Better Left Buried

When the fighting is over you dig, if you're still alive. You dig graves for your dead comrades. A last mark of respect, however little you might have had for them. You dig as deep as you can be bothered, you dump them in, you cover them up, they rot away and are forgotten. That's the way it's always been.

There would be a lot of digging when this fight was done. A lot of digging for both sides.

Twelve days, now, since the fire started falling. Since the wrath of God began to rain on these arrogant pinks, and lay blackened waste to their proud city. Twelve days since the killing started – at the walls, and in the streets, and through the houses. For twelve days in the cold sunlight, in the spitting rain, in the choking smoke, and for twelve nights by the light of flickering fires, Ferro had been in the thick of it.

Her boots slapped against the polished tiles, leaving black marks down the immaculate hallway behind her. Ash. The two districts where the fighting was raging were covered in it, now. It had mingled with the thin rain to make a sticky paste, like black glue. The buildings that still stood, the charred skeletons of the ones that did not, the people who killed and the people who died, all coated in it. The scowling guards and the cringing servants frowned at her and the marks she left, but she had never cared a shit for their opinions, and was not about to start. They would have more ash than they knew what to do with soon. The whole place would be ash, if the Gurkish got their way.

And it looked very much as if they might. Each day and each night, for all the efforts of the rag-tag defenders, for all the dead they left among the ruins, the Emperor's troops worked their way further into the city.

Towards the Agriont.

Yulwei was sitting in the wide chamber when she got there, shrunken into a chair in one corner, the bangles hanging from his limp arms. The calmness which had always seemed to swaddle him like an old blanket was stripped away. He looked worried, worn, eyes sunken in dark sockets. A man

looking defeat in the face. A look that Ferro was getting used to seeing over the past few days.

'Ferro Maljinn, back from the front. I always said that you would kill the whole world if you could, and now you have your chance. How do you like war, Ferro?'

'Well enough.' She tossed her bow rattling onto a polished table, dragged her sword out of her belt, shrugged off her quiver. She had only a few shafts left. Most of them she had left stuck through Gurkish soldiers, out there in the blackened ruins at the edge of the city.

But Ferro could not bring herself to smile.

Killing Gurkish was like eating honey. A little only left you craving more. Too much could become sickening. Corpses had always been a poor reward for all the effort it took to make them. But there was no stopping now.

'You are hurt?'

Ferro squeezed at the filthy bandage round her arm, and watched the blood seep out into the grey cloth. There was no pain. 'No,' she said.

'It is not too late, Ferro. You do not need to die here. I brought you. I can still take you away. I go where I please, and I take who I please with me. If you stop killing now, who knows? Perhaps God will still find a place in heaven for you.'

Ferro was becoming very tired of Yulwei's preaching. She and Bayaz might not have trusted each other a finger's breadth, but they understood each other. Yulwei understood nothing.

' "Heaven"?' she sneered as she turned away from him. 'Perhaps hell suits me better, did you think of that?'

She hunched up her shoulders as footsteps echoed down the hallway outside. She felt Bayaz' anger even before the door was flung open and the old bald pink stormed into the room.

'That little bastard! After all that I have given him, how does he repay me?' Quai and Sulfur slunk through the doorway behind him like a pair of dogs creeping after their master. 'He defies me before the Closed Council! He tells me to mind my business! Me! How would that cringing dunce know what is my business and what is not?'

'Trouble with King Luthar the Magnificent?' grunted Ferro.

The Magus narrowed his eyes at her. 'A year ago there was no emptier head in the whole Circle of the World. Stick a crown on him and have a

crowd of old liars tongue his arse for a few weeks and the little shit thinks he's Stolicus!'

Ferro shrugged. Luthar had never lacked a high opinion of himself, king or not. 'You should be more careful who you stick crowns on.'

'That's the trouble with crowns, they have to go on someone. All you can do is drop them in a crowd and hope for the best.' Bayaz scowled over at Yulwei. 'What of you brother? Have you been walking outside the walls?'

'I have.'

'And what have you seen?'

'Death. Much of that. The Emperor's soldiers flood into the western districts of Adua, his ships choke the bay. Every day more troops come up the road from the south, and tighten the Gurkish grip on the city.'

'That much I can learn from those halfwits on the Closed Council. What of Mamun and his Hundred Words?'

'Mamun, the thrice blessed and thrice cursed? Wondrous first apprentice of great Khalul, God's right hand? He is waiting. He and his brothers, and his sisters, they have a great tent outside the bounds of the city. They pray for victory, they listen to sweet music, they bathe in scented water, they laze naked and enjoy the pleasures of the flesh. They wait for the Gurkish soldiers to carry the walls of the city, and they eat.' He looked up at Bayaz. 'They eat night and day, in open defiance of the Second Law. In brazen mockery of the solemn word of Euz. Making ready for the moment when they will come to seek you out. The moment for which Khalul made them. They think it will not be long, now. They polish their armour.'

'Do they indeed?' hissed Bayaz. 'Damn them then.'

'They have damned themselves already. But that is no help to us.'

'Then we must visit the House of the Maker.' Ferro's head jerked up. There was something about that great, stark tower that had fascinated her ever since she first arrived in Adua. She found her eyes always drawn towards its mountainous bulk, rising untouchable, high above the smoke and the fury.

'Why?' asked Yulwei. 'Do you plan to seal yourself inside? Just as Kanedias did, all those years ago, when we came seeking our vengeance? Will you cower in the darkness, Bayaz? And this time, will you be the one thrown down, to break upon the bridge below?'

The First of the Magi snorted. ‘You know me better than that. When they come for me I will face them in the open. But there are still weapons in the darkness. A surprise or two from the Maker’s forge for our cursed friends beyond the walls.’

Yulwei looked even more worried than before. ‘The Divider?’

‘One edge here,’ whispered Quai from the corner. ‘One on the Other Side.’

Bayaz, as usual, ignored him. ‘It can cut through anything, even an Eater.’

‘Will it cut through a hundred?’ asked Yulwei.

‘I will settle for Mamun alone.’

Yulwei slowly unfolded himself from the chair, stood with a sigh. ‘Very well, lead on. I will enter the Maker’s House with you, one last time.’

Ferro licked her teeth. The idea of going inside was irresistible. ‘I will come with you.’

Bayaz glared back. ‘No, you will not. You can stay here and sulk. That has always been your special gift, has it not? I would hate to deny you the opportunity to make use of it. You will come with us,’ he snapped at Quai. ‘You have your business, eh, Yoru?’

‘I do, Master Bayaz.’

‘Good.’ The First of the Magi strode from the room with Yulwei at his shoulder, his apprentice trudging at the rear. Sulfur did not move. Ferro frowned at him, and he grinned back, his head tipped against the panelled wall, his chin pointed towards the moulded ceiling.

‘Are these Hundred Words not your enemies too?’ Ferro demanded.

‘My deepest and most bitter enemies.’

‘Why do you not fight, then?’

‘Oh, there are other ways to fight than struggling in the dirt out there.’ There was something in those eyes, one dark, one bright, that Ferro did not like the look of. There was something hard and hungry behind his smiles. ‘Though I would love to stay and chat, I must go and give the wheels another push.’ He turned a finger round and round in the air. ‘The wheels must keep turning, eh, Maljinn?’

‘Go then,’ she snapped. ‘I will not stop you.’

‘You could not if you wanted to. I would bid you a good day. But I’d wager you’ve never had one.’ And he sauntered out, the door clicking to behind him.

Ferro was already across the room, shooting back the bolt on the window. She had done as Bayaz told her once before, and it had brought her nothing but a wasted year. She would make her own choices now. She jerked the hangings aside and slipped out onto the balcony. Curled-up leaves blew on the wind, whipping around the lawns below along with the spitting rain. A quick glance up and down the damp paths showed only one guard, and he was looking the wrong way, huddled in his cloak.

Sometimes it is best to seize the moment.

Ferro swung her legs over the rail, gathered herself, then sprang out into the air. She caught a slippery tree branch, swung to the trunk, slid down it to the damp earth and crept behind a neatly clipped hedge, low to the ground.

She heard footsteps, then voices. Bayaz' voice, and Yulwei's, speaking soft into the hissing wind. Damn, but these old fools of Magi loved to flap their lips.

'Sulfur?' came Yulwei's voice. 'He is still with you?'

'Why would he not be?'

'His studies ran in . . . dangerous directions. I told you this, brother.'

'And? Khalul is not so picky with his servants . . .'

They passed out of earshot and Ferro had to rush along behind the hedge to keep pace, staying bent double.

'. . . I do not like this habit,' Yulwei was saying, 'of taking forms, of changing skin. A cursed discipline. You know what Juvens' feelings were on it—'

'I have no time to worry on the feelings of a man centuries in his grave. There is no Third Law, Yulwei.'

'Perhaps there should be. Stealing another's face . . . the tricks of Glustrod and his devil-bloods. Arts borrowed from the Other Side—'

'We must use such weapons as we can find. I have no love for Mamun, but he is right. They are called the Hundred Words because they are a hundred. We are two, and time has not been kind to us.'

'Then why do they wait?'

'You know Khalul, brother. Ever careful, watchful, deliberate. He will not risk his children until he must . . .'

Through the chinks in the bare twigs Ferro watched the three men pass between the guards and out of the gate in the high palace wall. She gave them a few moments, then she started up and strode after, shoulders back,

as though she was about important business. She felt the hard stares of the armoured men flanking the gate, but they were used to her coming and going now. For once they kept their silence.

Between the great buildings, around the statues, through the dull gardens she followed the two Magi and their apprentice across the Agriont. She kept her distance, loitering in doorways, under trees, walking close behind those few people hurrying down the windy streets. Sometimes, above the buildings in a square, or at the end of a lane, the top of the great mass of the Maker's House reared up. Hazy grey through the drizzle to begin with, but growing more black, vast and distinct with each stride she took.

The three men led her to a ramshackle building with crumbling turrets sticking from its sagging roof. Ferro knelt and watched from behind a corner while Bayaz beat on the rickety door with the end of his staff.

'I am glad you did not find the Seed, brother,' said Yulwei, while they waited. 'That thing is better left buried.'

'I wonder if you will still think so when the Hundred Words swarm through the streets of the Agriont, howling for our blood?'

'God will forgive me, I think. There are worse things than Khalul's Eaters.'

Ferro's nails dug into her palms. There was a figure standing at one of the grimy windows, peering out at Yulwei and Bayaz. A long, lean figure with a black mask and short hair. The woman who had chased her and Ninefingers, long before. Ferro's hand strayed on an instinct towards her sword, then she realised she had left it in the palace, and cursed her foolishness. Ninefingers had been right. You could never have too many knives.

The door wobbled open, some words were muttered, the two old men went through, Quai at their back, head bowed. The masked woman watched for a while longer, then stepped back from the window into the darkness. Ferro sprang over a hedge as the door wobbled closed, wedged her foot in the gap and slid through sideways, stealing into the deep shadows on the other side. The door clattered shut on its creaking hinges.

Down a long hallway, dusty paintings on one wall, dusty windows in the other. All the way the back of Ferro's neck prickled, waiting for the black masks to come boiling out of the shadows. But nothing came besides the echoing footsteps up ahead, the mindless droning of the old men's voices.

‘This place has changed,’ Yulwei was saying. ‘Since that day we fought Kanedias. The day the Old Time ended. It rained, then.’

‘I remember it.’

‘I lay wounded on the bridge, in the rain. I saw them fall, the Maker and his daughter. From on high, they tumbled down. Hard to believe, that I smiled to see it, then. Vengeance is a fleeting thrill. The doubts, we carry to our graves.’ Ferro sneered at that. If she could have the vengeance she would live with the doubts.

‘Time has brought us both regrets,’ muttered Bayaz.

‘More of them with every passing year. A strange thing, though. I could have sworn, as I lay there, that it was Kanedias who fell first, and Tolomei second.’

‘Memory can tell lies, especially to men who have lived as long as we. The Maker threw down his daughter, then I him. And so the Old Time ended.’

‘So it did,’ murmured Yulwei. ‘So much lost. And now we are come to this . . .’

Quai’s head snapped round and Ferro plastered herself against the wall behind a leaning cabinet. He stood there, for a long moment, frowning towards her. Then he followed the others. Ferro waited, holding her breath, until the three of them turned a corner and passed out of sight.

She caught them up in a crumbling courtyard, choked with dead weeds, littered with broken slates fallen from the roofs above. A man in a stained shirt led them up a long stairway, towards a dark arch high in the high wall of the Agriont. He had a bunch of jingling keys in his gnarled hands, was muttering something about eggs. Once they had passed into the tunnel Ferro padded across the open space and up the steps, pausing near the top.

‘We will come back shortly,’ she heard Bayaz growling. ‘Leave the door ajar.’

‘It’s always kept locked,’ a voice answered. ‘That’s the rule. It’s been kept locked all my life, and I don’t plan to—’

‘Then wait here until we come back! But go nowhere! I have many better things to do than sit waiting on the wrong side of your locked doors!’ Keys turned. Old hinges squealed. Ferro’s fingers slid round a loose lump of stone and gripped it tightly.

The man in the dirty shirt was pulling the gates shut as she crept to the top of the steps. He muttered angrily as he fumbled with his keys, metal clinking. There was a dull thump as the stone clubbed him across his bald spot. He gasped, lurched forward, Ferro caught his limp body under the arms and lowered him carefully to the ground.

Then she set the rock down and relieved him of his keys with a hooked finger.

As Ferro lifted her hand to push the doors open, a strange sensation washed over her. Like a cool breeze on a hot day, surprising, at first, then delightful. A shiver, not at all unpleasant, worked its way up her spine and made her breath catch. She pressed her hand to the weathered wood, the grain brushing warm and welcoming against her palm. She eased the door open just wide enough to peer through.

A narrow bridge sprang out from the wall of the Agriont, no more than a stride across, without rail or parapet. At the far end it met the side of the Maker's House – a soaring cliff of bare rock, shining black with the rain. Bayaz, Yulwei and Quai stood before a gate at the end of that strip of stone. A gate of dark metal, marked in the centre with bright circles. Rings of letters that Ferro did not understand. She watched Bayaz pull something out from the collar of his shirt. She watched the circles begin to move, to turn, to spin, her heart pounding in her ears. The doors moved silently apart. Slowly, reluctantly, almost, the three men passed into that square of blackness, and were gone.

The House of the Maker stood open.

Grey water slapped at hard stone below as Ferro followed them across the bridge. The rain kissed and the wind nipped at her skin. In the distance, smudges of smoke rose from the smouldering city and into the muddy sky, but her eyes were fixed on the yawning portal straight ahead. She loitered on the threshold for a moment, her hands clenched into fists.

Then she stepped into the darkness.

It was neither cold nor warm on the other side of the gate. The air was so still, and flat, and silent that it seemed to weigh heavily on Ferro's shoulders, to press at her ears. A few muffled steps and the light had all faded. Wind, and rain, and the open sky were dimly remembered dreams. She felt she walked a hundred miles beneath the dead earth. Time itself

seemed to have stopped. Ferro crept up to a wide archway and peered through.

The hall beyond was like a temple, but it would have swallowed whole even the great temple in Shaffa, where thousands called hourly out to God. It dwarfed the lofty dome where Jezal dan Luthar had been given a crown. It was an expanse that made even the vastness of ruined Aulcus seem petty. A place crowded with solemn shadows, peopled with sullen echoes, bounded by angry, unyielding stone. The tomb of long-dead giants.

The grave of forgotten gods.

Yulwei and Bayaz stood at its centre. Tiny, insect figures in an ocean of gleaming darkness. Ferro pressed herself to the cold rock, striving to pick their words out from the sea of echoes.

'Go to the armoury and find some of the Maker's blades. I will go up, and bring . . . that other thing.'

Bayaz turned away, but Yulwei caught him by the arm. 'First answer me one question, brother.'

'What question?'

'The same one I always ask.'

'Again? Even now? Very well, if you must. Ask.'

The two old men stood still for the longest time. Until the last echoes had faded and left only a silence as heavy as lead. Ferro held her breath.

'Did you kill Juvens?' Yulwei's whisper hissed through the darkness. 'Did you kill our master?'

Bayaz did not flinch. 'I made mistakes, long ago. Many mistakes, I know. Some out in the ruined west. Some here, in this place. The day does not pass when I do not regret them. I fought with Khalul. I ignored my master's wisdom. I trespassed in the House of the Maker. I fell in love with his daughter. I was proud, and vain, and rash, all this is true. But I did not kill Juvens.'

'What happened that day?'

The First of the Magi spoke the words as though they were lines long rehearsed. 'Kanedias came to take me. For seducing his daughter. For stealing his secrets. Juvens would not give me up. They fought, I fled. The fury of their battle lit the skies. When I returned, the Maker was gone, and our master was dead. I did not kill Juvens.'

Again a long silence, and Ferro watched, frozen. ‘Very well.’ Yulwei let fall his hand from Bayaz’ arm. ‘Mamun lied, then. Khalul lied. We will fight against them together.’

‘Good, my old friend, good. I knew that I could trust you, as you can trust me.’ Ferro curled her lip. Trust. It was a word that only liars used. A word the truthful had no need of. The First of the Magi’s footsteps rang out as he strode towards one of the many archways and vanished into the gloom.

Yulwei watched him go. Then he gave a sharp sigh, and padded off in the other direction, his bangles jingling on his thin arms. The echoes of his passing slowly faded, and Ferro was left alone with the shadows, wrapped in silence.

Slowly, carefully, she crept forwards into that immense emptiness. The floor glittered – snaking lines of bright metal, set into the black rock. The ceiling, if there was one, was shrouded in darkness. A high balcony ran around the walls a good twenty strides up, another far above that, then another, and another, vague in the half-light. Above all, a beautiful device hung. Rings of dark metal, great and small, gleaming discs and shining circles, marked with strange writings. All moving. All revolving, one ring about the other, and at their centre a black ball, the one point of perfect stillness.

She turned round, and round, or perhaps she stood still and the room turned about her. She felt dizzy, drunken, breathless. The bare rock soared away into the black, rough stones without mortar, no two alike. Ferro tried to imagine how many stones the tower was made of.

Thousands. Millions.

What had Bayaz said, on the island at the edge of the World? Where does the wise man hide a stone? Among a thousand. Among a million. The rings high above shifted gently. They pulled at her, and the black ball in the centre pulled at her most of all. Like a beckoning hand. Like a voice calling out her name.

She dug her fingers into the dry spaces between the stones and began to climb, hand over hand, up and up. It was easily done. As though the wall was meant to be climbed. Soon she swung her legs over the metal rail of the first balcony. On again, without pausing for breath, up and up. She reached the second balcony, sticky with sweat in the dead air. She reached the third,

breath rasping. She gripped the rail of the fourth, and pulled herself over. She stood, staring down.

Far below, at the bottom of a black abyss, the whole Circle of the World lay on the round floor of the hall. A map, the coastlines picked out in shining metal. Level with Ferro, filling almost all the space within the gently curving gallery, suspended on wires no thicker than threads, the great mechanism slowly revolved.

She frowned at the black ball in its centre, her palms tingling. It seemed to hover there, without support. She should have wondered how that could be, but all she could think about was how much she wanted to touch it. Needed to. She had no choice. One of the metal circles drifted close to her, gleaming dully.

Sometimes it is best to seize the moment.

She sprang up onto the rail, crouched there for an instant, gathering herself. She did not think. Thinking would have been madness. She leapt into empty space, limbs flailing. The whole machine wobbled and swayed as she caught hold of its outermost ring. She swung underneath, hanging breathless. Slowly, delicately, her tongue pressed into the roof of her mouth, she pulled herself up by her arms, hooked her legs over the metal and dragged herself along it. Soon it brought her close to a wide disc, scored with grooves, and she clambered from one to the other, body trembling with effort. The cool metal quivered under her weight, twisting and flexing, wobbling with her every movement, threatening to shrug her off into the empty void. Ferro might have had no fear in her.

But plunges of a hundred strides onto the hardest of hard rock still demanded her deep respect.

So she slithered out, from one ring to another, hardly daring even to breathe. She told herself there was no drop. She was only climbing trees, sliding between their branches, the way she had when she was a child, before the Gurkish came. Finally she caught hold of the innermost ring. She clung to it, furious tight, waiting until its own movement brought her close to the centre. She hung down, legs crossed around the frail metal, one hand gripping it, the other reaching out towards that gleaming black ball.

She could see her rigid face reflected in its perfect surface, her clawing hand, swollen and distorted. She strained forward with every nerve, teeth gritted. Closer, and closer yet. All that mattered was to touch it. The very tip

of her middle finger brushed against it and, like a bubble bursting, it vanished into empty mist.

Something dropped free, falling, slowly, as if it sank through water. Ferro watched it tumble away from her, a darker spot in the inky darkness, down, and down. It struck the floor with a boom that seemed to shake the very foundations of the Maker's House, filled the hall with crashing echoes. The ring that Ferro clung to trembled and for a giddy instant she nearly lost her grip. When she managed to haul herself back she realised that it had stopped moving.

The whole device was still.

It seemed to take her an age to clamber back across the motionless rings to the topmost gallery, to make the long descent down the towering walls. When she finally dropped to the floor of the cavernous chamber her clothes were torn, her hands, elbows, knees grazed and bloody, but she scarcely noticed. She ran across the wide floor, her footsteps ringing out. Towards the very centre of the hall, where the thing that had fallen from above still lay.

It looked like nothing more than an uneven chunk of dark stone the size of a big fist. But this was no stone, and Ferro knew it. She felt something leaking from it, pouring from it, flooding out in thrilling waves. Something that could not be seen, or touched, and yet filled the whole space to its darkest reaches. Invisible, yet irresistible, it flowed tingling around her and dragged her forwards.

Ferro's heart thumped at her ribs as her footsteps drew close. Her mouth flooded with hungry spit as she knelt beside it. Her breath clawed in her throat as she reached out, palm itching. Her hand closed around its pocked and pitted surface. Very heavy, and very cold, as if it were a chunk of frozen lead. She lifted it slowly up, turning it in her hand, watching it glitter in the darkness, fascinated.

'The Seed.'

Bayaz stood in one of the archways, face trembling with an ugly mixture of horror and delight. 'Leave, Ferro, now! Take it to the palace.' He flinched, raised one arm, as if to shield his eyes from a blinding glare. 'The box is in my chambers. Put it inside, and seal it tight, do you hear me? Seal it tight!'

Ferro turned away, scowling, not sure now which of the archways led out of the Maker's House.

'Wait!' Quai was padding across the floor towards her, his gleaming eyes fixed on her hand. 'Stay!' He showed no trace of fear as he came closer. Only an awful kind of hunger, strange enough that Ferro took a step away. 'It was here. Here, all along.' His face looked pale, slack, full of shadows. 'The Seed.' His white hand crept through the darkness towards her. 'At last. Give it to—'

He crumpled up like discarded paper, was ripped from his feet and flung away the whole width of the vast room in the time it took Ferro to drag in one stunned breath. He hit the wall just below the lowest balcony with an echoing crunch. She watched open-mouthed as his shattered body bounced off and tumbled to the ground, broken limbs flopping.

Bayaz stepped forward, his staff clenched tightly in his fist. The air around his shoulders was still shimmering ever so slightly. Ferro had killed many men, of course, and shed no tears. But the speed of this shocked even her.

'What did you do?' she hissed, the echoes of Quai's fatal impact with the far wall still thudding ahout them.

'What I had to. Get to the palace. Now.' Bayaz stabbed at one of the archways with a heavy finger, and Ferro saw the faintest glimmer of light inside it. 'Put that thing into the box! You cannot imagine how dangerous it is!'

Few people liked taking orders less, but Ferro had no wish to stay in this place. She stuffed the lump of rock down inside her shirt. It felt right there, pressed against her stomach. Cool and comforting, for all Bayaz called it dangerous. She took one step, and as her boot slapped down a grating chuckle floated up from the far side of the hall.

From where Quai's ruined corpse had fallen.

Bayaz did not seem surprised. 'So!' he shouted. 'You show yourself at last! I have suspected for some time that you were not who you appeared to be! Where is my apprentice, and when did you replace him?'

'Months ago.' Quai was still chuckling as he pushed himself slowly up from the polished floor. 'Before you left on your fool's errand to the Old Empire.' There was no blood on his smiling face. Not so much as a graze. 'I sat beside you, at the fire. I watched you while you lay helpless in that cart.

I was with you all the way, to the edge of the World and back. Your apprentice stayed here. I left his half-eaten corpse in the bushes for the flies, not twenty strides from where you and the Northman soundly slept.'

'Huh.' Bayaz tossed his staff from one hand to the other. 'I thought I noted a sharp improvement in your skills. You should have killed me then, when you had the chance.'

'Oh, there is time now.' Ferro shivered as she watched Quai stand. The hall seemed to have grown suddenly very cold.

'A hundred words? Perhaps. One word?' Bayaz' lip curled. 'I think not. Which of Khalul's creatures are you? The East Wind? One of those damned twins?'

'I am not one of Khalul's creatures.'

The faintest flicker of doubt passed over Bayaz' face. 'Who, then?'

'We knew each other well, in times long past.'

The First of the Magi frowned. 'Who are you? Speak!'

'Taking forms.' A woman's voice, soft and low. Something was happening to Quai's face as he paced slowly forward. His pale skin drooped, twisted. 'A dread and insidious trick.' His nose, his eyes, his lips began to melt, running off his skull like wax down a candle. 'Do you not remember me, Bayaz?' Another face showed itself beneath, a hard face, white as pale marble. 'You said that you would love me forever.' The air was icy chill. Ferro's breath was smoking before her mouth. 'You promised me that we would never be parted. When I opened my father's gate to you . . .'

'No!' Bayaz took a faltering step back.

'You look surprised. Not as surprised as I was, when instead of taking me in your arms you threw me down from the roof, eh, my love? And why? So that you could keep your secrets? So that you could seem noble?' Quai's long hair had turned white as chalk. It floated now about a woman's face, terribly pale, eyes two bright, black points. Tolomei. The Maker's daughter. A ghost, stepped out of the faded past. A ghost that had walked beside them for months, wearing a stolen shape. Ferro could almost feel her icy breath, cold as death on the air. Her eyes flickered from that pale face to the archway, far away across the floor, caught between wanting to run, and needing to know more.

'I saw you in your grave!' whispered Bayaz. 'I piled the earth over you myself!'

‘So you did, and wept when you did, as though you had not been the one to throw me down.’ Her black eyes swivelled to Ferro, to where the Seed lay tingling against her belly. ‘But I had touched the Other Side. In these two hands I had held it, while my father worked, and it had left me altered. There I lay, in the earth’s cold embrace. Between life and death. Until I heard the voices. The voices that Glustrod heard, long ago. They offered me a bargain. My freedom for theirs.’

‘You broke the First Law!’

‘Laws mean nothing to the buried! When I finally clawed my way from the grasping earth the human part of me was gone. But the other part, the part that belongs to the world below – that cannot die. It stands before you. Now I will complete the work that Glustrod began. I will throw open the doors that my grandfather sealed. This world and the Other Side shall be one. As they were before the Old Time. As they were always meant to be.’ She held out her open hand, and a bitter chill flowed from it and sent shivers across Ferro’s back to the tips of her fingers. ‘Give me the Seed, child. I made a promise to the Tellers of Secrets, and I keep the promises I make.’

‘We shall see!’ snarled the First of the Magi. Ferro felt the tugging in her stomach, saw the air around Bayaz begin to blur. Tolomei stood ten strides away from him. The next instant she struck him with a sound like a thunderclap. His staff burst apart, splintered wood flying. He gave a shocked splutter as he flew through the darkness, rolled over and over across the cold stone to lie face down in a crumpled heap. Ferro stared as a wave of freezing air washed over her. She felt a sick and terrible fear, all the worse for being unfamiliar. She stood frozen.

‘The years have made you weak.’ The Maker’s daughter moved slowly now, silently towards Bayaz’ senseless body, her white hair flowing out behind her like the ripples on a frosty pool. ‘Your Art cannot harm me.’ She stood over him, her dry white lips spreading into an icy smile. ‘For all you took from me. For my father.’ She raised her foot above Bayaz’ bald head. ‘For myself—’

She burst into brilliant flames. Harsh light flickered to the furthest corners of the cavernous chamber, brightness stabbed into the very cracks between the stones. Ferro stumbled back, holding one hand over her eyes. Between

her fingers she saw Tolomei reel madly across the floor, thrashing and dancing, white flames wreathing her body, her hair a coiling tongue of fire.

She flopped to the ground, the darkness closing back in, smoke pouring up in a reeking cloud. Yulwei padded out from one of the archways, his dark skin shining with sweat. He held a bundle of swords under one scrawny arm. Swords of dull metal, like the one that Ninefingers had carried, each marked with a single silver letter. 'Are you alright, Ferro?'

'I . . .' The fire had brought no warmth with it. Ferro's teeth were rattling, the hall had grown so cold. 'I . . .'

'Go.' Yulwei frowned at Tolomei's body as the last flames died. Ferro finally found the strength to move, began to back away. She felt a bitter sinking in her gut as she watched the Maker's daughter climb up, the ash of Quai's clothes sliding from her body. She stood, tall and deathly lean, naked and as bald as Bayaz, her hair all seared away to grey dust. There was not so much as a mark on her corpse-pale skin, gleaming flawless white.

'Always there is something more.' She glared at Yulwei with her flat black eyes. 'No fire can burn me, conjuror. You cannot stop me.'

'But I must try.' The Magus flung his swords into the air. They turned, spun, edges glittering, spreading apart in the darkness, drifting impossibly sideways. They began to fly around Yulwei and Ferro in a whirling circle. Faster and faster until they were a blur of deadly metal. Close enough that if Ferro had reached out, her hand would have been snatched off at the wrist.

'Stand still,' said Yulwei.

That hardly needed saying. Ferro felt a surge of anger, hot and familiar. 'First I should run, then stand still? First the Seed is at the Edge of the World, and now it is here at the centre? First she is dead and now she has stolen another's face? You old bastards need to get your stories straight.'

'They are liars!' snarled Tolomei, and Ferro felt the cold of her freezing breath wash over her cheek and chill her to the bone. 'Users! You cannot trust them!'

'But I can trust you?' Ferro snorted her contempt. 'Fuck yourself!'

Tolomei nodded slowly. 'Then die, along with the rest.' She padded sideways, balanced on her toes, rings of white frost spreading out wherever her bare feet touched the ground. 'You cannot keep juggling your knives forever, old man.'

Over her white shoulder, Ferro saw Bayaz get slowly to his feet, holding one arm with the other, rigid face scratched and bloody. Something dangled from his limp fist – a long mass of metal tubes with a hook on the end, dull metal gleaming in the darkness. His eyes rolled to the far-off ceiling, veins bulging from his neck with effort as the air began to twist around him. Ferro felt that sucking in her gut and her eyes were drawn upwards. Up to the great machine that hung above their heads. It began to tremble.

'Shit,' she muttered, starting to back away.

If Tolomei noticed, she showed no sign. She bent her knees and sprang high into the air, a white streak over the spinning swords. She hung above for an instant, then plummeted down towards Yulwei. She crashed into the floor, knees first, the impact making the ground shake. A splinter of stone grazed Ferro's cheek and she felt a blast of icy wind against her face, lurched a step back.

The Maker's daughter frowned up. 'You do not die easily, old man,' she snarled as the echoes faded.

Ferro could not tell how Yulwei had avoided her, but now he danced away, his hands moving in slow circles, bangles jingling, swords still tumbling through the air behind him. 'I have been working at it all my life. You do not die easily either.'

The Maker's daughter stood and faced him. 'I do not die.'

High above the huge device lurched, cables pinging as they snapped, whipping in the darkness. With an almost dreamlike slowness, it began to fall. Glittering metal twisted, flexed, shrieked as it tumbled down. Ferro turned and ran. Five breathless strides and she flung herself down, sliding flat on her face across the polished rock. She felt the Seed digging into her stomach, the wind of the spinning swords ripping close to her back as she passed just beneath them.

The great machine hit the floor behind her with a noise like the music of hell. Each ring made a vast cymbal, a giant's gong. Each struck its own mad note, a screaming, clanging, booming of tortured metal, loud enough to make every one of Ferro's bones buzz. She looked up to see one great disc reel past her, clattering on its edge, striking bright sparks from the floor. Another flew into the air, spin-ning crazily like a flipped coin. She gasped as she rolled out of its way, scrambled back as it crashed into the ground beside her.

Where Yulwei and Tolomei had faced each other there was a hill of twisted metal, of broken rings and leaning discs, bent rods and tangled cables. Ferro struggled dizzily to her feet, a fury of discordant echoes ripping about the hall. Splinters dropped around her, pinging from the polished floor. Fragments were scattered the width of the hall, glinting in the shadows like stars in the night sky.

She had no idea who was dead and who alive.

'Out!' Bayaz growled at her through gritted teeth, face a twisted mask of pain. 'Out! Go!'

'Yulwei,' she muttered, 'is he—'

'I will come back for him!' Bayaz flailed at her with his good arm. 'Go!'

There are times to fight, and there are times to run, and Ferro knew well the difference. The Gurkish had taught it to her, deep in the Badlands. The archway jerked and wobbled as she sprinted towards it. Her own breath roared in her ears. She leaped over a gleaming wheel of metal, boots slapping at the smooth stone. She was almost at the archway. She felt a bitter chill at her side, a rush of sick terror. She flung herself forwards.

Tolomei's white hand missed Ferro by a whisker, tore a great chunk of stone from the wall and filled the air with dust.

'You go nowhere!'

Time to run, perhaps, but Ferro's patience was all worn down. As she sprang up her fist already swinging, all the fury of her wasted months, her wasted years, her wasted life behind it. Her knuckles hit Tolomei's jaw with a sharp crunch. It was like punching a block of ice. There was no pain as her hand broke, but she felt her wrist buckle, her arm go numb. Too late to worry on it. Her other fist was on its way.

Tolomei snatched her arm from the air before it touched her, dragged Ferro close, twisting her helpless onto her knees with awful, irresistible strength. 'The Seed!' The hissing words froze across Ferro's face, snatching her breath out in a sick groan, her skin burning where Tolomei held her. She felt her bones twist, then snap, her forearm clicking sideways like a broken stick. A white hand crept through the shadows towards the lump in Ferro's shirt.

There was a sudden light, a brilliant curve of it that lit the whole chamber for a blinding instant. Ferro heard a piercing shriek and she was free, sprawling on her back. Tolomei's hand was sliced off cleanly just above the

wrist, leaving a bloodless stump. A great wound was scored down the smooth wall and deep into the floor, molten stone running from it, bubbling and sizzling. Smoke curled from the strange weapon in Bayaz' hand as he lurched from the shadows, the hook at its end still glowing orange. Tolomei gave an icy scream, one hand clawing at him.

Bayaz roared mindlessly back at her, his eyes narrowed, his bloody mouth wide open. Ferro felt a twisting at her stomach, so savage she was bent over, almost dragged to her knees. The Maker's daughter was snatched up and blasted away, one white heel tearing a long scar through the map on the floor, gouging through rock and ripping up metal.

The wreck of the grand device was blown apart behind her, its ruined pieces scattered glittering in the darkness like leaves on the wind. Tolomei was a flailing shape in a storm of flying metal. She hit the distant wall with an earth-shaking boom, flinging out chunks of broken stone. A hail of twisted fragments rattled, rang, clanged against the rock around her. Rings, pins, slivers like dagger blades wedged into the wall, making the whole great curve of stone a giant bed of nails.

Bayaz' eyes bulged, his gaunt face wet with sweat. 'Die, devil!' he bellowed.

Dust filtered down, rock began to shift. Cold laughter echoed out across the hall. Ferro scrambled back, heels kicking at the smooth stone, and she ran. Her broken hand shuddered over the wall of the tunnel, her broken arm dangled. A square of light came jolting towards her. The door of the Maker's House.

She tottered out into the air, stinging bright after the shadows, the thin rain warm after Tolomei's freezing touch. The Seed still weighed heavy in her shirt, rough and comforting against her skin.

'Run!' came Bayaz' voice from the darkness. 'To the palace!' Ferro tottered across the bridge, clumsy feet slipping on wet stone, cold water lurching far below. 'Put it in the box, and seal it tight!' She heard an echoing boom behind her, metal clashing against metal, but she did not look back.

She shouldered her way through the open doors in the wall of the Agriont, nearly tripping over the doorman, sitting against the wall where she had left him with one hand clasped to his head. She sprang over him as he cringed away, flew down the steps three at a time, across the crumbling courtyard,

down the dusty corridors, sparing no thought for masked figures or for anyone else. They seemed a pitiful, everyday sort of threat, now. She could still feel the icy breath on her neck.

Nothing mattered but to put it far behind her.

She slid up to the door, fumbled at the bolt with the heel of her broken hand, burst out into the drizzle and pounded down the wet streets the way she had come. The people in the lanes and squares stumbled back out of her way, shocked at the sight of her, desperate and bloody. Angry voices echoed after her but she ignored them, turned a corner onto a wide street between grey buildings and nearly slid right over on the wet stones.

A great crowd of dishevelled people were choking the road. Women, children, old men, dirty and shambling.

'Out of my way!' she screamed, and started to force a path through. 'Move!' The story Bayaz had told on the endless plain nagged at the back of her mind. How the soldiers had found the Seed in the ruins of Aulcus. How they had withered and died. She pushed and kicked and shouldered her way through the press. 'Move!' She tore free of them and sprinted off down the empty street, her broken arm held against her body, against the thing inside her shirt.

She ran across the park, leaves fluttering down from the trees with each chilly gust. The high wall of the palace rose up where the lawns ended and Ferro made for the gate. The two guards still flanked it just as they always did, and she knew they were watching her. They might have let her out, but they were not so keen on letting her in, especially filthy, bloody, covered in dirt and sweat, and running as if she had a devil at her heels.

'Wait, you!' Ferro made to duck past them but one grabbed hold of her.

'Let me go you fucking pink fools!' she hissed. 'You don't understand! ' She tried to twist away, and a gilded halberd fell to the ground as one of the guards wrapped his arms around her.

'Explain it, then!' snapped out from behind the visor of the other. 'Why the hurry?' His gauntleted fist reached out towards the bulge in her shirt. 'What have you got—'

'No!' Ferro hissed and squirmed, stumbled against the wall bearing one guard clanking back into the archway. The halberd of the other swung down smoothly, its glittering point levelled at Ferro's chest.

'Hold still!' he growled, 'before I—'

‘Let her in! Now!’ Sulfur stood on the other side of the gates, and for once he was not smiling. The guard’s head turned doubtfully towards him. ‘Now!’ he roared, ‘in the name of Lord Bayaz!’

They let her free and Ferro tore away, cursing. She ran through the gardens, into the palace, boots echoing in the hallways, servants and guards moving suspiciously out of her way. She found the door of Bayaz’ rooms and fumbled it open, stumbled through. The box sat open on a table near the window, an unremarkable block of dark metal. She strode across to it, unbuttoned her shirt and pulled out the thing inside.

A dark, heavy stone, the size of a fist. Its dull surface was still cold, no warmer than when she had first picked it up. Her hand tingled pleasantly, as if at the touch of an old friend. It made her angry, somehow, to even think of letting go.

So this, at last, was the Seed. The Other Side, made flesh. The very stuff of magic. She remembered the blighted ruins of Aulcus. The dead expanse of the land around it, for a hundred miles in every direction. Power enough to send the Emperor, and the Prophet, and his cursed Eaters, and the whole nation of Gurkhul to hell, and more besides. Power so terrible that it should have belonged to God alone, held now, in her frail fist. She stared down at it for a long time. Then, slowly, Ferro began to smile.

Now she would have vengeance.

The sound of heavy footsteps in the corridor outside brought her suddenly to her senses. She dropped the Seed into its resting place, jerked her hand away with an effort and snapped the lid of the box closed. As if a candle flame had been suddenly blown out in a darkened room, the world seemed dimmer, weaker, robbed of excitement. It was only then that she realised her hand was whole. She frowned down at it, working her fingers. They moved as easily as ever, not the slightest swelling around knuckles she had been sure were shattered. Her other arm too, the forearm straight and smooth, no sign of a mark where Tolomei’s freezing fingers had crushed it. Ferro looked towards the box. She had always healed quickly. But bones set, within an hour?

That was not right.

Bayaz dragged himself grimacing through the doorway. There was dry blood caked to his beard, a sheen of sweat across his bald head. He was breathing hard, skin pale and twitching, one arm pressed to his side. He

looked like a man who had spent the afternoon fighting a devil, and had only just survived.

'Where is Yulwei?'

The First of the Magi stared back at her. 'You know where he is.'

Ferro remembered the echoing bang as she ran from the tower. Like the sound of a door being shut. A door that no blade, no fire, no magic could open. Bayaz alone had the key. 'You did not go back. You sealed the gates with them inside.'

'Sacrifices must be made, Ferro, you know this. I have made a great sacrifice today. My own brother.' The First of the Magi hobbled across the room towards her. 'Tolomei broke the First Law. She struck a deal with the Tellers of Secrets. She meant to use the Seed to open the gates to the world below. She could be more dangerous than all of Khalul's Eaters. The House of the Maker must remain sealed. Until the end of time, if need be. An outcome not without irony. She began her life imprisoned in that tower. Now she has returned. History moves in circles, just as Juvens always said.'

Ferro frowned. 'Fuck your circles, pink. You lied to me. About Tolomei. About the Maker. About everything.'

'And?'

She frowned even harder. 'Yulwei was a good man. He helped me in the desert. He saved my life.'

'And mine, more than once. But good men will only go so far along dark paths.' Bayaz' bright eyes slid down to rest on the cube of dark metal under Ferro's hand. 'Others must walk the rest of the way.'

Sulfur stepped through the doorway, and Bayaz pulled the weapon he had brought from the House of the Maker from under his coat, grey metal glinting in the soft light from the windows. A relic of the Old Time. A weapon that Ferro had seen cut stone as if it was butter. Sulfur took it from him with a nervous respect, wrapped it carefully in an old oilskin. Then he flipped open his satchel and slid out the old black book that Ferro had seen once before. 'Now?' he muttered.

'Now.' Bayaz took it from him, placed his hand gently on the scarred cover, closed his eyes and took a long breath. When he opened them he was looking straight at Ferro. 'The paths we must walk now, you and I, are dark indeed. You have seen it.'

She had no answer. Yulwei had been a good man, but the gate of the Maker's House was sealed, and he was gone to heaven, or to hell. Ferro had buried many men, in many ways. One more pile of dirt in the desert was nothing to remark upon. She was sick of stealing her revenge one grain at a time. Dark paths did not scare her. She had been walking them all her life. Even through the metal of the box, she thought that she heard the barest hint of a whisper, calling to her. 'All I want is vengeance.'

'And you shall have it, just as I promised.'

She stood face to face with Bayaz, and she shrugged. 'Then what does it matter now, who killed who a thousand years ago?'

The First of the Magi smiled a sickly smile, his eyes bright in his pale and bloody face. 'You speak my very thoughts.'

Tomorrow's Hero

The hooves of Jezal's grey charger clopped obediently in the black mud. It was a magnificent beast, the very kind he had always dreamed of riding. Several thousand marks-worth of horse flesh, he did not doubt. A steed that could give any man who sat on it, however worthless, the air of royalty. His shining armour was of the best Styrian steel, chased with gold. His cloak was of the finest Suljuk silk, trimmed with ermine. The hilt of his sword was crusted with diamonds, twinkling as the clouds flowed overhead to let the sun peep through. He had foregone the crown today in favour of a simple golden circlet, its weight considerably less wearisome on the sore spots he had developed round his temples.

All the trappings of majesty. Ever since he was a child, Jezal had dreamed of being exalted, worshipped, obeyed. Now the whole business made him want to be sick. Although that might only have been because he had scarcely slept last night, and scarcely eaten that morning.

Lord Marshal Varuz rode on Jezal's right, looking as if age had suddenly caught up with him. He seemed shrunken in his uniform, stooped and slump-shouldered. His movements had lost their steely precision, his eyes their icy focus. He had developed, somehow, the very slightest hint of not knowing what to do.

'Fighting still continues in the Arches, your Majesty,' he was explaining, 'but we have only toe-holds there. The Gurkish have the Three Farms under firm control. They moved their catapults forward to the canal, and last night they threw incendiaries far into the central district. As far as the Middleway and beyond. Fires were burning until dawn. Still are burning, in some parts. The damage has been . . . extensive.'

A crashing understatement. Whole sections of the city had been devastated by fire. Whole rows of buildings, that Jezal remembered as grand houses, busy taverns, clattering workshops, reduced to blackened wreckage. Looking at them was as horrifying as seeing an old lover open their mouth to reveal two rows of shattered teeth. The reek of smoke, and burning, and death clawed constantly at Jezal's throat and had reduced his voice to a gravely croak.

A man streaked with ash and dirt looked up from picking through the wreckage of a still-smoking house. He stared at Jezal and his guards as they trotted past.

'Where is my son?' he shrieked suddenly. 'Where is my son?'

Jezal carefully looked away and gave his horse the slightest suggestion of a spur. He did not need to offer his conscience any further weapons with which to stab at him. It was already exceedingly well armed.

'Arnault's Wall still holds, though, your Majesty.' Varuz spoke considerably louder than was necessary in a futile effort to smother the heartbroken wails still ringing through the ruins behind them. 'Not a single Gurkish soldier has yet set foot in the central district of the city. Not one.'

Jezal wondered how much longer they would be able to make that boast. 'Have we received any news from Lord Marshal West?' he demanded for the second time that hour, the tenth time that day.

Varuz gave Jezal the same answer he would no doubt receive ten times more before descending into a fitful sleep that night. 'I regret that we are almost utterly cut off, your Majesty. News arrives but rarely through the Gurkish cordon. But there have been storms off Angland. We must face the possibility that the army will be delayed.'

'Black luck,' murmured Bremer dan Gorst from the other side, his narrow eyes flickering endlessly over the ruins for the slightest sign of any threat. Jezal chewed worriedly at the salty remnant of his thumbnail. He could scarcely remember the last shred of good news. Storms. Delays. Even the elements were ranged against them, it seemed.

Varuz had nothing to lift the mood. 'And now illness has broken out in the Agriont. A swift and merciless plague. A large group of the civilians to whom you opened the gates have succumbed, all at once. It has extended to the palace itself. Two Knights of the Body have already died from it. One day they were standing guard at the gate, as always. The next night they were in their coffins. Their bodies withered, their teeth rotted, their hair fell out. The corpses are burned, but more cases appear. The physicians have never seen the like before, have no notion of a cure. Some are saying it is a Gurkish curse.'

Jezal swallowed. The magnificent city, the work of so many pairs of hands over long centuries, it had taken only a few short weeks of his tender care to transform into charred wreckage. Its proud people were mostly

reduced to stinking beggars, to shrieking wounded, to wailing mourners. Those who had not been reduced to corpses. He was the most pathetic excuse for a king the Union could ever have spawned. He could not bring happiness to his own bitter sham of a marriage, let alone a nation. His reputation was all based on lies that he had not the courage to deny. He was a powerless, spineless, helpless cipher.

'Whereabouts are we now?' he mumbled as they rode out into a great, windswept space.

'Why, this is the Four Corners, your Majesty.'

'This? This cannot . . .' He trailed off, recognition coming as sharply as a slap in the face.

Only two walls of the building that had once been the Mercers' guildhall still stood, windows and doorways gaping like the stricken features of corpses, frozen at the moment of their deaths. The paving where hundreds of merry stalls had once been set out was cracked and caked with sticky soot. The gardens were leafless patches of mud and burned briar. The air should have been ringing with the calls of traders, the prattle of servants, the laughter of children. Instead it was deadly silent but for a cold wind hissing through the wreckage, sweeping waves of black grit through the heart of the city.

Jezal pulled on his reins, and his escort of some twenty Knights of the Body, five Knights Herald, a dozen of Varuz' staff and a nervous page or two clattered to a halt around him. Gorst frowned up towards the sky. 'Your Majesty, we should move on. It is not safe here. We do not know when the Gurkish will begin their bombardment again.'

Jezal ignored him, swung down from his saddle and walked out into the wreckage. It was difficult to believe that it was the same place where he had once bought wine, shopped for trinkets, been measured for a new uniform. Not one hundred strides away, on the other side of a row of smoking ruins, stood the statue of Harod the Great where he had met Ardee in the darkness, it seemed a hundred years ago.

A sorry group were clustered near there now, round the edge of a trampled garden. Women and children, mostly, and a few old men. Dirty and despairing, several with crutches or bloody bandages, clutching salvaged oddments. Those rendered homeless in last night's fires, last night's fighting. Jezal's breath caught in his throat. Ardee was one of them, sitting

on a stone in a thin dress, shivering and staring at the ground, her dark hair fallen across half of her face. He started towards her, the first time he had smiled in what felt like weeks.

'Ardee.' She turned, eyes wide open, and Jezal froze. A different girl, younger and considerably less attractive. She blinked up at him, rocking slowly back and forward. His hands twitched ineffectually, he mumbled something incoherent. They were all watching him. He could hardly just walk off. 'Please, take this.' He fumbled with the gilded clasps on his crimson cloak and held it out to her.

She said nothing as she took it from him, only stared. A ridiculous, worthless gesture, almost offensive in its burning hypocrisy. But the rest of the homeless civilians did not seem to think so.

'A cheer for King Jezal!' someone shouted, and a rousing clamour went up.

A young lad on a crutch gazed at him with moon-eyed desperation. A soldier had a bloody bandage over one eye, the other rimmed with proud moisture. A mother clutched a baby wrapped in what looked horribly like a shred of cloth from a fallen Union flag. It was as if the whole scene had been carefully posed for the greatest emotional impact. A set of painter's models for a lurid and ham-fisted piece on the horrors of war.

'King Jezal!' came the shout again, accompanied by a weak, 'Hurrah!'

Their adulation was like poison to him. It only made the great weight of responsibility press down all the heavier. He turned away, unable to maintain his twisted mockery of a smile one instant longer.

'What have I done?' he whispered, his hands tugging ceaselessly at each other. 'What have I done?' He clambered back up into the saddle, guilt picking at his guts. 'Take me closer to Arnault's Wall.'

'Your Majesty, I hardly think that—'

'You heard me! Closer to the fighting. I want to see it.'

Varuz frowned. 'Very well.' He turned his horse, led Jezal and his bodyguard off in the direction of the Arches, down routes that were so familiar, and yet so horribly changed. After a few nervous minutes the Lord Marshal pulled up his mount, pointing down a deserted lane to the west. He spoke softly, as though worried the enemy might hear them.

'Arnault's Wall is no more than three hundred strides that way, and the Gurkish are crawling on the other side. We really should turn—'

Jezal felt a faint vibration through his saddle, his horse started, dust filtered from the roofs of the houses on one side of the street.

He was just opening his mouth to ask what had happened when the air was ripped open by a thunderous noise. A crushing, terrifying wall of sound that left Jezal's ears humming. Men gasped and gaped. The horses milled and kicked, their eyes rolling with fear. Varuz' mount reared up, dumping the old soldier unceremoniously from his saddle.

Jezal paid him no mind, he was too busy urging his own horse keenly in the direction of the blast, seized by an awful curiosity. Small stones had started raining down, pinging from the roofs and clattering into the road like hailstones. A great cloud of brown dust was rising up into the sky to the west.

'Your Majesty!' came Gorst's plaintive cry. 'We should turn back!' But Jezal took no notice.

He rode out into a wide square, a great quantity of rubble scattered across the broken paving, some of it in chunks big as sheds. As the choking dust slowly settled in an eerie silence, Jezal realised that he knew the place. Knew it well. There was a tavern he had used to visit on the north side, but something was changed – it was more open than it had been . . . his jaw fell. A long stretch of Arnault's Wall had formed the western boundary of the square. Now there was nothing but a yawning crater.

The Gurkish must have dug a mine and filled it with their damned blasting powder. The sun chose that moment to break through the clouds above and Jezal could see all the way across the gaping fissure and into the ruined Arches district. There, crowding at the far edge, clambering down the rubble strewn slope with armour glinting and spears waving, was a sizeable body of Gurkish soldiers.

The first of them were already climbing up out of the crater and into the remains of the shattered square. A few semi-conscious defenders were crawling through the dust, choking and spitting. Others were not moving at all. There was no one to turn the Gurkish back, that Jezal could see. No one but him. He wondered what Harod the Great would have done in this spot.

The answer was not so very hard to find.

Courage can come from many places, and be made of many things, and yesterday's coward can become tomorrow's hero in an instant if the time is right. The giddy flood of bravery which Jezal experienced at that moment

consisted largely of guilt and fear, and shame at his fear, swollen by a peevish frustration at nothing having turned out the way he had hoped, and a sudden vague awareness that being killed might solve a great number of irritating problems to which he saw no solution. Not noble ingredients, to be sure. But no one ever asks what the baker put in his pie as long as it tastes well.

He drew his sword and held it up to the sunlight. 'Knights of the Body!' he roared. 'With me!'

Gorst made a despairing grab at his reins. 'Your Majesty! You cannot put yourself in—'

Jezal gave his mount the spurs. It sprang forward with unexpected vigour, and his head snapped painfully back almost causing him to lose his grip on the reins. He rolled in the saddle, hooves hammering, the dirty paving flying by beneath him. He was dimly aware of his escort following, some distance behind, but his attention was rather drawn to the ever-increasing body of Gurkish soldiers directly ahead.

His horse carried him forwards with gut-churning speed, directly at a man at the very front of the crowd, a standard-bearer with a tall staff, golden symbols shining on it. His bad luck, Jezal supposed, to have been given such a prominent task. The man's eyes went wide as he saw an enormous weight of horse bearing down on him. He flung away his standard and tried to throw himself aside. The edge of Jezal's steel bit deep into his shoulder with the full force of the charge, ripped him open and flung him onto his back. More men went down screaming under the hooves of his mount as it crashed into their midst, he could not have said how many.

Then all was chaos. He sat above a mass of snarling dark faces, glinting armour, jabbing spears. Wood cracked, metal clanged, men shouted words he did not understand. He hacked around him, on one side then the other, yelling mindless curses. A spear tip shrieked along his armoured leg. He chopped at a hand as it seized his reins and a couple of fingers flew off it. Something crunched into his side and nearly threw him from the saddle. His sword caved in a helmet with a hollow bonk and knocked the man under it down into the press of bodies.

Jezal's horse gave a shriek, reared up, twisting. He felt a terrible lurch of fear as he came away from the saddle, the world turning over. He crunched down, dust in his eyes, dust in his mouth, coughing and struggling. He

rolled up to his knees. Hooves crashed against the broken ground. Boots slid and stomped. He fumbled in his hair for his circlet, but it must have come off somewhere. How would anyone know he was king? Was he still king? His head was all sticky. A helmet would have been a damn good thing to have brought with him, but it was a little late now. He plucked weakly at the rubble, turned over a flat stone. He had forgotten what he was looking for. He stumbled up, something caught his foot and snatched it painfully away, dumping him on his face again. He waited to have the back of his head broken, but it was only his stirrup, still strapped to his horse's magnificent corpse. He dragged his boot free, gasping for air, reeled a couple of drunken steps under the weight of his armour, his sword dangling from one limp hand.

Someone lifted a curved blade and Jezal stabbed him through the chest. He vomited blood in Jezal's face, fell and twisted the steel from his hand. Something thumped into Jezal's breastplate with a dull clang and knocked him sideways, right into a Gurkish soldier with a spear. He dropped it and they clawed at each other, tottering pointlessly around. Jezal was getting terribly, terribly tired. His head hurt a lot. Just dragging the breath in was a tremendous effort. The whole heroic charge idea seemed as if it had been a bad one. He wanted to lie down.

The Gurkish soldier tore one arm free and raised it up high, a knife clutched in his fist. It flew off at the wrist, a long gout of blood spurting after it. He started to slide to the ground, staring at the stump and wailing. 'The king!' piped Gorst's boyish little voice. 'The king!'

His long steel described a wide arc and whipped the screaming soldier's head away. Another leaped forward, a curved sword raised. Before he got a stride Gorst's heavy blade split his skull wide open. An axe clanged into his armoured shoulder and he shrugged it away as if it was a fly, chopped the man who had swung it down in a shower of gore. A fourth got the short steel through his neck, staggered forward, eyes bulging, one bloody hand clutched to his throat.

Jezal, swaying numbly back and forward, almost felt sorry for the Gurkish. Their numbers might have been impressive from a distance, but close up these men were evidently auxiliaries, thrown forward into the crater as a forlorn hope. They were scrawny, dirty, helplessly disorganised, lightly armed and barely armoured. Many of them, he realised, looked

extremely scared. Gorst hacked his way impassively through them like a bull through a flock of sheep, growling as his scything steels opened gaping wounds with sickening fleshy sounds. Other armoured figures crowded in after him, shoving with shields, chopping with their bright swords, clearing a bloody space in the Gurkish crowd.

Gorst's hand slid under Jezal's armpit and dragged him backwards, his heels kicking at the rubble. He was vaguely aware that he had dropped his sword somewhere, but it seemed foolish to go looking for it now. Some beggar would no doubt receive a priceless windfall while he hunted among the bodies, later. Jezal saw a Knight Herald still mounted, an outline with a winged helmet in the choking dust, his long axe chopping around him.

He was half-carried back, out of the press. Some of the city's regular defenders had regrouped, or were coming in from other parts of the walls. Men with steel caps started to kneel at the lip of the crater, shooting flatbows down into the heaving mass of Gurkish in the bottom, all tangled up with the mud and the rubble. Others dragged up a cart and tipped it onto its side to form a temporary rampart. A Gurkish soldier sobbed as he was cut open, tumbled over the ragged edge of the crater and back down into the mud. More Union flatbows appeared at the edge of the square, more spears. Barrels, masonry, broken spars came with them until an improvised barricade was built up all across the wide gap in Arnault's wall, bristling with men and weapons.

Peppered with bolts and chunks of fallen masonry, the Gurkish faltered, then fell back, scrambling through the debris to their side of the crater and up towards safety, leaving the bottom strewn with corpses.

'To the Agriont, your Majesty,' said Gorst. 'At once.'

Jezal made no effort to resist. He had done more than enough fighting for today.

Something strange was happening in the Square of Marshals. Labourers were working at the paving stones with pick and chisel, digging up shallow trenches, apparently at random. Smiths sweated at temporary forges, pouring iron into moulds, lit by the glow of molten metal. The din of clanging hammers and crashing stone was enough to make Jezal's teeth

hurt, yet somehow the voice of the First of the Magi managed to be louder still.

'No! A circle, dunce, from here to there!'

'I must return to the Halls Martial, your Majesty,' said Varuz. 'Arnault's Wall is breached. It will not be long until the Gurkish try to push through once again. They would already be at the Middleway if it hadn't been for that charge of yours, though, eh? I see now how you won your reputation in the west! As noble a business as I ever saw!'

'Uh.' Jezal watched the dead being dragged away. Three Knights of the Body, one of Varuz' staff and a page-boy no older than twelve, the last with his head hanging off by a flap of gristle. Three men and a child he had led to their deaths. And that was without even considering the wounds the rest of his faithful entourage had gathered on his behalf. A noble business indeed.

'Wait here,' he snapped at Gorst, then he threaded his way through the sweating workmen towards the First of the Magi. Ferro sat cross-legged nearby on a row of barrels, her hands dangling loose, the same utter contempt she had always shown him written plainly on her dark face. It was almost comforting to see that some things never changed. Bayaz was glaring grimly down into the pages of a large black book, evidently of great age, its leather covers cracked and torn. He looked gaunt and pale, old and withered. One side of his face was covered in scabbed-over scratches.

'What happened to you?' asked Jezal.

Bayaz frowned, a muscle trembling under one dark-ringed eye. 'I could ask you the same question.'

Jezal noted that the Magus had not even bothered with a 'your Majesty'. He touched a hand to the bloody bandage round his skull. 'I was involved in a charge.'

'In a what?'

'The Gurkish brought down a section of Arnault's Wall while I was surveying the city. There was no one to turn them back, and so . . . I did it myself.' He was almost surprised to hear himself saying the words. He was far from proud of the fact, certainly. He had done little more than ride, fall, and hit his head. Bremer dan Gorst and his own dead horse had done the majority of the fighting, and against meagre opposition to boot. But he

supposed he had done the right thing, for once, if there was any such a thing.

Bayaz did not agree. ‘Have what little brains fate saved for you turned to shit?’

‘Have they . . .’ Jezal blinked as the meaning of Bayaz’ words soaked slowly into his consciousness. ‘How dare you, you meddling old turd? You are talking to a king!’ That was what he wanted to say, but his head was pounding, and something in the Magus’ twitching, wasted face prevented him. Instead he found himself mumbling in a tone almost apologetic. ‘But . . . I don’t understand. I thought . . . isn’t that what Harod the Great would have done?’

‘Harod?’ Bayaz sneered in Jezal’s face. ‘Harod was an utter coward, and an utter fathead to boot! That idiot could scarcely dress himself without my help!’

‘But—’

‘It is easy to find men to lead charges.’ The Magus pronounced each word with exaggerated care, as though addressing a simpleton. ‘Finding men to lead nations is considerably more difficult. I do not intend that the effort I have put into you should be wasted. Next time you experience a yearning to risk your life, perhaps you might lock yourself in the latrine instead. People respect a man with a fighter’s reputation, and that you have been fortunate enough to have been gifted. People do not respect a corpse. Not there!’ roared Bayaz, limping past Jezal and waving one arm angrily at one of the smiths. The poor man started like a frightened rabbit, glowing embers spattering from his crucible. ‘I told you, fool! You must follow the charts precisely! Exactly as I have drawn it! One mistake could be worse than fatal!’

Jezal stared after him, outrage, guilt, and simple exhaustion fighting for control of his body. Exhaustion won. He trudged over to the barrels and slumped down next to Ferro.

‘Your fucking Majesty,’ she said.

He rubbed at his eyes with finger and thumb. ‘You do me too much honour with your kind attentions.’

‘Bayaz not happy, eh?’

‘It seems not.’

‘Well. When is that old bastard happy with anything?’

Jezal gave a grunt of agreement. He realised that he had not spoken to Ferro since he was crowned. It was not as though they had been fast friends before, of course, but he had to admit that he was finding her utter lack of deference to him an unexpected tonic. It was almost like being, for a brief moment, the vain, idle, worthless, happy man he used to be. He frowned over at Bayaz, stabbing his finger at something in his old book. ‘What ever is he up to, anyway?’

‘Saving the world, he tells me.’

‘Ah. That. He’s left it a little late, don’t you think?

She shrugged. ‘I’m not in charge of the timing.’

‘How does he plan to do it? With picks and forges?’

Ferro watched him. He still found those devil-yellow eyes as off-putting as ever. ‘Among other things.’

Jezal planted his elbows on his knees, his chin drooping down onto his palms, and gave vent to a long sigh. He was so very, very tired. ‘I seem to have done the wrong thing,’ he muttered.

‘Huh.’ Ferro’s eyes slid away. ‘You’ve got a knack for it.’

Nightfall

General Poulder squirmed in his field chair, moustaches quivering, as though he could only just control his body so overpowering was his fury. His ruddy complexion and snorting breath seemed to imply that he might spring from the tent at any moment and charge the Gurkish positions alone. General Kroy sat rigidly erect on the opposite side of the table, clenched jaw-muscles bulging from the side of his close-cropped skull. His murderous frown clearly demonstrated that his anger at the invader, while no less than anyone else's, was kept under iron command, and if any charging was to be done it would be managed with fastidious attention to detail.

In their first briefings West had found himself outnumbered twenty to one by the two Generals' monstrous staffs. He had reduced them, by a relentless process of attrition, to a meagre two officers a piece. The meetings had lost the charged atmosphere of a tavern brawl and instead taken on the character of a small and bad-tempered family event – perhaps the reading of a disputed will. West was the executor, trying to find an acceptable solution for two squabbling beneficiaries to whom nothing was acceptable. Jalenhorm and Brint, sitting to either side of him, were his dumbstruck assistants. What role the Dogman played in the metaphor it was hard to judge, but he was adding to the already feverish pitch of worry in the tent by picking at his fingernails with a dagger.

'This will be a battle like no other!' Poulder was frothing, pointlessly. 'Never since Harod forged the Union has an invader set foot upon the soil of Midderland!'

Kroy growled his agreement.

'The Gurkish mean to overturn our laws, smother our culture, make slaves of our people! The very future of our nation hangs in the—'

The tent flap snapped back and Pike ducked through, his melted face expressionless. A tall man shuffled behind, stooped over and wobbly with fatigue, a heavy blanket wrapped round his shoulders, his face smeared with dirt.

‘This is Fedor dan Hayden,’ said Pike. ‘A Knight Herald. He was able to swim from the docks in Adua under cover of night, and slip around the Gurkish lines.’

‘An action of conspicuous bravery,’ said West, to grumbles of grudging agreement from Poulder and Kroy. ‘You have all of our thanks. How do things stand inside the city?’

‘Frankly, my Lord Marshal, they are dire.’ Hayden’s voice was scratchy with weariness. ‘The western districts – the Arches and the Three Farms – belong to the Emperor. The Gurkish breached Arnault’s Wall two days ago, and the defences are stretched to breaking point. At any moment they could burst through, and threaten the Agriont itself. His Majesty asks that you march on Adua with all possible speed. Every hour could be vital.’

‘Does he have any particular strategy in mind?’ asked West. Jezal dan Luthar never used to have anything in mind beyond getting drunk and bedding his sister, but he hoped that time might have wrought changes.

‘The Gurkish have the city surrounded, but they are spread thin. On the eastern side, particularly. Lord Marshal Varuz believes you could break through with a sharp attack.’

‘Though the western districts of the city will still be crawling with Gurkish swine,’ growled Kroy.

‘Bastards,’ whispered Poulder, his jowls twitching. ‘Bastards.’

‘We have no choice but to march on Adua immediately,’ said West. ‘We will make use of every road and move with all possible speed to take up a position east of the city, marching by torchlight if necessary. We must assault the Gurkish encirclement at dawn and break their hold on the walls. Admiral Reutzer will meanwhile lead the fleet in an attack against the Gurkish ships in the harbour. General Kroy, order some cavalry forward to scout the way and screen our advance. I want no surprises.’

For once, there was no sign of reluctance. ‘Of course, my Lord Marshal.’

‘Your division will approach Adua from the north-east, break through the Gurkish lines and enter the city in force, pushing westward towards the Agriont. If the enemy have reached the centre of the city, you will engage them. If not, you will bolster the defences at Arnault’s Wall and prepare to flush them from the Arches district.’

Kroy nodded grimly, a single vein bulging on his forehead, his officers like statues of military precision behind him. ‘By this time tomorrow, not

one Kantic soldier will be left alive in Adua.'

'Dogman, I would like you and your Northmen to support General Kroy's division in their attack. If your . . .' West wrestled with the word, '. . . king has no objections.'

The Dogman licked his sharp teeth. 'Reckon he'll go whichever way the wind blows. That's always been his style.'

'The wind blows towards Adua tonight.'

'Aye.' The Northman nodded. 'Towards Adua, then.'

'General Poulder, your division will approach the city from the south-east, participate in the battle for the walls, then enter the city in force and move on the docks. If the enemy has made it that far, you will clear them away, then turn northwards and follow the Middleway to the Agriont.'

Poulder hammered the table with his fist, his officers growling like prize-fighters. 'Yes, damn it! We'll paint the streets with Gurkish blood!'

West gave Poulder, and then Kroy, each a hard frown. 'I hardly need to emphasise the importance of victory tomorrow.'

The two Generals rose without a word and moved for the tent flap together. They faced each other before it. For a moment West wondered if, even now, they would fall back into their familiar bickering.

Then Kroy held out his hand. 'The best of luck, General Poulder.'

Poulder seized the hand in both of his. 'And to you, General Kroy. The very best of luck to all of us.' The two of them stepped smartly out into the dusk, their officers following, Jalenhorm and Brint close behind.

Hayden coughed. 'Lord Marshal . . . four other Knights Herald were sent with me. We split up, in the hopes that one of us at least would make it through the Gurkish lines. Have any of the others arrived?'

'No . . . not yet. Perhaps later . . .' West did not think it terribly likely, and neither did Hayden, he could see it in his eyes.

'Of course. Perhaps later.'

'Sergeant Pike will find you some wine and a horse. I imagine you would very much like to see us attack the Gurkish in the morning.'

'I would.'

'Very good.' The two men left the way they had come, and West frowned after them. A shame about the man's comrades, but there would be many more deaths to mourn before tomorrow was done. If there was anyone left

to do the mourning. He pushed aside the tent flap and stepped out into the chill air.

The ships of the fleet were anchored in the narrow harbour down below, rocking slowly on the waves, tall masts waving back and forth against the darkening clouds – hard blue, and cold grey, and angry orange. West fancied he could see a few boats crawling closer to the black beach, still ferrying the last of the army to the shore.

The sun was dropping fast towards the horizon, a final muddy flare above the hills in the west. Somewhere under there, just out of sight, Adua was burning. West worked his shoulders round in circles, trying to force the knotted muscles to relax. He had heard no word since before they left Angland. As far as he was aware Ardee was still inside its walls. But there was nothing he could do. Nothing beyond ordering an immediate attack and hoping, against the general run of luck, for the best. He rubbed unhappily at his stomach. He had been suffering with indigestion ever since the sea journey. The pressures of command, no doubt. A few more weeks of it would probably see him vomiting blood over his maps, just like his predecessor. He took a long, ragged breath and blew it out.

'I know how you feel.' It was the Dogman, sitting on a rickety bench beside the tent flap, elbows on his knees, staring down towards the sea.

West sagged down beside him. Briefings with Poulder and Kroy were always a terrible drain. Play the man of stone for too long and you are left a man of straw. 'I'm sorry,' he found himself saying.

Dogman looked up at him. 'You are? For what?'

'For all of it. For Threetrees, for Tul . . . for Cathil.' West had to swallow an unexpected lump in his throat. 'For all of it. I'm sorry.'

'Ah, we're all sorry. I don't blame you. I don't blame no one, not even Bethod. What good does blame do? We all do what we have to. I gave up looking for reasons a long time ago.'

West thought about that for a moment. Then he nodded. 'Alright.' They sat and watched the torches being lit around the bay below, like glittering dust spreading out across the dark country.

Night time, and a grim one. Grim for the cold, and the drip, drip of thin rain, and all the hard miles that needed slogging over before dawn. Grim

most of all for what waited at the end of it, when the sun came up. Marching to a battle only got harder each time. When Logen had been a young man, before he lost a finger and gained a black reputation, there'd at least been some trace of excitement to it, some shadow of a thrill. Now there was only the sick fear. Fear of the fight, and worse still, fear of the results.

Being king was no kind of help. It was no help to anything, far as he could see. It was just like being chief, but worse. Made him think there was something he should be doing that he wasn't. Made the gap between him and everyone else that bit wider. That bit more unbridgeable.

Boots squelched and sucked, weapons and harness clattered and jingled, men grunted and cursed in the darkness. A few of them had spitting torches now, to light the muddy way, streaks of rain flitting down in the glow around them. The rain fell on Logen too, a feathery kiss at his scalp, and his face, the odd pit and patter on the shoulders of his old coat.

The Union army was spread out down five roads, all heading east, all pointing towards Adua and what sounded like a hard reckoning with the Gurkish. Logen and his crew were on the northernmost one. Off to the south he could see a faint line of flickering lights, floating disembodied in the black country, stretching away out of sight. Another column. Another few thousand men, cursing through the mud towards a bloody dawn.

Logen frowned. He saw the side of Shivers' lean face, up ahead, by the flickering light of a torch, a scowl full of hard shadows, one eye glinting. They watched each other for a moment, then Shivers turned his back, hunched up his shoulders and carried on walking.

'He still don't like me much, that one, and never will.'

'Careless slaughter ain't necessarily the high road to popularity,' said Dogman. 'Especially in a king.'

'But that one there might have the bones to do something about it.' Shivers had a grudge. One that wasn't going away with time, or kindness, or even lives saved. There aren't many wounds that ever heal all the way, and there are some that hurt more with every day that passes.

The Dogman seemed to guess at Logen's thoughts. 'Don't worry about Shivers. He's alright. We've got plenty to worry about with these Gurkish, or whatever.'

'Uh,' said Grim.

Logen wasn't so sure about that. The worst enemies are the ones that live next door, his father always used to tell him. Back in the old days he'd just have murdered the bastard where he stood and problem solved. But he was trying to be a better man now. He was trying hard.

'By the dead, though,' Dogman was saying. 'Fighting against brown men, now, for the Union? How the bloody hell did that all happen? We shouldn't be down here.'

Logen took a long breath, and he let Shivers walk away. 'Furious stuck around for us. Wasn't for him we'd never have been done with Bethod. We owe him. It's just this one last fight.'

'You ever noticed how one fight has a habit of leading on to another? Seems like there's always one fight more.'

'Uh,' said Grim.

'Not this time. This is the last, then we're done.'

'That so? And what happens then?'

'Back to the North, I guess.' Logen shrugged his shoulders. 'Peace, isn't it?'

'Peace?' grunted the Dogman. 'Just what is that, anyway? What do you do with it?'

'I reckon . . . well . . . we'll make things grow, or something.'

'Make things grow? By all the fucking dead! What do you, or I, or any one of us know about making things grow? What else have we done, all our lives, but kill?'

Logen wriggled his shoulders, uncomfortable. 'Got to keep some hope. A man can learn, can't he?'

'Can he? The more you kill, the better you get at it. And the better you get at killing, the less use you are for anything else. Seems to me we've lived this long 'cause when it comes to killing we're the very best there is.'

'You're in a black mood, Dogman.'

'I been in a black mood for years. What worries me is that you ain't. Hope don't much suit the likes of us, Logen. Answer me this. You ever touched a thing that wasn't hurt by it? What have you ever had, that didn't turn to dirt?'

Logen thought about that. His wife and his children, his father and his people, all back to the mud. Forley, Threetrees and Tul. All good folk, and all dead, some of them by Logen's own hand, some of them by his neglect,

and his pride, and his foolishness. He could see their faces, now, in his thoughts, and they didn't look happy. The dead don't often. And that was without looking to the dark and sullen crew lurking behind. A crowd of ghosts. A hacked and bloody army. All the folk he'd chosen to kill. Shama Heartless, his guts hanging out of his split stomach. Blacktoe, with his crushed legs and his burned hands. That Finnius bastard, one foot cut off and his chest slashed open. Bethod, even, right at the front with his skull pounded to mush, his frowning face twisted sideways, Crummock's dead boy peering from around his elbow. A sea of murder. Logen squeezed his eyes shut then prised them wide open, but the faces still lingered at the edge of his mind. There was nothing he could say.

'Thought so.' Dogman turned away from him, wet hair dripping round his face. 'You have to be realistic, ain't you always told me? You have to be that.' He strode off up the road, under the cold stars. Grim lingered next to Logen for a moment, then he shrugged his damp shoulders and followed the Dogman, taking his torch with him.

'A man can change,' whispered Logen, not sure whether he was talking to the Dogman, or to himself, or to those corpse-pale faces waiting in the darkness. Men clattered down the track all round him, and yet he stood alone. 'A man can change.'

Questions

A trace of autumn fog had slunk off the restless sea as the sun went down over crippled Adua, turning the chill night ghostly. A hundred strides distant the houses were indistinct. Two hundred and they were spectral, the few lights in the windows floating wraiths, hazy through the gloom. *Good weather for bad work, and we have much of that ahead of us.*

No distant explosions had rattled the still darkness so far. The Gurkish catapults had fallen silent. *At least for the moment, and why not? The city almost belongs to them, and why burn your own city?* Here, on the eastern side of Adua, far from the fighting, all seemed timelessly calm. *Almost as if the Gurkish had never come.* So when a vague clattering filtered through the gloom, as of the boots of a body of well-armed men, Glokta could not help a pang of nervousness, and pressed himself into the deeper shadows against the hedge by the road. Faint, bobbing lights filtered through the murk. Then the outline of a man, one hand resting casually on the pommel of a sword, walking with a loose, strutting slouch that bespoke extreme over-confidence. Something tall appeared to stick from his head, waving with his movements.

Glokta peered into the murk. 'Cosca?'

'The very same!' laughed the Styrian. He was affecting a fine leather cap with a ludicrously tall plume, and he flicked at it with a finger. 'I bought a new hat. Or should I say you bought me one, eh, Superior?'

'So I see.' Glokta glared at the long feather, the flamboyant golden basketwork on the hilt of Cosca's sword. 'I thought we said inconspicuous.'

'In . . . con . . . spicuous?' The Styrian frowned, then shrugged his shoulders. 'Ah, so that was the word. I remember something was said, and I remember I didn't understand it.' He winced, and scratched at his crotch with one hand. 'I think I picked up some passengers from one of those women at the tavern. Little bastards don't half give a man an itch.' *Huh. The women are paid to go there. One might have thought the lice would have better taste.*

A shadowy crowd began to form out of the darkness behind Cosca, a few carrying hooded lanterns. A dozen shaggy outlines, then a dozen more, menace floating silently from each one of them like the stink floating from a turd. ‘Are these your men?’

The nearest sported perhaps the worst facial boils that Glokta had ever seen. The man beside him had only one hand, the other having been replaced with a savage-looking hook. A huge fat fellow came next, his pale neck blue with a confusion of badly drawn tattoos. A man almost dwarfish, with a face like a rat and only one eye accompanied him. He had not bothered with a patch, and the socket yawned open under his greasy hair. The list of villainy went on. Two dozen, perhaps, all told, of the most savage-looking criminals Glokta had ever laid eyes on. *And I’ve laid eyes on a few in my time. Strangers to bathwater, certainly. Not a one of them looks like he wouldn’t sell his sister for a mark.* ‘They appear somewhat unreliable,’ he murmured.

‘Unreliable? Nonsense, Superior! Out of luck is all, and we both know how that goes, no? Why, there’s not a man of them I wouldn’t trust my mother to.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘She’s been dead these twenty years. What harm could they do her now?’ Cosca flung his arm round Glokta’s twisted shoulders and drew him close, causing a painful twinge to jab at his hips. ‘I’m afraid that pickings are slim.’ His warm breath smelled strongly of spirits and corruption. ‘Every man not desperate fled the city the moment the Gurkish arrived. But who cares, eh? I hired them for their guts and their sinews, not their looks. Desperate men are the kind I like! We can understand them, no, you and I? Some jobs call for desperate men only, eh, Superior?’

Glokta frowned briefly over that collection of gaunt, of bloated, of scarred and ruined faces. *How could it possibly be that promising Colonel Glokta, dashing commander of the King’s Own first regiment, came to be in charge of such a rabble?* He gave a long sigh. *But it is a little late now to be finding fine-looking mercenaries, and I suppose these will fill a pit as well as better. ‘Very well. Wait here.’*

Glokta looked up at the dark house as he swung the gate open with his free hand and hobbled through. A chink of light peeped out from between the heavy hangings in the front window. He rapped at the door with the

handle of his cane. A pause, then the sound of reluctant footsteps shuffling up the hall.

'Who is it?'

'Me. Glokta.'

Bolts drew back and light spilled out into the chill. Ardee's face appeared, lean-looking, grey round the eyes and pink round the nose. *Like a dying cat.*

'Superior!' She grinned as she took him by the elbow and half-dragged him over the threshold. 'What a delight! Some conversation at last! I'm so toweringly bored.' Several empty bottles were gathered in the corner of the living room, made to glint angrily by smoky candles and a smouldering log in the grate. The table was cluttered with dirty plates and glasses. The place smelled of sweat and wine, old food and new desperation. *Can there be a more miserable occupation than getting drunk on one's own? Wine can keep a happy man happy, on occasion. A sad one it always makes worse.*

'I've been trying to get through this damn book again.' Ardee slapped at a heavy volume lying open, face down, on a chair.

'The Fall of the Master Maker,' muttered Glokta. 'That rubbish? All magic and valour, no? I couldn't get through the first one.'

'I sympathise. I'm onto the third and it doesn't get any easier. Too many damn wizards. I get them mixed up one with another. It's all battles and endless bloody journeys, here to there and back again. If I so much as glimpse another map I swear I'll kill myself.'

'Someone might save you the trouble.'

'Eh?'

'I'm afraid you are no longer safe here. You should come with me.'

'Rescue? Thank the fates!' She waved a dismissive hand. 'We've been over this. The Gurkish are away on the other side of the city. You're in more danger in the Agriont I shouldn't—'

'The Gurkish are not the threat. My suitors are.'

'Your gentleman-friends are a threat to me?'

'You underestimate the extent of their jealousy. I fear they will soon become a threat to everyone I have known, friend or enemy, my whole sorry life.' Glokta jerked a hooded cloak from a peg on the wall and held it out to her.

'Where are we going?'

‘A charming little house down near the docks. A little past its best, but plenty of character. Like the two of us, you could say.’

There were heavy footsteps in the hallway and Cosca stuck his head into the room. ‘Superior, we should leave if we want to reach the docks by—’ He stopped, staring at Ardee. There was an uncomfortable silence.

‘Who is this?’ she murmured.

Cosca pushed flamboyantly into the room, swept off his hat, displaying his scabrous bald patch, and bowed low, low, low. *Any lower and his nose would scrape the floorboards*. ‘Forgive me, my lady. Nicomo Cosca, famed soldier of fortune, at your service. Abject, in fact, at your feet.’ His throwing knife dropped out of his coat and rattled against the boards.

They all stared at it for a moment, then Cosca grinned up. ‘You see that fly, against the wall?’

Glokta narrowed his eyes. ‘Perhaps not the best moment for—’

The blade spun across the room, missed the target by a stride, hit the wall handle-first and gouged out a lump of plaster, bounced back and clattered across the floor.

‘Shit,’ said Cosca. ‘I mean . . . damn.’

Ardee frowned down at the knife. ‘I’d say shit.’

Cosca passed it off with a rotten smile. ‘I must be dazzled. When the Superior described to me your beauty I thought he must have . . . how do you say . . . exaggerated? Now I see that he came short of the mark.’ He retrieved his knife and jammed his hat back on, slightly askew. ‘Please allow me to declare myself in love.’

‘What did you tell him?’ asked Ardee.

‘Nothing.’ Glokta sucked sourly at his gums. ‘Master Cosca has a habit of overstating the case.’

‘Especially when in love,’ threw in the mercenary. ‘Especially then. When I fall in love, I fall hard, and, as a rule, I do it no more than once a day.’

Ardee stared at him. ‘I don’t know whether to feel flattered or scared.’

‘Why not be both?’ said Glokta. ‘But you will have to do it on the way.’ *We are short of time, and I have a rank garden to weed.*

The gate came open with an agonised shrieking of rusted metal. Glokta lurched over the decaying threshold, his leg, his hip, his back all stabbing at

him from the long limp to the docks. The ruined mansion loomed out of the gloom at the far end of the shattered courtyard. *Like a mighty mausoleum. A suitable tomb for all my dead hopes.* Severard and Frost waited in the shadows on the broken steps, dressed all in black and masked, as usual. *But not at all alike*. A burly man and a slender, one white haired and one dark, one standing, arms folded, the other sitting, cross-legged. *One is loyal, the other . . . we shall find out.*

Severard unravelled himself and got up with the usual grin around his eyes. 'Alright, chief, so what's all the—'

Cosca stepped through the gate and wandered lazily across the broken paving, tapping a few lumps of masonry away with the toe of one shabby boot. He stopped beside a ruined fountain and scraped some muck out of it with a finger. 'Nice place. Nice and . . .' He waved the finger around, and the muck with it. 'Crumbly.' His mercenaries were already spreading out slowly around the rubble-strewn courtyard. Patched coats and tattered cloaks twitched back to display weapons of every size and shape. Edges, points, spikes and flanges glinted in the shifting light from their lanterns, their steel as smooth and clean as their faces were rough and dirty.

'Who the hell are these?' asked Severard.

'Friends.'

'They don't look too friendly.'

Glokta showed his Practical the yawning hole in his front teeth. 'Well. I suppose that all depends whose side you're on.'

The last traces of Severard's smile had vanished. His eyes flickered nervously around the yard. *The eyes of the guilty. How well we know them. We see them on our prisoners. We see them in the mirror, when we dare to look. One might have hoped for better from a man of his experience, but holding the blade is a poor preparation for being cut by it. I should know.* Severard dashed towards the house, quick as a rabbit, but he only got a step before a heavy white hand chopped into the side of his neck and flung him senseless on the broken paving.

'Take him downstairs, Frost. You know the way.'

'Downthairth. Unh.' The hulking albino dragged Severard's limp body over his shoulder and set off towards the front door.

'I have to say,' said Cosca, flicking the scum carelessly off his finger, 'that I like your way with your men, Superior. Discipline, I've always admired

it.’

‘Fine advice from the least disciplined man in the Circle of the World.’

‘I have learned all kinds of things from my many mistakes.’ Cosca stretched his chin up and scratched at his scabby neck. ‘The one thing I never learn is to stop making them.’

‘Huh,’ grunted Glokta as he laboured up the steps. *A curse we all have to bear. Round and round in circles we go, clutching at successes that we never grasp, endlessly tripping over the same old failures. Truly, life is the misery we endure between disappointments.*

They stepped through the empty doorway and into the deeper darkness of the entrance hall. Cosca held his lamp high, staring up towards the ragged roof, his boots squelching heedless in the bird droppings spattering the floor. ‘A palace!’ His voice echoed back from the shattered staircases, the empty doorways, the naked rafters high above.

‘Please make yourselves comfortable,’ said Glokta. ‘But out of sight, perhaps. We can expect visitors some time tonight.’

‘Excellent. We love company, don’t we lads?’

One of Cosca’s men gave a wet-lunged chuckle, displaying two rows of shit-coloured teeth. *A set so incredibly rotten I am almost glad to have my own.* ‘These visitors will come from his Eminence the Arch Lector. Perhaps you could take a firm hand with them, while I’m downstairs?’

Cosca glanced round approvingly at the crumbling hall. ‘A nice place for a warm welcome. I’ll let you know when our guests have been. I doubt they’ll stay long.’

Ardee had found a place near the wall, her hood up, her eyes on the floor. *Trying to fade into the plaster, and who could blame her? Hardly the most pleasant company for a young woman, or the most reassuring setting. But better than a slit throat, I suppose.* Glokta held his hand out to her. ‘It would be best if you were to come with me.’

She hesitated. As though not entirely *sure that it would, in fact, be best to come with me*. But a brief glance at some of the ugliest men in one of the world’s ugliest professions evidently persuaded her. Cosca handed her his lamp, making sure his fingers lingered on hers for an uncomfortably long moment.

‘Thank you,’ she said, jerking her hand away.

‘My particular pleasure.’

Sheets of hanging paper, broken laths, lumps of fallen plaster cast strange shadows as they left Cosca and his thugs behind and picked their way into the guts of the dead building. Doorways passed by, squares of blackness, yawning like graves.

'Your friends seem a charming crowd,' murmured Ardee.

'Oh indeed, the brightest stars in the social firmament. Some tasks demand desperate men, apparently.'

'You must have some truly desperate work in mind, then.'

'When don't I?'

Their lamp barely lit the rotting drawing room, panelling sagging from the cheap brickwork, the best part of the floor a single festering puddle. The hidden door stood open in the far wall and Glokta shuffled round the edge of the room towards it, his hips burning with the effort.

'What did your man do?'

'Severard? He let me down.' *And we will soon find out how badly.*

'I hope I never let you down, then.'

'You, I am sure, have better sense. I should go first, then if I fall at least I fall alone.' He winced his way down the steps while she followed with the light.

'Ugh. What's that smell?'

'The sewers. There's an entrance to them down here, somewhere.' Glokta stepped past the heavy door and into the converted wine cellar, the bright steel grilles on the cells to either side glimmering as they passed, the whole place reeking of damp and fear.

'Superior!' came a voice from the darkness. Brother Longfoot's desperate face appeared, pressed up against one set of bars.

'Brother Longfoot, my apologies! I have been so very busy. The Gurkish have laid siege to the city.'

'Gurkish?' squeaked the man, his eyes bulging. 'Please, if you release me —'

'Silence!' hissed Glokta in a voice that brooked no dallying. 'You should stay here.'

Ardee glanced nervously towards the Navigator's cell. 'Here?'

'He isn't dangerous. I think you'll be more comfortable than you would be . . .' and he nodded his head towards the open doorway at the end of the vaulted hall, 'in there.'

She swallowed. ‘Alright.’

‘Superior, please!’ One despairing arm stuck from Longfoot’s cell, ‘please, when will you release me? Superior, please!’ Glokta shut the door on his begging with a gentle click. *We have other business today, and it will not wait.*

Frost already had Severard manacled to the chair beside the table, still unconscious, and was lighting the lamps one by one with a flaming taper. The domed chamber gradually grew bright, the colour leaking into the mural across the round walls. Kanedias frowned down, arms outstretched, the fire burning behind him. *Ah, our old friend the Master Maker, always disapproving*. Opposite him his brother Juvens still bled his lurid last across the wall. *And not the only blood that will be spilled in here tonight, I suspect.*

‘Urr,’ groaned Severard, his lank hair swaying. Glokta lowered himself slowly into his chair, the leather creaking under him. Severard grunted again, his head dropped back, eyelids flickering. Frost lumbered over, reached out and undid the buckles on Severard’s mask, pulled it off and tossed it away into the corner of the room. From a fearsome *Practical of the Inquisition to . . . nothing much.* He stirred, wrinkled his nose, twitching like a boy asleep.

Young. Weak. Helpless. One could almost feel sorry for him, if one had a heart. But now is not the time for sentiment and soft feelings, for friendship and forgiveness. The ghost of happy and promising Colonel Sand dan Glokta has been clinging to me for far too long. Farewell, my old friend. You cannot help us today. Now is the time for the ruthless Superior Glokta to do what he does best. To do the only thing that he does well. Now is the time for hard heads, hard hearts and even harder edges.

Time to cut the truth out.

Frost jabbed Severard in the stomach with two fingers and his eyes snapped open. He jerked in his chair, the manacles rattling. He saw Glokta. He saw Frost. His eyes went wide as they darted round the room. They went wider still when he realised where he was. He snorted in air, the quick, hard breath of abject terror, the greasy strands of hair across his face blowing this way and that with the force of it. And how will we begin?

‘I know . . .’ he croaked. ‘I know I told that woman who you were . . . I know . . . but I had no choice.’ *Ah, the wheedling. Every man, more or less,*

behaves the same way when he's chained to a chair. 'What could I do? She would've fucking killed me! I had no choice! Please—'

'I know what you told her, and I know you had no choice.'

'Then . . . then why—'

'Don't give me that, Severard. You know why you're here.' Frost stepped forward, as impassive as ever, and lifted the lid on Glokta's wonderful case. The trays inside opened up like an exotic flower, proffering out the polished handles, the gleaming needles, the shining blades of his instruments.

Glokta puffed out his cheeks. 'I had a good day, today. I woke up clean, and made it to the bath on my own. Not too much pain.' He wrapped his fingers around the grip of the cleaver. 'Something to celebrate, a good day. I get so very few of them.' He slid it from its sheath, the heavy blade flashing in the harsh lamplight. Severard's eyes followed it all the way, bulging with fear and fascination, beads of sweat glittering on his pale forehead.

'No,' he whispered. Yes. Frost unlocked the cuff around Severard's left wrist, lifted his arm in both meaty hands. He took the fingers and spread them out one by one until they were flattened on the wood in front of him, wrapping his other arm around Severard's shoulders in a tight embrace.

'I think we can dispense with the preamble.' Glokta rocked forward, got up and limped slowly around the table, his cane clicking on the tiles, his left leg dragging behind it, the corner of the cleaver's blade scraping gently across the wood of the table-top. 'I need not explain how this will work to you. You, who have assisted me so very ably, on so very many occasions. Who could know better how we will proceed?'

'No,' whimpered Severard, trying half a desperate smile, but with a tear leaking from the corner of his eye nonetheless. 'No, you wouldn't! Not to me! You wouldn't!'

'Not to you?' Glokta gave a sad smile of his own. 'Oh, Practical Severard, please . . .' He let the grin slowly fade as he lifted the cleaver. 'You know me so much better than that.'

Bang! The heavy blade flashed down and hacked into the table-top, paring the slightest sliver of skin from the end of Severard's middle finger.

'No!' he squawked. *'No!' You don't admire my precision any longer, then?*

'Oh, yes, yes.' Glokta tugged at the smooth handle and dragged the blade free. 'How did you think this would end? You've been talking. You've been saying things you shouldn't, to people you had no business saying anything

to. You will tell me what. You will tell me who.' The cleaver glimmered as he raised it again. 'And you had better tell me soon.'

'No!' Severard thrashed and wriggled in the chair but Frost had him as tightly as a fly in honey. Yes.

The blade sliced cleanly through the end of Severard's middle finger and took it off at the first joint. The end of his index finger spun across the wood. The tip of his ring finger stayed where it was, wedged into a joint in the table top. With Frost's hand still clamped tight as a vice round his wrist the blood only dribbled gently from the three wounds and spread out in slow rivulets down the grain.

There was a breathless pause. *One, two, three* . . . Severard screamed. He wailed, and jerked, and trembled, his face quivering. *Painful, eh? Welcome to my world.*

Glokta worked his aching foot around in his boot. 'Who would ever have thought that our charming association, so enjoyable and profitable to us both, could possibly end like this? Not my choice. Not mine. Tell me who you spoke to. Tell me what you said. Then this unpleasantness will all be over. Otherwise . . .'

Bang! The end of his little finger, now, and three more pieces of the rest. His middle finger was down to the knuckle, almost. Severard stared, his eyes wide with horror, his breath coming in short, fast gasps. *Shock, amazement, stunned terror.* Glokta leaned down to his ear. 'I hope you weren't planning to take up the violin, Severard. You'll be lucky if you can play a fucking gong by the time we're done here.' He winced at a spasm in his neck as he lifted the cleaver again.

'Wait!' sobbed Severard. 'Wait! Valint and Balk! The bankers! I told them . . . I told them . . .'

I knew it. 'What did you tell them?'

'That you were still looking for Raynault's murderer when we'd already hung the Emperor's emissary!' Glokta met Frost's eyes, and the albino stared back, emotionless. *And another secret is dragged kicking into the merciless light. How disappointingly right I was. It always amazes me, how swiftly problems can be solved, once you start cutting things off people.*
'And . . . and . . . I told them that you wanted to know about our bastard king, and about Bayaz, and I told them you weren't checking up on Sult like they asked, and I told them . . . I told them . . .'

Severard stuttered to a halt, staring at the remains of his fingers, scattered out across the table in a spreading slick of blood. *That mixture of unbearable pain, even more unbearable loss, and total disbelief. Am I dreaming? Or have I really lost half my fingers, forever?*

Glokta nudged Severard with the end of the cleaver. 'What else?'

'I told them anything I could. I told them . . . everything I knew . . .' The words came spitting and drooling from his lips, curled back with agony. 'I had no choice. I had debts, and . . . they offered to pay. I had no choice!'

Valint and Balk. Debts, and blackmail, and betrayal. How horribly banal it all is. That's the trouble with answers. They're never as exciting as the questions, somehow. Glokta's lips twitched into a sad smile. 'No choice. I know exactly how you feel.' He lifted the cleaver again.

'But—'

Bang! The heavy blade scraped against the table-top as Glokta swept four more neat slices of flesh carefully out of the way. Severard screamed, and gasped, and screamed some more. Desperate, slobbering screams, his face screwed up tight. *Just like the prunes I sometimes have for breakfast*. He still had half his little finger, but the other three were nothing more than oozing stumps. *But we cannot stop now, not after we have come so far. We cannot stop for anything, can we? We must know it all.*

'What about the Arch Lector?' asked Glokta, stretching his neck to the side and working his stiff shoulder. 'How did he know what went on in Dagoska? What did you tell him?'

'How did he . . . what . . . I told him nothing! I told him—'

Bang! Severard's thumb flew off, spinning across the table, leaving behind a spiralling trail of bloody spots. Glokta worked his hips back and forth, trying to wriggle out of the aches down his legs, the aches up his back. *But there is no escaping them. Every possible position, a little worse than the one before.* 'What did you tell Sult?'

'I . . . I . . .' Severard stared up, his mouth hanging open, a long string of drool dangling from his bottom lip. 'I . . .'

Glokta frowned. *That is not an answer.* 'Tie it off at the wrist and get the other hand ready. We've nothing left to work with here.'

'No! No! Please . . . I didn't . . . please . . .' *How I tire of the pleading. The words 'no' and 'please' lose all meaning after half an hour of this. They begin to sound like a sheep bleating. We are all lambs to the slaughter, in*

the end. He stared at the pieces of finger scattered across the bloody table. *Meat for the butcher.* Glokta's head hurt, the room was too bright. He put the cleaver down and rubbed at his sore eyes. *A draining business, mutilating your closest friends.* He realised he had smeared blood across his eyelids. *Damn it.*

Frost had already tightened a tourniquet round Severard's wrist and manacled the bloody remains of his left hand back to the chair. He unfastened his right arm and guided it carefully to the table. Glokta watched him do it. *All neat, and business-like, and ruthlessly efficient. Does his conscience nag at him, I wonder, when the sun goes down? I doubt it. I give the orders after all. And I act on orders from Sult, on advice from Marovia, on the demands of Valint and Balk. What choice do any of us have, in the end? Why, the excuses almost make themselves.*

Frost's white face was dusted with bloody red specks as he spread Severard's right hand out on the table, just where the left one had been. He did not even struggle this time. *You lose the will, after a while. I remember.* 'Please . . .' he whispered.

It would be so very nice to stop. Most likely the Gurkish will burn the whole city and kill us all, and then who will care who told who what? If by some miracle they fail, no doubt Sult will finish me, or Valint and Balk will collect their debt in my blood. What will it matter when I am floating face-down in the docks whether certain questions were ever answered? Then why do I do this? Why?

The blood reached the edge of the wood and started dripping to the floor with a steady tap, tap, tap. No other answer. Glokta felt a flurry of twitches run up the side of his face. He took hold of the cleaver again.

'Look at this.' He gestured at the pieces of bloody flesh scattered across the table. 'Look what you've lost here, already. All because you won't tell me what I need to know. Do you not value your own fingers? They're no use to you now, are they? They're no use to me, I can tell you that. They're no use to anyone, besides a hungry dog or two, maybe.' Glokta bared the yawning hole in his front teeth, and ground the point of the cleaver into the wood between Severard's outspread fingers. 'One more time.' He pronounced the words with icy precision. 'What . . . did you tell . . . his Eminence?'

‘I . . . told him . . . nothing!’ The tears ran down Severard’s hollow cheeks, his chest shuddered with sobs. ‘I told him nothing! Valint and Balk, I had no choice! I’ve never spoken to Sult in my fucking life! Not a word! Never!’

Glokta looked into his Practical’s eyes, his prisoner’s eyes, for a long moment, trying to see the truth. All was silent except for Severard’s gurgling, agonised breath. Then Glokta wrinkled his lip and tossed the cleaver down rattling on the table. *Why give up your other hand, when you have confessed already*? He gave a long sigh, reached out and gently wiped the tears from Severard’s pale face. ‘Alright. I believe you.’

But what then? We are left with more questions than before, and nowhere to look for the answers. He arched his back, wincing at the aches in his twisted spine, down his twisted leg, through his toeless foot. *Sult must have gained his information elsewhere. Who else survived Dagoska, who else saw enough? Eider? She would never dare reveal herself. Vitari? If she wanted to spill her guts she could have done it at the time. Cosca? His Eminence would never work with a man that unpredictable. I only use him myself because I have no other choice. Then who?*

Glokta’s eyes met Frost’s. Pink eyes, unblinking. They stared at him, bright and hard as pink gemstones. And the wheels clicked into place.

I see.

Neither one of them spoke. Frost reached out, without much haste, his eyes never leaving Glokta’s, and wrapped both his thick arms around Severard’s neck. The ex-Practical could only stare, helpless.

‘What’re—’ Frost frowned slightly. There was a sharp crunching sound as he wrenched Severard’s head sideways. *As simple and careless as killing a chicken.* Severard’s skull flopped backwards as Frost let him go, and far past backwards, unnatural knobbly shapes sticking from the pale skin of his twisted neck.

The albino stood up, between Glokta and the door, hanging ajar. No way out. Glokta winced as he stumbled backwards, the tip of his cane scraping against the floor. ‘Why?’ Frost came on, slowly and surely, his white fists clenched tight, his white face expressionless behind his mask. Glokta held up one hand. ‘Just tell me why, damn it!’

The albino shrugged. *I suppose some questions have no answers, after all.* Glokta’s twisted back hit the curved wall. And my time is up. Ah well. He

took a long breath. *The odds were always stacked against me. I do not mind dying, so very much.*

Frost raised his white fist, then grunted. The cleaver sank deep into his heavy shoulder with a dull smack. Blood began to leak out from it into his shirt. Frost turned. Ardee stood behind him. The three of them stared at each other for a moment. Then Frost punched her in the face. She reeled away and crashed into the side of the table, slid limp to the floor, dragging it over on its side, Glokta's case clattering down beside her, instruments tumbling, blood and bits of flesh scattering. Frost started to turn back, the cleaver still wedged in his flesh, his left arm hanging limp.

Glokta's lips curled away from his empty gums. *I do not mind dying. But I refuse to be beaten.*

He set his feet as best he could, ignoring the pain that stabbed through his toeless foot and up his front leg. He brought up his cane and jammed his thumb into its hidden catch. It had been made to his precise instructions by the same man who had made the case for his instruments. *And is an even finer piece of craftsmanship.*

There was a gentle click as the wood sprang open on secret hinges and dropped away revealing a two-foot needle of mirror-bright metal. He let go a piercing shriek.

Jab, jab, Glokta. Jab, jab.

The steel was a blur. The first thrust ran Frost neatly through the left side of his chest. The second darted silently through the right side of his neck. The third punctured his mask and scraped against his jaw bone, the glinting point showing itself just under his white ear for an instant before it whipped back out.

Frost stood, motionless, his white eyebrows going up with mild surprise. Then blood welled from the tiny wound on his throat and ran down into his shirt in a black line. He reached out with one big white hand. He wobbled, blood bubbling from under his mask.

'Futh,' he breathed.

He crumpled to the ground as though his legs had been snatched suddenly from under him. He put out an arm to push himself up, but there was no strength in it. His breaths gurgled noisily, then quietly, and he was still. *And that is all.*

Ardee was sitting up near the table, blood running out of her nose and down her top lip. ‘He’s dead.’

‘I used to fence,’ murmured Glokta. ‘It seems the trick never entirely leaves you.’ He stared from one corpse to the other. Frost lay in a slowly widening dark pool, one pink eye staring ahead, still unblinking, even in death. Severard’s head was hanging back over the chair, mouth yawning wide open in a silent scream, his mutilated hand still manacled, the other hanging limp. *My boys. My eyes. My hands. All finished.* He frowned at the bloody length of metal in his fist. *Well. We must fumble onwards as best we can without them.*

He winced as he reached down and picked up the fallen piece of his cane between two fingers, snapped it shut around the bloody steel. ‘If you wouldn’t mind closing that case for me.’ Ardee stared wide-eyed at the instruments, at Severard’s yawning corpse, at the blood-stained table on its side and the fragments of flesh scattered across the floor. She coughed, and pressed the back of her hand to her mouth. *One forgets that some people are not used to dealing with these matters. But we need such help as we can get, and it is a little late for easing anyone into this gently. If she can chop into a man with a cleaver, she can carry a blade or two for me without swooning.*
‘The case,’ he snapped. ‘I will still need my instruments.’

Ardee blinked, collected the few scattered tools with trembling hands and put them back in their places. She wedged the box under her arm and stood up, somewhat unsteadily, wiping the blood from her nose on her white sleeve. Glokta noticed that she had a piece of one of Severard’s fingers caught in her hair.

‘You have something . . .’ he pointed at his head, ‘just here.’

‘What? Gah!’ She tore the dead thing out and flung it on the ground, gave a shiver of disgust. ‘You should find another way to make a living.’

‘I have been thinking that for some time. But there are still a few more questions I must have answered.’

The door creaked and Glokta felt a sudden stab of panic. Cosca stepped through into the room. He whistled softly as he surveyed the carnage, pushed his cap back on his head, its feather casting a spray of long shadows across the mural behind him. ‘You’ve made quite a mess, Superior, quite a mess.’

Glokta fingered his cane. His leg was on fire, his heart was thumping dully at his temples, he was damp with cold sweat under his scratchy clothes. ‘Unavoidable.’

‘I thought you’d want to know that we had our visitors. Six Practicals of the Inquisition. I rather suspect they may have been sent here to kill you.’ *Undoubtedly. On the Arch Lector’s orders, acting on information from the late Practical Frost.*

‘And?’ asked Glokta. After the events of the past hour he was almost expecting Cosca to come at him, sword swinging.

But if the last hour has taught us anything, it is that the least trusted henchman is not always the least reliable. ‘And we cut them to pieces, of course.’ The Styrian grinned. ‘I’m insulted you might think otherwise.’

‘Good. Good.’ *At least something has gone to plan.* Glokta wanted nothing more than to slide to the floor and lie there, screaming. But there is work to do. He winced as he limped for the door. ‘We need to head for the Agriont immediately.’

The first traces of dawn were leaking into the cold, clear sky as Glokta hobbled out onto the Middleway, Ardee at his shoulder. There was still mist on the air, but it was fading, now. *A fine day in prospect, it would appear. A fine day for bloodshed, treachery, and—*

Shapes were moving in the mist, away south down the wide cobbled road, towards the sea. There were noises too. Rattling, jingling. It sounded very much like a body of armoured men on the move. Further off, someone was shouting. A bell began to clang, sullen and muffled. A warning bell.

Cosca frowned into the thinning mist. ‘What is that?’

The shapes grew more distinct. Armoured men, carrying spears, and in numbers. Their tall helmets were plainly not of Union design.

Ardee touched Glokta on the arm. ‘Are they—’

‘Gurkish.’ Their armour glinted in the thin, grey light as the fog drifted aside. A vast body of them, marching north up the Middleway. *They must finally have landed men at the docks, broken through into the centre of the city. What astonishingly poor timing.* ‘Back!’ Glokta turned towards the alley, slipped and nearly fell, grimacing as Ardee caught him by the elbow and dragged him up straight.

‘Back to the mansion!’ *And hope we weren’t seen already.* ‘And keep those lamps with you, we’ll need them.’ He hurried to the stinking alley as

best he could, barged and jostled by Cosca's mercenaries.

'Damn these Gurkish,' hissed the Styrian. 'I don't know for the life of me what I did to upset them so.'

'You have my sympathy.' The gate squealed shut and a couple of the mercenaries started dragging a broken fountain behind it. *I'm not sure how long that will keep out one of the Emperor's legions.*

'Might I ask what the plan is now, exactly, Superior? Charming though your palace is, sitting here and waiting for relief would hardly seem to be an option.'

'No.' Glokta struggled up the steps and through the open front door. 'We need to get to the Agriont.'

'Something tells me our Gurkish friends will have had the same idea. We will not be getting there overground, that is certain.'

'Then we must go underground.' Glokta limped into the guts of the building as smartly as he could, Ardee and the mercenaries following behind in a worried crowd. 'There is an entrance to the sewers here. One can get all the way to the Agriont, if one knows the route.'

'Sewers?' Cosca grinned. 'I like nothing more than wading through life's filth, as you well know, but sewers can be quite . . . confusing. Do you know the route?'

'Actually, no.' *But I know a man who says he can find a way through anything, even a river of shit.* 'Brother Longfoot!' he called out as he hobbled towards the steps. 'I have a proposition for you!'

The Day of Judgement

Lord Marshal West stood in the shadow of an abandoned barn, up on a rise above the fertile plains of Midderland, his eye-glass clutched tightly in one gloved hand. There was still a trace of morning mist clinging to the flat autumn fields – patchworks of brown, green, yellow, stabbed with trees, slashed with bare hedgerows. In the distance West could see the outermost walls of Adua, a stern grey line pimpled with towers. Behind, in a lighter grey, the vague shapes of buildings jutted skywards. Above them loomed the towering ghost of the House of the Maker, stark and unrepentant. All in all, it was a grim homecoming.

There was not so much as a breath of wind. The crisp air was strangely still. Just as if there was no war, no rival armies drawing up, no bloody battles scheduled to begin. West swept his eye-glass back and forth, but he could scarcely see any hint of the Gurkish. Perhaps he imagined a tiny fence, down there before the walls, perhaps the outlines of pin-prick spears, but at this distance, in this light, he could be sure of nothing.

'They must be expecting us. They must be.'

'Maybe they're sleeping late,' said Jalenhorm, ever the optimist.

Pike was more direct. 'What difference if they are?'

'Not much,' West admitted. King Jezal's orders had been specific. The city was infested with Gurkish troops and the defences were close to complete collapse. There was no time for clever stratagems, for careful approaches, for probing the enemy for weak spots. Prince Ladisla, ironically, would probably have been as good a commander for this particular situation as anyone else. For once, circumstances called for a magnificent charge, followed closely by death or glory. The only thing under West's control was the timing.

Brint pulled up his horse nearby, sending a shower of grit into the cold air. He swung down from the saddle and gave a smart salute. 'General Kroy's cavalry is in position on the right wing, Lord Marshal, and ready to charge at your order.'

'Thank you, Captain. His foot?'

‘Perhaps halfway to deploying. Some companies are still spread out down the roads.’

‘Still?’

‘Muddy-going, sir.’

‘Huh.’ Armies left mud behind them like a slug left a trail. ‘What about Poulder?’

‘A similar position, as far as I can tell,’ said Brint. ‘No messages?’

Jalenhorm shook his head. ‘General Poulder has not been forthcoming this morning.’

West stared towards the city, that distant grey line beyond the fields. ‘Soon.’ He chewed at his lip, already raw from his constant worrying. ‘Very soon. Mustn’t let fly half-drawn. When a little more of the foot comes up . . .’

Brint was frowning off to the south. ‘Sir, is that . . .’ West followed his pointing finger. Over on the left wing, where Poulder had been gathering his division, the cavalry were already moving smartly forward.

West stared as the riders gathered pace. ‘What the . . .’

Two full regiments of heavy horse broke into a majestic gallop. Thousands of them, streaming forwards across the open farmland, surging round the trees and the scattered farmhouses, throwing up a wake of dusty earth. West could hear the hammering of their hooves now, like distant thunder, could almost feel the vibration of it through his boots. The sun glinted on raised sword and lance, on shield and full armour. Banners streamed and snapped in the wind. It was quite the display of martial grandeur. A scene from a lurid storybook with a muscular hero in which meaningless words like honour and righteousness were often repeated.

‘Shit,’ growled West through gritted teeth, feeling the familiar pulsing coming up behind his eyes. General Poulder had been itching to mount one of his fabled cavalry charges all across the North and back. There the harsh terrain, or the harsh weather, or the harsh circumstances had all prevented it. Now, with the perfect conditions, it seemed he had been unable to resist the opportunity.

Jalenhorm slowly shook his head. ‘Bloody Poulder.’

West gave a snarl of frustration, raised up his eye-glass to dash it on the ground. He managed to stop himself at the last moment, forced in a heavy breath, and slapped the thing angrily closed. He could not afford to indulge

himself today. ‘Well, that’s it then, isn’t it? Order the charge, all across the line!’

‘Sound the charge!’ roared Pike. ‘The charge!’

The sharp bugle call rang out, blaringly loud on the chill morning air, doing nothing to ease West’s throbbing headache. He stuck one muddy boot in his stirrup and dragged himself reluctantly up into his saddle, already sore from riding all night. ‘I suppose we must follow General Poulder to glory. At a less honourable distance, though, perhaps. Someone still needs to co-ordinate this shambles.’ The sounds of answering bugles further down the line floated up to them, and on the right Kroy’s horsemen began to trot forwards.

‘Major Jalenhorm, order the foot forward in support as soon as they come up.’ West worked his mouth. ‘Piecemeal if need be.’

‘Of course, Lord Marshal.’ The big man was already turning his horse to give the orders.

‘War,’ muttered West. ‘A noble business.’

‘Sir?’ asked Pike.

‘Nothing.’

Jezal took the last few steps two at a time, Gorst and a dozen of his Knights clattering after him, sticking to his heels as tightly as his shadow. He swept imperiously past the guard and into the bright morning light at the top of the Tower of Chains, high above the stricken city. Lord Marshal Varuz was already at the parapet, surrounded by a gaggle of his staff, all glaring out across Adua. The old soldier stood stiffly, his hands clasped behind him, just the way he had always done at fencing practice, long ago. Jezal had never noticed his hands shake in the old days, however. They shook now, and badly. High Justice Marovia stood beside him, black robes stirred by the gentle breeze.

‘The news?’ demanded Jezal.

The Lord Marshal’s tongue darted nervously over his lips. ‘The Gurkish mounted an assault before dawn. The defenders of Arnault’s wall were overwhelmed. Not long afterwards they managed to land men at the docks. A great number of men. We have been fighting a rearguard action with the greatest courage, but . . . well . . .’

There was really no need to say more. As Jezal moved closer to the parapet, and wounded Adua came into view, he could plainly see the Gurkish flooding down the Middleway, the tiny golden standards of the Emperor's legions bobbing above the mass of humanity like flotsam on a glittering tide. Like seeing one ant on the carpet, then gradually becoming aware of hundreds all across his living room, Jezal began to notice movement elsewhere, then everywhere. The very centre of the city was infested with Gurkish soldiers.

'Fighting a rearguard action with . . . mixed success,' finished Varuz lamely.

Down below, a few men burst out from the buildings near the western gate of the Agriont, ran across the cobbled square before the moat, heading for the bridge.

'Gurkish?' someone squealed.

'No,' muttered the Lord Marshal. 'Those are ours.' Men doing their very best to escape the slaughter that was no doubt taking place down in the ruined city. Jezal had faced death often enough to guess at how they felt.

'Have those men brought to safety,' he said, voice cracking slightly.

'I am afraid . . . the gates have been sealed, your Majesty.'

'Then unseal them!'

Varuz' dewy eyes wandered nervously to Marovia. 'That would . . . not be wise.'

A dozen or more had made it to the bridge now, were shouting and waving their arms. Their words were lost over the distance, but the tone of helpless, abject terror was impossible to miss.

'We should do something.' Jezal's hands gripped tight to the parapet. 'We must do something! There will be others out there, many more!'

Varuz cleared his throat. 'Your Majesty—'

'No! Have my horse saddled. Gather the Knights of the Body. I refuse to —'

High Justice Marovia had moved to block the door to the stairs, and now looked calmly, sadly into Jezal's face. 'If you were to open the gates now, you would be putting everyone in the Agriont at risk. Many thousands of citizens, all looking to you for protection. Here we can keep them safe, at least for now. We must keep them safe.' His eyes slid sideways to the

streets. Different-coloured eyes, Jezal noticed, one blue, one green. ‘We must weigh the greater good.’

‘The greater good.’ Jezal looked the other way, into the Agriont. Brave defenders were ranged around the walls, he knew, ready to fight to the death for king and country, however undeserving. He pictured civilians too, scurrying for safety through the narrow lanes. Men, women, children, the old and the young, driven from their ruined homes. People to whom he had promised safety. His eyes flickered across the high white buildings around the green park, the wide Square of Marshals, the long Kingsway with its tall statues. They were filled, he knew, with the helpless and the needy. Those unlucky enough to have no one better to rely on than the gutless fraud, Jezal dan Luthar.

It stuck in his throat, but he knew the old bureaucrat was right. There was nothing he could do. He had been shockingly lucky to survive his last magnificent charge, and it was far too late for another. Outside the Agriont, Gurkish soldiers were beginning to boil into the square before the gate. A few of them knelt, bows in hand, and sent a flight of arrows arcing across onto the bridge. Tiny figures tumbled and fell, splashed into the moat. Tiny screams wafted gently up to the top of the Tower of Chains.

An answering volley rattled from the walls, peppered the Gurkish with flatbow bolts. Men dropped, others faltered and fell back, leaving a few bodies scattered across the cobbles. They scurried for cover in the buildings around the edge of the square, men darting through the shadows from house to house. A Union soldier jumped from the bridge and splashed along in the moat for a few strokes before disappearing. He did not resurface. Behind him a last handful of the stranded defenders were still crawling, desperately holding up their arms. The notion of the greater good was likely to be scant consolation for them as they choked their last breaths. Jezal squeezed his eyes shut and looked away.

‘There! To the east!’

Varuz and a few members of his staff had clustered around the far parapet, gazing out past the House of the Maker and towards the distant fields outside the city. Jezal strode over to them, shielded his eyes against the rising sun. Beyond the great wall of the Agriont, beyond the shining river and the wide curve of the city, he thought he caught some trace of movement. A wide crescent of movement, crawling slowly towards Adua.

One of the officers lowered an eye-glass. ‘Cavalry! Union Cavalry!’ ‘Are you sure?’

‘The Army!’

‘Late to the party,’ muttered Varuz, ‘but no less welcome for that.’

‘Hurrah for Marshal West!’

‘We are delivered!’

Jezal was in no mood to whoop for joy. Hope was a fine thing, of course, and had long been in short supply, but celebrations were decidedly premature. He crossed back to the other side of the tower and frowned down.

More Gurkish were surging into the square outside the citadel, and more still, and they were coming well prepared. They wheeled great sloping wooden screens forward, each one big enough for a score of men or more to hide behind. The foremost of them already bristled with flatbow bolts, but they continued to creep towards the bridge. Arrows flitted up and down. The wounded fell, did their best to crawl for the rear. One of the buildings at the side of the square had already caught fire, flames licking hungrily round the eaves of its roof.

‘The army!’ someone whooped from the opposite battlement. ‘Marshal West!’

‘Indeed.’ Marovia frowned down at the carnage below, the sounds of battle growing steadily more frantic. ‘Let us hope he has not come too late.’

The noise of fighting crept up through the cool air. Clashing and clicking, echoing calls. Logen glanced left and right at the men around him, jogging forward over the open fields, quick breath hissing, gear rattling, all blunt frowns and sharp weapons.

Hardly a heartening thing, to be part of all this again.

The sad fact was that Logen had felt more warmth and more trust with Ferro and Jezal, Bayaz and Quai than he did with his own kind now. They’d been a difficult set of bastards, each in their own way. It wasn’t that he’d really understood them, or even liked them much. But Logen had liked himself when he was with them. Out there in the deserted west of the World, he’d been a man you could rely on, like his father had been. A man with no bloody history breathing on his shoulder, no name blacker than hell,

no need to watch his back every moment. A man with hopes for something better.

The thought of seeing those folk again, the chance at being that man again, put the spur to him, made Logen want to run at the grey wall of Adua all the faster. It seemed, in that moment anyway, as if he might be able to leave the Bloody-Nine outside it.

But the rest of the Northmen didn't share his eagerness. It was closer to a stroll than a charge. They ambled up to a stand of trees, a couple of birds went flapping into the white sky, and they stopped altogether. No one said anything. One lad even sat down, with his back to a tree, and started supping water from a flask.

Logen stared at him. 'By the dead, I don't reckon I ever saw such a piss-weak charge as this. Did you leave your bones back in the North?'

There was a bit of mumbling, a few shifty looks. Red Hat glanced sideways, his tongue wedged into his bottom lip. 'Maybe we did. Don't get me wrong, chief, or your Royal Highness, or whatever it is now.' He bowed his head to show he meant no disrespect by it. 'I've fought before and hard enough, had my life balanced on a sword's edge, and all o' that. Just, well . . . why fight now, is what I'm saying. What we're all thinking, I reckon. Ain't none of our business, is it? Ain't our fight, this.'

Dogman shook his head. 'The Union are going to take us for a right crowd o' cowards.'

'Who cares what they think?' someone said.

Red Hat stepped up close. 'Look, chief, I don't care much of a shit whether some fool I don't know thinks I'm a coward. I've spilled enough blood for that. We all have.'

'Huh,' grunted Logen. 'So your vote's to stay here, then, is it?'

Red Hat shrugged. 'Well, I guess—' He squawked as Logen's forehead crunched into his face, smashing his nose like a nut on an anvil. He dropped hard on his back in the mud, spluttering blood down his chin.

Logen turned round, and he let his face hang on one side, the way he used to. The Bloody-Nine's face – cold and dead, caring for nothing. It was easy to do it. Felt as natural on him as a favourite pair of boots. His hand found the cold grip of the Maker's sword, and all around him men eased back, shuffled away, muttered and whispered.

'Any other one o' you cunts want a vote?'

The lad dropped his flask in the grass and jumped up from where he'd been sitting. Logen gave a few of them his eye, one by one, whoever looked hardest, and one by one they looked at the ground, at the trees, at anything but him. Until he looked at Shivers. That long-haired bastard stared straight back at him. Logen narrowed his eyes. 'How about you?'

Shivers shook his head, hair swaying across his face. 'Oh no. Not now.'

'When you're ready, then. When any one o' you are ready. Until then, I'll have some work out o' you. Weapons,' he growled.

Swords and axes, spears and shields were all made ready quick-time. Men fussed about, finding their places, competing all of a sudden to be the first to charge. Red Hat was just getting up, wincing with one hand to his bloody face. Logen looked down at him. 'If you're feeling hard done by, think on this. In the old days you'd be trying to hold your guts in about now.'

'Aye,' he grunted, wiping his mouth. 'Right y'are.' Logen watched him walk off back to his boys, spitting blood. Say one thing for Logen Ninefingers, say he's got a talent for turning a friend into an enemy.

'Did you have to?' asked the Dogman.

Logen shrugged. He hadn't wanted it, but he was leader now. Always a disaster, but there it was, and a man in charge can't have men putting questions. Just can't have it. They come with questions first, then they come with knives. 'Couldn't see another way. That's how it's always been, ain't it?'

'I was hoping times changed.'

'Times never change. You have to be realistic, Dogman.'

'Aye. Shame, though.'

A lot of things were a shame. Logen had given up trying to put them right a long time ago. He slid out the Maker's sword and held it up. 'Let's go, then! And this time like we care a shit!' He started off through the trees, hearing the rest of the lads following. Out into the open air, and the walls of Adua loomed up, a sheer grey cliff at the top of a grassy rise, studded with round towers. There were quite a number of corpses lying around. Enough to give even a battle-hardened Carl some cold feelings. Gurkish corpses mostly, from the colour of their skin, sprawled among all kinds of broken gear, squashed into muddy earth, trampled with hoof-prints.

'Steady!' shouted Logen as he jogged on through them. 'Steady!' He caught sight of something up ahead, a fence of sharpened stakes, the body

of a horse hanging dead from one of them. Behind the stakes, men moved. Men with bows.

'Cover up!' A few arrows came zipping down. One thudded into Shivers' shield, a couple more into the ground round Logen's feet. A Carl not a stride from him got one in the chest and tumbled over.

Logen ran. The fence came wobbling towards him, a good bit slower than he'd have liked. Someone stood between two of the stakes, dark-faced, with a shining breastplate, a red plume on his pointed helmet. He was shouting to a crowd of others gathered behind him, waving a curved sword. A Gurkish officer, maybe. As good a thing to charge at as any. Logen's boots squelched at the churned-up ground. A couple more arrows spun past him, hastily aimed. The officer's eyes went wide. He took a nervous step back, raised his sword.

Logen jerked to his left and the curved blade thudded into the turf at his feet. He growled as he swung the Maker's sword round and the heavy length of metal clanged deep into the officer's bright breastplate, left a great dent in it. He screeched, then tottered forwards, all doubled up and hardly able to gasp in a breath. His sword spun out of his hand and Logen hit him on the back of his head, crushed his helmet and sent him sprawling in the mud.

He looked to the others, but not one of them had moved. They were a tattered-looking set, like a dark-skinned version of the weakest kind of Thralls. Hardly the ruthless bastards he'd expected from the way that Ferro had always talked about the Gurkish. They huddled together, spears sticking out this way and that. A couple even had bows with arrows nocked, probably could have stuck him like a hedgehog, but they didn't. Still, charging right at them might well have been the very thing to wake them up. Logen had taken an arrow or two in his time and he didn't fancy another.

So instead of coming forward, he stood up tall, and he gave a roar. A fighting roar, like the one he'd given when he charged down the hill at Carleon, all those years ago, when he still had all his fingers and all his hopes intact. He felt the Dogman come up beside him, and lift his sword, and give a scream of his own. Then Shivers was up with them, bellowing like a bull and smashing the head of his axe against his shield. Then Red Hat, with his bloody face, and Grim, and all the rest, yelling their war cries.

They stood in a long line, shaking their weapons, beating them crashing together, roaring and screaming and whooping at the tops of their voices, making a sound as if hell itself had opened up and a crowd of devils was singing welcome. The brown men watched them, staring and trembling, their mouths and their eyes wide open. Logen didn't reckon they'd ever seen anything like this before.

One of them dropped his spear. Didn't mean to, maybe, just so struck with the noise and the sight of all these crazy hairy bastards his fingers came open. It fell anyway, whether he meant it or not, and that was it, they all started dropping their gear. Fast as they could, it clattered down in the grass. Seemed stupid to keep shouting, and the war cries died out, left the two groups of men staring at each other in silence across that stretch of mud, planted with bent stakes and twisted corpses.

'Strange kind o' battle, that,' muttered Shivers.

The Dogman leaned towards Logen. 'What do we do with 'em now we've got 'em?'

'We can't just sit hear minding 'em.'

'Uh,' said Grim.

Logen chewed at his lip, spun his sword round and round in his hand, trying to think of some clever way to come at this. He couldn't see one. 'Might as well just let 'em go.' He jerked his head away north. None of them moved, so he tried it again, and pointed with his sword. They cringed and muttered to each other when he lifted it, one of them falling over in the mud. 'Just piss off that way,' he said, 'and we've got no argument. Just piss . . . off . . . that way!' He stabbed with the sword again.

One of them got the idea now, took a cautious step away from the group. When no one struck him dead, he started running. Soon enough the others followed him. Dogman watched the last of them shamble off. Then he shrugged his shoulders. 'Good luck to 'em, then, I guess.'

'Aye,' muttered Logen. 'Good luck.' Then, so quiet that no one could hear, 'Still alive, still alive, still alive . . .'

Glokta limped through the reeking gloom, down a fetid walkway half a stride across, his tongue squirming into his empty gums with the effort of staying upright, wincing all the way as the pain in his leg grew worse and

worse, doing his best not to breathe through his nose. *I thought when I lay crippled in bed after I came back from Gurkhul I could sink no lower. When I presided over the brutality of a stinking prison in Angland I thought the same again. When I had a clerk slaughtered in an abattoir I imagined I had reached the bottom. How wrong I was.*

Cosca and his mercenaries formed a single file with Glokta in their midst, their cursing, grumbling, slapping footfalls echoing up and down the vaulted tunnel, the light from their swinging lamps casting swaying shadows over the glistening stone. Rotten black water dripped from above, trickled down the mossy walls, gurgled in slimy gutters, rushed and churned down the reeking channel beside him. Ardee shuffled along behind with his instruments clasped under one arm. She had abandoned any attempt to hold up the hem of her dress and the fabric was well stained with black slurry. She looked up at him, damp hair hanging across her face, and made a weak effort at a smile. 'You certainly do take a girl to the very best places.'

'Oh, indeed. My knack for finding romantic settings no doubt explains my continuing popularity with the fairer sex.' Glokta winced at a painful twinge. 'Despite being a crippled monstrosity. Which way are we heading, now?'

Longfoot hobbled along in front, tethered by a rope to one of the mercenaries. 'North! Due north, give or take. We are just beside the Middleway.'

'Huh.' *Above us, not ten strides distant, are some of the most fashionable addresses in the city. The shimmering palaces and a river of shit, so much closer together than most would ever like to believe. Everything beautiful has a dark side, and some of us must dwell there, so that others can laugh in the light*. His snort of laughter turned to a squeak of panic as his toeless foot slid on the sticky walkway. He flailed at the wall with his free hand, fumbled his cane and it clattered to the slimy stones. Ardee caught his elbow before he fell and pulled him upright. He could not stop a girlish whimper of pain hissing out from the gaps in his teeth.

'You're really not enjoying yourself, are you?'

'I've had better days.' He smacked the back of his head against the stone as Ardee leaned down to retrieve his cane. 'To be betrayed by both,' he found himself muttering. 'That hurts. Even me. One I expected. One I could have taken. But both? Why?'

‘Because you’re a ruthless, plotting, bitter, twisted, self-pitying villain?’ Glokta stared at her, and she shrugged. ‘You asked.’ They set off once again through the nauseating darkness.

‘The question was meant to be rhetorical.’

‘Rhetoric? In a sewer?’

‘Wait up, there!’ Cosca held up his hand and the grumbling procession shuffled to a halt again. A sound filtered down from above, softly at first, then louder – the rhythmic boom of tramping feet, seeming to come, disconcertingly, from everywhere at once. Cosca pressed himself to the sticky wall, stripes of daylight falling across his face from a grate above, the long feather on his cap drooping with slime. Voices settled through the murk. Kantic voices. Cosca grinned, and jabbed one finger up towards the roof. ‘Our old friends the Gurkish. Those bastards don’t give up, eh?’

‘They’ve moved quickly,’ grunted Glokta as he tried to catch his breath.

‘No one much fighting in the streets any more, I imagine. All pulled back to the Agriont, or surrendered.’

Surrendering to the Gurkish. Glokta winced as he stretched out his leg. Rarely a good idea, and not one a man would ever consider twice. ‘We must hurry, then. Move along there, Brother Longfoot!’

The Navigator hobbled on. ‘Not much further, now! I have not led you wrong, oh no, not I! That would not have been my way. We are close now, to the moat, very close. If there is a way inside the walls, I will find it, on that you may depend. I will have you inside the walls in a—’

‘Shut your mouth and get on with it,’ growled Glokta.

One of the workmen shook the last of the wood shavings from his barrel, another raked the heap of pale powder smooth, and they were done. The whole Square of Marshals, from the towering white walls of the Halls Martial on Ferro’s right to the gilded gates of the Lords’ Round on her left, was entirely covered in sawdust. It was as if snow had come suddenly, only here, and left a thin blanket across the smooth flags. Across the dark stone, and across the bright metal.

‘Good.’ Bayaz nodded with rare satisfaction. ‘Very good!’

‘Is that all, my Lord?’ called their foreman from the midst of their cringing group.

‘Unless any of you wish to stay, and witness the destruction of the indestructible Hundred Words?’

The foreman squinted sideways at one of his fellows with some confusion. ‘No. No, I think we’ll just . . . you know . . .’ He and the rest of the workmen began to back off, taking their empty barrels with them. Soon they were away between the white palaces. Ferro and Bayaz were left alone in all that flat expanse of dust.

Just the two of them, and the Maker’s box, and the thing that it contained.

‘So. The trap is set. We need merely wait for our quarry.’ Bayaz tried his knowing grin, but Ferro was not fooled. She saw his gnarled hands fussing with each other, the muscles clenching and unclenching on the side of his bald head. He was not sure if his plans would work. However wise he was, however subtle, however cunning, he could not be sure. The thing in the box, the cold and heavy thing that Ferro longed to touch, was an unknown. The only precedent for its use was far away, in the empty wastes of the Old Empire. The vast ruin of blighted Aulcus.

Ferro frowned, and loosened her sword in its scabbard.

‘If they come, that will not save you.’

‘You can never have too many knives,’ she growled back. ‘How do you know they will even come this way?’

‘What else can they do? They must come to wherever I am. That is their purpose.’ Bayaz pulled in a ragged breath through his nose, and blew it out. ‘And I am here.’

Sacrifices

Dogman squeezed through the gate along with a rush of others, some Northmen and an awful lot of Union boys, all pouring into the city after that excuse for a battle outside. There were a few folk scattered on the walls over the archway, cheering and whooping like they were at a wedding. A fat man in a leather apron was standing on the other side of the tunnel, clapping folk on the back as they came past. 'Thank you, friend! Thank you!' He shoved something into Dogman's hand, grinning like a madman all the way. A loaf of bread.

'Bread.' Dogman sniffed at it, but it smelled alright. 'What the hell's all that about?' The man had a whole heap of loaves on a cart. He was handing them out to any soldier that came past, Union or Northman. 'Who's he, anyway?'

Grim shrugged. 'A baker?'

There weren't much time to think on it. They were all getting shoved together into a big space full of men pushing, and grumbling, and making mess. All kind of soldiers and some old men and women round the edge, starting to get tired of cheering. A well-clipped lad in a black uniform was standing on top of a cart in the midst of this madness and screeching like a lost goat.

'Eighth regiment, towards the Four Corners! Ninth towards the Agriont! If you're with the tenth you came through the wrong damn gate!'

'Thought we were to the docks, Major!'

'Poulder's division are dealing with the docks! We're for the north part of the city! Eighth regiment towards the Four Corners!'

'I'm with the Fourth!'

'Fourth? Where's your horse?'

'Dead!'

'What about us?' roared Logen. 'Northmen!'

The lad stared at them, wide-eyed, then he threw up his hands. 'Just get in there! If you see any Gurkish, kill them!' He turned back towards the gate, jerking his thumb over his shoulder into the city. 'Ninth regiment towards the Agriont!'

Logen scowled. ‘We’ll get no sense here.’ He pointed down a wide street, full of walking soldiers. Some great tall tower poked up above the buildings. Huge thing, must’ve been built on a hill. ‘We get split up, we’ll just aim at that.’ He struck off down that street and Dogman came after, Grim behind with Shivers and his boys, Red Hat and his crew further back. Wasn’t long before the crowds thinned out and they were marching down empty streets, quiet except for some birds calling, happy as ever, not caring a thing for there having been a battle just now, and caring even less that there was another one coming.

Dogman wasn’t giving it a lot of thought either, for all he had his bow loose in one hand. He was too busy staring at the houses down either side of the road. Houses the like of which he’d never seen in his life. Made of little square, red stones, and black wood filled in with white render. Each one of ’em was big enough for a chieftain to be happy with, most with glass windows in as well.

‘Bloody palaces, eh?’

Logen snorted. ‘You think this is something? You should see this Agriont we’re aiming at. The buildings they got there. You never dreamed o’ the like. Carleon’s a pigsty beside this place.’

Dogman had always found Carleon a good bit too built-up. This was downright ridiculous. He dropped back a way, found he was walking next to Shivers. He lore the loaf and held one half out.

‘Thanks.’ Shivers took a bite out of the end, then another. ‘Not bad.’

‘Ain’t nothing quite like it, is there? That taste o’ new bread? Tastes like . . . peace, I guess.’

‘If you say so.’ They chewed together for a while, saying nothing.

Dogman looked sideways. ‘I think you need to put this feud o’ yours behind you.’

‘What feud’s that?’

‘How many you got? The one with our new king up there. Ninefingers. ’

‘Can’t say I haven’t tried.’ Shivers frowned up the road at Logen’s back. ‘But whenever I turn around, there it is beside me.’

‘Shivers, you’re a good man. I like you. We all do. You got bones, lad, and brains too, and men’ll follow you. You could go a long way if you don’t get yourself killed, and there’s the problem. I don’t want to see you start up something you can’t put a good end to.’

‘You needn’t worry then. Anything I start I’ll make sure I finish.’

Dogman shook his head. ‘No, no, that ain’t my point, lad, not at all. Maybe you come out on top, maybe you don’t. My point is neither one’s a victory. Blood makes blood, and nothing else. My point is it ain’t too late for you. It ain’t too late for you to be better’n that.’

Shivers frowned at him. Then he tossed the heel of bread away, turned his big shoulder and headed off without another word. Dogman sighed. Some things can’t be put right just with talk. Some things can’t be put right at all.

They came out from the maze of buildings and onto a river. It must’ve been as wide as the Whiteflow, only the banks on each side were made of stone. The biggest bridge the Dogman had ever seen spanned it, railings made of curly iron, wide enough to drive two carts across side by side. Another wall stood at the far end, even bigger than the one they came through first. Dogman took a few gawping steps forward, and he looked up and down the gleaming water, and he saw that there were more bridges. A lot more, and some even bigger, standing out from a great forest of walls, and towers, and soaring high buildings.

A lot of the others were staring too, eyes wide open like they’d stepped out onto the moon. Even Grim had a twist to his face that might’ve been surprise.

‘Bloody hell,’ said Shivers. ‘You ever see the like o’ this?’

Dogman’s neck was aching from staring round at it all. ‘They’ve got so much here. Why do they even want bloody Angland? Place is a shit-hole. ’

Logen shrugged. ‘Couldn’t say. Some men always want more, I guess.’

‘Some men always want more, eh, Brother Longfoot?’ Glokta gave a disapproving shake of his head. ‘I spared your other foot. I spared your life. Now you want freedom, too?’

‘Superior,’ he wheedled. ‘If I may, you did undertake to release me . . . I have upheld my side of the bargain. That door should open onto a square not far from the House of Questions—’

‘We shall see.’

One last splintering blow of the axe and the door shuddered back on its rusty hinges, daylight spilling into the narrow cellar. The mercenary with the tattooed neck stood aside and Glokta limped up and peered out. *Ah,*

fresh air. A gift we so often take for granted. A short set of steps led up to a cobbled yard, hemmed in by the grubby backs of grey buildings. Glokta knew it. *Just round the corner from the House of Questions, as promised.*

'Superior?' murmured Longfoot.

Glokta curled his lip. *But where's the harm? The chances are none of us will live out the day in any case, and dead men can afford to be merciful. The only kind of men that can, in fact.* 'Very well. Let him go.' The one-eyed mercenary slid out a long knife and sawed through the rope round Longfoot's wrists. 'It would be best if I didn't ever see you again.'

The Navigator had the ghost of a grin on his face. 'Don't worry, Superior. I was only this moment thinking the very same thing.' He hobbled back the way they had come, down the dank stairway towards the sewers, rounded a corner and was gone.

'Tell me you brought the things,' said Glokta.

'I'm untrustworthy, Superior. Not incompetent.' Cosca flicked a hand at the mercenaries. 'Time, my friends. Let's black up.'

As a unit they pulled out black masks and buckled them on, pulled off their ragged coats, their torn clothes. Every man wore clean black underneath, from head to toe, with weapons carefully stowed. In a few moments a crowd of criminal villains was transformed into a well-ordered unit of Practicals of his Majesty's Inquisition. *Not that there's too much of a leap from one to the other.*

Cosca himself whisked his coat off, pulled it quickly inside out and dragged it back on. The lining was black as night. 'Always wise to wear a choice of colours,' he explained. 'In case one should be called upon to change sides in a pinch.' *The very definition of a turncoat.* He took off his hat, flicked at the filthy feather. 'Can I keep it?'

'No.'

'You're a hard man, Superior.' He grinned as he tossed the cap away into the shadows. 'And I love you for it.' He pulled his own mask on, then frowned at Ardee, standing, confused and exhausted in a corner of the store-room. 'What about her?'

'Her? A prisoner, Practical Cosca! A spy in league with the Gurkish. His Eminence expressed his desire to question her personally.' Ardee blinked at him. 'It's easy. Just look scared.'

She swallowed. 'That shouldn't be a problem.'

Wandering through the House of Questions with the aim of arresting the Arch Lector? I should say not. Glokta snapped his fingers. 'We need to move.'

'We need to move,' said West. 'Have we cleared the docks? Where the hell is Poulder?'

'Nobody seems to know, sir.' Brint tried to push his horse further, but they were squashed in by a grumbling throng. Spears waved, their points flailing dangerously close. Soldiers cursed. Sergeants bellowed. Officers clucked like frustrated chickens. It was hard to imagine more difficult terrain than the narrow streets behind the docks through which to manoeuvre an army of thousands. To make matters worse there was now an ominous flow of wounded, limping or being carried, in the opposite direction.

'Make some room for the Lord Marshal!' roared Pike. 'The Lord Marshal!' He lifted his sword as though he was more than willing to lay about him with the flat, and men rapidly cleared out of the way, a valley forming through the rattling spears. A rider came clattering up out of their midst. Jalenhorm, a bloody cut across his forehead.

'Are you alright?'

The big man grinned. 'It's nothing, sir. Caught my head on a damn timber.'

'Progress?'

'We're forcing them back towards the western side of the city. Kroy's cavalry made it to the Four Corners, as far as I can tell, but the Gurkish still have the Agriont well surrounded, and now they're regrouping, counterattacking from the west. A lot of Kroy's foot are still all caught up in the streets on the other side of the river. If we don't get reinforcement there soon—'

'I need to speak to General Poulder,' snapped West. 'Where the hell is bloody Poulder? Brint?'

'Sir?'

'Take a couple of these fellows and bring Poulder here, right away!' He stabbed at the air with a finger. 'In person!'

'Yes, sir!' Brint did his best to turn his horse around.

'What about at sea? Is Reutzer up?'

‘As far as I’m aware he’s engaged the Gurkish fleet, but I’ve no idea how . . .’ The smell of rotting salt and burning wood intensified as they emerged from the buildings and onto the harbour. ‘Bloody hell.’

West could only agree.

The graceful curve of Adua’s docks had been transformed into a crescent of carnage. Near to them the quay was blackened, wasted, scattered with broken gear and broken bodies. Further off, crowds of men were struggling in ill-formed groups, polearms sticking up in all directions like hedgehog’s spines, the air heavy with their noise. Union battle-flags and Gurkish standards flailed like scarecrows in the breeze. The epic conflict covered almost the entire long sweep of the shoreline. Several warehouses were in flames, sending up a shimmering heat-haze, lending a ghostly air to the hundreds of men locked in battle beyond them. Long smears of choking smoke, black, grey, white, rolled from the burning buildings and out into the bay. There, in the churning harbour, a host of ships was engaged in their own desperate struggle.

Vessels ploughed this way and that under full sail, turning, tacking, jockeying for position, flinging glittering spray high into the air. Catapults hurled flaming missiles, archers on the decks loosed flaming volleys, sailors crawled high in the cobwebs of rigging. Other ships were locked together in ungainly pairs by rope and grapple, like fighting dogs snapping at one another, glinting sunlight showing men in savage mêlée on their decks. Stricken vessels limped vainly, torn sailcloth hanging, slashed rigging dangling. Several were burning, sending up brown columns of smoke, turning the low sun into an ugly smudge. Wreckage floated everywhere on the frothing water – barrels, boxes, shivered timbers and dead sailors.

West knew the familiar shapes of the Union ships, yellow suns stitched into their sails, he could guess which were the Gurkish vessels. But there were others there too – long, lean, black-hulled predators, each one of their white sails marked with a black cross. One in particular towered far over every other vessel in the harbour, and was even now being secured at one of the few wharves still intact.

‘Nothing good ever comes from Talins,’ muttered Pike.

‘What the hell are Styrian ships doing here?’

The ex-convict pointed to one in the very act of ramming a Gurkish ship in the side. ‘Fighting the Gurkish, by the look of it.’

‘Sir,’ somebody asked. ‘What shall we do?’

The eternal question. West opened his mouth, but nothing came out. How could one man hope to exert any measure of control over the colossal chaos spread out before him? He remembered Varuz, in the desert, striding around with his huge staff crowding after him. He remembered Burr, thumping at his maps and wagging his thick finger. The greatest responsibility of a commander was not to command, but to look like he knew how to. He swung his sore leg over the saddle bow and slid down to the sticky cobbles.

‘We will set up our headquarters here, for the time being. Major Jalenhorm?’

‘Sir?’

‘Find General Kroy and tell him to keep pressing north and west, towards the Agriont.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Somebody get some men together and start clearing this rubbish from the docks. We need to get our people through quicker.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘And somebody find me General Poulder, damn it! Each man has to do his part!’

‘What’s this now?’ grunted Pike.

A strange procession was sweeping down the blasted quay towards them, almost dreamily out of place amongst the wreckage. A dozen watchful guards in black armour flanked a single man. He had black hair streaked with grey, sported a pointed beard, immaculately trimmed. He wore black boots, a fluted breastplate of black steel, a cloak of black velvet flowing majestically from one shoulder. He was dressed, in fact, like the world’s richest undertaker, but walked with the kind of steely self-importance reserved for the highest royalty. He plotted a direct course towards West, looking neither left nor right, the dumbfounded guards and staff forced effortlessly aside by his air of command like iron filings parted by magnetic repulsion.

He held out his black-gauntleted hand. ‘I am Grand Duke Orso, of Talins.’

The idea, perhaps, was that West should kneel and kiss it. Instead he seized it with his own and gave it a firm shake. ‘Your Excellency, an honour.’ He had no idea if that was even the proper form of address. He had scarcely been expecting to encounter one of the most powerful men in the

world in the midst of a bloody battle on the docks of Adua. ‘I am Lord Marshal West, commander of his Majesty’s Army. Not to appear ungrateful, but you are far from home—’

‘My daughter is your Queen. On her behalf, the people of Talins are prepared to make any sacrifice. As soon as I heard of the . . .’ He arched one black eyebrow at the burning harbour. ‘Troubles, here, I prepared an expedition. The ships of my fleet, as well as ten thousand of my best troops, stand at your disposal.’

West hardly knew how to respond. ‘They do?’

‘I have taken the liberty of disembarking them. They are engaged in clearing the Gurkish from the south-western quarter of the city. The Three Farms, is it called?’

‘Er . . . yes.’

Duke Orso gave the thinnest of smiles. ‘A picturesque name for an urban area. You need no longer trouble yourself with your western flank. I wish you the best of luck with your endeavours, Lord Marshal. If fate is willing, we will meet each other afterward. Victorious.’ He bowed his magnificent head and swept away.

West stared after him. He knew that he really should have been grateful for the sudden appearance of ten thousand helpful Styrian troops, but he could not escape the nagging feeling that he would have been happier if Grand Duke Orso had never arrived. For the time being, however, he had more pressing worries.

‘Lord Marshal!’ It was Brint, hurrying down the quay at the front of a group of officers. One side of his face was covered in a long smear of ash. ‘Lord Marshal, General Poulder—’

‘At long bloody last!’ snapped West. ‘Now perhaps we’ll have some answers. Where the hell is that bastard?’ He shouldered Brint aside, and froze. Poulder lay on a stretcher held by four muddy and miserable-looking members of his staff. He had the expression of a man in peaceful sleep, to the degree that West kept expecting to hear him snore. A huge, ragged wound in his chest rather spoiled the effect, however.

‘General Poulder led the charge from the front,’ said one of the officers, swallowing his tears. ‘A noble sacrifice . . .’

West stared down. How often had he wished that man dead? He jerked one hand over his face at a sudden wave of nausea. ‘Damn it,’ he whispered.

*

‘Damn it!’ hissed Glokta as he twisted his trembling ankle on the topmost step and nearly pitched onto his face. A bony Inquisitor coming the other way gave him a long look. ‘Is there a problem?’ he snarled back. The man lowered his head and hurried past without speaking.

Click, tap, pain. The dim hallway slid by with agonising slowness. Every step was an ordeal, now, but he forced himself on, legs burning, foot throbbing, neck aching, sweat running down his twisted back under his clothes, a rictus of toothless nonchalance clamped onto his face. At every gasp and grunt through the building he had expected a challenge. With each twinge and spasm he had been waiting for the Practicals to flood from the doorways and butcher him and his thinly disguised hirelings like hogs.

But those few nervous people they had passed had scarcely looked up. *Fear has made them sloppy. The world teeters at a precipice. All scared to take a step in case they put a foot into empty air. The instinct of self-preservation. It can destroy a man’s efficiency*.

He lurched through the open doors and into the ante-room outside the Arch Lector’s office. The secretary’s head jerked angrily up. ‘Superior Glokta! You cannot simply . . .’ He stumbled on the words as the mercenaries began to tramp into the narrow room behind him. ‘I mean to say . . . you cannot . . .’

‘Silence! I am acting on the express orders of the king himself.’ *Well, everyone lies. The difference between a hero and a villain is whether anyone believes him*. ‘Step aside!’ he hissed at the two Practicals flanking the door, ‘or be prepared to answer for it.’ They glanced at each other, then, as more of Cosca’s men appeared, raised their hands together and allowed themselves to be disarmed. *The instinct of self-preservation. A decided disadvantage.*

Glokta paused before the doorway. *Where I have cringed so often at the pleasure of his Eminence*. His fingers tingled against the wood. *Can it possibly be this easy? To simply walk up in broad daylight and arrest the most powerful man in the Union?* He had to suppress a smirk. *If only I had thought of it sooner.* He wrenched the doorknob round and lurched over the threshold.

Sult's office was much as it had always been. The great windows, with their view of the University, the huge round table with its jewelled map of the Union, the ornate chairs and the brooding portraits. It was not Sult sitting in the tall chair, however. It was none other than his favourite lapdog, Superior Goyle. *Trying the big seat out for size, are we? Far too big for you, I'm afraid.*

Goyle's first reaction was outrage. *How dare anyone barge in here like* this? His second was confusion. *Who would dare to barge in here like this?* His third was shock. *The cripple? But how?* His fourth, as he saw Cosca and four of his men follow Glokta through the door, was horror. *Now we're getting somewhere.*

'You!' he hissed. 'But you're—'

'Slaughtered? Change of plans, I'm afraid. Where's Sult?'

Goyle's eyes flickered around the room, over the dwarfish mercenary, the one with a hook for a hand, the one with the hideous boils, and came to rest on Cosca, swaggering round the edge of the chamber with one fist on his sword-hilt.

'I'll pay you! Whatever he's paying you, I'll double it!'

Cosca held out his open palm. 'I prefer cash in hand.'

'Now? I don't have . . . I don't have it with me!'

'A shame, but I work on the same principle as a whore. You'll buy no fun with promises, my friend. No fun at all.'

'Wait!' Goyle stumbled up and took a step back, his trembling hands held up in front of him. *But there's nowhere to go but out the window. That's the trouble with ambition. It's easy to forget, when you're always looking upwards, that the only way down from the dizzy heights is a long drop.*

'Sit down, Goyle,' growled Glokta.

Cosca grabbed his wrist, twisted his right arm savagely behind him and made him squeal, forced him back into the chair, clamped one hand round the back of his head and smashed his face into the beautiful map of the Union. There was a sharp crunch as his nose broke, spattering blood across the western part of Midderland.

Hardly subtle, but then the time for subtlety is behind us. The Arch Lector's confession, or someone close to him . . . Sult would have been better, but if we cannot have the brains, I suppose we must make do with the

arsehole. ‘Where is that girl with my instruments?’ Ardee crept cautiously into the room, came slowly across to the table and put the case down.

Glokta snapped his fingers, pointed. The fat mercenary ambled up and took a firm grip on Goyle’s free arm, dragged it sharply out across the table. ‘I expect you think you know an awful lot about torture, eh, Goyle? Believe me, though, you don’t really understand a thing until you’ve spent some time on both sides of the table.’

‘You mad bastard!’ The Superior squirmed, smearing blood across the Union with his face. ‘You’ve crossed the line!’

‘Line?’ Glokta spluttered with laughter. ‘I spent the night cutting the fingers from one of my friends and killing another, and you dare to talk to me about *lines?*’ He pushed open the lid of the case and his instruments offered themselves up. ‘The only line that matters is the one that separates the strong from the weak. The man who asks the questions from the man who answers them. There are no other lines.’ He leaned forward and ground the tip of his finger into the side of Goyle’s skull. ‘That’s all in your head! The manacles, if you please.’

‘Eh?’ Cosca looked to the fat mercenary, and the man shrugged, the blurred tattoos on his thick neck squirming.

‘Pffft,’ said the dwarf. Boil-face was silent. The one-handed mercenary had pulled down his mask and was busy picking his nose with his hook.

Glokta arched his back and gave a heavy sigh. *There really is no replacement for experienced help.* ‘Then I suppose we must improvise.’ He scooped up a dozen long nails and scattered them jingling across the table-top. He slid out the hammer, its polished head shining. ‘I think you can see where we’re going with this.’

‘No. No! We can work something out, we can—’ Glokta pressed the point of one nail into Goyle’s wrist. ‘Ah! Wait! Wait—’

‘Would you be good enough to hold this? I have only one hand to spare.’

Cosca took the nail gingerly between finger and thumb. ‘Mind where you aim with the hammer, though, eh?’

‘Don’t worry. I am quite precise.’ *An awful lot of practice.*

‘Wait!’ screeched Goyle.

The hammer made three metallic clicks, almost disappointingly quiet, as it drove the nail cleanly between the bones of Goyle’s forearm and into the table beneath. He roared with pain, spraying bloody spit over the table.

‘Oh, come now, Superior, compared to what you did to your prisoners in Angland this is really quite infantile. Try to pace yourself. If you scream like that now, you’ll have nowhere to go later.’ The fat mercenary seized Goyle’s other wrist in his pudgy hands and dragged it out across the map of the Union.

‘Nail?’ asked Cosca, raising an eyebrow.

‘You’re getting the hang of it.’

‘Wait! Ah! Wait!’

‘Why? This is the closest I’ve come to enjoying myself in six years. Don’t begrudge me my little moment. I get so very few of them.’ Glokta raised the hammer.

‘Wait!’

Click. Goyle roared with pain again. Click. And again. Click. The nail was through, and the one-time scourge of Angland’s penal colonies was pinned flat by both arms. *I suppose that’s where ambition gets you without the talent. Humility is easier to teach than one would think. All it takes to puncture our arrogance is a nail or two in the right place.* Goyle’s breath hissed through his bloody teeth, pinioned fingers clawing at the wood. Glokta disapprovingly shook his head. ‘I would stop struggling if I was you. You’ll only tear the flesh.’

‘You’ll pay for this, you crippled bastard! Don’t think you won’t!’

‘Oh, I’ve paid already.’ Glokta turned his neck around in a slow circle, trying to make the grumbling muscles in his shoulders unclench just a fraction. ‘I was kept, I am not sure for how long, but I would guess at several months, in a cell no bigger than a chest of drawers. Far too small to stand, or even to sit up straight in. Every possible position twisted, bent, agonising. Hundreds of interminable hours in the pitch darkness, the stifling heat. Kneeling in a stinking slurry of my own shit, wriggling, and squirming, and gasping for air. Begging for water which my jailers let drip down through a grate above. Sometimes they would piss through it, and I would be grateful. I have never stood up straight since. I really have no idea how I remained sane.’ Glokta thought about it for a moment, then shrugged. ‘Perhaps I didn’t. In any case, these are the kind of sacrifices I have made. What sacrifices will you make, just to keep Sult’s secrets?’

No answer but the blood running out from under Goyle’s forearms, pooling around the glittering stone that marked the House of Questions in

the city of Keln.

'Huh.' Glokta gripped his cane hard and leaned down to whisper in Goyle's ear. 'There's a little bit of flesh, between your fruits and your arsehole. You never really see it, unless you're a contortionist, or unnaturally fond of mirrors. You know the one I'm talking about. Men spend hours thinking about the area in front of it, and almost as long on the area behind, but that little patch of flesh? Unfairly ignored.' He scooped up a few nails and jingled them gently in Goyle's face. 'I mean to set that right, today. I'm going to start there, and work outwards, and believe me, once I'm done, you'll be thinking about that patch of flesh for the rest of your life. Or you'll be thinking about where it used to be, at least. Practical Cosca, would you be kind enough to help the Superior out of his trousers?'

'The University!' bellowed Goyle. He had a sheen of sweat all over his balding head. 'Sult! He's in the University!'

So soon? Almost disappointing. But then few bullies take a beating well. 'What's he doing there, at a time like this?'

'I . . . I don't—'

'Not good enough. Trousers, please.'

'Silber! He's with Silber!'

Glokta frowned. 'The University Administrator?'

Goyle's eyes darted from Glokta, to Cosca, and back again. He squeezed them shut. 'The Adeptus Demonic!'

There was a long pause. 'The what?'

'Silber, he doesn't just run the University! He conducts . . . experiments. '

'Experiments of what nature?' Glokta jabbed sharply at Goyle's bloody face with the head of the hammer. 'Before I nail your tongue to the table.'

'Occult experiments! Sult has been giving him money, for a long time! Since the First of the Magi came calling! Before, maybe!'

Occult experiments? Funding from the Arch Lector? It hardly seems Sult's style, but it explains why those damn Adepti were expecting money from me when I first visited the place. And why Vitari and her circus have set up shop there now. 'What experiments?'

'Silber . . . he can make contact . . . with the Other Side!'

'What?'

'It's true! I have seen it! He can learn things, secrets, there is no other way of knowing, and now . . .'

‘Yes?’

‘He says he has found a way to bring them through!’

‘Them?’

‘The Tellers of Secrets, he calls them!’

Glokta licked at his dry lips. ‘Demons?’ *I thought his Eminence had no patience with superstition, when all this time . . . The nerve of the man!*

‘He can send them against his enemies, he says. Against the Arch Lector’s enemies! They are ready to do it!’

Glokta felt his left eye twitching, and he pressed the back of his hand against it. *A year ago I would have laughed to my boots and nailed him to the ceiling. But things are different, now. We passed inside the House of the Maker. We saw Shickel smile as she burned. If there are Eaters? If there are Magi? Why should there not be demons? How could there not be?* ‘What enemies?’

‘The High Justice! The First of the Magi!’ Goyle squeezed his eyes shut again. ‘The king,’ he whimpered.

Ahhhh. The. King. Those two little words are my kind of magic. Glokta turned to Ardee, and showed her the yawning gap in his front teeth. ‘Would you be so kind as to prepare a Paper of Confession?’

‘Would I . . .’ She stared at him for a moment, eyes wide in her pale face, then hurried to the Arch Lector’s desk, snatched up a sheet of paper and a pen, dipped it rattling in a bottle of ink. She paused, her hand trembling. ‘What should I write?’

‘Oh, something like, “I, Superior Goyle, confess to being an accomplice in a treasonous plot of his Eminence Arch Lector Sult, to . . .” ’ *How to phrase it? He raised his brows. How else but call it what it is? ‘* “To use diabolical arts against his Majesty the king and members of his Closed Council.”

The nib scratched clumsily over the paper, scattering specks of ink. Ardee held it crackling out to him. ‘Good enough?’

He remembered the beautiful documents that Practical Frost used to prepare. The elegant, flowing script, the immaculate wording. *Each Paper of Confession, a work of art.* Glokta stared sadly down at the ink-spotted daub in his hand.

‘But a brief step from unreadable, but it will serve.’ He slid the paper under Goyle’s trembling hand, then took the pen from Ardee and wedged it

between his fingers. ‘Sign.’

Goyle sobbed, sniffed, scrawled his name at the bottom of the page as best he could with his arm nailed down. *I win, and for once the taste is almost sweet.*

‘Excellent,’ said Glokta. ‘Pull those nails, and find some sort of bandage. It would be a shame if he bled to death before he had the chance to testify. Gag him, though, I’ve heard enough for now. We’ll take him with us to the High Justice.’

‘Wait! Wait! Wurghh—!’ Goyle’s cries were sharply cut off as the mercenary with the boils wedged a wad of dirty cloth in his mouth. The dwarf slid the pliers from the case. *So far, and we are still alive. What ever are the odds of that?* Glokta limped to the window and stood, stretching his aching legs. There was a muffled shriek as the first nail was ripped from Goyle’s arm, but Glokta’s thoughts were elsewhere. He stared out towards the University, its spires looming up through the smoky murk like clawing fingers. *Occult experiments? Summonings and sendings?* He licked sourly at his empty gums. *What is going on in there?*

‘What is going on out there?’ Jezal strode up and down the roof of the Tower of Chains in a manner which he hoped was reminiscent of a caged tiger, but probably was closer to a criminal on the morning of his own hanging.

Smoke had drawn a sooty veil across the city and made it impossible to tell what was happening any further than a half mile distant. Members of Varuz’ staff, scattered around the parapets, would occasionally call out useless and wildly contradictory news. There was fighting in the Four Corners, up the Middleway, throughout the central part of the city. There was fighting on land and on sea. By turns all hope was lost and they were on the verge of deliverance. But one thing was in no doubt. Below, beyond the moat of the Agriont, the Gurkish efforts continued ominously unabated.

A rain of flatbow bolts continued to pepper the square outside the gates, but for every corpse the Gurkish left, for every wounded man dragged away, five more would vomit out from the burning buildings like bees from a broken hive. Soldiers swarmed down there in teeming hundreds, enclosing the whole circuit of the Agriont in an ever-strengthening ring of men and

steel. They squatted behind their wooden screens, they shot arrows up towards the battlements. The pounding of drums had drawn steadily closer and now echoed out around the city. Peering through his eye-glass, with every muscle tensed to try and hold it steady, Jezal had begun to notice strange figures scattered below.

Tall and graceful figures, conspicuous in pearly white armour edged with glinting gold, they moved among the Gurkish soldiers, pointing, ordering, directing. Often, now, they were pointing towards the bridge that led to the west gate of the Agriont. Dark thoughts niggled at the back of Jezal's mind. Khalul's Hundred Words? Risen up from the shadowy corners of history to bring the First of the Magi to justice?

'If I didn't know better, I would have said that they were preparing for an assault.'

'There is no cause for alarm,' croaked Varuz, 'our defences are impregnable.' His voice quavered, then cracked entirely at the final word, doing little to give anyone the slightest reassurance. Only a few short weeks ago, nobody would have dared to suggest that the Agriont could ever fall. But nobody would ever have dreamed that it would be surrounded by legions of Gurkish soldiers, either. Very plainly, the rules had changed. A deep blast of horns rang out.

'Down there,' muttered one of his staff.

Jezal peered through his borrowed eye-glass. Some form of great cart had been drawn up through the streets, like a wooden house on wheels, covered by plates of beaten metal. Even now, Gurkish soldiers were loading barrels into it under the direction of two men in white armour.

'Explosive powder,' someone said, unhelpfully.

Jezal felt Marovia's hand on his arm. 'Your Majesty, it might be best if you were to retire.'

'And if I am not safe here? Where, precisely, will I be out of danger, do you suppose?'

'Marshal West will soon deliver us, I am sure. But in the meantime the palace is much the safest place. I will accompany you.' He gave an apologetic smile. 'At my age, I fear I will be little use on the walls.'

Gorst held out one gauntleted hand towards the stairs. 'This way.'

‘This way,’ growled Glokta, limping up the hall as swiftly as his ruined feet would carry him, Cosca ambling after. Click, tap, pain.

Only one secretary remained outside the office of the High Justice, peering disapprovingly over his twinkling eye-glasses. *No doubt the rest have donned ill-fitting armour and are manning the walls. Or, more likely, have locked themselves in cellars. If only I were with them.*

‘I am afraid his Worship is busy.’

‘Oh, he will see me, don’t worry about that.’ Glokta hobbled past without stopping, placed his hand on the brass doorknob of Marovia’s office, and almost jerked it back in surprise. The metal was icy cold. Cold as hell. He turned it with his fingertips and opened the door a crack. A breath of white vapour curled out into the hall, like the freezing mist that would hang over the snowy valleys in Angland in the midst of winter.

It was deathly cold in the room beyond. The heavy wooden furniture, the old oak panelling, the grubby window panes, all glittered with white hoar-frost. The heaps of legal papers were furry with it. A bottle of wine on a table by the door had shattered, leaving behind a bottle-shaped block of pink ice and a scattering of sparkling splinters.

‘What in hell . . .’ Glokta’s breath smoked before his smarting lips. Mysterious articles were scattered widely about the wintry room. A long, snaking length of black tubing was frozen to the panelling, like a string of sausages left in the snow. There were patches of black ice on the books, on the desk, on the crunching carpet. There were pink fragments frozen to the ceiling, long white splinters frozen to the floor . . .

Human remains?

A large chunk of icy flesh, partly coated in rime, lay in the middle of the desk. Glokta turned his head sideways to better take it in. There was a mouth, still with some teeth attached, an ear, an eye. Some strands of a long beard. Enough, in the end, for Glokta to recognise whose parts were scattered so widely around the freezing room. *Who else but my last hope, my third suitor, High Justice Marovia?*

Cosca cleared his throat. ‘It seems there is something to your friend Silber’s claims after all.’

An understatement of devilish proportions. Glokta felt the muscles round his left eye twitching with a painful intensity. The secretary fussed up to the door behind them, peered through, gasped, and reeled away. Glokta heard

him being noisily sick outside. ‘I doubt the High Justice will be lending us much assistance.’

‘True. But isn’t it getting a little late in the day for your papers and so forth anyway?’ Cosca gestured towards the windows, flecked and spotted with frozen blood. ‘The Gurkish are coming, remember? If you’ve scores to settle, get them settled now, before our Kantic friends tear up all the bills. When plans fail, swift action must serve, eh, Superior?’ He reached behind his head, unbuckled his mask, and let it drop to the floor. ‘Time to laugh in your enemy’s face! To risk all on one final throw! You can pick up the pieces afterward. If they don’t go back together, well, what’s the difference? Tomorrow we might all be living in a different world.’

Or dying in one. Not the way we wanted it, maybe, but he is right. Perhaps we might borrow one final shred of Colonel Glokta’s dash before the game is over? ‘I hope I can still count on your help?’

Cosca clapped him on the shoulder and sent a painful shudder through his twisted back. ‘A noble last effort, against all the odds? Of course! Though I should mention that I usually charge double once the diabolical arts are involved.’

‘How does triple sound?’ *After all, Valint and Balk have deep pockets.*

Cosca’s grin grew wider. ‘It sounds well.’

‘And your men? Are they reliable?’

‘They are still waiting for four fifths of their pay. Until they receive it I would trust any one of them with my life.’

‘Good. Then we are prepared.’ Glokta worked his aching foot around in his boot. *Just a little further now, my toeless beauty. Just a few shuddering steps more, and one way or another, we both can rest.* He opened his fingers and let Goyle’s confession float down to the frosty floor. ‘To the University, then! His Eminence has never liked to be kept waiting.’

Open the Box

Logen could feel the doubt in the men around him, could see the worry on their faces, in the way they held their weapons, and he didn't blame them. A man can be fearless on his own doorstep, against enemies he understands, but take him long miles over the salty sea to strange places he never dreamed of, he'll take fright at every empty doorway. And there were an awful lot of those, now.

The city of white towers, where Logen had hurried after the First of the Magi, amazed at the scale of the buildings, the strangeness of the people, the sheer quantity of both, had become a maze of blackened ruins. They crept down empty streets, lined with the outsize skeletons of burned-out houses, charred rafters stabbing at the sky. They crept across empty squares, scattered with rubble and dusted with ash. Always the sounds of battle echoed, ghostly – near, far, all around them.

It was as if they crept through hell.

'How d'you fight in this?' whispered the Dogman.

Logen wished he had an answer. Fighting in forests, in mountains, in valleys, they'd done it all a hundred times, and knew the rules, but this? His eyes flickered nervously over the gaping windows and doorways, the piles of fallen stones. So many places for an enemy to hide.

All Logen could do was aim at the House of the Maker and hope for the best. What would happen when they got there, he wasn't sure, but it seemed a safe bet there'd be blood involved. Nothing that would do anyone the slightest good, most likely, but the fact was he'd said go, and the one thing a leader can't do is change his mind.

The clamour of fighting was getting louder, now, and louder. The stink of smoke and anger was picking at his nose, scratching at his throat. The scored metal of the Maker's sword was slippery in his sweaty palm. He crept low to the ground, over a heap of rubble and along beside a shattered wall, his hand held flat behind him to say go careful. He eased up to the edge, and peered around it.

The Agriont rose up just ahead, great walls and towers black against the white sky, a second set reflected in the moat below. A lot of men were

gathered near the water, crowded up and down the cobbled space as far as Logen could see. It didn't take a sharp mind to realise they were Gurkish. Arrows flitted up towards the battlements, bolts flitted back down, spinning from the cobbles, sticking wobbling into wooden screens.

Not thirty strides away they'd drawn up a line, facing into the city. A good, clean line, bristling with spears, set out on either side of a tall standard, golden letters twinkling on it. A tough-looking line of hard men, well armed and well armoured, nothing like the rubbish they'd faced outside the walls. Logen didn't reckon shouting was going to get this lot moving anywhere. Except straight at him, maybe.

'Whoa,' muttered the Dogman as he crept up. A few more Northmen followed him, spreading out in the mouth of the street, staring stupidly around.

Logen waved an arm at them. 'Might be best if we stay out of sight for the —'

An officer in the midst of the Gurkish line barked in his harsh tongue, pointed towards them with his curved sword. Armour rattled as the men set their spears.

'Ah, shit,' hissed Logen. They came forward, fast, but organised. A mass of them, and bristling with bright, sharp, deadly metal.

There are only three choices when you get charged. Run away, stand, or charge yourself. Running away isn't usually a bad option, but given the way the rest of the boys were feeling, if they ran they wouldn't stop running until they fell in the sea. If they stood, all in a puzzled mess from coming through the city, the chances were good that they'd break, and that would leave some dead and do nothing for the rest. Which left one choice, and that's no choice at all.

Two charges in one day. Shitty luck, that, but there was no use crying about it. You have to be realistic about these things.

Logen started running. Not the way he wanted to, but forward, out from the buildings and across the cobbles towards the moat. He didn't give too much thought to whether anyone was following. He was too busy screaming and waving his sword around. The first into the killing, just like in the old days. A fitting end for the Bloody-Nine. Be a good song, maybe, if anyone could be bothered finding a tune for it. He gritted his teeth, waiting for the terrible impact.

Then a crowd of Union soldiers came pouring from the buildings on the left, shouting like madmen themselves. The Gurkish charge faltered, their line began to break up, spears swinging wildly as men turned to face the sudden threat. An unexpected bonus, and no mistake.

The Union crashed into the end of the line. Men screeched and bellowed, metal shrieked on metal, weapons flashed, bodies dropped, and Logen fell into the midst of it. He slid past a wobbling spear, slashed at a Gurkish soldier. He missed and hit another, sent him screaming, blood bubbling down chain-mail. He rammed into a third with his shoulder and flung him on his back, stomped on the side of his jaw and felt it crunch under his boot.

The Gurkish officer who'd led the charge was only a stride away, his sword ready. Logen heard a bow string behind and an arrow took the officer near the collar bone. He dragged in a shuddering breath to scream, half spinning round. Logen chopped a deep gash through his back-plate, spots of blood jumping. Men crunched into the remains of the line around him. A spear shaft bent up and shattered sending splinters flying in Logen's face. Someone roared right next to him and made his ear buzz. He jerked his head away to see a Carl throw a desperate hand up, a curved sword sliced into it and sent a thumb spinning. Logen hacked the Gurkish soldier who'd swung it in the face, the heavy blade of the Maker's sword catching him across the cheek and splitting his skull wide.

A spear flashed at him. Logen tried to turn sideways, gasped as the point slid through his shirt and down his right side, leaving a cold line under his ribs. The man who held it stumbled on towards him, moving too quick to stop. Logen stabbed him right through, just under his breastplate, ended up blinking in his face. A Union soldier with a patchy ginger beard on his cheeks.

The man frowned, puzzled at seeing another white face. 'Wha . . .' he croaked, clutching at him. Logen tore away, one hand pressed to his side. It was wet there. He wondered if the spear had nicked him or run him right through. He wondered if it had killed him already, and he had just a last few bloody moments left.

Then something hit him on the back of his head and he was reeling, bellowing, not knowing what was happening. His limbs were made of mud. The world wobbled about, full of flying dirt and flying edges. He hacked at something, kicked at something else. He grappled with someone, snarling,

tore his hand free and fumbled out a knife, stabbed at a neck, black blood flowing. The sounds of battle roared and hummed in his ears. A man staggered past with part of his face hanging off. Logen could see right inside his mangled mouth from the side, bits of teeth falling out.

The cut down his side burned, and burned, and sucked his breath out. The knock on his head made the pulse pound in his skull, made the blurry world slide from side to side. His mouth was full of the salt metal taste of blood. He felt a touch on his shoulder and lurched around, teeth bared, fingers tight round the grip of the Maker's blade.

Dogman let go of him and held up his hands. 'It's me! It's me!'

Logen saw who it was. But it wasn't his hand that held the sword, now, and the Bloody-Nine saw only work that needed doing.

*

What a curious flock this crippled shepherd has acquired. Two dozen fake Practicals followed Glokta through the deserted lanes of the Agriont, Nicomo Cosca, infamous soldier of fortune, swaggering at their head. My hopes all entrusted to the world's least trustworthy man. One of them dragged the bound and gagged Superior Goyle stumbling along by a rope. Like an unwilling dog being taken for a walk. Ardee West shuffled in their midst, her white dress stained with the filth of the sewers and the blood of several men, her face stained with darkening bruises and a haunted slackness. *No doubt the result of the several horrors she has already witnessed today. All capering through the Agriont after the Inquisition's only crippled Superior. A merry dance to hell, accompanied by the sounds of distant battle.*

He lurched to a sudden halt. An archway beside him led through into the Square of Marshals and, for some reason beyond his comprehension, the whole wide space had been covered with sawdust. In the middle of that yellow-white expanse, perfectly recognisable even over this distance, the First of the Magi stood, waiting. Beside him was the dark-skinned woman who had nearly drowned Glokta in his bath. *My two favourite people in all the world, I do declare.*

'Bayaz,' hissed Glokta.

‘No time for that.’ Cosca caught him by the elbow and pulled him away, and the First of the Magi and his sullen companion passed out of view. Glokta limped on, down the narrow lane, winced as he turned a corner, and found himself staring directly into the face of his old acquaintance Jezal dan Luthar. *Or, should I say, the High King of the Union. I am painfully honoured.*

‘Your Majesty,’ he said, lowering his head and causing a particularly unpleasant stabbing through his neck. Cosca, just appearing beside him, gave an extravagant bow, reaching for his cap to sweep it from his head. It was gone. He shrugged his shoulders apologetically, and tugged at his greasy forelock.

Luthar frowned at him, and at each member of his strange group as they appeared. Someone seemed to be lurking at the back of the royal entourage. A robe of black and gold in amongst all that polished steel. Could that be . . . *our old friend the High Justice? But surely he is in frozen pieces*—Then Ardee shuffled around the corner.

Luthar’s eyes went wide. ‘Ardee . . .’

‘Jezal . . .’ She looked every bit as amazed as he did. ‘I mean—’

And the air was ripped apart by a colossal explosion.

The Middleway was not what it used to be.

West and his staff rode northwards in stunned silence. Their horses’ hooves tapped at the cracked road. A sorry bird cheeped from the bare rafters of a burned-out house. Someone in a side street squealed for help. From the west the vague sounds of fighting still echoed, like the noise of a distant sporting event, but one with no winners. Fire had swept through the centre of the city, turning whole swathes of buildings to blackened shells, the trees to grey claws, the gardens to patches of withered slime. Corpses were the only addition. Corpses of every size and description.

The Four Corners was a slaughter-yard, scattered with all the ugly garbage of war, bounded by the ruined remains of some of Adua’s finest buildings. Near at hand, the wounded were laid out in long rows on the dusty ground, coughing, groaning, calling for water, bloody surgeons moving helplessly among them.

A few grim soldiers were already piling the Gurkish dead into formless heaps, masses of tangled arms, legs, faces. They were watched over by a tall man with his hands clenched behind his back. General Kroy, always quick to put things in order. His black uniform was smudged with grey ash, one torn sleeve flapping around his wrist. The fighting must have been savage indeed to make a mark on his perfect presentation, but his salute was unaffected. It could not have been more impeccable if they stood on a parade ground.

'Progress, General?'

'Bitter fighting through the central district, Lord Marshal! Our cavalry broke through this morning and we took them by surprise. Then they counterattacked while we were waiting for the foot. I swear, this weary patch of ground has changed hands a dozen times. But we have the Four Corners, now! They're fighting hard for every stride, but we're driving them back towards Arnault's wall. Look at that, now!' He pointed to a pair of Gurkish standards leaning against a length of crumbling masonry, their golden symbols gleaming in the midst of that drab destruction. 'They'll make a fine centrepiece to anyone's living room, eh, sir?'

West could not stop his eyes wandering down to a group of groaning wounded lolling against the wall below. 'I wish you joy of them. The Agriont?'

'The news is less good there, I'm afraid. We're pushing them hard, but the Gurkish are up in numbers. They still have the citadel entirely surrounded.'

'Push harder, General!'

Kroy snapped out another salute. 'Yes, sir, we'll break them, don't you worry. Might I ask how General Poulder is doing with the docks?'

'The docks are back in our hands, but General Poulder . . . is dead.'

There was a pause. 'Dead?' Kroy's face had turned deathly pale. 'But how did he—'

There was a rumble, like thunder in the distance, and the horses shied, pawed at the ground. West's face, and Kroy's, and the faces of their officers, all turned as one to the north. There, over the tops of the blackened ruins at the edge of the square, a great mass of dust was rising high above the Agriont.

The bright world spun and throbbed, full of the beautiful song of battle, the wonderful taste of blood, the fine and fruitful stink of death. In the midst of it, no further than arms length away, a small man stood, watching him.

To come so close to the Bloody-Nine? To ask for death as surely as to step into the searing fire. To beg for death. To demand it.

Something about his pointed teeth seemed familiar. A faint memory, from long ago. But the Bloody-Nine pushed it away, shook it off, sunk it in the bottomless sea. It meant nothing to him who men were, or what they had done. He was the Great Leveller, and all men were equal before him. His only care was to turn the living into the dead, and it was past time for the good work to begin. He raised the sword.

The earth shook.

He stumbled, and a great noise washed over him, tore between the dead men and the living, split the world in half. He felt it knock something loose inside his skull. He snarled as he righted himself, lifted the blade high . . .

Except the arm would not move.

'Bastard . . .' snarled the Bloody-Nine, but the flames were all burned out. It was Logen who turned towards the noise.

A vast cloud of grey smoke was rising up from the wall of the Agriont a few hundred strides away. Spinning specks flew up high, high above it leaving arching trails of brown dust in the sky, like the tentacles of some vast sea-monster. One seemed to reach its peak just above them. Logen watched it fall. It had looked like a pebble at first. As it tumbled slowly down he realised it was a chunk of masonry the size of a cart.

'Shit,' said Grim. There was nothing else to say. It crashed through the side of a building right in the midst of the fight. The whole house burst apart, flinging broken bodies in every direction. A broken timber whirred past the Dogman and splashed into the moat. Specks of grit nipped at the back of Logen's head as he flung himself to the ground.

Choking dirt billowed out across the road. He retched, one hand over his face. He wobbled up to standing, the dusty world lurching around him, using his sword as a crutch, ears still ringing from the noise, not sure who he was, let alone where.

The bones had gone right out of the battle by the moat. Men coughed, stared, wandered in the gloom. There were a lot of bodies, Northmen,

Gurkish, Union, all mixed up together. Logen saw a dark-skinned man staring at him, blood running down his dusty face from a cut above one eye.

Logen lifted his sword, gave a throaty roar, tried to charge and ended up staggering sideways and nearly falling over. The Gurkish soldier dropped his spear and ran off into the murk.

There was a second deafening detonation, this one even closer, off to the west. A sudden blast of wind ripped at Jezal's hair, nipped at his eyes. Swords rang from sheaths. Men stared up, faces slack with shock.

'We must go,' piped Gorst, taking a firm grip on Jezal's elbow.

Glokta and his henchmen were already making off down a cobbled lane, as quickly as the Superior could limp. Ardee gave one brief look over her shoulder, eyes wide.

'Wait . . .' Seeing her like that had given Jezal a sudden and painful rush of longing. The idea of her in the thrall of that disgusting cripple was almost too much to bear. But Gorst was having none of it.

'The palace, your Majesty.' He ushered Jezal away towards the park without a backward glance, the rest of the royal bodyguard clattering after. Fragments of stone began to click off the roofs around them, to bounce from the road, to ping from the armour of the Knights of the Body.

'They are coming,' muttered Marovia, staring grimly off towards the Square of Marshals.

Ferro squatted, hands held over her head, the monstrous echoes still booming from the high white walls. A stone the size of a man's head fell out of the sky and burst apart on the ground a few strides away, black gravel scattering across the pale sawdust. A boulder ten times as big crashed through the roof of a building, sent glass tinkling from shattered windows. Dust billowed out from the streets and into the square in grey clouds. Gradually the noise faded. The man-made hailstorm rattled to a stop, and there was a pregnant silence.

'What now?' she growled at Bayaz.

'Now they will come.' There was a crash somewhere in the streets, the sound of men shouting, then a long scream suddenly cut off. He turned

towards her, his jaw working nervously. ‘Once we begin, do not move from the spot. Not a hair. The circles have been carefully—’

‘Keep your mind on your own part, Magus.’

‘Then I will. Open the box, Ferro.’

She stood, frowning, her fingertips rubbing at her thumbs. Once it was opened, there would be no going back, she felt it.

‘Now!’ snapped Bayaz. ‘Now, if you want your vengeance!’

‘Sssss.’ But the time for going back was far behind her. She squatted down, laying her hand on the cool metal of the lid. A dark path was the only choice, and always had been. She found the hidden catch and pressed it in. The box swung silently open, and that strange thrill seeped, then flowed, then poured out over her and made the air catch in her throat.

The Seed lay inside, nestling on its metal coils, a dull, grey, unremarkable lump. She closed her fingers round it. Lead-heavy and ice-cold, she lifted it from the box.

‘Good.’ But Bayaz was wincing as he watched her, face twisted with fear and disgust. She held it out towards him and he flinched back. There were beads of sweat across his forehead. ‘Come no closer!’

Ferro slammed the box shut. Two Union guards, clad in full armour, were backing into the square, heavy swords in their fists. There was a fear in the way they moved, as if they were retreating from an army. But only one man rounded the corner. A man in white armour, worked with designs of shining metal. His dark face was young, and smooth, and beautiful, but his eyes seemed old. Ferro had seen such a face before, in the wastelands near Dagoska.

An Eater.

The two guards came at him together, one shouting a shrill battle-cry. The Eater shrugged effortlessly around their swords, came forward in a sudden blur, caught one of the Union men with a careless flick of his open hand. There was a hollow clang as it caved in his shield and breastplate both, lifted him flailing into the air. He crunched down some twenty strides from where he had been standing, rolled over and over leaving dark marks in the pale sawdust. He flopped to rest not far from Ferro, coughed out a long spatter of blood and was still.

The other guard backed away. The Eater looked at him, a sadness on his perfect face. The air around him shimmered, briefly, the man’s sword

clattered down, he gave a long squeal and clutched at his head. It burst apart, showering fragments of skull and flesh across the walls of the white building beside him. The headless corpse slumped to the ground. There was a pause.

'Welcome to the Agriont!' shouted Bayaz.

Ferro's eyes were drawn up by a flash of movement. High above, a figure in white armour dashed across a roof. They made an impossible leap across the wide gap to the next building and vanished from sight. In the street below a woman flowed out of the shadows and into the square, dressed in glittering chain-mail. Her hips swayed as she sauntered forwards, a happy smile on her flawless face, a long spear carried loose in one hand. Ferro swallowed, shifted her fist around the Seed, gripping it tight.

Part of a wall collapsed behind her, blocks of stone tumbling out across the square. A huge man stepped through the ragged gap, a great length of wood in his hands, studded with black iron, his armour and his long beard coated in dust. Two others followed, a man and a woman, all with the same smooth skin, the same young faces and the same old, black eyes. Ferro scowled round at them as she slid her sword out, the cold metal glinting. Useless, maybe, but holding it was some kind of comfort.

'Welcome to you all!' called Bayaz. 'I have been waiting for you, Mamun!'

The first of the Eaters frowned as he stepped carefully over the headless corpse. 'And we for you.' White shapes flitted from the roofs of the buildings, thumped down into the square in crouches, and stood tall. Four of them, one to each corner. 'Where is that creeping shadow, Yulwei?'

'He could not be with us.'

'Zacharus?'

'Mired in the ruined west, trying to heal a corpse with a bandage.'

'Cawneil?'

'Too much in love with what she used to be to spare a thought for what comes.'

'You are left all alone, then, in the end, apart from this.' Mamun turned his empty gaze on Ferro. 'She is a strange one.'

'She is, and exceptionally difficult, but not without resources.' Ferro scowled, and said nothing. If anything needed saying, she could talk with

her sword. ‘Ah, well.’ Bayaz shrugged. ‘I have always found myself my own best council.’

‘What choice have you? You destroyed your own order with your pride, and your arrogance, and your hunger for power.’ More figures stepped from doorways round the square, strolled unhurried from the streets. Some strutted like lords. Some held hands like lovers. ‘Power is all you ever cared for, and you are left without even that. The First of the Magi, and the last.’

‘So it would seem. Does that not please you?’

‘I take no pleasure in this, Bayaz. This is what must be done.’

‘Ah. A righteous battle? A holy duty? A crusade, perhaps? Will God smile on your methods, do you think?’

Mamun shrugged. ‘God smiles on results.’ More figures in white armour spilled into the square and spread out around its edge. They moved with careless grace, with effortless strength, with bottomless arrogance. Ferro frowned around at them, the Seed clutched tight at one hip, her sword at the other.

‘If you have a plan,’ she hissed. ‘Now might be the time.’

But the First of the Magi only watched as they were surrounded, the muscles twitching on the side of his face, his hands clenching and unclenching by his sides. ‘A shame that Khalul himself could not pay a visit, but you have brought some friends with you, I see.’

‘One hundred, as I promised. Some few have other tasks about the city. They send their regrets. But most of us are here for you. More than enough.’ The Eaters were still. They stood facing inwards, spread out in a great ring with the First of the Magi at their centre. Ferro Maljinn felt no fear, of course.

But these were poor odds.

‘Answer me one thing,’ called Mamun, ‘since we are come to the end. Why did you kill Juvens?’

‘Juvens? Ha! He thought to make the world a better place with smiles and good intentions. Good intentions get you nothing, and the world does not improve without a fight. I say I killed no one.’ Bayaz looked sideways at Ferro. His eyes were feverish bright, now, his scalp glistened with sweat. ‘But what does it matter who killed who a thousand years ago? What matters is who dies today.’

‘True. Now, at last, you will be judged.’ Slowly, very slowly, the circle of Eaters began to contract, stepping gently forward as one, drawing softly inwards.

The First of the Magi gave a grim smile. ‘Oh, there will be a judgement here, Mamun, on that you can depend. The magic has drained from the world. My Art is a shadow of what it was. But you forgot, while you were gorging yourselves on human meat, that knowledge is the root of power. High Art I learned from Juvens. Making I took from Kanedias.’

‘You will need more than that to defeat us.’

‘Of course. For that I need some darker medicine.’

The air around Bayaz’ shoulders shimmered. The Eaters paused, some of them raised their arms in front of their faces. Ferro narrowed her eyes, but there was only the gentlest breath of wind. A subtle breeze, that washed out from the First of the Magi in a wave, that lifted the sawdust from the stones and carried it out in a white cloud to the very edge of the Square of Marshals.

Mamun looked down, and frowned. Set into the stone beneath his feet, metal shone dully in the thin sunlight. Circles, and lines, and symbols, and circles within circles, covering the entire wide space in a single vast design.

‘Eleven wards, and eleven wards reversed,’ said Bayaz. ‘Iron. Quenched in salt water. An improvement suggested by Kanedias’ researches. Glustrod used raw salt. That was his mistake.’

Mamun looked up, the icy calmness vanished from his face. ‘You cannot mean . . .’ His black eyes flickered to Ferro, then down to her hand, clenched tight around the Seed. ‘No! The First Law—’

‘The First Law?’ The Magus showed his teeth. ‘Rules are for children. This is war, and in war the only crime is to lose. The word of Euz?’ Bayaz’ lip curled. ‘Hah! Let him come forth and stop me!’

‘Enough!’ One of the Eaters leaped forward, flashing across the metal circles towards their centre. Ferro gasped as the stone in her hand turned suddenly, terribly cold. The air about Bayaz twisted, danced, as though he was reflected in a rippling pool.

The Eater sprang up, mouth open, the bright blade of his sword shining. Then he was gone. So were two others behind him. A long spray of blood was smeared across the ground where one of them had been standing. Ferro’s eyes followed it, growing wider and wider. Her mouth fell open.

The building that had stood behind them had a giant, gaping hole torn out of it from ground to dizzy roof. A great canyon lined with broken stone and hanging plaster, with splintered spars and dangling glass. Dust showered from the shattered edges and into the yawning hole below. A flock of torn papers fluttered down through the empty air. From out of the carnage a thin and agonised screaming came. A sobbing. A screech of pain. Many voices. The voices of those who had been using that building as a refuge.

Poor luck for them.

Bayaz' mouth slowly curled up into a smile. 'It works,' he breathed.

Dark Paths

Jezal hurried through the tall archway and into the gardens of the palace, his Knights around him. It was remarkable that High Justice Marovia had been able to keep pace with them on their dash through the Agriont, but the old man scarcely seemed out of breath. ‘Seal the gates!’ he bellowed. ‘The gates!’

The huge doors were heaved shut, two beams the thickness of ships’ masts swung into position behind them. Jezal allowed himself to breathe a little easier. There was a reassuring feeling to the weight of those gates, to the height and thickness of the walls of the palace compound, to the sizeable host of well trained and armoured men defending it.

Marovia laid his hand gently on Jezal’s shoulder, began to steer him down the cobbled path towards the nearest door into the palace. ‘We should find the safest place possible, your Majesty—’

Jezal shook him off. ‘Would you lock me in my bedroom? Or should I hide in the cellar? I will remain here, and co-ordinate the defence of—’

A long, blood-chilling scream came from the other side of the wall and echoed around the bare gardens. It was as if that shriek made a hole in him through which all confidence quickly leaked away. The gates rattled slightly against the mighty beams, and the notion of hiding in the cellar gained appeal with astonishing speed.

‘A line!’ barked Gorst’s shrill voice. ‘To the King!’ A wall of heavily-armoured men clustered instantly around Jezal, swords drawn, shields raised. Others kneeled in front, pulling bolts from quivers, turning the cranks of their heavy flatbows. All eyes were fixed on the mighty double doors. They rattled gently again, wobbled slightly.

‘Down there!’ someone called from the walls above. ‘Down—’ There was a screech and an armoured man plummeted from the battlements and crunched into the turf. His body trembled, then fell limp.

‘How . . .’ someone muttered.

A white figure dived from the walls, gracefully turned over in the air and thudded onto the pathway in front of them. It stood up. A dark-skinned man, arrayed in armour of white and gold, his face smooth as a boy’s. He held a

spear of dark wood with a long, curved blade in one hand. Jezal stared at him, and he looked back, expressionless. There was something in those black eyes, or rather there was something missing from them. Jezal knew that this was not a man. It was an Eater. A breaker of the Second Law. One of Khalul's Hundred Words, come to settle ancient scores with the First of the Magi. It seemed, rather unfairly, that their score had somehow come to include Jezal. The Eater raised one hand, as if in blessing.

'May God admit us all to heaven.'

'Loose!' squealed Gorst. Flatbows rattled and popped. A couple of bolts glanced off the Eater's armour, a couple more thudded into flesh, one under the breastplate, another in the shoulder. One bolt caught it right through the face, the flights sticking out just below the eye. Any man should have dropped dead before them. The Eater sprang forwards with shocking speed.

One of the Knights raised his flatbow in a feeble attempt to defend himself. The spear split it in two and sliced him cleanly in half at the belly, chopped into another man with an echoing clang and sent him tumbling through the air into a tree ten strides away. Fragments of dented armour and splintered wood flew. The first Knight made a strange whistling sound as his top half tumbled to the path, showering his dumbstruck comrades with gore.

Jezal was jostled back, could see nothing more than flashes of movement between his bodyguards. He heard screams and groans, clashing metal, saw swords glinting, gouts of blood flying. An armoured body flew into the air, flopping like a rag-doll, crunched into a wall on the other side of the gardens.

The bodies swayed apart. The Eater was surrounded, swinging its spear in blinding circles. One ripped into a man's shoulder and knocked him shrieking to the ground, the shaft splintering with the force of the blow and the blade spinning away edge-first into the turf. A Knight charged in from behind and spitted the Eater through the back, the glittering point of his halberd sliding bloodless through the white armour on its chest. Another Knight struck its arm off with an axe and dust showered from the stump. The Eater screeched, hit him across the chest with a backhanded blow that crushed his breastplate and drove him sighing into the dirt.

A sword-cut squealed through the white armour, sending dust flying up as if from a beaten carpet. Jezal stared dumbly as the Eater reeled towards

him. Gorst shoved him out of the way, growling as he brought his long steel round to hack deep into the Eater's neck with a meaty thud. It flailed, silently, its head hanging off by a flap of gristle, brown dust pouring from its yawning wounds. It clutched at Gorst with its remaining hand and he staggered, face twisted with pain, sank to his knees as it wrenched his arm around.

'Here's heaven, bastard!' Jezal's sword chopped through the last bit of neck and the Eaters' head dropped onto the grass. It let go of Gorst and he clutched at his mangled forearm, the shape of the Eater's hand dented into his heavy armour. The headless body slowly toppled over. 'Cursed thing!' Jezal took one step and kicked its head across the garden, watched it bounce and roll into a flower bed leaving a trail of dust through the grass. Three men stood over the body, their heavy breath echoing from inside their helmets, their swords flashing in the sun as they hacked it into pieces. Its fingers were still twitching.

'They're made of dust,' someone whispered.

Marovia frowned at the remains. 'Some are. Some bleed. Each one is different. We should get inside the palace!' he shouted as he hurried across the gardens. 'There will be more of them!'

'More?' Twelve Knights of the Body lay dead. Jezal swallowed as he counted their broken and bloody, dented and battered corpses. The best men the Union had to offer, scattered around the palace gardens like heaps of scrap metal among the brown leaves. 'More? But how do we—?' The gates shuddered. Jezal's head snapped towards them, the blind courage of the fight fading quickly and sick panic rushing in behind it.

'This way!' roared Marovia, holding open a door and beckoning desperately. It was not as though there were other choices. Jezal rushed towards him, caught one gilded boot with the other three steps in, and went sprawling painfully on his face. There was a cracking, a tearing, a squealing of wood and metal behind. He clawed his way onto his back to see the gates torn apart in a cloud of flying timber. Broken planks spun through the air, bent nails pinged from the pathways, splinters settled gently across the lawns.

A woman sauntered through the open gateway, the air still shimmering gently around her tall, thin body. A pale woman with long, golden hair. Another walked beside her, just the same except that her left side was

spattered from head to toe with red blood. Two women, happy smiles on their beautiful, perfect, identical faces. One of them slapped a Knight Herald across the head as he charged up, tearing his winged helmet from his shattered skull and sending it spinning high into the air. The other turned her black, empty eyes on Jezal. He struggled up and ran, wheezing with fear, slid through the door beside Marovia and into the shadowy hallway, lined with ancient arms and armour.

Gorst and a few Knights of the Body tumbled through after him. Over their shoulders the one-sided battle in the gardens continued. A man raised a flatbow only to explode in a shower of blood. An armoured corpse crashed into a Knight just as he turned to run, sent him hurtling sideways through a window, sword spinning from his hand. Another ran towards them, arms pumping, tumbled down a few strides away, thrashing on the ground, flames spurting from the joints in his armour.

'Help me!' someone wailed. 'Help me! Help—' Gorst slammed the heavy doors shut with his one good arm, one of his fellows dropped the thick bar into the brackets. They tore old polearms from the walls, one with a tattered battle-flag attached, and started wedging them in the doorway.

Jezal was already backing away, cold sweat tickling at his skin under his armour, gripping tight to the hilt of his sword more for reassurance than defence. His drastically denuded entourage stumbled back with him – Gorst, Marovia, and but five others, their gasping, horrified breath echoing in the dim corridor, all staring towards the door.

'The last gate did not hold them,' Jezal whispered. 'Why should this one?'

No one answered.

'Keep your wits about you, gentlemen,' said Glokta. 'The door, please.'

The fat mercenary took his axe to the front gate of the University. Splinters flew. It wobbled at the first blow, shuddered at the second, tore open at the third. The one-eyed dwarf slithered through, a knife in either hand, closely followed by Cosca, sword drawn.

'Clear,' came his Styrian drawl from inside, 'if fusty.'

'Excellent.' Glokta looked at Ardee. 'It might be best if you stayed towards the back.'

She gave an exhausted nod. 'I was thinking the same.'

He limped painfully over the threshold, black-clad mercenaries pouring through the doorway behind him, the last of them dragging Goyle reluctantly by his bandaged wrists. *And along the very paths I took the first time I visited this heap of dust, so many months ago. Before the vote. Before Dagoska, even. How lovely to be back . . .*

Down the dark hallway, past the dirty paintings of forgotten Adepti, tortured floorboards groaning under the boots of the mercenaries. Glokta lurched out into the wide dining hall.

The freak-show of Practicals was scattered about the dim chamber just as it had been when he last visited. The two identical men from Suljuk, with their curved swords. The tall, thin one, the dark men with their axes, the vast Northman with the ruined face. And so on. A good score of them in all. *Have they been sitting here all this time, I wonder, just being menacing to each other?*

Vitari was already up from her chair. 'I thought I told you to keep away from here, cripple.'

'I tried, indeed I did, but I could not banish the memory of your smile.'

'Ho, ho, Shylo!' Cosca strolled out from the hallway, twiddling at the waxed ends of his moustache with one hand, sword drawn in the other.

'Cosca! Don't you ever die?' Vitari let a cross-shaped knife tumble from her hand to clatter across the boards on the end of a long chain. 'Seems a day for men I hoped I'd seen the last of.' Her Practicals spread out around her, swords sliding from sheaths, axes, maces, spears scraping off the table. The mercenaries clomped into the hall, their own weapons at the ready. Glokta cleared his throat. 'I think it would be better for all concerned if we could discuss this like civilised—'

'You see anyone civilised?' snarled Vitari.

A fair point. One Practical sprang up on the table making the cutlery jump. The one-handed mercenary waved his hook in the air. The two heavily-armed groups edged towards each other. It looked very much as if Cosca and his hired hands would be earning their pay. *A merry bloodbath I daresay it will be, and the outcome of a bloodbath is notoriously hard to predict. All in all, I would rather not take the gamble.*

'A shame about your children! A shame for them, that there's no one civilised around!'

Vitari's orange eyebrows drew furiously inwards. 'They're far away!'

‘Oh, I’m afraid not. Two girls and a boy? Beautiful, flaming red hair, just like their mother’s?’ *Which gate would they go through? The Gurkish came from the west, so* . . . ‘They were stopped at the east gate, and taken into custody.’ Glokta stuck out his bottom lip. ‘Protective custody. These are dangerous times for children to be wandering the streets, you know.’

Even with her mask on Glokta could see her horror. ‘When?’ she hissed.

When would a loving mother send her children to safety? ‘Why, the very day the Gurkish arrived, of course, you know that.’ The way her eyes widened told him that he had guessed right. Now to twist the blade. ‘Don’t worry though, they’re tucked up safe. Practical Severard is acting as nurse. But if I don’t come back . . .’

‘You wouldn’t hurt them.’

‘What is it with everyone today? Lines I won’t cross? People I won’t hurt?’ Glokta showed his most revolting leer. ‘Children? Hope, and prospects, and all that happy life ahead of them? I despise the little bastards!’ He shrugged his twisted shoulders. ‘But perhaps you know me better. If you’re keen to play dice with your children’s lives, I suppose we can find out. Or we could reach an understanding, as we did in Dagoska.’

‘Shit on this,’ growled one of the Practicals, hefting his axe and taking a step forward. *And the atmosphere of violence lurches another dizzy step towards the brink* . . .

Vitari shoved out her open hand. ‘Don’t move.’

‘You’ve got children, so what? Means nothing to me. It’ll mean nothing to Sult eeeeeee—’ There was a flash of metal, the jingling of a chain, and the Practical staggered forward, blood pouring from his opened throat.

Vitari’s cross-shaped knife slapped back into her palm and her eyes flicked back to Glokta. ‘An understanding?’

‘Exactly. You stay here. We go past. You didn’t see nothing, as they say in the older parts of town. You know well enough that you can’t trust Sult. He left you to the dogs in Dagoska, didn’t he? And he’s all done, anyway. The Gurkish are knocking at the door. Time we tried something new, don’t you think?’

Vitari’s mask shifted as she worked her mouth. *Thinking, thinking.* The eyes of her killers sparkled, the blades of their weapons glinted. *Don’t call the bluff, bitch, don’t you dare* . . .

‘Alright!’ She gestured with her arm and the Practicals edged unhappily back, still glaring at the mercenaries across the room. Vitari nodded her spiky head towards a doorway at the end of the chamber. ‘Down that hall, down the stairs at the end, and there’s a door. A door with black iron rivets.’

‘Excellent.’ *A few words can be more effective than a lot of blades, even in such times as these.* Glokta began to hobble away, Cosca and his men following.

Vitari frowned after them, her eyes deadly slits. ‘If you so much as touch my—’

‘Yes, yes.’ Glokta waved his hand. ‘My terror is boundless.’

There was a moment of stillness, as the remains of the gutted building settled across one side of the Square of Marshals. The Eaters stood, as shocked as Ferro, a circle of amazement. Bayaz appeared to be the only one not horrified by the scale of the destruction. His harsh chuckling echoed out and bounced back from the walls. ‘It works!’ he shouted.

‘No!’ screamed Mamun, and the Hundred Words came rushing forward.

Closer they came, the polished blades of their beautiful weapons flashing, their hungry mouths hanging open, their white teeth gleaming. Closer yet, streaming inwards with terrible speed, shrieking out a chorus of hate that made even Ferro’s blood turn cold.

But Bayaz only laughed. ‘Let the judgement begin!’

Ferro growled through clenched teeth as the Seed burned cold at her palm. A mighty blast of wind swept out across the square from its centre, sent Eaters tumbling like skittles, rolling and flailing. It shattered every window, ripped open every door, stripped the roofs of every building bare.

The great inlaid gates of the Lords’ Round were sucked open, then torn from their hinges, careering across the square. Tons of wood, spinning over and over like sheets of paper in a gale. They carved a crazy swathe through the helpless Eaters. They ripped white-armoured bodies apart, sending parts of limbs flying, blood and dust going up in sprays and spatters.

Ferro’s hand was shimmering, and half her forearm. She gasped quick breaths as the cold spread through her veins, out to every part of her, burning at her insides. The Seed blurred and trembled as if she looked at it through fast flowing water. The wind whipped at her eyes as white figures

were flung through the air like toys, writhing in a storm of shattered glass, shredded wood, splintered stone. No more than a dozen of them kept their feet, reeling, clutching at the ground, shining hair streaming from their heads, straining desperately against the blast.

One of them reached for Ferro, snarling into the wind. A woman, her glittering chain-mail thrashing, her hands clawing at the screaming air. She edged closer, and closer. A smooth, proud face, stamped with contempt.

Like the faces of the Eaters who had come for her near Dagoska. Like the faces of the slavers who had stolen her life from her. Like the face of Uthman-ul-Dosht, who had smiled at her anger and her helplessness.

Ferro's shriek of fury merged with the shrieking of the wind. She had not known that she could swing a sword so hard. The look of shock only just had time to form on the Eater's perfect face before the curved blade sliced through her outstretched arm and took her head from her shoulders. The corpse was plucked flopping away, dust flying from its gaping wounds.

The air was full of flashing shapes. Ferro stood frozen as debris whirred past her. A beam crashed through a struggling Eater's chest and carried it screaming away, high into the air, spitted like a locust on a skewer. Another burst suddenly apart in a cloud of blood and flesh, the remains sucked spiralling up into the trembling sky.

The great Eater with the beard struggled forward, lifting his huge club above his head, bellowing words no one could hear. Through the pulsing, twisting air Ferro saw Bayaz raise one eyebrow at him, saw his lips make one word.

'Burn.'

For a single moment he blazed as brightly as a star, the image of him stamped white into Ferro's eyes. Then his blackened bones were snatched away into the storm.

Only Mamun remained. He strained forwards, dragging his feet across the stone, across the iron, inch by desperate inch towards Bayaz. One armoured greave tore from his leg and flew back spinning through the maddened air, then a plate from his shoulder followed it. Torn cloth flapped. The skin on his snarling face began to ripple and stretch.

'No!' One clutching, clawing arm stretched desperately out towards the First of the Magi, fingertips straining.

‘Yes,’ said Bayaz, the air around his smiling face trembling like the air above the desert. The nails tore from Mamun’s fingers, his outstretched arm bent back, snapped, was ripped from his shoulder. Flawless skin peeled from bone, flapping like sailcloth in a squall, brown dust flying out of his torn body like a sandstorm over the dunes.

He was dashed suddenly away, crashed through a wall near the top of one of the tall buildings. Blocks were sucked from the edges of the ragged hole he left and tumbled outwards, upwards. They joined the whipping paper, thrashing rock, spinning planks, flailing corpses that reeled through the air around the edge of the square, faster and faster, a circle of destruction that followed the iron circles on the ground. It reached now as high as the tall buildings, and now higher yet. It flayed and scoured at everything it passed, tearing up more stone, glass, wood, metal, flesh, growing darker, faster, louder and more powerful with every moment.

Over the mindless anger of the wind Ferro could just hear Bayaz’ voice.

‘God smiles on results.’

Dogman got up, and shook his sore head, dirt flying from his hair. There was blood running down his arm, red on white. Seemed as if the world hadn’t ended after all.

Looked like it had come close, though.

Bridge and gatehouse both had disappeared. Where they’d stood there was nothing but a great heap of broken stone and a yawning chasm carved out of the walls. That and a whole lot of dust. There were still some folk killing, but there were a lot more rolling about, choking and groaning, staggering through the rubbish, the fight all gone out of ’em. Dogman knew how they felt.

Someone was clambering up onto that mass of junk where the moat used to be, heading towards the breach. Someone with a tangled mess of hair and a long sword in one hand.

Who else but Logen Ninefingers?

‘Ah, shit,’ cursed Dogman. He’d got some damn fool ideas all of a sudden, had Logen, but that wasn’t halfway the worst of it. There was someone following him across that bridge of rubble. Shivers, axe in hand,

shield on arm, and a frown on his dirty face like a man with some dark work in mind.

'Ah, shit!'

Grim shrugged his dusty shoulders. 'Best get after 'em.'

'Aye.' Dogman jerked his thumb at Red Hat, just getting up from the ground and shaking a pile of grit off his coat. 'Get some lads together, eh?' He pointed off towards the breach with the blade of his sword. 'We're going that way.'

Damn it but he needed to piss, just like always.

Jezal backed away down the shadowy hall, hardly daring even to breathe, feeling the sweat prickle at his palms, at his neck, at the small of his back.

'What are they waiting for?' someone muttered.

There was a gentle creaking sound above. Jezal looked up towards the black rafters. 'Did you hear—'

A shape burst through the ceiling and hurtled down into the hallway in a white blur, flattening one of the Knights of the Body, her feet leaving two great dents in his breastplate, blood spraying from his visor.

She smiled up at Jezal. 'Greetings from the Prophet Khalul.'

'The Union!' roared another Knight, charging forward. One moment his sword whistled towards her. The next she was on the other side of the corridor. The blade clanged harmlessly into the stone floor and the man tottered forward. She seized him under the armpit, bent her knees slightly, and flung him shrieking through the ceiling. Broken plaster rained down as she grabbed another Knight round the neck and smashed his head into the wall with such force that he was left embedded in the shattered stonework, armoured legs dangling. Antique swords tumbled from their brackets and clattered down into the hallway around his limp corpse.

'This way!' The High Justice dragged Jezal, numb and helpless, towards a pair of gilded double doors. Gorst lifted up one heavy boot, gave them a shivering kick and sent them flying open. They burst through into the Chamber of Mirrors, cleared of the many tables that had stood there on Jezal's wedding night, an empty acre of polished tiles.

He ran for the far door, his slapping footfalls and his heaving, wheezing, horrified breath echoing out around the huge room. He saw himself

running, distorted, in the mirrors far ahead of him, the mirrors to each side. A ludicrous sight. A clown-king, fleeing though his own palace, crown askew, his scarred face beaded with sweat, slack with terror and exhaustion. He skidded to a halt, almost fell over backwards in his haste to stop, Gorst nearly ploughing into his back.

One of the twins was sitting on the floor beside the far doorway, leaning back against the mirrored wall, reflected in it, as though she were leaning against her sister. She lifted up one languorous hand, daubed crimson with blood, and she waved.

Jezal spun towards the windows. Before he could even think of running one of them burst into the room. The other twin came tumbling through in a shower of glittering glass, rolled over and over across the polished floor, unfolded to her feet and slid to a stop.

She ran one long hand through her golden hair, yawned, and smacked her lips. ‘Have you ever had the feeling that someone else is having all the fun?’ she asked.

Reckonings

Red Hat had been right. There was no reason for anyone to die here. No one but the Bloody-Nine, at least. It was high time that bastard took his share of the blame.

'Still alive,' Logen whispered, 'still alive.' He crept around the corner of a white building and into the park.

He remembered this place full of people. Laughing, eating, talking. There was no laughter here now. He saw bodies scattered on the lawns. Some armoured, some not. He could hear a distant roar – far-off battle, maybe. Nothing nearer except the hissing of the wind through the bare branches and the crunching of his own footsteps in the gravel. His skin prickled as he crept towards the high wall of the palace.

The heavy doors were gone, only the twisted hinges left hanging in the archway. The gardens on the other side were full of corpses. Armoured men, all dented and bloody. There was a crowd of them on the path before the gate, crushed and broken as though they'd been smashed with a giant hammer. One was sliced clean in half, the two pieces lying in a slick of dark blood.

A man stood in the midst of all this. He had white armour on, speckled and dusted with red. A wind had blown up in the gardens, and his black hair flicked around his face, dark skin smooth and flawless as a baby's. He was frowning down at a body near his feet, but he looked up at Logen as he came through the gate. Without hatred or fear, without happiness or sadness. Without anything much.

'You are a long way from home,' he said, in Northern.

'You too.' Logen looked into that empty face. 'You an Eater?'

'To that crime I must confess.'

'We're all guilty o' something.' Logen hefted his sword in one hand. 'Shall we get to it, then?'

'I came here to kill Bayaz. No one else.'

Logen glanced round at the ruined corpses scattered across the gardens. 'How's that working out for you?'

‘Once you set your mind on killing, it is hard to choose the number of the dead.’

‘That is a fact. Blood gets you nothing but more blood, my father used to tell me.’

‘A wise man.’

‘If only I’d listened.’

‘It is hard, sometimes, to know what is . . . the truth.’ The Eater lifted up his bloody right hand and frowned at it. ‘It is fitting that a righteous man should have . . . doubts.’

‘You tell me. Can’t say I know too many righteous men.’

‘I once thought I did. Now I am not sure. We must fight?’

Logen took a long breath. ‘Looks that way.’

‘So be it.’

He came so fast there was hardly time to lift a sword, let alone swing it. Logen threw himself out of the way but still got caught in the ribs with something – elbow, knee, shoulder. It can be hard to tell when you’re flopping over and over on the grass, everything tumbling around you. He tried to get up, found that he couldn’t. Raising his head an inch was almost more than he could manage. Every breath was painful. He dropped back, staring up at the white sky. Maybe he should’ve stayed outside the walls. Maybe he should’ve just let the lads rest in the trees, until after it was all settled.

The tall shape of the Eater swam into his blurry vision, black against the clouds. ‘I am sorry for this. I will pray for you. I will pray for us both.’ He lifted up his armoured foot.

An axe chopped into his face and sent him staggering. Logen shook the light out of his head, dragged some air in. He forced himself up onto one elbow, clutching at his side. He saw a white-armoured fist flash down and crash onto Shivers’ shield. It ripped a chunk out of the edge and knocked Shivers onto his knees. An arrow pinged off the Eater’s shoulder-plate and he turned, one side of his head hanging bloodily open. A second shaft stuck him neatly through the neck. Grim and the Dogman stood in the archway, their bows raised.

The Eater went pounding towards them with huge strides, the wind of his passing tearing at the grass.

‘Huh,’ said Grim. The Eater rammed into him with an armoured elbow. He crashed into a tree ten strides away and flopped down onto the grass. The Eater raised its other arm to chop at Dogman and a Carl stabbed a spear into him, carried him thrashing backwards. More Northmen charged through the gate, crowding round, screaming and shouting, hacking with axes and swords.

Logen rolled over, crawled across the lawn and seized hold of his sword, tearing a wet handful of grass up with it. A Carl tumbled past him, broken head covered in blood. Logen squeezed his jaws together and charged, lifting his sword in both hands.

It bit into the Eater’s shoulder, sheared through his armour and split him open down as far as his chest, showering blood in the Dogman’s face. Same time, almost, one of the Carls caught him full in the side with a maul, smashed his other arm and left a great dent in his breastplate.

The Eater stumbled and Red Hat hacked a gash in one of his legs. He lurched to his knees, blood spilling from his wounds and running down his dented white armour, pooling on the path underneath him. He was smiling, so far as Logen could tell with half his face hanging off. ‘Free,’ he whispered.

Logen raised the Maker’s blade and hacked his head from his shoulders.

A wind had blown up suddenly, swirling through the stained streets, hissing out of the burned-out buildings, whipping ash and dust in West’s face as he rode towards the Agriont. He had to shout over it. ‘How do we fare?’

‘The fight’s gone out of ’em!’ bellowed Brint, his hair dragged sideways by another gust. ‘They’re in full retreat! Seems as if they were too keen to get the Agriont surrounded and they weren’t ready for us! Now they’re falling over each other to get away to the west. Still some fighting around Arnault’s Wall, but Orso has them on the run in the Three Farms!’

West saw the familiar shape of the Tower of Chains over the top of a ruin, and he urged his horse towards it. ‘Good! If we can just clear them away from the Agriont we’ll have the best of it! Then we can . . .’ He trailed off as they rounded the corner and could see all the way to the west gate of the citadel. Or, more accurately, where the west gate had once been.

It took him a moment to make sense of it. The Tower of Chains loomed up to one side of a monumental breach in the wall of the Agriont. The entire gatehouse had somehow been brought down, along with large sections of the wall to either side, the remains choking the moat below or distributed widely around the ruined streets in front.

The Gurkish were inside the Agriont. The very heart of the Union lay exposed.

Not far ahead, now, a formless battle was still raging before the citadel. West urged his horse closer, through the stragglers and the wounded, into the very shadow of the walls. He saw a line of kneeling flatbow-men deliver a withering volley into a crowd of Gurkish, bodies toppling. Beside him a man screamed into the wind as another tried to secure a tourniquet on the bloody stump of his leg.

Pike's face was grimmer even than usual. 'We should be further back, sir. This isn't safe.'

West ignored him. Each man had to do his part, without exception. 'We need a line formed up here! Where is General Kroy?' The Sergeant was no longer listening. His eyes had drifted upwards, his mouth dropping stupidly open. West turned around in his saddle.

A black column was rising above the western end of the citadel. It seemed at first to be made of swirling smoke, but as West gained some sense of scale he realised it was spinning matter. Masses of it. Countless tons of it. His eyes followed it upwards, higher and higher. The clouds themselves were moving, whipped round in a spiral at the centre, shifting in a slow circle above them. The fighting sputtered, as Union and Gurkish alike gaped up at the writhing pillar above the Agriont, the Tower of Chains a black finger in front of it, the House of the Maker an insignificant pin-prick behind.

Things began to rain from the sky. Small things, at first – splinters, dust, leaves, fragments of paper. Then a chunk of wood the size of a chair leg plummeted down and bounced spinning from the paving. A soldier squealed as a stone big as a fist smashed into his shoulder. Those who were not fighting were backing away, crouching to the ground, holding shields above their heads. The wind was growing more savage, clothes whipping in the storm, men stumbling against it, leaning into it, teeth gritted and eyes narrowed. The spinning pillar was growing wider, darker, faster, higher,

touching the very sky. West could see specks around its edge dancing against the white clouds like swarms of midges on a summer's day.

Except that these were tumbling blocks of stone, wood, earth, metal, by some freak of nature sucked into the heavens and set flying. He did not know what was happening, or how. All he could do was stare.

'Sir!' bellowed Pike in his ear. 'Sir, we must go!' He seized hold of West's bridle. A great chunk of masonry crashed into the paving not far from them. West's horse reared up, screaming in panic. The world lurched, spun, was black, he was not sure how long for.

He was on his face, mouth full of grit. He raised his head, wobbled drunkenly up to his hands and knees, wind roaring in his ears, flying grit stinging at his face. It was dark as dusk. The air was full of tumbling rubbish. It ripped at the ground, at the buildings, at the men, huddled now like sheep, all thoughts of battle long forgotten, the living sprawled on their faces with the dead. The Tower of Chains was scoured by debris, the slates flying from its rafters, then the rafters torn away into the storm. A giant beam plummeted down and crashed into the cobbles, spun end over end, flinging corpses out of its path to slice through the wall of a house and send its roof sliding inwards.

West trembled, tears snatched away from his stinging eyes, utterly helpless. Was this how the end would come? Not covered in blood and glory at the head of a fool's charge like General Poulder. Not passing quietly in the night like Marshal Burr. Not even hooded on the scaffold for the murder of Crown Prince Ladisla.

Crushed at random by a giant piece of rubbish falling from the sky.

'Forgive me,' he whispered into the tempest.

He saw the black outline of the Tower of Chains shifting. He saw it lean outwards. Chunks of stone rained down, splashed into the churning moat. The whole vast edifice lurched, bulged, and toppled outwards, with ludicrous slowness, through the flailing storm and into the city.

It broke into monstrous sections as it fell, crashing down upon the houses, crushing cowering men like ants, throwing deadly missiles in every direction.

And that was all.

There were no buildings, now, around the space that had once been the Square of Marshals. The gushing fountains, the stately statues in the Kingsway, the palaces full of soft pinks.

All snatched away.

The gilded dome had lifted from the Lords' Round, cracked, split, and been ripped into chaff. The high wall of the Halls Martial was a ravaged ruin. The rest of the proud buildings were nothing more than shattered stumps, torn down to their very foundations. They had all melted away before Ferro's watering eyes. Dissolved into the formless mass of fury that whirled shrieking around the First of the Magi, endlessly hungry from the ground to the very heavens.

'Yes!' She could hear his delighted laughter, over the noise of the storm. 'I am greater than Juvens! I am greater than Euz himself!'

Was this vengeance? Then how much of it would make her whole? Ferro wondered dumbly how many people had been cowering in those vanished buildings. The shimmering around the Seed was swelling, up to her shoulder, then to her neck, and it engulfed her.

The world grew quiet.

Far away the destruction continued, but it was blurred now, the sounds of it came to her muffled, as if through water. Her hand was beyond cold. She was numb to the shoulder. She saw Bayaz, smiling, his arms raised. The wind ripped about them, a wall of endless movement.

But there were shapes within it.

They grew sharper even as the rest of the world grew less distinct. They gathered around the outside of the outermost circle. Shadows. Ghosts. A hungry crowd of them.

'Ferro . . .' came their whispering voices.

A storm had blown up sudden in the gardens, more sudden even than the storms in the High Places. The light had faded, then stuff had started tumbling down from the dark sky. Dogman didn't know where it was coming from and he didn't much care. He had other things more pressing to worry on.

They dragged the wounded in through a high doorway, groaning, cursing, or worst of all, saying nothing. A couple they left outside, back to the mud

already. No point wasting breath on them who were far past helping.

Logen had Grim under his armpits, the Dogman had him by the boots. His face was white as chalk but for the red blood on his lips. You could see it plain on his face that it was bad, but he didn't complain any, not Harding Grim. Dogman wouldn't have believed it if he had.

They set him down on the floor, in the gloom on the other side of the door. Dogman could hear things rattling against the windows, thumping against the turf outside, clattering on the roofs above. More men were carried in – broken arms and broken legs and worse besides. Shivers came after, bloody axe in one hand and his shield-arm dangling useless.

Dogman had never seen a hallway like it. The floor was made of green stone and white stone, polished up smooth and shining bright as glass. The walls were hung with great paintings. The ceiling was crusted with flowers and leaves, carved so fine they looked almost real, except that they were made from gold, glittering in the dim light leaking through the windows.

Men bent down, tending to fellows injured, giving them water and soft words, a splint or two being fixed. Logen and Shivers just stood there, giving each other a look. Not hatred, exactly, and not respect. It was hard for the Dogman to say what it was, and he didn't much care about that either.

'What were you thinking?' he snapped. 'Pissing off on your own like that? Thought you were supposed to be chief, now! That's a poor effort, ain't it?'

Logen only stared back, eyes gleaming in the gloom. 'Got to help Ferro,' he muttered, half to himself. 'Jezal too.'

Dogman stared at him. 'Got to help who? There's real folk here in need o' help.'

'I ain't much with the wounded.'

'Only with the making of 'em! Go on then, Bloody-Nine, if you must. Get to it.'

Dogman saw Logen's face flinch when he heard that name. He backed away, one hand clamped to his side and his sword gripped bloody in the other. Then he turned and limped off down the glittering hallway.

'Hurts,' said Grim, as Dogman squatted down next to him.

'Where?'

He gave a bloody smile. 'Everywhere.'

‘Right, well . . .’ Dogman pulled his shirt up. One side of his chest was caved in, a great blue-black bruise spread out all across it like a tar-stain. He could hardly believe a man could still be breathing with a wound like that. ‘Ah . . .’ he muttered, not having a clue where to start even.

‘I think . . . I’m done.’

‘What, this?’ Dogman tried to grin but didn’t have it in him. ‘No more’n a scratch.’

‘Scratch, eh?’ Grim tried to lift his head, winced and fell back, breathing shallow. He stared up, eyes wide open. ‘That’s a fucking beautiful ceiling.’

The Dogman swallowed. ‘Aye. I reckon.’

‘Should’ve died fighting Ninefingers, long time ago. The rest was all a gift. Grateful for it, though, Dogman. I’ve always loved . . . our talks.’

He closed his eyes, and he stopped breathing. He’d never said much, Harding Grim. Famous for it. Now he’d stay silent forever. A pointless sort of a death, a long way from home. Not for anything he’d believed in, or understood, or stood to gain from. Nothing more’n a waste. But then Dogman had seen a lot of men go back to the mud, and there was never anything fine about it. He took a long breath, and stared down at the floor.

A single lamp cast creeping shadows across the mouldering hallway, over rough stone and flaking plaster. It made sinister outlines of the mercenaries, turned Cosca’s face and Ardee’s into unfamiliar masks. The darkness seemed to gather inside the heavy stonework of the archway and around the door within – ancient-looking, knotted and grained, studded with black iron rivets.

‘Something amusing, Superior?’

‘I stood here,’ murmured Glokta. ‘In this exact spot. With Silber.’ He reached out and brushed the iron handle with his fingertips. ‘My hand was on the latch . . . and I moved on.’ *Ah, the irony. The answers we seek so long and far for – so often at our fingertips all along.*

Glokta felt a shiver down his twisted spine as he leaned close to the door. He could hear something from beyond, a muffled droning in a language he did not recognise. *The Adeptus Demonic calls upon the denizens of the abyss?* He licked his lips, the image of High Justice Marovia’s frozen

remains fresh in his mind. *It would be rash to plunge straight through, however keen we are to put our questions to rest. Very rash . . .*

'Superior Goyle, since you have led us here, perhaps you would care to go first?'

'Geegh?' squeaked Goyle through his gag, his already bulging eyes going even wider. Cosca took the Superior of Adua by his collar, seized the iron handle with his other hand, thrust it swiftly open and applied his boot to the seat of Goyle's trousers. He stumbled through, bellowing meaningless nonsense into his gag. The metallic sound of a flatbow being discharged issued from the other side of the door, along with the chanting, louder and harsher now by far.

What would Colonel Glokta have said? Onwards to victory, lads! Glokta lurched through the doorway, almost tripping over his own aching foot on the threshold, and gazed about him in surprise. A large, circular hall with a domed ceiling, its shadowy walls painted with a vast, exquisitely detailed mural. *And one that seems uncomfortably familiar.* Kanedias, the Master Maker, loomed up over the chamber with arms outspread, five times life-size or more, fire blazing from behind him in vivid crimson, orange, white. On the opposite wall lay his brother Juvens, stretched out on the grass beneath flowering trees, blood running from his many wounds. In between the two men, the Magi marched to take their revenge, six on one side, five on the other, bald Bayaz in the lead. *Blood, fire, death, vengeance. How wonderfully appropriate, given the circumstances.*

An intricate design had been laid out with obsessive care, covering wide floor. Circles within circles, shapes, symbols, figures of frightening complexity, all described in neat lines of white powder. Salt, unless I am much mistaken. Goyle lay on his chest a stride or two from the door, at the edge of the outermost ring, his hands still tied behind him. Dark blood spread out from under him, the point of a flatbow bolt sticking out of his back. *Just where his heart should be. I would never have taken that for his weak spot.*

Four of the University's Adepti stood in various stages of amazement. Three of them: Chayle, Denka, and Kandelau, held candles in both hands, their sputtering wicks giving off a choking corpse-stink. Saurizin, the Adeptus Chemical, clutched an empty flatbow. The faces of the old men, lit in bilious yellow from beneath, were pantomime masks of fear.

At the far side of the room Silber stood behind a lectern, a great book open before him, staring down with intense concentration by the light of a single lamp. His finger hissed across the page, his thin lips moving ceaselessly. Even at this distance, and despite the fact the room was icy cold, Glokta could see fat beads of sweat running down his thin face. Beside him, painfully upright in his pure white coat and glaring blue daggers across the width of the chamber, stood Arch Lector Sult.

'Glokta, you crippled bastard!' he snarled, 'what the hell are you doing here?'

'I could well ask you the same question, your Eminence.' He waved his cane at the scene. 'Except the candles, the ancient books, the chanting and the circles of salt rather give the game away, no?' *And a rather infantile game it seems, suddenly. All that time, while I was torturing my way through the Mercers, while I was risking my life in Dagoska, while I was blackmailing votes in your name, you were up to* . . . this?

But Sult seemed to be taking it seriously enough. 'Get out, you fool! This is our last chance!'

'This? Seriously?' Cosca was already through the door, masked mercenaries following. Silber's eyes were still fixed on the book, lips still moving, more sweat on his face than ever. Glokta frowned. 'Someone shut him up.'

'No!' shouted Chayle, a look of utter horror on his tiny face. 'You mustn't stop the incantations! It is a profoundly dangerous operation! The consequences could be . . . could be—'

'Disastrous!' shrieked Kandelau. One of the mercenaries took a step towards the middle of the room nonetheless.

'Don't tread near the salt!' screeched Denka, wax dripping from his wobbling candle. 'Whatever you do!'

'Wait!' snapped Glokta, and the man paused at the edge of the circle, peering at him over his mask. The room was growing colder even as they spoke. Unnaturally cold. Something was happening in the centre of the circles. The air was trembling, like the air above a bonfire, more and more as Silber's harsh voice droned on. Glokta stood frozen, his eyes flicking between the old Adepti. *What to do? Stop him, or don't stop him? Stop him, or—*

‘Allow me!’ Cosca stepped forwards, delving into his black coat with his spare left hand. *But you can’t be—* He whipped his arm out with a careless flourish and his throwing knife came with it. The blade flashed in the candlelight, spun directly through the shimmering air in the centre of the room, and imbedded itself to the hilt in Silber’s forehead with a gentle thud.

‘Ha!’ Cosca seized Glokta by the shoulder. ‘What did I tell you? Have you ever seen a knife thrown better?’

Blood ran down the side of Silber’s face in a red trickle. His eyes rolled upwards, flickered, then he sagged sideways, dragging over his lectern, and crashed to the floor. His book tumbled down on top of him, aged pages flapping, the lamp spilled over and sprayed streaks of burning oil across the floor.

‘No!’ shrieked Sult.

Chayle gasped, his mouth falling open. Kandelau threw his candle aside and sank grovelling to the floor. Denka gave a terrified squeak, one hand over his face, staring out pop-eyed from between his fingers. There was a long pause while everyone except Cosca stared, horrified, towards the corpse of the Adeptus Demonic. Glokta waited, his few teeth bared, his eyes almost squeezed shut. *Like that horrible, beautiful moment between stubbing your toe and feeling the hurt. Here it comes. Here it comes.*

Here comes the pain . . .

But nothing came. No demonic laughter echoed through the chamber. The floor did not fall in to expose a gate to hell. The shimmering faded, the room began to grow warmer. Glokta raised his brows, almost disappointed. ‘It would seem the diabolical arts are decidedly overrated. ’

‘No!’ snarled Sult again.

‘I am afraid so, your Eminence. And to think I used to respect you.’ Glokta grinned at the Adeptus Chemical, still clinging weakly to his empty flatbow. He waved a hand at Goyle’s body. ‘A good shot. I congratulate you. One less mess for me to tidy up.’ He waved a finger at the crowd of mercenaries behind him. ‘Now seize that man.’

‘No!’ bellowed Saurizin, throwing his flatbow to the floor. ‘None of it was my idea! I had no choice! It was him!’ He stabbed a thick finger at Silber’s lifeless body. ‘And . . . and him!’ He pointed to Sult with a trembling arm.

‘You’ve got the right idea, but it can wait for the interrogation. Would you be kind enough to take his Eminence into custody?’

‘Happily.’ Cosca strolled across the floor of the wide room, his boots sending up puffs of white powder, leaving a trail of ruination through the intricate patterns.

‘Glokta, you blundering idiot!’ shrieked Sult. ‘You have no idea of the danger Bayaz poses! This First of the Magi and his bastard king! Glokta! You have no right! Gah!’ He yelped as Cosca dragged his arms behind his back and forced him to his knees, his white hair in disarray. ‘You have no idea—’

‘If the Gurkish don’t kill the lot of us, you’ll get ample time to explain it to me. Of that I assure you.’ Glokta leered his toothless smile as Cosca drew the rope tight around Sult’s wrists. *If you only knew how long I have dreamed of saying these words.* ‘Arch Lector Sult. I arrest you for high treason against his Majesty the King.’

Jezal could only stand and stare. One of the twins, the one spattered in blood, lifted her long arms slowly over her head and gave a long, satisfied stretch. The other raised an eyebrow.

‘How would you like to die?’ she asked.

‘Your Majesty, get behind me.’ Gorst hefted his long steel in his one good hand.

‘No. Not this time.’ Jezal pulled the crown from his head, the crown that Bayaz had been so particular in designing, and tossed it clattering away. He was done with being a king. If he was to die, he would die a man, like any other. He had been given so many advantages, he realised now. Far more than most men could ever dream of. So many chances to do good, and he had done nothing besides whine and think of himself. Now it was too late. ‘I’ve lived my life leaning on others. Hiding behind them. Climbing on their shoulders. Not this time.’

One of the twins raised her hands and started slowly to clap, the regular tap, tap, echoing from the mirrors. The other giggled. Gorst raised his sword. Jezal did the same, one last act of pointless defiance.

Then High Justice Marovia flashed between them. The old man moved with impossible speed, his dark robe snapping around him. He had

something in his hand. A long rod of dark metal with a hook on the end.

'What—' muttered Jezal.

The hook blazed suddenly, searingly white, bright as the sun on a summer's day. A hundred hooks burned like stars, reflected back from the mirrors round the walls, and back, and back, into the far distance. Jezal gasped, squeezed his eyes shut, holding one hand over his face, the long trail left by that brilliant point burned fizzing into his vision.

He blinked, gaped, lowered his arm. The twins stood, the High Justice beside them, just where they had before, still as statues. Tendrils of white steam hissed up from vents in the end of the strange weapon and curled around Marovia's arm. For a moment, nothing moved.

Then a dozen of the great mirrors at the far end of the hall fell in half across the middle, as though they were sheets of paper slashed suddenly by the world's sharpest knife. A couple of the bottom halves and one of the top toppled slowly forwards into the room and shattered, scattering bright fragments of glass across the tiled floor.

'Urgggh,' breathed the twin on the left. Jezal realised that blood was spurting out from under her armour. She lifted one hand towards him and it dropped off the end of her arm and thudded to the tiles, blood squirting from the smoothly severed stump. She toppled to the left. Or her body did, at least. Her legs fell the other way. The bigger part of her crashed to the ground, and her head came off and rolled across the tiles in a widening pool. Her hair, trimmed off cleanly at the neck, fluttered down into the bloody mess in a golden cloud.

Armour, flesh, bone, all divided into neat sections as perfectly as cheese by a cheese wire. The twin on the right frowned, took a wobbling step towards Marovia. Her knees gave out and she fell in half at the waist. The legs slumped down and lay still, dust sliding out in a brown heap. The top half dragged itself forward by the nails, lifted its head, hissing.

The air around the High Justice shimmered and the Eater's severed body burst into flames. It thrashed, for a while, making a long squealing sound. Then it was still, a mass of smoking black ash.

Marovia lifted up the strange weapon, whistling softly as he smiled at the hook on the end, a last few traces of vapour still drifting from it. 'Kanedias. He certainly knew how to make a weapon. The Master Maker indeed, eh, your Majesty?'

‘What?’ muttered Jezal, utterly dumbfounded.

Marovia’s face melted slowly away as he crossed the floor towards them. Another began to show itself beneath. Only his eyes remained the same. Different-coloured eyes, happy lines around the corners, grinning at Jezal like an old friend.

Yoru Sulfur bowed. ‘Never any peace, eh, your Majesty? Never the slightest peace.’

There was a crash as one of the doors burst open. Jezal raised his sword, heart in his mouth. Sulfur whipped round, the Maker’s weapon held down by his side. A man stumbled into the room. A big man, his grimacing face covered in scars, his chest heaving, a heavy sword hanging from one hand, the other clutched to his ribs.

Jezal blinked, hardly able to believe it. ‘Logen Ninefingers. How the hell did you get here?’

The Northman stared for a moment. Then he leaned back against a mirror by the door, let his sword drop to the tiles. He slid down, slowly, until he hit the floor, and sat there with his head leaning back against the glass. ‘Long story,’ he said.

‘Listen to us . . .’

The wind was full of shapes, now. Hundreds of them. They crowded in around the outermost circle, the bright iron turned misty, gleaming with cold wet.

‘. . . we have things to tell you, Ferro . . .’

‘Secrets . . .’

‘What can we give you?’

‘We know . . . everything.’

‘You need only let us in . . .’

So many voices. She heard Aruf among them, her old teacher. She heard Susman the slaver. She heard her mother and her father. She heard Yulwei, and Prince Uthman. A hundred voices. A thousand. Voices she knew and had forgotten. Voices of the dead and of the living. Shouts, mutters, screams. Whispers, in her ear. Closer still. Closer than her own thoughts.

‘You want vengeance?’

‘We can give you vengeance.’

‘Like nothing you have dreamed of.’

‘All you want. All you need.’

‘Only let us in . . .’

‘That empty space in you?’

‘We are what is missing!’

The metal rings had turned white with frost. Ferro kneeled at one end of a dizzying tunnel, its walls made from rushing, roaring, furious matter, full of shadows, its end far beyond the dark sky. The laughter of the First of the Magi echoed faintly in her ears. The air hummed with power, twisted, shimmered, blurred.

‘You need do nothing.’

‘Bayaz.’

‘He will do it.’

‘Fool!’

‘Liar!’

‘Let us in . . .’

‘He cannot understand.’

‘He uses you!’

‘He laughs.’

‘But not for long.’

‘The gates strain.’

‘Let us in . . .’

If Bayaz heard the voices he gave no sign. Cracks ran through the quivering paving, branching out from his feet, splinters floating up around him in whirling spirals. The iron rings began to shift, to buckle. With a grinding of tortured metal they twisted out from the crumbling stones, bright edges shining.

‘The seals break.’

‘Eleven wards.’

‘And eleven wards reversed.’

‘The doors open.’

‘Yes,’ came the voices, speaking together.

The shadows crowded in closer. Ferro’s breath came short and fast, her teeth rattled, her limbs trembled, the cold was on her very heart. She knelt at a precipice, bottomless, limitless, full of shadows, full of voices.

‘Soon we will be with you.’

‘Very soon.’

‘The time is upon us.’

‘Both sides of the divide, joined.’

‘As they were meant to be.’

‘Before Euz spoke his First Law.’

‘Let us in . . .’

She needed only to cling to the Seed a moment longer. Then the voices would give her vengeance. Bayaz was a liar, she had known it from the start. She owed him nothing. Her eyelids flickered, closed, her mouth hung open. The noise of the wind grew fainter yet, until she could hear only the voices.

Whispering, soothing, righteous.

‘We will take the world and make it right.’

‘Together.’

‘Let us in . . .’

‘You will help us.’

‘You will free us.’

‘You can trust us.’

‘Trust us . . .’

Trust?

A word that only liars used. Ferro remembered the wreckage of Aulcus. The hollow ruins, the blasted mud. The creatures of the Other Side are made of lies. Better to have an empty space in her, than to fill it with this. She wedged her tongue between her teeth and bit down hard, felt her mouth fill up with salty blood. She sucked in breath, forced her eyes open.

‘Trust us . . .’

‘Let us in!’

She saw the Maker’s box, a shifting, swimming outline. She bent down over it, digging at it with her numb fingertips while the air lashed at her. She would be no one’s slave. Not for Bayaz, not for the Tellers of Secrets. She would find her own path. A dark one, perhaps, but her own.

The lid swung open.

‘No.’ The voices hissed together in her ear.

‘No!’

Ferro ground her bloody teeth, growled with fury as she forced her fingers to unclench. The world was a melting, screaming, formless mass of

darkness. Gradually, gradually, her dead hand came open. Here was her revenge. Against the liars, the users, the thieves. The earth shook, crumbled, tore, as thin and fragile as a sheet of glass, and with an empty void beneath it. She turned her trembling hand and the Seed dropped from her palm.

All as one, the voices screamed their harsh command. ‘No!’

She blindly seized hold of the lid. ‘Fuck yourselves!’ she hissed.

And with her last grain of strength she forced the box closed.

After the Rains

Logen leaned on the parapet, high up on a tower at one side of the palace, and frowned into the wind. He'd done the same, it felt an age ago now, from the top of the Tower of Chains. He'd stared out dumbstruck at the endless city, wondering if he could ever have dreamed of a man-made thing so proud, and beautiful, and indestructible as the Agriont.

By the dead, how times change.

The green space of the park was scattered with fallen rubbish, trees broken, grass gouged, half the lake leaked away and sunken to a muddy bog. At its western edge a sweep of fine white buildings still stood, even if the windows gaped empty. Further west, and they had no roofs, bare rafters hanging. Further still their walls were torn and scoured, empty shells, choked with rubble.

Beyond that, there was nothing. The great hall with the golden dome, gone. The square where Logen had watched the sword-game, gone. The Tower of Chains, the mighty wall under it, and all the grand buildings over which Logen had fled with Ferro. All gone.

A colossal circle of destruction was carved from the western end of the Agriont, and only acres of formless wreckage remained. The city beyond was torn with black scars, smoke still rising from a few last fires, from smouldering hulks still drifting in the bay. The House of the Maker loomed over the scene, a sharp black mass under the brooding clouds, uncaring and untouched.

Logen stood there, scratching at the scarred side of his face, over and over. His wounds ached. So many of them. Every part of him was battered and bruised, slashed and torn. From the fight with the Eater, from the battle beyond the moat, from the duel with the Feared, from seven days of slaughter in the High Places. From a hundred fights, and skirmishes, and old campaigns. Too many to remember. So tired, and sore, and sick.

He frowned down at his hands on the parapet in front of him. The bare stone looked back where his middle finger used to be. He was Ninefingers still. The Bloody-Nine. A man made of death, just as Bethod had said. He'd nearly killed the Dogman yesterday, he knew it. His oldest friend. His only

friend. He'd raised the sword, and if it wasn't for a trick of fate, he would have done it.

He remembered standing high up, on the side of the Great Northern library, looking out over the empty valley, the still lake like a great mirror beneath it. He remembered feeling the wind on his fresh-shaved jaw, and wondering whether a man could change.

Now he knew the answer.

'Master Ninefingers!'

Logen turned quickly, hissed through his teeth as the stitches down his side burned. The First of the Magi stepped through the doorway and out into the open air. He was changed, somehow. He looked young. Younger even than when Logen first met him. There was a sharpness to his movements, a gleam in his eye. It even seemed that there were a few dark hairs in the grey beard round his friendly grin. The first smile Logen had seen in a good while.

'You are hurt?' he asked.

Logen sucked sourly at his teeth. 'Hardly the first time.'

'And yet it gets no easier.' Bayaz placed his meaty fists on the stone next to Logen's and stared out happily at the view. Just as if it was a field of flowers instead of a sweep of epic ruin. 'I hardly expected to see you again so soon. And to see you so very far advanced. I understand that your feud is over. You defeated Bethod. Threw him from his own walls, the way I heard it. A nice touch. Always thinking of the song they will sing, eh? And then you took his place. The Bloody-Nine, King of the Northmen! Imagine that.'

Logen frowned. 'That wasn't how it happened.'

'Details. The result is the same, is it not? Peace in the North, at last? Either way, I congratulate you.'

'Bethod had a few things to say.'

'Did he?' asked Bayaz, carelessly. 'I always found his conversation rather drab. All about himself, his plans, his achievements. It is so very tiresome when men think never of others. Poor manners.'

'He said you're the reason why he didn't kill me. That you bargained for my life.'

'True, I must confess. He owed me, and you were the price I demanded. I like to keep one eye on the future. Even then, I knew I might have need of a

man who could speak to the spirits. It was an unexpected bonus that you turned out to be such a winning travelling companion.'

Logen found he was talking through gritted teeth. 'Would have been nice to know is all.'

'You never asked, Master Ninefingers. You did not want to know my plans, as I recall, and I did not want to make you feel indebted. "I saved your life once" would have been a poor start to our friendship.'

All reasonable enough, like everything Bayaz ever said, but it left a sour taste still, to have been traded like a hog. 'Where's Quai? I'd like to—'

'Dead.' Bayaz pronounced the word smartly, sharp as a knife thrust. 'We feel his loss most keenly.'

'Back to the mud, eh?' Logen remembered the effort he'd made to save that man's life. The miles he'd slogged through the rain, trying to do the right thing. All wasted. Perhaps he should've felt more. But it was hard with so much death spread out in front of him. Logen was numb, now. Either that, or he really didn't care a shit. It was hard to say which.

'Back to the mud,' he muttered again. 'You carry on, though, don't you.'

'Of course.'

'That's the task that comes with surviving. You remember them, you say some words, then you carry on, and hope for better.'

'Indeed.'

'You have to be realistic about these things.'

'True.'

Logen worked at his sore side with one hand, trying to make himself feel something. But a scrap of extra pain helped no one. 'I lost a friend yesterday.'

'It was a bloody day. But a victorious one.'

'Oh aye? For who?' He could see people moving among the ruins, insects picking at the rubble, searching for survivors and finding the dead. He doubted many of them were feeling the flush of victory right now. He knew he wasn't. 'I should be with my own kind,' he muttered, but without moving. 'Helping with the burying. Helping with the wounded.'

'And yet you are here, looking down.' Bayaz' green eyes were hard as stones. That hardness that Logen had noticed from the very start, and had somehow forgotten. Somehow grown to overlook. 'I entirely understand your feelings. Healing is for the young. As one gets older, one finds one has

less and less patience with the wounded.' He raised his eyebrows as he turned back towards the horrible view. 'I am very old.'

He lifted his fist to knock, then paused, fingers rubbing nervously against his palm.

He remembered the sour-sweet smell of her, the strength of her hands, the shape of her frown in the firelight. He remembered the warmth of her, pressed up close to him in the night. He knew there had been something good between them, even if all the words they had said had been hard. Some people don't have soft words in them, however much they try. He didn't hold much hope, of course. A man like him was better off without it. But you get nothing out if you put nothing in.

So Logen gritted his teeth and knocked. No reply. He chewed at his lip, and knocked again. Nothing. He frowned, twitchy and suddenly out of patience, wrenched the knob round and shoved the door open.

Ferro spun about. Her clothes were rumpled and dirty, even more than usual. Her eyes were wide, wild even, her fists clenched. But her face quickly fell when she saw it was him, and his heart sank with it.

'It's me, Logen.'

'Uh,' she grunted. She jerked her head sideways, frowning at the window. She took a couple of steps towards it, eyes narrowed. Then she snapped round suddenly the other way. 'There!'

'What?' muttered Logen, baffled.

'Do you not hear them?'

'Hear what?'

'Them, idiot!' She crept over to one wall and pressed herself up against it.

Logen hadn't been sure how it would go. You could never be sure of anything with her, he knew that. But he hadn't been expecting this. Just plough ahead, he reckoned. What else could he do?

'I'm a king, now.' He snorted. 'King of the Northmen, would you believe it?' He was thinking she'd laugh in his face, but she just stood, listening to the wall. 'Me and Luthar, both. A pair of kings. Can you think of two more worthless bastards to put crowns on, eh?' No answer.

Logen licked his lips. No choice but to get straight to it, maybe. 'Ferro. The way things turned out. The way we . . . left it.' He took a step towards

her, and another. ‘I wish I hadn’t . . . I don’t know . . .’ He put one hand on her shoulder. ‘Ferro, I’m trying to tell you—’

She turned, quickly, plastered her hand over his mouth. ‘Shhhhh.’ She grabbed his shirt and pulled him down, down onto his knees. She pressed her ear against the tiles, eyes moving back and forward as if she was listening for something. ‘Do you hear that?’ She let go of him and pushed herself into the corner. ‘There! Do you hear them?’

He reached out, slowly, and touched the back of her neck, ran his rough fingertips over her skin. She shook him off with a jerk of her shoulders, and he felt his face twist. Perhaps that good thing between them had been only in his mind, and never in hers. Perhaps he had wanted it so badly that he had let himself imagine it.

He stood up, cleared his dry throat. ‘Never mind. I’ll come back later, maybe.’ She was still on her knees, her head against the floor. She did not even watch him leave.

*

Logen Ninefingers was no stranger to death. He’d walked among it all his days. He’d watched the bodies burned by the score after the battle at Carleon, long ago. He’d seen them buried by the hundred up in the nameless valley in the High Places. He’d walked on a hill of men’s bones under ruined Aulcus.

But even the Bloody-Nine, even the most feared man in the North, had never looked on anything like this.

Bodies were stacked beside the wide avenue in heaps, chest-high. Sagging mounds of corpses, on and on. Hundreds upon hundreds. Too many for him to guess at the numbers. Someone had made an effort at covering them, but not that great an effort. The dead give no thanks for it, after all. Ragged sheets flapped in the breeze, weighted down with broken wood, limp hands and feet hanging out from underneath.

At this end of the road a few statues still stood. Once-proud kings and their advisers, stone faces and bodies scarred and pitted, stared sadly down at the bloody waste heaped round their feet. Enough of them for Logen to

recognise that this truly was the Kingsway, and that he hadn't somehow stumbled into the land of the dead.

A hundred strides further and there were only empty plinths, one with broken legs still attached. A strange group were clustered around them. Withered-looking. Somewhere between dead and alive. A man sat on a block of stone, staring numbly as he pulled handfuls of hair out of his head. Another was coughing into a bloody rag. A woman and a man lay side by side, gawping at nothing, faces shrivelled to little more than skulls. Her breath came crackling short and fast. His did not come at all.

Another hundred strides and it was as if Logen walked through some ruined hell. There was no sign that statues, buildings, or anything else had ever stood there. In their place were only tangled hills of strange rubbish. Broken stone, splintered wood, twisted metal, paper, glass, all crushed together and bound up with tons of dust and mud. Things stuck from the wreckage, strangely intact – a door, a chair, a carpet, a painted plate, the smiling face of a statue.

Men and women struggled everywhere among this chaos, streaked with dirt, picking at the rubbish, throwing it down to the road, trying to clear paths through it. Rescuers, workmen, thieves, who knew? Logen passed by a crackling bonfire high as a man, felt the kiss of its heat on his cheek. A big soldier in armour stained with black soot stood beside it. 'You find anything in white metal?' he was roaring at the searchers, 'anything at all? It goes in the fire! Flesh in white metal? Burn it! Orders of the Closed Council!'

A few strides further on, someone was on top of one of the highest mounds, straining at a great length of wood. He turned round to get a better grip. None other than Jezal dan Luthar. His clothes were torn and grubby, his face was smudged with mud. He barely looked any more like a king than Logen did.

A thickset man stood staring up, one arm in a sling. 'Your Majesty, this is not safe!' he piped in an oddly girlish voice. 'We really should be—'

'No! This is where I'm needed!' Jezal bent back over the beam, straining at it, veins bulging from his neck. There was no way he was going to get it shifted on his own, but still he tried. Logen stood watching him. 'How long's he been like this?'

'All night, and all day,' said the thickset man, 'and no sign of stopping. Those few we've found alive, nearly all of them have this sickness.' He

waved his good arm towards the pitiful group beside the statues. ‘Their hair falls out. Their nails. Their teeth. They wither. Some have died already. Others are well on the way.’ He slowly shook his head. ‘What crime did we commit to deserve this punishment?’

‘Punishment doesn’t always come to the guilty.’

‘Ninefingers!’ Jezal was looking down, the watery sun behind him. ‘There’s a strong back! Grab the end of that beam there!’

It was hard to see what good shifting a beam might do, in all of this. But great journeys start with small steps, Logen’s father had always told him. So he clambered up, wood cracking and stones sliding underneath his boots, hauled himself to the top and stood there, staring.

‘By the dead.’ From where he was standing, the hills of wreckage seemed to go on forever. People crawled over them, dragging frantically at the rubble, sorting carefully through it, or simply standing like him, stunned by the scale of it. A circle of utter waste, a mile across or more.

‘Help me, Logen!’

‘Aye. Right.’ He bent down and dug his hands under one end of the great length of scarred wood. Two kings, dragging at a beam. The kings of mud.

‘Pull, then!’ Logen heaved, his stitches burning. Gradually he felt the wood shift. ‘Yes!’ grunted Jezal through gritted teeth. Together they lifted it, hauled it to one side. Jezal reached down and dragged away a dry tree-branch, tore back a ripped sheet. A woman lay beneath, staring sideways. One broken arm was wrapped around a child, curly hair dark with blood.

‘Alright.’ Jezal wiped slowly at his mouth with the back of one dirty hand. ‘Alright. Well. We’ll put them with the rest of the dead.’ He clambered further over the wreckage. ‘You! Bring that crowbar up here! Up here, and a pick, we need to clear this stone! Stack it there. We’ll need it, later. To rebuild!’

Logen put a hand on his shoulder. ‘Jezal, wait. Wait. You know me.’

‘Of course. I like to think so.’

‘Alright. Tell me something, then. Am I . . .’ He struggled to find the right words. ‘Am I . . . an evil man?’

‘You?’ Jezal stared at him, confused. ‘You’re the best man I know.’

They were gathered under a broken tree in the park, a shadowy crowd of them. Black outlines of men, standing calm and still, red clouds and golden spread out above, around the setting sun. Logen could hear their slow voices as he walked up. Words for the dead, soft and sad. He could see the graves at their feet. Two dozen piles of fresh turned earth, set out in a circle so each man was equal. The Great Leveller, just as the hillmen say. Men put in the mud, and men saying words. Could've been a scene out of the old North, long ago in the time of Skarling Hoodless.

'. . . Harding Grim. I never saw a better man with a bow. Not ever. Can't count the number o' times he saved my life, and never expected thanks for it. Except maybe that I'd do the same for him. Guess I couldn't, this time. Guess none of us could . . .'

The Dogman's voice trailed off. A few heads turned to look at Logen as his footsteps crunched in the gravel. 'If it ain't the King o' the Northmen,' someone said.

'The Bloody-Nine his self.'

'We should bow, shouldn't we?'

They were all looking at him now. He could see their eyes gleaming in the dusk. Nothing more than shaggy outlines, hard to tell one man from another. A crowd of shadows. A crowd of ghosts, and just as unfriendly.

'You got something you want to say, Bloody-Nine?' came a voice from near the back.

'I don't reckon,' he said. 'You're doing alright.'

'Was no reason for us to be here.' A few mumbles of agreement.

'Not our bloody fight.'

'No need for them to have died.' More mutters.

'Should be you we're burying.'

'Aye, maybe.' Logen would have liked to weep at that. But instead he felt himself smiling. The Bloody-Nine's smile. That grin that skulls have, with nothing inside but death. 'Maybe. But you don't get to pick who dies. Not unless you've got the bones to put your own hand to it. Have you? Have any of you?' Silence. 'Well, then. Good for Harding Grim. Good for the rest o' the dead, they'll all be missed.' Logen spat onto the grass. 'Shit on the rest of you.' And he turned and walked back the way he came.

Into the darkness.

Answers

***S**o much to do.* The House of Questions still stood, and someone had to take the reins. *Who else will do it? Superior Goyle? A flatbow bolt through the heart prevents him, alas.* Someone had to look to the internment and questioning of the many hundreds of Gurkish prisoners, more captured every day as the army drove the invaders back to Keln. *And who else will do it? Practical Vitari? Left the Union forever with her children in tow*. Someone had to examine the treason of Lord Brock. To dig him up, and root out his accomplices. To make arrests, and obtain confessions. *And who else is there, now? Arch Lector Sult? Oh, dear me, no.*

Glokta wheezed up to his door, his few teeth bared at the endless pains in his legs. A fortunate *decision, at least, to move to the eastern side of the Agriont. One should be grateful for the small things in life, like a place to rest one's crippled husk. My old lodgings are no doubt languishing under a thousand tons of rubble, just like the rest of—*

His door was not quite shut. He gave it the gentlest of pushes and it creaked open, soft lamplight spilling out into the corridor, a glowing stripe over the dusty floorboards, over the foot of Glokta's cane and the muddy toe of one boot. *I left no door unlocked, and certainly no lamps burning*. His tongue slithered nervously over his empty gums. *A visitor, then. An uninvited one. Do I go in, and welcome them to my rooms?* His eyes slid sideways into the shadows of the corridor. *Or do I make a run for it?* He was almost smiling as he shuffled over the threshold, cane first, then the right foot, then the left, dragging painfully behind him.

Glokta's guest sat by the window in the light of a single lamp, brightness splashed across the hard planes of his face, cold darkness gathered in the deep hollows. The squares board was set before him, just as Glokta left it, the pieces casting long shadows across the chequered wood.

'Why, Superior Glokta. I have been waiting for you.'

And I for you. Glokta limped over to the table, his cane scraping against the bare boards. *As reluctantly as a man limping to the gallows. Ah, well. No one tricks the hangman forever. Perhaps we'll have some answers, at*

least, before the end. I always dreamed of dying well-informed. Slowly, ever so slowly, he lowered himself grunting into the free chair.

'Do I have the pleasure of addressing Master Valint, or Master Balk?'

Bayaz smiled. 'Both, of course.'

Glokta wrapped his tongue round one of his few remaining teeth and dragged it away with a faint sucking sound. 'And to what do I owe the overpowering honour?'

'I said, did I not, that day we visited the Maker's House, that we should have a talk at some point? A talk about what I want, and about what you want? That point has come.'

'Oh joyous day.'

The First of the Magi watched him, the same look in his bright eyes that a man might have while watching an interesting beetle. 'I must admit that you fascinate me, Superior. Your life would seem to be entirely unbearable. And yet you fight so very, very hard to stay alive. With every weapon and stratagem. You simply refuse to die.'

'I am ready to die.' Glokta returned his gaze, like for like. 'But I refuse to lose.'

'Whatever the cost, eh? We are two of a kind, you and I, and we are a rare kind indeed. We understand what must be done, and we do not flinch from doing it, regardless of sentiment. You remember Lord Chancellor Feekt, of course.'

If I cast my mind a long way back . . . 'The Golden Chancellor? They say he ran the Closed Council for forty years. They say he ran the Union.' *Sult said so. Sult said his death left a hole, into which he and Marovia were both keen to step. That is where this ugly dance began, for me. With a visit from the Arch Lector, with the confession of my old friend Salem Rews, with the arrest of Sepp dan Teufel, Master of the Mints . . .*

Bayaz let one thick fingertip trail across the pieces on the squares board, as though considering his next move. 'We had an agreement, Feekt and I. I made him powerful. He served me, utterly.'

Feekt . . . the foundation on which the nation rested . . . served you? I expected delusions of grandeur, but this will take some beating. 'You would have me suppose that you controlled the Union all that time?'

Bayaz snorted. 'Ever since I forced the damn thing together in the time of Harod the Great, so-called. It has sometimes been necessary for me to take

a hand myself, as in this most recent crisis. But mostly I have stood at a distance, behind the curtain, as it were.'

'A little stuffy back there, one imagines.'

'An uncomfortable necessity.' The lamplight gleamed on the Magus' white grin. 'People like to watch the pretty puppets, Superior. Even a glimpse of the puppeteer can be most upsetting for them. Why, they might even suddenly notice the strings around their own wrists. Sult caught a glimpse of something, behind the curtain, and only look at the trouble he caused for everyone.' Bayaz flicked one of the pieces over and it clattered onto its side, rocked gently back and forth.

'Let us suppose you are indeed the great architect, and you have given us . . .' Glokta waved his hand towards the window. *Acres of charming devastation.* 'All this. Why such generosity?'

'Not entirely selfless, I must confess. Khalul had the Gurkish to fight for him. I needed soldiers of my own. Even the greatest of generals needs little men to hold the line.' He absently nudged one of the smallest pieces forward. 'Even the greatest of warriors needs his armour.'

Glokta stuck out his bottom lip. 'But then Feekt died, and you were left naked.'

'Naked as a babe, at my age.' Bayaz gave a long sigh. 'And in poor weather too, with Khalul making ready for war. I should have arranged a suitable successor more quickly, but my thoughts were elsewhere, deep in my books. The older you get, the more swiftly the years pass. It's easy to forget how quickly people die.'

And how easily. 'The death of the Golden Chancellor left a vacuum,' muttered Glokta, thinking it through. 'Sult and Marovia saw a chance to take power for themselves, and advance their own notions of what the nation should be.'

'Exceptionally cock-eyed notions, as it happens. Sult wanted to return to an imaginary past where everyone kept their place and always did as they were told, and Marovia? Hah! Marovia wanted to piss power away to the people. Votes? Elections? The voice of the common man?'

'He aired some such notion.'

'I hope you aired the suitable level of contempt. Power for the people?' sneered Bayaz. 'They don't want it. They don't understand it. What the hell

would they do with it if they had it? The people are like children. They *are* children. They need someone to tell them what to do.'

'Someone like you, I suppose?'

'Who better suited? Marovia thought to use me in his petty schemes, and all the while I made good use of him. While he tussled with Sult over scraps the game was already won. A move I had prepared some time before.'

Glokta slowly nodded. 'Jezal dan Luthar.' *Our little bastard.*

'Your friend and mine.'

But a bastard is no use unless . . . 'Crown Prince Raynault stood in the way.'

The Magus flicked a piece over and it rolled slowly from the board and rattled to the table. 'We talk of great events. There is sure to be some wastage.'

'You made it seem that he was killed by an Eater.'

'Oh, he was.' Bayaz watched smugly from the shadows. 'Not all who break the Second Law serve Khalul. My apprentice, Yoru Sulfur, has long been partial to a bite or two.' And he snapped his two rows of smooth and even teeth together.

'I see.'

'This is war, Superior. In war one must make use of every weapon. Restraint is folly. Worse. Restraint is cowardice. But only look who I am lecturing. You need no lessons in ruthlessness.'

'No.' *They cut them into me in the Emperor's prisons, and I have been practising them ever since.*

Bayaz nudged one of the pieces gently forward. 'A useful man, Sulfur. A man who long ago accepted the demands of necessity, and mastered the discipline of taking forms.' *He was the guard, weeping outside Prince Raynault's door. The guard who vanished into thin air the next day . . .*

'A shred of cloth taken from the Emissary's bed-chamber,' murmured Glokta. 'Blood daubed on his robe.' *And so an innocent man went to the gallows, and the war between Gurkhul and the Union blossomed. Two obstacles swept neatly away with one sharp flick of the broom.*

'Peace with the Gurkish did not suit my purposes. It was sloppy of Sulfur to leave such blatant clues. But then he never expected you to care about the truth when there was a convenient explanation to hand.'

Glokta nodded, slowly, as the shape of things unfolded in his mind. ‘He heard of my investigations from Severard, and I received a charming visit from your walking corpse, Mauthis, telling me to halt or die.’

‘Exactly so. On other occasions Yoru took another face, and called himself the Tanner, and incited a few peasants to some rather unbecoming behaviour.’ Bayaz examined his fingernails. ‘All in a good cause, though, Superior.’

‘To lend glamour to your latest puppet. To make him a favourite with the people. To make him familiar to the nobles, to the Closed Council. You were the source of the rumours.’

‘Heroic acts in the ruined west? Jezal dan Luthar?’ Bayaz snorted. ‘He did little more than whine about the rain.’

‘Amazing the rubbish idiots will believe if you shout it loudly enough. And you rigged the Contest too.’

‘You noticed that?’ Bayaz’ smile grew wider. ‘I am impressed, Superior, I am most impressed. You have fumbled so very close to the truth this whole time.’ *And yet so very far away*. ‘I wouldn’t feel badly about it. I have many advantages. Sult groped towards the answers, in the end, but far too late. I suspected from the first what his plans might be.’

‘Which is why you asked me to investigate?’

‘The fact that you did not oblige me until the very last moment was the source of some annoyance.’

‘Asking nicely might have helped.’ *It would have been refreshing, at least.* ‘I regret that I found myself in a difficult position. A case of too many masters.’

‘No longer, though, eh? I was almost disappointed when I found out how limited Sult’s studies were. Salt, and candles, and incantations? How pathetically adolescent. Enough to put a timely end to that would-be democrat Marovia, perhaps, but nothing to pose the slightest threat to me.’

Glokta frowned down at the squares board. *Sult and Marovia. For all their cleverness, for all their power, their ugly little struggle was an irrelevance. They were small pieces in this game. So small they never even guessed how vast the board truly was. Which makes me what? A speck of dust between the squares, at best.*

‘What of the mysterious visitor to your chambers the day I first met you?’ *A visitor to my chambers too, perhaps? A woman, and cold . . .*

Angry lines cut across Bayaz' forehead. 'A mistake made in my youth. You will speak no more of it.'

'Oh, as you command. And the Great Prophet Khalul?'

'The war will continue. On different battlefields, with different soldiers. But this will be the last battle fought with the weapons of the past. The magic leaks from the world. The lessons of the Old Time fade into the darkness of history. A new age dawns.'

The Magus made a careless movement with one hand and something flickered into the air, clattered to the centre of the board and spun round and round until it lay flat, with the unmistakable sound of falling money. A golden fifty-mark piece, glinting warm and welcoming in the lamplight. Glokta almost laughed. *Ah, even now, even here, it always comes down to this. Everything has a price.*

'It was money that bought victory in King Guslav's half-baked Gurkish war,' said Bayaz. 'It was money that united the Open Council behind their bastard king. It was money that brought Duke Orso rushing to the defence of his daughter and tipped the balance in our favour. All my money.'

'It was money that enabled me to hold Dagoska as long as I did.'

'And you know whose.' *Who would have thought? More first of the moneylenders than First of the Magi. Open Council and Closed, commoners and kings, merchants and torturers, all caught up in a golden web. A web of debts, and lies, and secrets, each strand plucked in its proper place, played like a harp by a master. And what of poor Superior Glokta, fumbling buffoon? Is there a place for his sour note in this sweet music? Or is the loan of my life about to be called in?*

'I suppose I should congratulate you on a hand well played,' muttered Glokta bitterly.

'Bah.' Bayaz dismissed it with a wave. 'Forcing a clutch of primitives together under that cretin Harod and making them act like civilised men. Keeping the Union in one piece through the civil war and bringing that fool Arnault to the throne. Guiding that coward Casamir to the conquest of Angland. Those were hands well played. This was nothing. I hold all the cards and always will do. I have—'

I tire of this. 'And blah, blah, fucking blah. The stench of self-satisfaction is becoming quite suffocating. If you mean to kill me, blast me to a cinder

now and let's be done, but, for pity's sake, subject me to no more of your boasting.'

They sat still for a long moment, gazing at each other in silence across the darkened table. Long enough for Glokta's leg to start trembling, for his eye to start blinking, for his toothless mouth to turn dry as the desert. *Sweet anticipation. Will it be now? Will it be now? Will it be—* 'Kill you?' asked Bayaz mildly. 'And rob myself of your winning sense of humour?'

Not now. 'Then . . . why reveal your game to me?'

'Because I will soon be leaving Adua.' The Magus leaned forwards, his hard face sliding into the light. 'Because it is necessary that you understand where the power lies, and always will lie. It is necessary that you, unlike Sult, unlike Marovia, have a proper perspective. It is necessary . . . if you are to serve me.'

'To serve you?' *I would sooner spend two years in the stinking darkness. I would sooner have my leg chopped to mincemeat. I would sooner have my teeth pulled from my head. But since I have done all those things already . . .*

'You will take the task that Feekt once had. The task that a score of great men bore before him. You will be my representative, here in the Union. You will manage the Closed Council, the Open Council, and our mutual friend the king. You will ensure him heirs. You will maintain stability. In short, you will watch the board, while I am gone.'

'But the rest of the Closed Council will never—'

'Those that survive have been spoken to. They all will bow to your authority. Under mine, of course.'

'How will I—'

'I will be in touch. Frequently. Through my people at the bank. Through my apprentice, Sulfur. Through other means. You will know them.'

'I don't suppose I have any choice in the matter?'

'Not unless you can repay the million marks I leant you. Plus interest.'

Glokta patted at the front of his shirt. 'Damn it. I left my purse at work.'

'Then I fear you have no choice. But why would you refuse me? I offer you the chance to help me forge a new age.' *To bury my hands to the elbow in your dirty work. 'To be a great man. The very greatest of men.' To bestride the Closed Council like a crippled colossus.* 'To leave your likeness set in stone on the Kingsway.' *Where its hideousness can make the*

children cry. Once they clear away the rubble and the corpses, of course.
‘To shape the course of a nation.’

‘Under your direction.’

‘Naturally. Nothing is free, you know that.’ Again the Magus flicked his hand and something clattered spinning across the squares board. It came to rest in front of Glokta, gold glinting. The Arch Lector’s ring. *So many times I bent to kiss this very jewel. Who could have dreamed that I might one day wear it?* He picked it up, turned it thoughtfully round and round. *And so I finally shake off a dark master, only to find my leash in the fist of another, darker and more powerful by far. But what choice do I have? What choices do any of us truly have?* He slid the ring onto his finger. The great stone shone in the lamplight, full of purple sparks. *From a dead man to the greatest in the realm, and all in one evening.*

‘It fits,’ murmured Glokta.

‘Of course, your Eminence. I always knew it would.’

The Wounded

West woke with a start and tried to jerk up to sitting. Pain shot up one leg, across his chest, through his right arm, and stayed there, throbbing. He dropped back with a groan and stared at the ceiling. A vaulted stone ceiling, covered in thick shadows.

Sounds crept at him now from all around. Grunts and whimpers, coughs and sobs, quick gasping, slow growling. The occasional outright shriek of pain. Sounds between men and animals. A voice whispered throatily from somewhere to his left, droning endlessly away like a rat scratching at the walls. 'I can't see. Bloody wind. I can't see. Where am I? Somebody. I can't see.'

West swallowed, feeling the pain growing worse. In the hospitals in Gurkhul there had been sounds like that, when he had come to visit wounded soldiers from his company. He remembered the stink and noise of those horrible tents, the misery of the men in them, and above all the overpowering desire to leave and be among the healthy. But it was already awfully clear that leaving would not be so easy this time.

He was one of the wounded. A different, contemptible and disgusting species. Horror crept slowly through his body and mingled with the pain. How badly was he injured? Did he have all his limbs, still? He tried to move his fingers, wriggle his toes, clenched his teeth as the aching in his arm and leg grew worse. He brought his left hand trembling up before his face, turned it over in the dimness. It seemed intact, at least, but it was the only limb that he could move, and even that was a crushing effort. Panic slithered up his throat and clutched at him.

'Where am I? Bloody wind. I can't see. Help. Help. Where am I?'

'Fucking shut up!' West shouted, but the words died in his dry throat. All that came up was a hollow cough that set his ribs on fire again.

'Shhhh.' A soft touch on his chest. 'Just be still.'

A blurry face swam into view. A woman's face, he thought, with fair hair, but it was hard to focus. He closed his eyes and stopped trying. It hardly seemed to matter that much. He felt something against his lips, the neck of a

bottle. He drank too thirstily, spluttered and felt cold water running down his neck.

'What happened?' he croaked.

'You were wounded.'

'I know that. I mean . . . in the city. The wind.'

'I don't know. I don't think anyone knows.'

'Did we win?'

'I suppose that . . . the Gurkish were driven out, yes. But there are a lot of wounded. A lot of dead.'

Another swallow of water. This time he managed it without gagging. 'Who are you?'

'My name is Ariss. Dan Kaspa.'

'Ariss . . .' West fumbled with the name. 'I knew your cousin. Knew him well . . . a good man. He always used to talk about . . . how beautiful you were. And rich,' he muttered, vaguely aware he should not be saying this, but unable to stop his mouth from working. 'Very rich. He died. In the mountains.'

'I know.'

'What are you doing here?'

'Trying to help with the wounded. It would be best for you to sleep now, if you—'

'Am I whole?'

A pause. 'Yes. Sleep now, if you can.'

Her dark face grew blurry, and West let his eyes close. The noises of agony slowly faded around him. He was whole. All would be well.

Someone was sitting next to his bed. Ardee. His sister. He blinked, worked his sour mouth, unsure where he was for a moment.

'Am I dreaming?' She reached forward and dug her nails into his arm. 'Ah!'

'Painful dream, eh?'

'No,' he was forced to admit. 'This is real.'

She looked well. Far better than the last time he had seen her, that was sure. No blood on her face for one thing. No look of naked hatred, for another. Only a thoughtful frown. He tried to bring himself up to sitting,

failed, and slumped back down. She did not offer to help. He had not really expected her to. ‘How bad is it?’ he asked.

‘Nothing too serious, apparently. A broken arm, a few broken ribs, and a leg badly bruised, they tell me. Some cuts on your face that may leave a scar or two, but then I got all the looks in the family anyway.’

He gave a snort of laughter and winced at the pain across his chest. ‘True enough. The brains too.’

‘Don’t feel badly about it. I’ve used them to make the towering success of my life that you see before you. The kind of achievement that you, as a Lord Marshal of the Union, can only dream of.’

‘Don’t,’ he hissed, clamping his good hand across his ribs. ‘It hurts.’

‘No less than you deserve.’

His laughter quickly stuttered out, and they were silent for a moment, looking at each other. Even that much was difficult. ‘Ardee . . .’ His voice caught in his sore neck. ‘Can you . . . forgive me?’

‘I already did. The first time I heard you were dead.’ She was trying to smile, he could tell. But she still had that twist of anger to her mouth. Probably she would have liked to dig her nails into his face rather than his arm. He was almost glad then, for a moment, that he was wounded. She had no choice but to be soft with him. ‘It’s good that you’re not. Dead, that is . . .’ She frowned over her shoulder. There was some manner of commotion at one end of the long cellar. Raised voices, the clatter of armoured footsteps.

‘The king!’ Whoever it was nearly squealed it in their excitement. ‘The king is come again!’

In the beds all around men turned their heads, propped themselves up. A nervous excitement spread from cot to cot. ‘The king?’ they whispered, faces anxious and expectant, as though they were privileged to witness a divine visitation.

Several figures moved through the shadows at the far end of the hall. West strained to look, but could see little more than metal gleaming in the darkness. The foremost shape stopped beside a wounded man a few beds down.

‘They are treating you well?’ A voice strangely familiar, strangely different.

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Is there anything you need?’

‘A kiss from a good woman?’

‘I would love to oblige you, but I fear I’m only a king. We’re a great deal more common than good women.’ Men laughed, even though it was not funny. West supposed that people laughing at your poor jokes was one advantage of being a monarch. ‘Anything else?’

‘Maybe . . . maybe another blanket, sir. Getting cold down here, at night.’

‘Of course.’ The figure jerked his thumb at a man behind. Lord Hoff, West realised now, dragging along at a respectful distance. ‘Another blanket for every man here.’

The Lord Chamberlain, that fearsome scourge of the audience chamber, humbly nodded his head like a meek child. The king stood, and moved into the light.

Jezal dan Luthar, of course, and yet it was hard to believe that it was the same man, and not only because of the rich fur mantle and the golden circlet on his forehead. He seemed taller. Handsome, still, but no longer boyish. A deep scar on his bearded jaw had given him an air of strength. The sneer of arrogance had become a frown of command. The carefree swagger had become a purposeful stride. He worked his way on slowly down the aisle between the cots, speaking to each man, pressing their hands, giving them thanks, promising them help. No one was overlooked.

‘A cheer for the king!’ someone gurgled through gritted teeth.

‘No! No. The cheering should be for you, my brave friends! You who have made sacrifices in my name. I owe you everything. It was only with your help that the Gurkish were defeated. Only with your help that the Union was saved. I do not forget a debt, that I promise you!’

West stared. Whoever this strange apparition was who looked so like Jezal dan Luthar, he spoke like a monarch. West almost felt a preposterous desire to drag himself from his bed and kneel. One casualty was trying to do just that as the king passed his bed. Jezal restrained him with a gentle hand on his chest, smiled and patted his shoulder as though he had been offering succour to the wounded his entire life, instead of getting drunk in shit-holes with the rest of the officers, and whining about such meagre tasks as he was given.

He drew close and saw West, lying there. His face lit up, though there was a tooth missing from his smile. ‘Collem West!’ he said, hastening over. ‘I

can honestly say that I have never in my life been so pleased to see your face.'

'Er . . .' West moved his mouth around a bit, but hardly knew what to say.

Jezal turned to his sister. 'Ardee . . . I hope you are well.'

'Yes.' She said nothing else. They stared at each other, for a long and intensely awkward moment, not speaking.

Lord Hoff frowned at the king, then at West, then at Ardee. He insinuated himself somewhat between the two of them. 'Your Majesty, we should—'

Jezal silenced him effortlessly with one raised hand. 'I trust that you will soon join me in the Closed Council, West. I am in some need of a friendly face there, in truth. Not to mention good advice. You always were a mine of good advice. I never did thank you for it. Well, I can thank you now.'

'Jezal . . . I mean, your Majesty—'

'No, no. Always Jezal to you, I hope. You will have a room in the palace, of course. You will have the royal surgeon. Everything possible. See to that, please, Hoff.'

The Lord Chamberlain bowed. 'Of course. Everything will be arranged.'

'Good. Good. I am glad you are well, West. I cannot afford to lose you.' The king nodded, to him, and to his sister. Then he turned and moved on, pressing hands, speaking soft words. A pool of hope seemed to surround him as he passed. Despair crowded in behind it. Smiles faded as he moved away. Men dropped back onto their beads, faces clouding over with pain.

'Responsibility seems to have improved him,' muttered West. 'Almost beyond recognition.'

'How long will it last, do you think?'

'I'd like to think that it could stick, but then I've always been an optimist.'

'That's good.' Ardee watched the magnificent new king of the Union striding away, wounded men straining from their cots for the slightest touch of his cloak. 'That one of us can be.'

'Marshal West!'

'Jalenhorm. Good to see you.' West pulled back the blankets with his good hand, eased his legs over the edge of the bed and winced his way up to

sitting. The big man reached out and gave his hand a squeeze, clapped him on the shoulder.

'You're looking well!'

West smiled weakly. 'Better ever day, Major. How's my army?'

'Fumbling on without you. Kroy's holding things together. Not such a bad sort, the General, once you get used to him.'

'If you say so. How many did we lose?'

'Still hard to say. Things are somewhat chaotic. Whole companies missing. Impromptu units still chasing Gurkish stragglers across half the countryside. I don't think we'll have numbers for a while. I don't know if we'll ever get them. No one did well, but the ninth regiment were the ones fighting at the western end of the Agriont. They took the worst of . . .' He fumbled for the words. 'It.'

West grimaced. He remembered that black column of whirling matter reaching from the tortured earth to the circling clouds. The debris lashing at his skin, the screaming of the wind all around him. 'What was . . . it?'

'I'm damned if I know.' Jalenhorm shook his head. 'Damned if anyone does. But the rumour is that this Bayaz was involved, somehow. Half the Agriont's in ruins, and they've barely started shifting the rubble. You never saw anything like it, that I promise you. A lot of people dead in all that. Bodies stacked up in the open . . .' Jalenhorm took a long breath. 'And there are more dying every day. A lot of people getting ill.' He shuddered. 'This . . . sickness.'

'Disease. Always a part of war.'

'Not like this. Hundreds of cases, now. Some die in a day, almost before your eyes. Some take longer. They wither to skin and bone. They have whole halls full of them. Stinking, hopeless places. But you don't need to worry about that.' He shook himself. 'I have to go.'

'Already?'

'Flying visit, sir. I'm helping to arrange Poulder's funeral, would you believe? He's being buried in state, by order of the king . . . that is to say Jezal. Jezal dan Luthar.' He blew out his cheeks. 'Strange business.'

'The strangest.'

'All that time. A king's son sitting in the midst of us. I knew there had to be a reason why he was so bloody good at cards.' He slapped West on the

back again. ‘Good to see you looking so well, sir. Knew they wouldn’t be able to keep you down for long!’

‘Keep out of trouble!’ West called after him as he made for the door.

‘Always!’ The big man grinned as he pulled it shut.

West took his stick from the side of the bed, gritted his teeth as he pushed himself up to standing. He hobbled across the expanse of chequered tiles to the window, one painstaking step at a time, and finally stood blinking into the morning sunlight.

Looking down on the palace gardens it was hard to believe that there had been any war, that there were any acres of ruins, any heaps of dead. The lawns were neatly trimmed, the gravel well-raked. The last few brown leaves had fallen from the trees, leaving the smooth wood black and bare.

It had been autumn when he set out for Angland. Could it really have been only a year ago? He had lived through four great battles, a siege, an ambush, a bloody mêlée. He had witnessed a duel to the death. He had stood at the centre of great events. He had survived a slog of hundreds of miles through the bleak Angland winter. He had found new comrades in unlikely places, and he had seen friends dead before his eyes. Burr, Kaspa, Cathil, Threetrees, all back to the mud, as the Northmen said. He had faced death, and he had delivered it. He shifted his aching arm uncomfortably in the sling. He had murdered the heir to the throne of the Union with his own hands. He had risen, by a stroke of chance that verged on the impossible, to one of the highest posts in the nation.

Busy year.

And now it was over. Peace, of a kind. The city was in ruins, and every man had to do his part, but he owed himself a rest. Surely no one would begrudge him that. Perhaps he could insist on Ariss dan Kaspa to tend him to health. A rich and beautiful nurse seemed like just the thing he needed . . .

‘You shouldn’t be up.’ Ardee stood in the doorway.

He grinned. It was good to see her. For the last few days they had been close. Almost as it had been long ago, when they were children. ‘Don’t worry. Getting stronger every day.’

She walked across to the window. ‘Oh yes, in a few weeks time you’ll be strong as a little girl. Back to bed.’ She slid one arm under his and took the cane from his hand, started to guide him back across the room. West made no effort to resist. If he was being honest, he was starting to feel tired

anyway. ‘We’re taking no chances,’ she was saying. ‘You’re all I have, I’m sorry to say. Unless you count that other invalid, my good friend Sand dan Glokta.’

West almost snorted with laughter. ‘That worked out?’

‘The man is utterly loathsome, of course, in a way. Terrifying and pitiful at once. And yet . . . having had no one else to talk to, I find that I’ve strangely warmed to him.’

‘Huh. He used to be loathsome in an entirely different way. I’ve never been sure quite why I warmed to him then. And yet I did. I suppose there’s no—’

He felt a sudden wave of sickness cramp up his guts, stumbled and almost fell, sank onto the bed, stiff leg stretched out in front of him. His vision was blurry, his head spun. He pressed his face into his palms, teeth gritted, as spit rushed into his mouth. He felt Ardee’s hand on his shoulder.

‘Are you alright?’

‘Ah, yes, it’s just . . . I’ve been having these sick spells.’ The feeling was already passing. He rubbed at his sore temples, then the back of his skull. He lifted his head, and smiled up at her again. ‘I’m sure it’s nothing.’

‘Collem . . .’

There was hair wedged between his fingers. A lot of hair. His own, by the colour. He blinked at it, mystified, then coughed with disbelieving laughter. A wet, salty cough from down under his ribs. ‘I know it’s been thinning for years,’ he croaked, ‘but really, this is too much.’

Ardee did not laugh. She was staring at his hands, eyes wide with horror.

Patriotic Duties

Glokta winced as he carefully lowered himself into his chair. There was no fanfare to mark the moment when his aching arse touched the hard wood. No round of applause. Only a sharp clicking in his burning knee. *And yet it is a moment of the greatest significance, and not only for me.*

The designers of the White Chamber's furniture had ventured beyond austerity and into the realm of profound discomfort. *One would have thought that they could have stretched to some upholstery for the most powerful men in the realm. Perhaps the intention was to remind the occupants that one should never become too comfortable at the pinnacle of power.* He glanced sideways, and saw Bayaz watching him. *Well, uncomfortable is about as good as I ever get. Have I not often said so?* He winced as he tried to worm his way forwards, the legs of his chair squealing noisily against the floor.

Long ago, when I was handsome, young, and promising, I dreamed of one day sitting at this table as a noble Lord Marshal, or a respected High Justice, or even an honourable Lord Chamberlain. Who could ever have suspected, even in their darkest moments, that beautiful Sand dan Glokta would one day sit on the Closed Council as the feared, the abhorred, the all-powerful Arch Lector of the Inquisition? He could scarcely keep the smile from his toothless mouth as he slumped back against the unyielding wood.

Not everyone appeared amused by his sudden elevation, however. King Jezal in particular glowered at Glokta with the most profound dislike. 'Remarkable that you are confirmed already in your position,' he snapped.

Bayaz interposed. 'Such things can happen quickly when there is the will, your Majesty.'

'After all,' observed Hoff, stealing a rare moment away from his goblet to sweep the table with a melancholy glance, 'our numbers are most sadly reduced.'

All too true. Several chairs loomed significantly empty. Marshal Varuz was missing, presumed dead. *Certainly dead, given that he was conducting the defence from the Tower of Chains, a structure now scattered widely over*

the streets of the city. Farewell, my old fencing master, farewell. High Justice Marovia had also left a vacant seat. *No doubt they are still trying to scrape the frozen meat from the walls of his office. Adieu to my third suitor, I fear*. Lord Valdis, Commander of the Knights Herald, was not in attendance. *Keeping watch on the southern gate, I understand, when the Gurkish detonated their explosive powder. Body never found, nor ever will be, one suspects*. Lord Admiral Reutzer too, was absent. Wounded at sea by a cutlass to the guts. *Not expected to survive, alas.*

Truly, the pinnacle of power is less crowded than it used to be.

'Marshal West could not be with us?' asked Lord Chancellor Halleck.

'He regrets that he cannot.' General Kroy seemed to pinch off each word with his teeth. 'He has asked me to take his place, and speak for the army.'

'And how is the Marshal?'

'Wounded.'

'And further afflicted by the wasting illness that has recently swept the Agriont,' added the king, frowning grimly down the table at the First of the Magi.

'Regrettable.' Bayaz' face showed not the slightest sign of regret or anything else.

'A terrible business,' lamented Hoff. 'The physicians are utterly baffled.'

'Few survive.' Luthar's glare had become positively deadly.

'Let us ardently hope,' gushed Torlichorm, 'that Marshal West is one of the lucky ones.' *Let us hope so indeed. Although hope changes nothing.*

'To business, then?' Wine gurgled from the pitcher as Hoff filled his goblet for the second time since entering the room. 'How fares the campaign, General Kroy?'

'The Gurkish army is utterly routed. We have pursued them towards Keln, where some few managed to flee on the remnant of their fleet. Duke Orso's ships soon put an end to that, however. The Gurkish invasion is over. Victory is ours.' *And yet he frowns as though he is admitting defeat.*

'Excellent.'

'The nation owes a debt of thanks to its brave soldiers.'

'Our congratulations, General.'

Kroy stared down at the table-top. 'The congratulations belong to Marshal West, who gave the orders, and to General Poulder and the others who gave their lives carrying them out. I was no more than an observer.'

‘But you played your part, and admirably.’ Hoff raised his goblet. ‘Given the unfortunate absence of Marshal Varuz, I feel confident his Majesty will soon wish to confer a promotion upon you.’ He glanced towards the king, and Luthar grunted his unenthusiastic assent.

‘I am honoured to serve in whatever capacity his Majesty should decide, of course. The prisoners are a more urgent matter, however. We have many thousands of them, and no food with which to—’

‘We have not enough food for our own soldiers, our own citizens, our own wounded,’ said Hoff, dabbing at his wet lips.

‘Ransom any men of quality back to the Emperor?’ suggested Torlichorm.

‘There were precious few men of quality among their entire damn army.’

Bayaz frowned down the table. ‘If they are of no value to the Emperor they are certainly of no value to us. Let them starve.’

A few men shifted uncomfortably. ‘We are talking of thousands of lives, here—’ began Kroy.

The gaze of the First of the Magi fell upon him like a great stone and squashed his objections flat. ‘I know what we are talking of, General. Enemies. Invaders.’

‘Surely we can find a way?’ threw in the king. ‘Could we not ship them back to Kantic shores? It would be a shameful epilogue to our victory if—’

‘Each prisoner fed is one citizen that must go hungry. Such is the terrible arithmetic of power. A difficult decision, your Majesty, but those are the only kind we have in this room. What would your opinion be, Arch Lector?’

The eyes of the king, and the old men in the high chairs, all turned towards Glokta. *Ah, we know what must be done, and we do not flinch, and so forth. Let the monster pronounce the sentence, so the rest can feel like decent men.* ‘I have never been a great admirer of the Gurkish.’ Glokta shrugged his aching shoulders. ‘Let them starve.’

King Jezal settled further into his throne with an even grimmer frown. *Could it be that our monarch is a touch less house-broken than the First of the Magi would like to believe?* Lord Chancellor Halleck cleared his throat. ‘Now that victory is ours, our first concern, without question, is the clearing of the ruins, and the rebuilding of the damage caused by . . .’ his eyes shifted nervously sideways to Bayaz, and back. ‘Gurkish aggression.’

‘Hear, hear.’

‘Rebuilding. We are all agreed.’

‘The costs,’ and Halleck winced as if the word caused him pain, ‘even of clearing the wreckage in the Agriont alone, may run to many tens of thousands of marks. The price of rebuilding, many millions. When we consider the extensive damage to the city of Adua besides . . . the costs . . .’ Halleck scowled again and rubbed at his ill-shaved jaw with one hand. ‘Difficult even to guess at.’

‘We can only do our best.’ Hoff sadly shook his head. ‘And find one mark at a time.’

‘I, for one, suggest we look to the nobles,’ said Glokta. There were several grumbles of agreement.

‘His Eminence makes a fine point.’

‘A sharp curtailment of the powers of the Open Council,’ said Halleck.

‘Harsh taxes on those who did not provide material support in the recent war.’

‘Excellent! Trim the nobles’ sails. Damn parasites.’

‘Sweeping reforms. Lands returned to the crown. Levies on inheritance. ’

‘On inheritance! An inspired notion!’

‘The Lord Governors too must be brought into the fold.’

‘Skald and Meed. Yes. They have long enjoyed too much independence. ’

‘Meed can hardly be blamed, his province is a wreck—’

‘This is not a question of blame,’ said Bayaz. *No indeed, we all know where that lies.* ‘This is a question of control. Victory has given us the opportunity for reform.’

‘We need to centralise!’

‘Westport as well. Too long they have played us off against the Gurkish.’

‘They need us now.’

‘Perhaps we should extend the Inquisition to their city?’ suggested Glokta.

‘A foothold in Styria!’

‘We must rebuild!’ The First of the Magi thumped at the table with one meaty fist. ‘Better and more glorious even than before. The statues in the Kingsway may have fallen, but they have left space for new ones.’

‘A new era of prosperity,’ said Halleck, eyes shining.

‘A new era of power,’ said Hoff, raising his goblet.

‘A golden age?’ Bayaz looked up the table at Glokta.

‘An age of unity and opportunity for all!’ said the king.

His offering fell somewhat flat. Eyes swivelled uncomfortably toward the king's end of the table. *Quite as if he noisily farted, rather than spoke.* 'Er . . . yes, your Majesty,' said Hoff. 'Opportunities.' *For anyone lucky enough to sit on the Closed Council, that is.*

'Perhaps heavier taxes on the merchant guilds?' proffered Halleck. 'As our last Arch Lector had in mind. The banks also. Such a move could produce vast incomes—'

'No,' said Bayaz, offhand. 'Not the guilds, not the banks. The free operation of those noble institutions provides wealth and security to all. The future of the nation lies in commerce.'

Halleck humbly inclined his head. *With more than a hint of fear, do I detect?* 'Of course, Lord Bayaz, you are right. I freely admit my mistake.'

The Magus moved smoothly on. 'Perhaps the banks would be willing to extend a loan to the crown, however.'

'An excellent idea,' said Glokta without hesitation. 'The banking house of Valint and Balk are a trustworthy and long-founded institution. They were of profound value during my attempts to defend Dagoska. I am sure we could count on their help again.' Bayaz' smile was almost imperceptible. 'In the meantime the lands, assets, and titles of the traitor Lord Brock have been requisitioned by the crown. Their sale will raise a considerable sum.'

'And what of the man himself, Arch Lector?'

'It would appear he fled the nation along with the last of the Gurkish. We assume that he is still their . . . guest.'

'Their puppet, you mean.' Bayaz sucked at his teeth. 'Unfortunate. He may continue to be a focus for discontent.'

'Two of his children are under lock and key in the House of Questions. His daughter and one of the sons. An exchange might be possible—'

'Brock? Ha!' barked Hoff. 'He wouldn't swap his own life for the whole world and everything in it.'

Glokta raised his eyebrows. 'Then perhaps a demonstration of intent? A clear message that treason will not and will never be tolerated?'

'Never a bad message to send,' growled Bayaz to affirmative mutterings from the old men.

'A public declaration of Brock's guilt, then, and his responsibility for the ruin of the city of Adua. Accompanied by a pair of hangings.' *A shame for*

them, to have been born to such an ambitious father, but everyone loves a public killing. 'Does anyone have a preference for a certain day or—'

'There will be no hangings.' The king was frowning levelly at Bayaz.

Hoff blinked. 'But your Majesty, you cannot allow—'

'There has been enough bloodshed. Far more than enough. Release Lord Brock's children.' There were several sharp intakes of breath around the table. 'Allow them to join their father, or remain in the Union as private citizens, as they desire.' Bayaz glared balefully from the far end of the room, but the king did not appear intimidated. 'The war is over. We won.' *The war never ends, and victory is temporary.* 'I would rather try to heal wounds than deepen them.' *A wounded enemy is the best kind, they are the easiest to kill.* 'Sometimes mercy buys you more than ruthlessness.'

Glokta cleared his throat. 'Sometimes.' *Though I myself have yet to see the circumstance.*

'Good,' said the king in a voice that brooked no argument. 'Then it is decided. Have we other pressing business? I need to make a tour of the hospitals, and then once more to clearing the wreckage.'

'Of course, your Majesty.' Hoff gave a sycophantic bow. 'Your care for you subjects does you much credit.'

Jezal stared at him for a moment, then snorted, and got up. He had already left the room before most of the old men had struggled to their feet. *And I take even longer.* When Glokta had finally wrestled his chair out of the way and grimaced to standing, he found Hoff was beside him, a frown on his ruddy face. 'We have a small problem,' he muttered.

'Indeed? Something we cannot raise with the rest of the Council?'

'I fear so. Something which, in particular, it would be better not to discuss before his Majesty.' Hoff looked quickly over his shoulder, waited for the last of the old men to pull the heavy door shut behind him and leave the two of them unobserved. *Secrets, then? How tremendously exciting.* 'Our absent Lord Marshal's sister.'

Glokta frowned. *Oh dear*. 'Ardee West? What of her?'

'I have it on good authority, that she finds herself in . . . a delicate condition.'

The familiar flurry of twitches ran up the left side of Glokta's face. 'Is that so?' *What a shame*. 'You are remarkably well informed about that lady's personal business.'

‘It is my duty to be so.’ Hoff leaned close and blasted Glokta with wine-stinking breath as he whispered. ‘When you consider who the father might very well be.’

‘And that is?’ *Though I think we both already guess the answer.*

‘Who else but the king?’ hissed Hoff under his breath, a note of panic in his voice. ‘You must be well aware that they were involved in . . . a liaison, to put it delicately, prior to his coronation. It is scarcely a secret. Now this? A bastard child! When the king’s own claim to the throne is not of the purest? When he has so many enemies still on the Open Council? Such a child could be used against us, if it became known of, and it will, of course!’ He leaned closer yet. ‘Such a thing would constitute a threat to the state.’

‘Indeed,’ said Glokta icily. *All too unfortunately true. What a terrible, terrible shame.*

Hoff’s fat fingers fussed nervously with each other. ‘I realise that you have some association with the lady and her family. I understand entirely if this is one responsibility that you would rather be free of. I can make the arrangements with no—’

Glokta flashed his craziest grin. ‘Are you implying that I lack sufficient ruthlessness for the murder of a pregnant mother, Lord Chamberlain?’ His voice bounced loud from the hard white walls, merciless as a knife-thrust.

Hoff winced, his eyes darting nervously towards the door. ‘I am sure you would not flinch from any patriotic duty—’

‘Good. You may rest easy, then. Our mutual friend did not select me for this role because of my soft heart.’ *Anything but.* ‘I will deal with the matter.’

The same small, brick-built house in the same unremarkable street that Glokta had visited so often before. *The same house where I spent so many enjoyable afternoons. As close as I have come to comfort since I was dragged drooling from the Emperor’s prisons*. He slid his right hand into his pocket, felt the cold metal brush against his fingertips. *Why do I do this? Why? So that drunken arsehole Hoff can mop his brow at a calamity averted? So that Jezal dan Luthar can sit a hair more secure on his puppet throne?* He twisted his hips one way and then the other until he felt his back

click. *She deserves so much better. But such is the terrible arithmetic of power.*

He pushed back the gate, hobbled up to the front door, and gave it a smart knock. It was a moment before the cringing maid answered. *Perhaps the one who alerted our court drunkard Lord Hoff to the unfortunate situation?* She showed him through into the over-furnished sitting room with little more than a mumble and left him there, staring at a small fire in the small grate. He caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror above the fireplace, and frowned.

Who is that man? That ruined shell? That shambling corpse? Can you even call it a face? So twisted and so lined, so etched with pain. What is this loathsome, pitiable species? Oh, if there is a God, protect me from this thing!

He tried to smile. Savage grooves cut through his corpse-pale skin, the hideous gap in his teeth yawned. The corner of his mouth trembled, his left eye twitched, narrower than the other, rimmed with angry red. *The smile seems to promise horrors more surely even than the frown.*

Has any man ever looked more of a villain? Has any man ever been more of a monster? Could any vestige of humanity possibly remain behind such a mask? How did beautiful Sand dan Glokta become . . . this? Mirrors. Even worse than stairs. His lip curled with disgust as he turned away.

Ardee stood in the doorway, watching him in silence. She looked well, to his mind, once he got over the awkward surprise of being observed. *Very well, with perhaps the slightest swelling about her stomach already? Three months along now? Four perhaps? Soon there will be no disguising it.*

'Your Eminence.' She gave him an appraising glance as she stepped into the room. 'White suits you.'

'Truly? You do not feel it makes the skull-like rings about my feverish eyes look all the darker?'

'Why, not at all. It perfectly matches your ghoulish pallor.'

Glokta leered his toothless grin. 'The very effect I was hoping for.'

'Have you come to take me on another tour of sewers, death and torture?'

'A repeat of that performance will probably never be possible, alas. I seem to have used up all my friends and most of my enemies in that one throw.'

'And regrettably the Gurkish army can no longer be with us.'

‘Busy elsewhere, I understand.’ He watched her cross to the table, look out of the window towards the street, the daylight glowing through her dark air, down the edge of her cheek.

‘I trust that you are well?’ she asked.

‘Busier even than the Gurkish. A great deal to do. How is your brother? I have been meaning to visit him, but . . .’ *But I doubt even I could stand the stink of my own hypocrisy if I did. I cause pain. The easing of it is a foreign tongue to me.*

Ardee looked at her feet. ‘He is always sick now. Every time I visit he is thinner. One of his teeth fell out while I was with him.’ She shrugged her shoulders. ‘It just came out while he was trying to eat. He nearly choked on it. But what can I do? What can anyone?’

‘I am truly sorry to hear it.’ *But it changes nothing.* ‘I am sure that you are a great help to him.’ *I am sure that there can be no help for him*. ‘And how are you?’

‘Better than most, I suppose.’ She gave a long sigh, shook herself and tried to smile. ‘Will you take some wine?’

‘No, but don’t let me stop you.’ *I know you never have.*

But she only held the bottle for a moment, then set it down again. ‘I have been trying to drink less, lately.’

‘I have always felt that you should.’ He took a slow step towards her. ‘You feel sick, then, in the mornings?’

She looked sharply sideways, then swallowed, the thin muscles standing out from her neck. ‘You know?’

‘I am the Arch Lector,’ he said as he came closer. ‘I am supposed to know everything.’

Her shoulders sagged, her head dropped, she leaned forwards, both hands on the edge of the table. Glokta could see her eyelids fluttering, from the side. *Blinking back the tears. For all of her anger, and her cleverness, she’s just as much in need of saving as anyone could be. But there is no one to come to the rescue. There is only me.*

‘I suppose I made quite a mess of things, just as my brother said I would. Just as you said I would. You must be disappointed.’

Glokta felt his face twisting. S*omething like a smile, perhaps. But not much joy in it.* ‘I’ve spent most of my life disappointed. But not in you. It’s a hard world. No one gets what they deserve.’ *How long must we drag this*

out before we find the courage? It will not get any easier to do it. It must be now.

'Ardee . . .' his voice sounded rough in his own ears. He took another limping step, his palm sweaty on the handle of his cane. She looked up at him, wet eyes gleaming, one hand on her stomach. She moved as if to take a step back. *A trace of fear, perhaps? And who can blame her? Can it be that she guesses at what is coming?*

'You know that I have always had a great liking and respect for your brother.' His mouth was dry, his tongue slurped awkwardly against his empty gums. Now is the time. 'Over the past months I have developed a great liking and respect for you.' A flurry of twitches ran up the side of his face and made a tear leak from his flickering eye. Now, now. 'Or . . . as close to such feelings as a man like myself can come, at least.' Glokta slid his hand into his pocket, carefully, so she would not notice. He felt the cold metal, the hard, merciless edges brushing against his skin. It must be now. His heart was pounding, his throat so tight that he could barely speak. 'This is difficult. I am . . . sorry.'

'For what?' she said, frowning at him.

Now.

He lurched towards her, snatching his hand from his pocket. She stumbled back against the table, eyes wide . . . and they both froze.

The ring glittered between them. A colossal, flashing diamond so large it made the thick golden band look flimsy. So large it looks a joke. A fake. An absurd impossibility. *The biggest stone that Valint and Balk had to offer.*

'I have to ask you to marry me,' he croaked. The hand that held the ring was trembling like a dry leaf. *Put a cleaver in it and it's steady as a rock, but ask me to hold a ring and I nearly wet myself. Courage, Sand, courage.*

She stared down at the glittering stone, her mouth hanging stupidly open. *With shock? With horror? Marry this . . . thing? I would rather die!* 'Uh . . .' she muttered. 'I . . .'

'I know! I know, I'm as disgusted as you are, but . . . let me speak. Please.' He stared down at the floor, his mouth twisting as he said the words. 'I am not stupid enough to pretend that you might ever come to love . . . a man like me, or think of me with anything warmer than pity. This is a question of necessity. You should not flinch from it because . . . of what I am. They know you are carrying the king's child.'

‘They?’ she muttered.

‘Yes. They. The child is a threat to them. You are a threat to them. This way I can protect you. I can give your child legitimacy. It must be our child, now and forever.’ Still she stared at the ring in silence. *Like a prisoner staring horrified upon the instruments, and deciding whether to confess. Two awful choices, but which is the worse?*

‘There are many things that I can give you. Safety. Security. Respect. You will have the best of everything. A high place in society, for what such things are worth. No one will dream of laying a finger upon you. No one will dare to talk down to you. People will whisper behind your back, of course. But they will whisper of your beauty, your wit, and your surpassing virtue.’ Glokta narrowed his *eyes*. ‘I will see to it.’

She looked up at him, and swallowed. *And now comes the refusal. My thanks, but I would rather die.* ‘I should be honest with you. When I was younger . . . I did some foolish things.’ Her mouth twisted. ‘This isn’t even the first bastard I’ve carried. My father threw me down the stairs and I lost it. He nearly killed me. I didn’t think that it could happen again.’

‘We have all done things we are not proud of.’ *You should hear my confessions, some time. Or rather no one ever should.* ‘That changes nothing. I promised that I would look to your welfare. I see no other way.’

‘Then yes.’ She took the ring from him without any ceremony and slid it onto her finger. ‘There is nothing to think about, is there?’ *Scarcely the gushing acceptance, the tearful acquiescence, the joyful surrender that one reads of in the story books. A reluctant business arrangement. An occasion for sad reflection on all that might have been, but is not.*

‘Who would have thought,’ she murmured, staring at the jewel on her finger, ‘when I watched you fence with my brother, all those years ago, that I would one day wear your ring? You always were the man of my dreams.’

And now of your nightmares. ‘Life takes strange turns. The circumstances are not quite what anyone would have predicted.’ *And so I save two lives. How much evil can that possibly outweigh? Yet it is something on the right side of the scales, at least. Every man needs something on the right side of the scales.*

Her dark eyes rolled up to his. ‘Could you not have afforded a bigger stone?’

‘Only by raiding the treasury,’ he croaked. *A kiss would be traditional, but under the circumstances—*

She stepped towards him, lifting one arm. He lurched back, winced at a twinge in his hip. ‘Sorry. Somewhat . . . out of practice.’

‘If I am to do this, I mean to do it properly.’

‘To make the best of it, do you mean?’

‘To make something of it, anyway.’ She drew closer still. He had to force himself to stay where he was. She looked into his eyes. She reached up, slowly, and touched his cheek, and set his eyelid flickering. *Foolishness. How many women have touched me before? And yet that was another life. Another—*

Her hand slid round his face, her fingertips pressing tight into his jaw. His neck clicked as she pulled him close. He felt her breath warm on his chin. Her lips brushed against his, gently, and back the other way. He heard her make a soft grunt in her throat, and it made his own breath catch. *Pretence, of course. How could any woman want to touch this ruined body? Kiss this ruined face? Even I am repulsed at the thought of it. Pretence, and yet I must applaud her for the effort.*

His left leg trembled and he had to cling tight to his cane. The breath hissed fast through his nose. Her face was sideways on to his, their mouths locked together, sucking wetly. The tip of her tongue licked at his empty gums. *Pretence, of course, what else could it be ? And yet she does it so very, very well . . .*

The First Law

Ferro sat, and she stared at her hand. The hand that had held the Seed. It looked the same as ever, yet it felt different. Cold, still. Very cold. She had wrapped it in blankets. She had bathed it in warm water. She had held it near the fire, so near that she had burned herself.

Nothing helped.

'Ferro . . .' Whispered so quiet it could almost have been the wind around the window-frame.

She jerked to her feet, knife clutched in her fist. She stared into the corners of her room. All empty. She bent down to look under the bed, under the tall cupboard. She tore the hangings out of the way with her free hand. No one. She had known there would be no one.

Yet she still heard them.

A thumping at the door and she whipped round again, breath hissing through her teeth. Another dream? Another ghost? More heavy knocks.

'Come in?' she growled.

The door opened. Bayaz. He raised one eyebrow at her knife. 'You are altogether too fond of blades, Ferro. You have no enemies here.'

She glared at the Magus through narrowed eyes. She was not so sure. 'What happened, in the wind?'

'What happened?' Bayaz shrugged. 'We won.'

'What were those shapes? Those shadows.'

'I saw nothing, aside from Mamun and his Hundred Words receiving the punishment they deserved.'

'Did you not hear voices?'

'Over the thunder of our victory? I heard nothing.'

'I did.' Ferro lowered the knife and slid it into her belt. She worked the fingers of her hand, the same, and yet changed. 'I still hear them.'

'And what do they tell you, Ferro?'

'They speak of locks, and gates, and doors, and the opening of them. Always they talk of opening them. They ask about the Seed. Where is it?'

'Safe.' Bayaz gazed blankly at her. 'Remember, if you truly hear the creatures of the Other Side, that they are made of lies.'

‘They are not alone in that. They ask me to break the First Law. Just as you did.’

‘Open to interpretation.’ Bayaz had a proud twist to the corner of his mouth. As if he had achieved something wonderful. ‘I tempered Glustrod’s disciplines with the techniques of the Master Maker, and used the Seed as the engine for my Art. The results were . . .’ He took a long, satisfied breath. ‘Well, you were there. It was, above all, a triumph of will.’

‘You tampered with the seals. You put the world at risk. The Tellers of Secrets . . .’

‘The First Law is a paradox. Whenever you change a thing you borrow from the world below, and there are always risks. If I have crossed a line it is a line of scale only. The world is safe, is it not? I make no apologies for the ambition of my vision.’

‘They are burying men, and women, and children, in pits for a hundred. Just as they did in Aulcus. This sickness . . . it is because of what we did. Is that ambition, then? The size of the graves?’

Bayaz gave a dismissive toss of his head. ‘An unexpected side-effect. The price of victory, I fear, is the same now as it was in the Old Time, and always will be.’ He fixed her with his eye, and there was a threat in it. A challenge. ‘But if I broke the First Law, what then? In what court will you have me judged? By what jury? Will you release Tolomei from the darkness to give evidence? Will you seek out Zacharus to read the charge? Will you drag Cawneil from the edge of the World to deliver the verdict? Will you bring great Juvens from the land of the dead to pronounce the sentence? I think not. I am First of the Magi. I am the last authority and I say . . . I am righteous.’

‘You? No.’

‘Yes, Ferro. Power makes all things right. That is my first law, and my last. That is the only law that I acknowledge.’

‘Zacharus warned me,’ she murmured, thinking of the endless plain, the wild-eyed old man with his circling birds. ‘He told me to run, and never stop running. I should have listened to him.’

‘To that bloated bladder of self-righteousness?’ Bayaz snorted. ‘Perhaps you should have, but that ship has sailed. You waved it away happily from the shore, and chose instead to feed your fury. Gladly you fed it. Let us not pretend that I deceived you. You knew we were to walk dark paths.’

‘I did not expect . . .’ she worked her icy fingers into a trembling fist. ‘This.’

‘What did you expect, then? I must confess I thought you made of harder stuff. Let us leave the philosophising to those with more time and fewer scores to settle. Guilt, and regret, and righteousness? It is like talking with the great King Jezal. And who has the patience for that?’ He turned towards the door. ‘You should stay near me. Perhaps, in time, Khalul will send other agents. Then I will have need of your talents once again.’

She snorted. ‘And until then? Sit here with the shadows for company? ’

‘Until then, smile, Ferro, if you can remember how.’ Bayaz flashed his white grin at her. ‘You have your vengeance.’

The wind tore around her, rushed around her, full of shadows. She knelt at one end of a screaming tunnel, touching the very sky. The world was thin and brittle as a sheet of glass, ready to crack. Beyond it a bottomless void, filled with voices.

‘Let us in . . .’

‘No!’ She thrashed her way free and struggled up, stood panting on the floor beside her bed, every muscle rigid. But there was no one to fight. Another dream, only.

Her own fault, for letting herself sleep.

A long strip of moonlight reached towards her across the tiles. The window at its end stood ajar, a cold night breeze washed through and chilled her sweat-beaded skin. She walked to it, frowning, pushed it shut and slid the bolt. She turned around.

A figure stood in the thick shadows beside the door. A one-armed figure, swathed in rags. The few pieces of armour still strapped to him were scuffed and gouged. His face was a dusty ruin, torn skin hanging in scraps from white bone, but even so, Ferro knew him.

Mamun.

‘We meet again, devil-blood.’ His dry voice rustled like old paper.

‘I am dreaming,’ she hissed.

‘You will wish that you were.’ He was across the room in a breathless instant. His one hand closed round her throat like a lock snapping shut. ‘Digging my way out of that ruination one handful of dirt at a time has

given me a hunger.' His dry breath tickled at her face. 'I will make myself a new arm from your flesh, and with it I will strike down Bayaz and take vengeance for great Juvens. The Prophet has seen it, and I will turn his vision into truth.' He lifted her, effortlessly, crushed her back against the wall, her heels kicking against the panelling.

The hand squeezed. Her chest heaved, but no air moved inside her neck. She struggled with the fingers, ripped at them with her nails, but they were made of iron, made of stone, tight as a hanged man's collar. She fought and twisted but he did not shift a hair's breadth. She fiddled with Mamun's ruined face, her fingers worked their way into his ripped cheek, tore at the dusty flesh inside but his eyes did not even blink. It had grown cold in the room.

'Say your prayers, child,' he whispered, broken teeth grinding, 'and hope that God is merciful.'

She was growing weaker now. Her lungs were bursting. She tore at him still, but each effort was less. Weaker and weaker. Her arms drooped, her legs dangled, her eyelids were heavy, heavy. All was terrible cold.

'Now,' he whispered, breath smoking. He brought her down, opening his mouth, his torn lips sliding back from his splintered teeth. 'Now.'

Her finger stabbed into his neck. Through his skin and into his dry flesh, up to the knuckle. It drove his head away. Her other hand wormed round his, prised it from her throat, bent his fingers backwards. She felt the bones in them snap, crunch, splinter as she dropped to the floor. White frost crept out across the black window-panes beside her, squeaked under her bare feet as she twisted Mamun round and rammed him against the wall, crushed his body into the splintering panels, the cracking plaster. Dust showered down from the force of it.

She drove her finger further into his throat, upwards, inwards. It was easy to do it. There was no end to her strength. It came from the other side of the divide. The Seed had changed her, as it had changed Tolomei, and there could be no going back.

Ferro smiled.

'Take my flesh, would you? You have had your last meal, Mamun.'

The tip of her finger slid out between his teeth, met her thumb and hooked him like a fish. With a jerk of her wrist she ripped the jaw-bone from his

head and tossed it clattering away. His tongue lolled inside a ragged mass of dusty flesh.

'Say your prayers, Eater,' she hissed, 'and hope that God is merciful.' She clamped her palms around either side of his head. A long squeak came from his nose. His shattered hand pawed at her, uselessly. His skull bent, then flattened, then burst apart, splinters of bone flying. She let the body fall, dust sliding out across the floor, curling round her feet.

'Yes . . .'

She did not startle. She did not stare. She knew where the voice came from. Everywhere and nowhere.

She stepped to the window and pulled it open. She jumped through, dropped a dozen strides down to the turf, and stood. The night was full of sounds, but she was silent. She padded across the moonlit grass, crunching frozen where her bare feet fell, crept up a long stair and onto the walls. The voices followed her.

'Wait.'

'The Seed!'

'Ferro.'

'Let us in . . .'

She ignored them. An armoured man stared out into the night, out towards the House of the Maker, a blacker outline against the black sky. A wedge of darkness over the Agriont within which there were no stars, no moonlit clouds, no light at all. Ferro wondered if Tolomei was lurking in the shadows inside, scratching at its gates. Scratching, scratching, forever. She had wasted her chance at vengeance.

Ferro would not do the same.

She slid down the battlements, around the guard, hugging his cloak tight about his shoulders as she passed. Up onto the parapet and she leaped, the wind rushing against her skin. She cleared the moat, creaking ice spreading out across the water beneath her. The cobbled ground beyond rushed up. Her feet thumped into it and she rolled over, over, away into the buildings. Her clothes were torn from the fall but there was no mark on her skin. Not so much as a bead of blood.

'No, Ferro.'

'Back, and find the Seed!'

'It is near him.'

‘Bayaz has it.’

Bayaz. Perhaps when she was done in the South, she would return. When she had buried the great Uthman-ul-Dosht in the ruins of his own palace. When she had sent Khalul, and his Eaters, and his priests to hell. Perhaps then she would come back, and teach the First of the Magi the lesson that he deserved. The lesson that Tolomei meant to teach him. But then, liar or not, he had kept his word to her, in the end. He had given her the means of vengeance.

Now she would take it.

Ferro stole through the silent ruins of the city, quiet and quick as a night breeze. South, towards the docks. She would find a way. South, across the sea to Gurkhul, and then . . .

The voices whispered to her. A thousand voices. They spoke of the gates that Euz closed, and of the seals that Euz put upon them. They begged her to open them. They told her to break them. They told her how, and they commanded her to do it.

But Ferro only smiled. Let them speak.

She had no masters.

Tea and Threats

Logen frowned. He frowned at the wide hall, and its glittering mirrors, and the many powerful people in it. He scowled at the great Lords of the Union facing him. Two hundred of them or more, sitting in a muttering crowd around the opposite side of the room. Their false talk, and their false smiles, and their false faces cloyed at him like too much honey. But he felt no better about the folk on his side of the hall, sharing the high platform with him and the great King Jezal.

There was the sneering cripple who'd asked all the questions that day in the tower, dressed now all in white. There was a fat man with a face full of broken veins, looked as if he started each day with a bottle. There was a tall, lean bastard in a black breastplate covered in fancy gold, with a soft smile and hard little eyes. As shifty a pack of liars as Logen had ever laid eyes on, but there was one worse than all the rest together.

Bayaz sat with an easy grin on his face, as if everything had turned out just the way he'd planned. Maybe it had. Damn wizard. Logen should have known better than to trust a man with no hair. The spirits had warned him that Magi have their own purposes, but he'd taken no notice, plunged on blindly, hoping for the best, just like always. Say one thing for Logen Ninefingers, say he never listens. One fault among many.

His eyes swivelled the other way, towards Jezal. He looked comfortable enough in his kingly robes, golden crown gleaming on his head, golden chair even bigger than the one that Logen was sitting in. His wife sat beside him. She had a frosty pride about her, maybe, but no worse for that. Beautiful as a winter morning. And she had this look on her face, when she looked at Jezal. A fierce kind of look, as if she could hardly stop herself tearing into him with her teeth. That lucky bastard always seemed to come out alright. She could've had a little bite out of Logen if she'd wanted, but what woman in her right mind did?

He frowned most of all at himself in the mirrors opposite, raised up on the high platform beside Jezal and his queen. He looked a sullen and brooding, scarred and fearsome monster beside that beautiful pair. A man made of murder, then swaddled in rich coloured cloth and rare white furs, set with

polished rivets and bright buckles, all topped off with a great golden chain around his shoulders. That same chain that Bethod had worn. His hands stuck from the ends of his fur-trimmed sleeves, marked and brutal, one finger missing, grasping at the arms of his gilded chair. King's clothes, maybe, but killer's hands. He looked like the villain in some old children's story. The ruthless warrior, clawed his way to power with fire and steel. Climbed to a throne up a mountain of corpses. Maybe he was that man.

He squirmed around, new cloth scratching at his clammy skin. He'd come a long way, since he dragged himself out of a river without even a pair of boots to his name. Dragged himself across the High Places with nothing but a pot for company. He'd come a long way, but he wasn't sure he hadn't liked himself better before. He'd laughed when he'd heard that Bethod was calling himself a king. Now here he was, doing the same, and even worse suited to the job. Say one thing for Logen Ninefingers, say he's a cunt. Simple as that. And that's not something any man likes to admit about himself.

The drunkard, Hoff, was doing most of the talking. 'The Lords' Round lies in ruins, alas. For the time being, therefore, until a venue of grandeur suitable for this noble institution has been built – a new Lords' Round, richer and greater than the last – it has been decided that the Open Council will stand in recess.'

There was a pause. 'In recess?' someone muttered.

'How will we be heard?'

'Where will the nobles have their voice?'

'The nobles will speak through the Closed Council.' Hoff had that tone a man uses talking down to a child. 'Or may apply to the Under-Secretary for Audiences to obtain a hearing with the king.'

'But any peasant may do so!'

Hoff raised his eyebrows. 'True.'

A ripple of anger spread out through the Lords in front of them. Logen might not have understood too much about politics, but he could recognise one set of men getting stood on by another. Never a nice thing to be part of, but at least he was on the side doing the standing, for once.

'The king and the nation are one and the same!' Bayaz' harsh voice cut over the chatter. 'You only borrow your lands from him. He regrets that he requires some portion of them back, but such is the spur of necessity.'

‘A quarter.’ The cripple licked at his empty gums with a faint sucking sound. ‘From each one of you.’

‘This will not stand!’ shouted an angry old man in the front row.

‘You think not, Lord Isher?’ Bayaz only smiled at him. ‘Those who do not think so may join Lord Brock in dusty exile, and surrender all their lands to the crown instead of just a portion.’

‘This is an outrage!’ shouted another man. ‘Always, the king has been first among equals, the greatest of nobles, not above them. Our votes brought him to the throne, and we refuse—’

‘You dance close to a line, Lord Heugen.’ The cripple’s face twitched with ugly spasms as he frowned across the room. ‘You might wish to remain on that side of it, where it is safe, and warm, and loyal. The other side will not suit you so well, I think.’ A long tear ran from his flickering left eye and down his hollow cheek. ‘The Surveyor General will be assessing your estates over the coming months. It would be wise for you all to lend him your fullest assistance.’

A lot of men were on their feet now, scowling, shaking fists. ‘This is outrageous!’

‘Unprecedented!’

‘Unacceptable!’

‘We refuse to be intimidated!’

Jezal sprang from his throne, raising his jewelled sword high, and struck at the platform again and again with the end of the scabbard, filling the room with booming echoes. ‘I am the king!’ he bellowed at the suddenly silent chamber. ‘I am not offering a choice, I am issuing a royal decree! Adua will be rebuilt, and more glorious than ever! This is the price! You have grown too used to a weak crown, my Lords! Believe me when I say that those days are now behind us!’

Bayaz leaned sideways to mutter in Logen’s ear. ‘Surprisingly good at this, isn’t he?’

The Lords grumbled, but they sat back down as Jezal spoke on, voice washing around the room with easy confidence, sheathed sword still held firmly in one fist. ‘Those who lent me their wholehearted support in the recent crisis will be exempt. But that list, to your shame, is all too brief. Why, it was friends from outside the borders of the Union who sustained us in our time of need!’

The man in black swept from his chair. ‘I, Orso of Talins, stand always at the side of my royal son and daughter!’ He seized Jezal’s face and kissed both his cheeks. Then he did the same with the queen. ‘Their friends are my friends.’ He said it with a smile, but the meaning was hard to miss. ‘Their enemies? Ah! You all are clever men. You can guess the rest.’

‘I thank you for your part in our deliverance,’ said Jezal. ‘You have our gratitude. The war between the Union and the North is at an end. The tyrant Bethod is dead, and there is a new order. I am proud to call the man who threw him down my friend. Logen Ninefingers! King of the Northmen!’ He beamed, holding out his hand. ‘It is fitting that we should stride into this bold new future as brothers.’

‘Aye,’ said Logen, pushing himself painfully up from his chair. ‘Right.’ He folded Jezal in a hug, slapped him on the back with a thump that echoed round the great chamber. ‘Reckon we’ll be staying our side of the Whiteflow from now on. Unless my brother has trouble down here, of course.’ He swept the sullen old men in the front row with a graveyard scowl. ‘Don’t make me fucking come back here.’ He sat down in the big chair and frowned out. The Bloody-Nine might not have known too much about politics, but he knew how to make a threat alright.

‘We won the war!’ Jezal rattled the golden hilt of his sword, then slid it smoothly back through the clasp on his belt. ‘Now we must win the peace!’

‘Well said, your Majesty, well said!’ The red-faced drunkard stood, not giving anyone the chance to get a word in. ‘Then only one order of business remains before the Open Council stands in recess.’ He turned with an oily smile and a hand-rubbing bow. ‘Let us offer our thanks to Lord Bayaz, the First of the Magi, who, by the wisdom of his council and the power of his Art, drove out the invader and saved the Union!’ He began to clap. The cripple Glokta joined him, then Duke Orso.

A burly lord in the front row sprang up. ‘Lord Bayaz!’ he roared, smashing his fat hands together. Soon the whole hall was resounding with reluctant applause. Even Heugen joined in. Even Isher, although he had a look on his face as if he was clapping at his own burial. Logen let his hands stay where they were. If he was honest, he felt a touch sick even being there. Sick and angry. He slumped back in his chair, and kept on frowning.

Jezal watched the great worthies of the Union file unhappily out of the Chamber of Mirrors. Great men. Isher, Barezin, Heugen, and all the rest. Men that he had once gaped at the sight of. All humbled. He could hardly keep the smile from his face as they grumbled their helpless discontent. It felt almost like being a king, until he caught sight of his queen.

Terez and her father, the Grand Duke Orso, were engaged in what appeared to be a heartfelt argument, carried out in expressive Styrian, accentuated on both sides by violent hand movements. Jezal might have been relieved that he was not the only family member she appeared to despise, had he not suspected that he was the subject of their argument. He heard a soft scraping behind him, and was mildly disgusted to see the twisted face of his new Arch Lector.

'Your Majesty.' Glokta spoke softly, as if he planned to discuss secrets, frowning towards Terez and her father. 'Might I ask . . . is all well between you and the queen?' His voice dropped even lower. 'I understand that you rarely sleep in the same room.'

Jezal was on the point of giving the cripple a backhanded blow across the face for his impudence. Then he caught Terez looking at him, out of the corner of his eye. That look of utter contempt that was his usual treatment as a husband. He felt his shoulders sag. 'She can scarcely stand to be in the same country as me, let alone the same bed. The woman's an utter bitch!' he snarled, then hung his head and stared down at the floor. 'What am I to do?'

Glokta worked his neck to one side, then the other, and Jezal suppressed a shudder as he heard a loud click. 'Let me speak to the queen, your Majesty. I can be quite persuasive when I have the mind. I understand your difficulties. I am myself but recently married.'

Jezal dreaded to think what manner of monster might have accepted this monster as a husband. 'Truly?' he asked, feigning interest. 'Who is the lady?'

'I believe that the two of you are distantly acquainted. Ardee is her name. Ardee dan Glokta.' And the cripple's lips slid back to display the sickening hole in his front teeth.

'But not—'

'My old friend Collem West's sister, yes.' Jezal stared, speechless. Glokta gave a stiff bow. 'I accept your congratulations.' He turned away, limped to

the edge of the platform, and began to lurch down the steps, leaning heavily on his cane.

Jezal could hardly contain his cold shock, his crushing disappointment, his utter horror. He could not conceive of what blackmail that shambling monstrosity might have employed to trap her. Perhaps she had simply been desperate when Jezal abandoned her. Perhaps, with her brother ill, she had been left with nowhere else to turn. Only the other morning, in the hospital, the sight of her had tugged at something in him, just the way it used to. He had been thinking to himself that perhaps, one day, with time . . .

Now even such pleasurable fancies were brought crashing to the ground. Ardee was married, and to a man that Jezal despised. A man who sat on his own Closed Council. To make matters even worse, a man to whom he had, in a moment of madness, just now confessed the total emptiness of his own marriage. He had made himself appear weak, vulnerable, absurd. He cursed bitterly under his breath.

It seemed now that he had loved Ardee with an unbearable passion. That they had shared something he would never find again. How could he not have realised it at the time? How could he have allowed it all to fall apart, for this? The sad fact was, he supposed, that love on its own was nothing like enough.

Logen felt a lurch of disappointment as he opened the door, and close behind it an ugly wave of anger. The room was empty, neat and clean, as though no one had ever slept there. Ferro was gone.

Nothing had worked out the way he'd hoped. He should've expected it by now, maybe. After all, things never had before. And yet he kept on pissing into the wind. He was like a man whose door's too low, but instead of working out how to duck, keeps on smacking his head into the lintel every day of his miserable life. He wanted to feel sorry for himself, but he knew he deserved no better. A man can't do the things he'd done, and hope for happy endings.

He strode out into the corridor and down the hallway, his jaw clenched. He shouldered open the next door without knocking. The tall windows stood open, sunlight pouring into the airy room, hangings stirring in the breeze. Bayaz sat in a carved chair in front of one of them, a teacup in his

hand. A fawning servant in a velvet jacket was pouring into it from a silver pot, a tray and cups balanced on his outspread fingertips.

'Ah, the King of the Northmen!' called Bayaz. 'How are—'

'Where is Ferro?'

'Gone. She left something of a mess behind, in fact, but I have tidied up, as I so often find myself—'

'Where?'

The Magus shrugged. 'South, I would imagine. Vengeance, or some such, if I was forced to guess. She always said a very great deal about vengeance. A most ill-tempered woman.'

'She is changed.'

'Great events, my friend. None of us are quite the same. Now, will you take tea?'

The servant pranced forward, silver tray bobbing. Logen seized him by his velvet jacket and flung him across the room. He squealed as he crashed into the wall and sprawled on the carpet, cups clattering around him.

Bayaz raised an eyebrow. 'A simple "no" would have sufficed.'

'Shit on that, you old bastard.'

The First of the Magi frowned. 'Why, Master Ninefingers, you seem in bullish mood this morning. You are a king now, and it ill becomes you to let your baser passions rule you in this manner. Kings of that sort never last. You have enemies still in the North. Calder and Scale, up in the hills causing trouble, I am sure. Manners should be repaid by like manners, I have always thought. You have been helpful to me, and I can be helpful in return.'

'As you were to Bethod?'

'Just so.'

'Much good it did him.'

'When he had my help, he prospered. Then he became proud, and unruly, and demanded things all his own way. Without my help . . . well, you know the rest.'

'Stay out of my business, wizard.' Logen let his hand fall onto the hilt of the Maker's blade. If swords have voices, as the Magus had once told him, he made it give a grim threat now.

But Bayaz' face showed only the slightest trace of annoyance. 'A lesser man might find himself upset. Did I not buy your life from Bethod? Did I

not give you purpose when you had nothing? Did I not take you to the very edge of the World, show you wonders few men have seen? These are poor manners. Why, the very sword with which you threaten me was my gift to you. I had hoped we might come to a—'

'No.'

'I see. Not even—'

'We are done. Looks as if I'll never be a better man, but I can try not to be a worse. I can try that much, at least.'

Bayaz narrowed his eyes. 'Well, Master Ninefingers, you surprise me to the last. I thought you a courageous yet restrained man, a calculating yet compassionate one. I thought you, above all, a realistic man. But the Northmen have ever been prone to petulance. I observe in you now an obstinate streak and a destructive temper. I see the Bloody-Nine at last.'

'I'm happy to disappoint you. Seems we misjudged each other entirely. I took you for a great man. Now I realise my mistake.' Logen slowly shook his head. 'What have you done here?'

'What have I done?' Bayaz snorted with disbelieving laughter. 'I combined three pure disciplines of magic, and I forged a new one! It seems you do not understand the achievement, Master Ninefingers, but I forgive you. I realise that book-learning has never been your strongest suit. Such a thing has not been contemplated since before the Old Time, when Euz split his gifts among his sons.' Bayaz sighed. 'None will appreciate my greatest achievement, it seems. None except Khalul, perhaps, and it is unlikely he will ever proffer his congratulations. Why, such power has not been released within the Circle of the World since . . . since . . .'

'Glustrod destroyed himself and Aulcus with him?'

The Magus raised his eyebrows. 'Since you mention it.'

'And the results are pretty much the same, it seems to me, except you wrought a touch less careless slaughter, and ruined a smaller part of a smaller city, in a smaller, meaner time. Otherwise what's the difference, between you and him?'

'I would have thought that was entirely obvious.' Bayaz lifted his teacup, gazing mildly over the rim. 'Glustrod lost.'

Logen stood there for a long while, thinking on that. Then he turned and stalked from the room, the servant cringing out of his way. Into the corridor,

footsteps clapping from the gilded ceiling, Bethod's heavy chain jingling round his shoulders like laughter in his ear.

He probably should've kept the ruthless old bastard on his side. Chances were that Logen would need his help, the way things were like to be in the North, once he got back. He probably should've sucked up that stinking piss he called tea and smiled as if it was honey. He probably should've laughed, and called Bayaz old friend, so he could come crawling to the Great Northern Library when things turned sour. That would have been the clever thing to do. That would have been the realistic thing. But it was just the way that Logen's father had always said . . .

He'd never been that realistic.

Behind the Throne

As soon as he heard the door open, Jezal knew who his visitor must be. He did not even have to look up. Who else would have the temerity to barge into a king's own chambers without so much as knocking? He cursed, silently, but with great bitterness.

It could only be Bayaz. His jailer. His chief tormentor. His ever-present shadow. The man who had destroyed half the Agriont, and made a ruin of beautiful Adua, and now smiled and revelled in the applause as though he were the saviour of the nation. It was enough to make a man sick to the pit of his guts. Jezal ground his teeth, staring out of the window towards the ruins, refusing to turn round.

More demands. More compromises. More talk of what had to be done. Being the head of state, at least with the First of the Magi at his shoulder, was an endlessly frustrating and disempowering experience. Getting his own way on even the tiniest of issues, an almost impossible struggle. Wherever he looked he found himself staring directly into the Magus' disapproving frown. He felt like nothing more than a figurehead. A fine-looking, a gilded, a magnificent yet utterly useless chunk of wood. Except a figurehead at least gets to go at the front of the ship.

'Your Majesty,' came the old man's voice, the usual thin veneer of respect scarcely concealing the hard body of disdain beneath.

'What now?' Jezal finally turned to face him. He was surprised to see that the Magus had shed his robes of state in favour of his old travel-stained coat, the heavy boots he had worn on their ill-fated journey into the ruined west. 'Going somewhere?' asked Jezal, hardly daring even to hope.

'I am leaving Adua. Today.'

'Today?' It was the most Jezal could do to stop himself leaping in the air and screaming for joy. He felt like a prisoner stepping from his stinking dungeon and into the bright sunlight of freedom. Now he could rebuild the Agriont as he saw fit. He could reorganise the Closed Council, pick his own advisers. Perhaps even rid himself of that witch of a wife Bayaz had saddled him with. He would be free to do the right thing, whatever that was. He would be free to try and find out what the right thing might be, at least. Was

he not the High King of the Union, after all? Who would refuse him? ‘We will be sorry to lose you, of course.’

‘I can imagine. There are some arrangements that we must make first, however.’

‘By all means.’ Anything if it meant he was rid of the old bastard.

‘I have spoken with your new Arch Lector, Glokta.’

The name alone produced a shiver of revulsion. ‘Have you indeed?’

‘A sharp man. He has greatly impressed me. I have asked him to speak in my stead while I am absent from the Closed Council.’

‘Truly?’ asked Jezal, wondering whether to toss the cripple from his post directly after the Magus left the gates or to leave it a day.

‘I would recommend,’ said in very much the tone of an order, ‘that you listen closely to his opinions.’

‘Oh I will, of course. The best of luck on your journey back to . . .’

‘I would like you, in fact, to do as he says.’

A cold knot of anger pressed at Jezal’s throat. ‘You would have me, in effect . . . obey him?’

Bayaz’ eyes did not deviate from his own. ‘In effect . . . yes.’

Jezal was left momentarily speechless. For the Magus to suppose that he could come and go as he pleased, leaving his maimed lackey in charge? Above a king, in his own kingdom? The overwhelming arrogance of the man! ‘You have taken a high hand of late in my affairs!’ he snapped. ‘I am in no mind to trade one overbearing adviser for another.’

‘That man will be very useful to you. To us. Decisions will have to be made that you would find difficult. Actions will have to be taken which you would rather not take yourself. People who would live in sparkling palaces need others willing to carry away their ordure, lest it pile up in the polished corridors and one day bury them. All this is simple, and obvious. You have not attended to me.’

‘No! You are the one who has failed to attend! Sand dan Glokta? That crippled bastard . . .’ he realised his unfortunate choice of words, but had to forge on regardless, growing angrier than ever, ‘sitting beside me at the Closed Council? Leering over my shoulder every day of my life? And now you would have him dictate to me? Unacceptable. Insufferable. Impossible! We are no longer in the time of Harod the Great! I have no notion of what

causes you to suppose that you could speak to me in such a manner. I am king here, and I refuse to be steered!'

Bayaz closed his eyes, and drew a slow breath threw his nose. Quite as though he were trying to find the patience for the education of a moron. 'You cannot understand what it is to live as long as I have. To know all that I know. You people are dead in the blink of an eye, and have to be taught the same old lessons all over again. The same lessons that Juvens taught Stolicus a thousand years ago. It becomes extremely tiresome.'

Jezal's fury was steadily building. 'I apologise if I bore you!'

'I accept your apology.'

'I was joking!'

'Ah. Your wit is so very sharp I hardly noticed I was cut.'

'You mock me!'

'It is easily done. Every man seems a child to me. When you reach my age you see that history moves in circles. So many times I have guided this nation back from the brink of destruction, and on to ever greater glory. And what do I ask in return? A few little sacrifices? If you only understood the sacrifices that I have made on behalf of you cattle!'

Jezal stabbed one finger furiously towards the window. 'And what of all those dead? What of all those who have lost everything? Those cattle, as you put it! Are they happy with their sacrifices, do you suppose? What of all those who have suffered from this illness? That still suffer? My own close friend among them! I cannot but notice it seems similar to that illness you described to us in ruined Aulcus. I cannot help thinking that your magic might be the cause!'

The Magus made no effort to deny it. 'I deal in the momentous. I cannot concern myself with the fate of every peasant. Neither can you. I have tried to teach you this, but it seems you have failed to learn the lesson.'

'You are mistaken! I refuse to learn it!' Now was his chance. Now, while he was angry enough, for Jezal to step forever from the shadow of the First of the Magi and stand a free man. Bayaz was poison, and he had to be cut out. 'You helped me to my throne, and for that I thank you. But I do not care for your brand of government, it smacks of tyranny!'

Bayaz narrowed his eyes. 'Government is tyranny. At its best it is dressed in pretty colours.'

‘Your callous disregard for the lives of my subjects! I will not stand for it! I have moved beyond you. You are no longer wanted here. No longer needed. I will find my own way from now on.’ He waved Bayaz away with what he hoped was a regal gesture of dismissal. ‘You may leave.’

‘May . . . I . . . indeed?’ The First of the Magi stood in silence for a long time, his frown growing darker and darker. Long enough for Jezal’s rage to begin to wilt, for his mouth to go dry, for his knees to feel weak. ‘I perceive that I have been far too soft with you,’ said Bayaz, each word sharp as a razor-cut. ‘I have coddled you, like a favourite grandchild, and you have grown wilful. A mistake that I shall not make again. A responsible guardian should never be shy with the whip.’

‘I am a son of kings!’ snarled Jezal, ‘I will not—’

He was doubled over by a spear of pain through his guts, stunningly sudden. He tottered a step or two, scalding vomit spraying from his mouth. He crashed onto his face, scarcely able even to breathe, his crown bouncing off and rolling away into the corner of the room. He had never known agony like it. Not a fraction of it.

‘I have no notion . . . of what causes you to suppose . . . that you could speak to me in such a manner. To me, the First of the Magi!’ Jezal heard Bayaz’ footsteps thumping slowly towards him, voice picking at his ears as he squirmed helplessly in his own sick.

‘Son of kings? I am disappointed, after all that we have been through together, that you would so readily believe the lies I have spread on your behalf. That nonsense was meant for the idiots in the streets, but it seems that idiots in palaces are lulled by sweet slop just as easily. I bought you from a whore. You cost me six marks. She wanted twenty, but I drive a hard bargain.’

The words were painful, of course. But far, far worse was the unbearable stabbing that cut up Jezal’s spine, that tore at his eyes, burned his skin, seared the very roots of his hair and made him thrash like a frog in boiling water.

‘I had others waiting, of course. I know better than to trust all to one throw of the dice. Other sons of mysterious parentage, ready to step into the role. There was a family called Brint, as I recall, and plenty more besides. But you floated to the top, Jezal, like a turd in the bath. When I crossed that bridge into the Agriont and saw you grown, I knew you were the one. You

simply looked right, and you can't teach that. You have even come to speak like a king, which is a bonus I never expected.'

Jezal moaned and slobbered, unable even to scream. He felt Bayaz' boot slide under him and kick him over onto his back. The Magus' scowling face loomed down towards him, blurred by tears.

'But if you insist on being difficult . . . if you insist on going your own way . . . well, there are other options. Even kings die unexplained deaths. Thrown by a horse. Choked on an olive-pit. Long falls to the hard, hard cobble-stones. Or simply found dead in the morning. Life is always short for you insects. But it can be very short for those who are not useful. I made you out of nothing. Out of air. With a word I can unmake you.' Bayaz snapped his fingers, and the sound was like a sword through Jezal's stomach. 'Like that you can be replaced.'

The First of the Magi leaned down further. 'Now, dolt, bastard, son of a whore, consider carefully your answers to these questions. You will do as your Arch Lector advises, yes?'

The cramps relaxed a merciful fraction. Enough for Jezal to whisper, 'yes.'

'You will be guided by him in all things?'

'Yes.'

'You will abide by his orders, in public and in private?'

'Yes,' he gasped, 'yes.'

'Good,' said the Magus, straightening up, towering over Jezal as his statue had once towered over the people on the Kingsway. 'I knew that you would say so, because although I know that you are arrogant, ignorant, and ungrateful, I know this also . . . you are a coward. Remember that. I trust that this is one lesson you will not ignore.' The agony ebbed suddenly away. Enough for Jezal to lift his spinning head from the tiles.

'I hate you,' he managed to croak.

Bayaz spluttered with laughter. 'Hate me? The arrogance of you! To suppose that I might care. I, Bayaz, first apprentice of great Juvens! I, who threw down the Master Maker, who forged the Union, who destroyed the Hundred Words!' The Magus slowly lifted his foot and planted it on the side of Jezal's jaw. 'I don't care whether you like me, fool.' He ground Jezal's face into the vomit-spattered floor with his boot. 'I care that you obey. And you will. Yes?'

‘Yes,’ Jezal slobbered through his squashed mouth.

‘Then, your Majesty, I take my leave. Pray that you never give me cause to return.’ The crushing pressure on his face released and Jezal heard the Magus’ footsteps tap away to the far side of the room. The door creaked open, and then clicked firmly shut.

He lay on his back, staring at the ceiling, his breath heaving quickly in and out. After a while he drew up the courage to roll over, dragged himself dizzily up to his hands and knees. There was an unpleasant stink, and not just from the vomit smeared across his face. He realised with a meagre flicker of shame that he had soiled himself. He crawled across to the window, still limp as a wrung-out rag, drew himself gasping up to his knees, and looked down into the chilly gardens.

It only took a moment for Bayaz to come into view, striding down the gravel path between the neat lawns, the back of his bald pate shining. Yoru Sulfur walked behind him, staff in one hand, a box of dark metal held under the other arm. The same box that had followed Jezal, and Logen, and Ferro in a cart across half the Circle of the World. What happy days those seemed now.

Bayaz stopped, suddenly, turned, raised his head. He looked up, straight towards the window.

Jezal pressed himself into the hangings with a whimper of terror, his whole body trembling, the after-image of that unbearable pain still stamped, cold as ice, into his guts. The First of the Magi stood there for a moment longer, the faintest hint of a smile on his face. Then he turned away smartly, strode between the bowing Knights of the Body flanking the gate, and was gone.

Jezal knelt there, clinging to the curtains like a child to his mother. He thought about how happy he had once been, and how little he had realised it. Playing cards, surrounded by friends, a bright future ahead of him. He dragged in a heavy breath, the tightness of tears creeping up his throat, spreading out around his eyes. Never in his life had he felt so alone. Son of Kings? He had no one and nothing. He spluttered and sniffed. His vision grew blurry. He shook with hopeless sobs, his scarred lip trembling, the tears dripping down and spattering on the tiles.

He wept with pain and fear, with shame and anger, with disappointment and helplessness. But Bayaz had been right. He was a coward. So most of

all he wept with relief.

Good Men, Evil Men

Grey morning time, out in the cold, wet gardens, and the Dogman was just stood there, thinking about how things used to be better. Stood there, in the middle of that circle of brown graves, staring at the turned earth over Harding Grim. Strange, how a man who said so little could leave such a hole.

It was a long journey that Dogman had taken, the last few years, and a strange one. From nowhere to nowhere, and he'd lost a lot of friends along the way. He remembered all those men gone back to the mud. Harding Grim. Tul Duru Thunderhead. Rudd Threetrees. Forley the Weakest. And what for? Who was better off because of it? All that waste. It was enough to make a man sick to the soles of his boots. Even one who was famous for having a flat temper. All gone, and left Dogman lonely. The world was a narrower place without 'em.

He heard footsteps through the wet grass. Logen, walking up through the misty rain, breath smoking round his scarred face. Dogman remembered how happy he'd been, that night, when Logen had stepped into the firelight, still alive. It had seemed like a new beginning, then. A good moment, promising better times. Hadn't quite worked out that way. Strange, how the Dogman didn't feel so happy at the sight of Logen Ninefingers no more.

'The King o' the Northmen,' he muttered. 'The Bloody-Nine. How's the day?'

'Wet is how it is. Getting late in the year.'

'Aye. Another winter coming.' Dogman picked at the hard skin on his palm. 'They come quicker and quicker.'

'Reckon it's high time I got back to the North, eh? Calder and Scale still loose, making mischief, and the dead know what type o' trouble Dow's cooked up.'

'Aye, I daresay. High time we left.'

'I want you to stay.'

Dogman looked up. 'Eh?'

'Someone needs to talk to the Southerners, make a deal. You've always been the best man I knew for talking. Other than Bethod, maybe, but . . . he

ain’t an option now, is he?’

‘What sort of a deal?’

‘Might be we’ll need their help. There’ll be all kind o’ folk in the North not too keen about the way things have gone. Folk don’t want a king, or don’t want this one, leastways. The Union on our side’ll be a help. Wouldn’t hurt if you brought some weapons back with you too, when you come.’

Dogman winced. ‘Weapons, is it?’

‘Better to have ’em and not want ’em, than to need ’em but—’

‘I know the rest. What happened to one more fight, then we’re done? What happened to making things grow?’

‘They might have to grow without us, for now. Listen, Dogman, I never looked for a fight, you know that, but you have to be—’

‘Don’t. Even. Bother.’

‘I’m trying to be a better man, here, Dogman.’

‘That so? I don’t see you trying that hard. Did you kill Tul?’

Logen’s eyes went narrow. ‘Dow been talking, has he?’

‘Never mind who said what. Did you kill the Thunderhead or did you not? Ain’t a hard one to come at. It’s just a yes or a no.’

Logen made a kind of snort, like he was about to start laughing, or about to start crying, but didn’t do either one. ‘I don’t know what I did.’

‘Don’t know? What use is don’t know? Is that what you’ll say after you’ve stabbed me through the back, while I’m trying to save your worthless life?’

Logen winced down at the wet grass. ‘Maybe it will be. I don’t know.’ His eyes slid back up to the Dogman’s, and stuck there, hard. ‘But that’s the price, ain’t it? You know what I am. You could have picked a different man to follow.’

Dogman watched him go, not knowing what to say, not knowing what to think even. Just standing there, in the midst of the graves, getting wetter. He felt someone come up beside him. Red Hat, looking off into the rain, watching after Logen’s black shape growing fainter and fainter. He shook his head, mouth pursed up tight.

‘I never believed the stories they told about him. About the Bloody-Nine. All bluster, I thought. But I believe ’em now. I heard he killed Crummock’s boy, in that fight in the mountains. Carved him careless as you’d crush a beetle, no reason. That’s a man there cares for nothing. No man worse, I

reckon, ever, in all the North. Not even Bethod. That's an evil bastard, if ever there was one.'

'That so?' Dogrnan found he was right up in Red Hat's face, and shouting. 'Well piss on you, arsehole! Who made you the fucking judge?'

'Just saying, is all.' Red Hat stared at him. 'I mean . . . I thought we had the same thing in mind.'

'Well, we don't! You need a mind bigger'n a pea to hold something in it and you're lacking the equipment, idiot! You wouldn't know a good man from an evil if he pissed on you!'

Red Hat blinked. 'Right y'are. I see I got the wrong notion.' He backed off a stride, then walked away through the drizzle, shaking his head.

Dogman watched him go, teeth gritted, thinking how he wanted to hit someone, but not sure who. There was no one here but him, now, anyway. Him and the dead. But maybe that's what happens once the fighting stops, to a man who knows nothing but fighting. He fights himself.

He took a long breath of the cold, wet air, and he frowned down at the earth over Grim's grave. He wondered if he'd know a good man from an evil, any more. He wondered what the difference was.

Grey morning time, out in the cold, wet gardens, and the Dogman was just stood there, thinking about how things used to be better.

Not What You Wanted

Glokta woke to a shaft of soft sunlight spilling through the hangings and across his wrinkled bed-clothes, full of dancing dust-motes. He tried to turn over, winced at a click in his neck. *Ah, the first spasm of the day.* The second was not long coming. It flashed through his left hip as he wrestled his way onto his back and snatched his breath away. The pain crept down his spine, settled in his leg, and stayed there.

'Ah,' he grunted. He tried, ever so gently, to turn his ankle round, to work his knee. The pain instantly grew far worse. 'Barnam!' He dragged the sheet to one side and the familiar stink of ordure rose up to his nostrils. *Nothing like the stench of your own dung to usher in a productive morning.*

'Ah! Barnam!' He whimpered, and slobbered, and clutched at his withered thigh, but nothing helped. The pain grew worse, and worse. The fibres started from his wasted flesh like metal cables, toeless foot flopping grotesquely on the end, entirely beyond his control.

'Barnam!' he screamed. 'Barnam, you fucker! The door!' Spit dribbled from his toothless mouth, tears ran down his twitching face, his hands clawed, clutching up Fistfuls of brown-stained sheet.

He heard hurried footsteps in the corridor, the lock scraping. 'Locked you fool!' he squealed through his gums, thrashing with pain and anger. The knob turned and the door opened, much to his surprise. *What the . . .*

Ardee hurried over to the bed. 'Get out!' he hissed, holding one arm pointlessly over his face, clutching at his bedclothes with the other. 'Get out!'

'No.' She tore the sheet away and Glokta grimaced, waiting for her face to go pale, waiting for her to stagger back, one hand across her mouth, eyes wide with shock and disgust. *I am married . . . to this shit-daubed monstrosity?* She only frowned down, for a moment, then took hold of his ruined thigh and pressed her thumbs into it.

He gasped and flailed and tried to twist away but her grip was merciless, two points of agony stabbing right into the midst of his cramping sinews. 'Ah! You fucking . . . you . . .' The wasted muscle went suddenly soft, and he went soft with it, dropping back against the mattress. *And now being*

splattered with my own shit begins to seem just the slightest bit embarrassing.

He lay there for a moment, helpless. 'I didn't want you to see me . . . like this.'

'Too late. You married me, remember. We're one body, now.'

'I think I got the better part of that deal.'

'I got my life, didn't I?'

'Hardly the kind of life that most young women hanker for.' He watched her, the strip of sunlight wandering back and forth across her darkened face as she moved. 'I know that I'm not what you wanted . . . in a husband.'

'I always dreamed of a man I could dance with.' She looked up and held his eye. 'But I think, perhaps, that you suit me better. Dreams are for children. We both are grownups.'

'Still. You see now that not dancing is the least of it. You should not have to do . . . this.'

'I want to do it.' She took a firm grip on his face and twisted it, somewhat painfully, so he was looking straight into hers. 'I want to do something. I want to be useful. I want someone to need me. Can you understand that?'

Glokta swallowed. 'Yes.' *Few better.* 'Where's Barnam?'

'I told him he could have the mornings off. I told him I'd be doing this from now on. I've told him to move my bed in here, as well.'

'But—'

'Are you telling me I can't sleep in the same room as my husband?' Her hands slid slowly over his withered flesh, gentle, but firm, rubbing at the scarred skin, pressing at the ruined muscles. *How long ago? Since a woman looked at me with anything but horror? Since a woman touched me with anything but violence?* He lay back, his eyes closed and his mouth open, tears running from his eye and trickling down the sides of his head into the pillow. *Almost comfortable. Almost . . .*

'I don't deserve this,' he breathed.

'No one gets what they deserve.'

Queen Terez looked down her nose at Glokta as he lurched into her sunny salon, without the slightest attempt to hide her utter disgust and contempt. *As though she saw a cockroach crawling into her regal presence. But we*

will see. We know well the path, after all. We have followed it ourselves, and we have dragged so many others after. Pride comes first. Then pain. Humility follows hard upon it. Obedience lies just beyond.

'My name is Glokta. I am the new Arch Lector of his Majesty's Inquisition.'

'Ah, the cripple,' she sneered. *With refreshing directness*. 'And why do you disrupt my afternoon? You will find no criminals here.' Only Styrian witches.

Glokta's eyes flickered to the other woman, standing bolt upright near one of the windows. 'It is a matter we had better discuss alone.'

'The Countess Shalere has been my friend since birth. There is nothing you can say to me that she cannot hear.' The Countess glared at Glokta with a disdain little less piercing than the queen's.

'Very well.' *No delicate way to say it. I doubt that delicacy will serve us here in any case*. 'It has come to my attention, your Majesty, that you have not been performing your duties as a wife.'

Terez' long, thin neck seemed to stretch with indignation. 'How dare you? That is none of your concern!'

'I am afraid that it is. Heirs for the king, you see. The future of the state, and so forth.'

'This is insufferable!' The queen's face was white with fury. *The Jewel of Talins flashes fire indeed*. 'I must eat your repulsive food, I must tolerate your dreadful weather, I must smile at the rambling mutterings of your idiot king! Now I must answer to his grotesque underlings? I am kept prisoner here!'

Glokta looked round at the beautiful room. The opulent hangings, the gilt furnishings, the fine paintings. The two beautiful women in their beautiful clothes. He dug one tooth sourly into the underside of his tongue. 'Believe me. This is not what a prison looks like.'

'There are many kinds of prison!'

'I have learned to live with worse, and so have others.' *You should see what my wife has to put up with.*

'To share my bed with some disgusting bastard, some scarred son of who knows what, to have some stinking, hairy man pawing at me in the night!' The queen gave a shiver of revulsion. 'It is not to be borne!'

Tears shone in her eyes. Her lady-in-waiting rushed forward, dress rustling, and knelt beside her, putting a comforting hand on her shoulder. Terez reached up, pressed her own hand on top of it. The queen's companion stared at Glokta with naked hatred. 'Get out! Out, cripple, and never come back! You have upset her Majesty!'

'I have a gift for it,' muttered Glokta. 'One reason why I am so widely hated . . .' He trailed off, frowning. He stared at their two hands on Terez' shoulder. There was something in that touch. *Comforting, soothing, protective. The touch of the committed friend, the trusted confidante, the sisterly companion. But there is more than that. Too familiar. Too warm. Almost like the touch of . . . Ah.*

'You don't have much use for men, do you?'

The two women looked up at him together, then Shalere snatched her hand away from the queen's shoulder. 'I will have your meaning!' barked Terez, but her voice was shrill, almost panicked.

'I think you know my meaning well enough.' *And my task is made a great deal easier.* 'Some help here!' Two hulking Practicals barged through the doors. *And as quickly as that, everything is changed. Amazing, the spice that two big men can add to a conversation. Some kinds of power are only tricks of the mind. I learned that well, in the Emperor's prisons, and my new master has only reinforced the lesson.*

'You would not dare!' shrieked Terez, staring at the masked arrivals with wide eyes. 'You would not dare to touch me!'

'As luck would have it, I doubt it will be necessary, but we will see.' He pointed at the Countess. 'Seize that woman.'

The two black-masked men tramped across the thick carpet. One moved a chair out of his way with exaggerated care.

'No!' The queen sprang up, grabbing Shalere's hand in hers. 'No!'

'Yes,' said Glokta.

The two women backed away, clinging to each other, Terez in front, shielding the Countess with her body, teeth bared in a warning snarl as the two great shadows approached. *One might almost be touched by their evident care for one another, if one was capable of being touched at all.* 'Take her. But no marks on the queen, if you please.'

'No!' screamed Terez. 'I'll have your heads for this! My father . . . my father is—'

‘On his way back to Talins, and I doubt he’ll be starting a war over your friend since birth, in any case. You are bought and paid for, and Duke Orso does not strike me as the type to renege on a deal.’

The two men and the two women lurched around the far end of the room in an ungainly dance. One of the Practicals seized the Countess by one wrist, dragged her away from the queen’s clutching hand and forced her down onto her knees, twisting her arms behind her, snapping heavy irons shut on her wrists. Terez shrieked, punched, kicked, clawed at the other, but she might as well have vented her fury on a tree. The huge man barely moved, his eyes every bit as emotionless as the mask below them.

Glokta found that he was almost smiling as he watched the ugly scene. *I may be crippled, and hideous, and in constant pain, but the humiliation of beautiful women is one pleasure I can still enjoy. I do it now with threats and violence, instead of with soft words and entreaties, but still. Almost as much fun as it ever was.*

One of the Practicals forced a canvas bag over Shalere’s head, turning her cries to muffled sobs, then marched her helplessly across the room. The other stayed where he was for a moment, keeping the queen herded into the corner. Then he backed off towards the door. On his way he picked up the chair he had moved and carefully put it back exactly as he had found it.

‘Curse you!’ Terez screeched, her clenched fists trembling as the door clicked shut and left the two of them alone. ‘Curse you, you twisted bastard! If you harm her—’

‘It will not come to that. Because you have the means of her deliverance well within your grasp.’

The queen swallowed, chest heaving. ‘What must I do?’

‘Fuck.’ The word somehow sounded twice as ugly in the beautiful surroundings. ‘And bear children. I will give the Countess seven days in the darkness, unmolested. If, at the end of that time, I do not hear that you have set the king’s cock on fire every night, I will introduce her to my Practicals. Poor fellows. They get so little exercise. Ten minutes each should do the trick, but there are plenty of them, in the House of Questions. I daresay we can keep your childhood friend quite busy night and day.’

A spasm of horror passed over Terez’ face. *And why not? This is a low chapter even for me.* ‘If I do as you ask?’

‘Then the Countess will be kept quite safe and sound. Once you are verifiably with child, I will return her to you. Things can be as they are now, during the period of your confinement. Two boys, as heirs, two girls, to marry off, and we can be done with one another. The king can find his entertainment elsewhere.’

‘But, that will take years!’

‘You could get it done in three or four, if you really ride him hard. And you might find it makes everyone’s lives easier if you at least pretend to enjoy it.’

‘Pretend?’ she breathed.

‘The more you seem to like it, the quicker it will be over. The cheapest whore on the docks can squeal for her coppers when the sailors stick her. Are you telling me you cannot squeal for the king of the Union? You offend my patriotic sensibilities! Uh!’ he gasped, rolling his eyes in a parody of ecstasy. ‘Ah! Yes! Just there! Don’t stop!’ He curled his lip at her. ‘You see? Even I can do it! A liar of your experience should have no difficulty.’

Her teary eyes darted round the room, as though she were looking for some way out. *But there is none. The noble Arch Lector Glokta, protector of the Union, great heart of the Closed Council, paragon of the gentlemanly virtues, displays his flair for politics and diplomacy*. He felt some tiny stirring within him as he watched her wretched desperation, some negligible flutter in his guts. *Guilt, perhaps? Or indigestion? It hardly matters which, I have learned my lesson. Pity never works for me.*

He took one more slow step forward. ‘Your Majesty, I hope you fully understand the alternative.’

She nodded, and wiped her eyes. Then she proudly raised up her chin. ‘I will do as you ask. Please, I beg of you, do not hurt her . . . please . . .’

Please, please, please. Many congratulations, your Eminence. ‘You have my word. I will see the Countess has only the best of treatment.’ He licked gently at the sour gaps in his teeth. ‘And you will do the same with your husband.’

Jezal sat in the darkness. He watched the fire dance in the great hearth, and he thought about what might have been. He thought about it with some

bitterness. All the paths his life could have taken, and he had ended up here. Alone.

He heard hinges creaking. The small door that connected to the queen's bedchamber crept slowly open. He had never bothered to lock it, from his side. He had not foreseen any circumstance under which she would ever want to use it. Some error of etiquette that he had made, no doubt, for which she could not wait even until morning to admonish him.

He stood up, quickly, stupidly nervous.

Terez stepped through the shadowy doorway. She looked so different that at first he hardly recognised her. Her hair was loose, she wore only her shift. She looked humbly towards the ground, her face in darkness. Her bare feet padded across the boards, across the thick carpet towards the fire. She seemed very young, suddenly. Young and small, weak and alone. He watched her, mostly confused, somewhat scared, but also, as she came closer and the firelight caught the shape of her body, ever so slightly aroused.

'Terez, my . . .' he fumbled for the word. Darling scarcely seemed to cover it. Nor did love. Worst enemy might have, but it hardly would have helped matters. 'Can I—'

She cut him off, as ever, but not with the tirade he was expecting. 'I'm sorry for the way that I have treated you. For the things that I have said . . . you must think me . . .'

There were tears in her eyes. Actual tears. He would hardly have believed until that moment that she could cry. He took a hurried step or two towards her, one hand out, no idea of what to do. He had never dared to hope for an apology, and certainly not one so earnestly and honestly delivered.

'I know,' he stuttered, 'I know . . . I'm not what you wanted in a husband. I'm sorry for that. But I'm as much a prisoner in this as you are. I only hope . . . that perhaps we can make the best of it. Perhaps we might find a way . . . to care for one another? We have no one else, either of us. Please, tell me what I have to do—'

'Shhhh.' She touched one finger to his lips, looking into his eyes, one half of her face glowing orange from the fire, the other half black with shadow. Her fingers worked through his hair and drew him towards her. She kissed him, gently, awkwardly, almost, their lips brushing, then pressing clumsily together. He slid one hand round behind her neck, under her ear, his thumb

stroking at her smooth cheek. Their mouths worked mechanically, accompanied by the soft squeak of breath in his nose, the gentle squelch of spit moving. Hardly the most passionate kiss he had ever enjoyed, but it was a great deal more than he had ever expected to get from her. There was a pleasant tingling building in his crotch as he pushed his tongue into her mouth.

He ran his other palm down her back, feeling the bumps of her spine under his fingers. He grunted softly as he slid his hand over her arse, down the side of her thigh then up between her legs, the hem of her shift gathering round his wrist. He felt her shudder, felt her flinch, and bite her lip in shock, it seemed, or even in disgust. He jerked his hand back, and they broke apart, both looking at the floor. 'I'm sorry,' he muttered, inwardly cursing his eagerness. 'I—'

'No. It's my fault. I'm not . . . experienced . . . with men . . .' Jezal blinked for a moment, then almost smiled at a surge of relief. Of course. Now everything was clear. She was so assured, so sharp, it had never even occurred to him that she might be a virgin. It was simple fear that made her tremble so. Fear of disappointing him. He felt a rush of sympathy.

'Don't worry,' he murmured it softly, stepping forward and taking her in his arms. He felt her stiffen, no doubt with nervousness, and he gently stroked her hair. 'I can wait . . . we don't have to . . . not yet.'

'No.' She said it with a touching determination, looking him fearlessly in the eye. 'No. We do.'

She dragged her shift up and over her head, let it drop to the floor. She came close to him, took hold of his wrist, guided it back to her thigh, then upwards.

'Ah,' she whispered, urgent and throaty, her lips brushing his cheek, her breath hot in his ear. 'Yes . . . just there . . . don't stop.' She led him breathless to the bed.

'If that is all?' Glokta looked around the table, but the old men were silent. *All waiting for my word*. The king was absent again, so he made them wait an unnecessarily long time. *Just to stab home to any doubters who is in charge. Why not, after all? The purpose of power is not to be gracious*. Then this meeting of the Closed Council is over.'

They rose, quickly, quietly, and in good order. Torlichorm, Halleck, Kroy and all the rest filed slowly from the room. Glokta himself struggled up, his leg still aching with the memory of the morning's cramps, only to find that the Lord Chamberlain had, once again, remained behind. *And he looks far from amused*.

Hoff waited until the door shut before he spoke. 'Imagine my surprise,' he snapped, 'to hear of your recent marriage.'

'A swift and understated ceremony.' Glokta showed the Lord Chamberlain the wreckage of his front teeth. 'Young love, you understand, brooks no delays. I apologise if the lack of an invitation offended you.'

'An invitation?' growled Hoff, frowning mightily. 'Hardly! This is not what we discussed!'

'Discussed? I believe we have a misunderstanding. Our mutual friend,' and Glokta let his eyes move significantly to the empty thirteenth chair at the far end of the table, 'left me in charge. Me. No other. He deems it necessary that the Closed Council speak with one voice. From now on, that voice will sound remarkably like mine.'

Hoff's ruddy face had paled slightly. 'Of course, but—'

'You are aware, I suppose, that I lived through two years of torture? Two years in hell, so I can stand before you now. Or lean before you, twisted as an old tree root. A crippled, shambling, wretched mockery of a man, eh, Lord Hoff? Let us be honest with one another. Sometimes I lose control of my own leg. My own eyes. My own face.' He snorted. 'If you can call it a face. My bowels too, are rebellious. I often wake up daubed in my own shit. I find myself in constant pain, and the memories of everything that I have lost nag at me, endlessly.' He felt his left eye twitching. *Let it twitch*. 'So you can see how, despite my constant efforts to be a man of sunny temper, I find that I despise the world, and everything in it, and myself most of all. A regrettable state of affairs, for which there is no remedy.'

The Lord Chamberlain licked his lips uncertainly. 'You have my sympathy, but I fail to see the relevance.'

Glokta came suddenly very close, ignoring a spasm up his leg, pressing Hoff back against the table. 'Your sympathy is less than worthless, and the relevance is this. Knowing what I am, what I have endured, what I still endure . . . can you suppose there is anything in this world I fear? Any act I will shrink from? The most unbearable pain of others is at the worst . . . an

irritation to me.' Glokta jerked even closer, letting his lips work back from his ruined teeth, letting his face tremble, and his eye weep. 'Knowing all that . . . can you possibly think it wise . . . for a man to stand where you stand now . . . and make threats? Threats against *my* wife? Against my unborn child?'

'No threat was intended, of course, I would never—'

'That simply would not do, Lord Hoff! That simply would not do. At the very slightest breath of violence against them . . . why, I would not wish you even to imagine the inhuman horror of my response.' Closer yet, so close that his spit made a soft mist across Hoff's trembling jowls. 'I cannot permit any further discussion of this issue. Ever. I cannot permit even the rumour that there might be an issue. Ever. It simply . . . would . . . not . . . do, Lord Hoff, for an eyeless, tongue-less, faceless, fingerless, cockless bag of meat to be occupying your chair on the Closed Council.' He stepped away, grinning his most revolting grin. 'Why, my Lord Chamberlain . . . who would drink all the wine?'

It was a beautiful autumn day in Adua, and the sun shone pleasantly through the branches of the fragrant fruit trees, casting a dappled shade onto the grass beneath. A pleasing breeze fluttered through the orchard, stirring the crimson mantle of the king as he strode regally around his lawn, and the white coat of his Arch Lector as he hobbled doggedly along at a respectful distance, stooped over his cane. Birds twittered from the trees, and his Majesty's highly polished boots crunched in the gravel and made faint, agreeable echoes against the white buildings of the palace.

From the other side of the high walls came the faint sound of distant work. The clanking of picks and hammers, the scraping of earth and the clattering of stone. The faint calls of the carpenters and the masons. These were the most pleasant sounds of all, to Jezal's ear. The sounds of rebuilding.

'It will take time, of course,' he was saying.

'Of course.'

'Years, perhaps. But much of the rubble is already cleared. The repair of some of the more lightly damaged buildings has already begun. The Agriont

will be more glorious than ever before you know it. I have made it my highest priority.'

Glokta bowed his head even lower. 'And therefore mine, and that of your Closed Council. Might I enquire . . .' he murmured, 'after the health of your wife, the queen?'

Jezal worked his mouth. He hardly liked discussing his personal business with this man, of all people, but it could not be denied that whatever the cripple had said, there had been a most dramatic improvement.

'A material change.' Jezal shook his head. 'I find now that she is a woman of almost . . . insatiable appetites.'

'I am delighted that my entreaties have had an effect.'

'Oh, they have, they have, only there is still a certain . . .' Jezal waved his hand in the air, searching out the right word. 'Sadness in her. Sometimes . . . I hear her crying, in the night. She stands at the open window, and she weeps, for hours at a time.'

'Crying, your Majesty? Perhaps she is merely homesick. I always suspected she was a much gentler spirit than she appears to be.'

'She is! She is. A gentle spirit.' Jezal thought about it for a moment. 'Do you know, I think you may be right. Homesick.' A plan began to take shape in his mind. 'Perhaps we should have the gardens of the palace redesigned, to give a flavour of Talins? We could have the stream altered, in the likeness of canals, and so forth!'

Glokta leered his toothless grin. 'A sublime idea. I shall speak to the Royal Gardener. Perhaps another brief word with her Majesty as well, to see if I can staunch her tears.'

'I would appreciate whatever you can do. How is your own wife?' he tossed over his shoulder, hoping to change the subject, then realising he had strayed onto one even more difficult.

But Glokta only showed his empty smile again. 'She is a tremendous comfort to me, your Majesty. I really don't know how I ever managed without her.'

They moved on in awkward silence for a moment, then Jezal cleared his throat. 'I've been thinking, Glokta, about that scheme of mine. You know, about a tax on the banks? Perhaps to pay for a new hospital near the docks. For those who cannot afford a surgeon. The common folk have been good to us. They have helped us to power, and suffered in our name. A

government should offer something to all its people, should it not? The more mean, the more base, the more they need our help. A king is only truly as rich as his poorest subject, do you not think? Would you have the High Justice draw something up? Small to begin with, then we can go further. Free housing, perhaps, for those who find themselves without a home. We should consider—'

'Your Majesty, I have spoken to our mutual friend of this.'

Jezal stopped dead, a cold feeling creeping up his spine. 'You have?'

'I fear that I am obliged to.' The cripple's tone was that of a servant, but his sunken eyes did not stray from Jezal's for a moment. 'Our friend is . . . not enthusiastic.'

'Does he rule the Union, or do I?' But they both knew the answer to that question well enough.

'You are king, of course.'

'Of course.'

'But our mutual friend . . . we would not wish to disappoint him.' Glokta came a limping step closer, his left eye giving a repulsive flutter. 'Neither one of us, I am sure, would want to encourage a visit to Adua . . . on his part.'

Jezal's knees felt suddenly very weak. The faint memory of that awful, unbearable pain nagged at his stomach. 'No,' he croaked, 'no, of course not.'

The cripple's voice was only just above a whisper. 'Perhaps, in time, funds could be found for some small project. Our friend cannot see everything, after all, and what he does not see will do no harm. I am sure between the two of us, quietly . . . we could do some little good. But not yet.'

'No. You are right, Glokta. You have a fine sense for these things. Do nothing that would cause the least offence. Please inform our friend that his opinions will always be valued above all others. Please tell our good friend that he can rely on me. Will you tell him that, please?'

'I will, your Majesty. He will be delighted to hear it.'

'Good,' murmured Jezal. 'Good.' A chilly breeze had blown up, and he turned back towards the palace, pulling his cloak around him. It was not, in the end, quite so pleasant a day as he had hoped it might be.

Loose Ends

A grubby white box with two doors facing each other. The ceiling was too low for comfort, the room too brightly lit by blazing lamps. Damp was creeping out of one corner and the plaster had erupted with flaking blisters, speckled with black mould. Someone had tried to scrub a long bloodstain from the wall, but hadn't tried nearly hard enough.

Two huge Practicals stood against the wall, their arms folded. One of the chairs at the bolted-down table was empty. Carlot dan Eider sat in the other. *History moves in circles, so they say*. *How things have changed. And yet, how they have stayed the same*. Her face was pale with worry, there were dark rings of sleeplessness around her eyes, but she still seemed beautiful. *More than ever, in a way. The beauty of the candle-flame that has almost burned out. Again*.

Glokta could hear her scared breathing as he settled himself in the remaining chair, leaned his cane against the scarred table-top, and frowned into her face. 'I am still wondering whether, in the next few days, I will receive that letter you spoke of. You know the one. The one you meant for Sult to read. The one that lays out the history of my self-indulgent little mercy to you. The one that you made sure will be sent to the Arch Lector . . . in the event of your death. Will it find its way onto my desk, now, do you suppose? A final irony.'

There was a pause. 'I realise that I made a grave mistake, when I came back.' *And an even worse one when you didn't leave fast enough.* 'I hope you will accept my apology. I only wanted to warn you about the Gurkish. If you can find it in your heart to be merciful—'

'Did you expect me to be merciful once?'

'No,' she whispered.

'Then what, do you suppose, are the chances of my making the same mistake twice? Never come back, I said. Not ever.' He waved with his hand and one of the monstrous Practicals stepped forward and lifted the lid of his case.

'No . . . no.' Her eyes darted over his instruments, and back. 'You won. You won, of course. I should have been grateful, the first time. Please.' She

leaned forward, looking him in the eyes. Her voice dropped, grew husky, ‘Please. Surely there must be . . . something that I can do . . . to make up for my foolishness . . .’

A peculiar mixture of feigned desire and genuine disgust. Fake longing and genuine loathing. And rendered still more distasteful by the edge of mounting terror. It makes me wonder why I was merciful in the first place.

Glokta snorted. ‘Must this be embarrassing as well as painful?’

The effort at seduction leaked quickly away. But I note that the fear is going nowhere. It was joined now by a rising note of desperation. ‘I know that I made a mistake . . . I was trying to help . . . please, I meant you no real harm . . . I caused you no harm, you know it!’ He reached out slowly towards the case, watched her horrified eyes follow his white-gloved hand, her voice rising to a squeal of panic. ‘Only tell me what I can do! Please! I can help you! I can be useful! Tell me what I can do!’

Glokta’s hand paused on its remorseless journey across the table. He tapped one finger against the wood. The finger on which the Arch Lector’s ring glittered in the lamplight. ‘Perhaps there is a way.’

‘Anything,’ she gurgled, teary eyes gleaming. ‘Anything, only name it!’

‘You have contacts in Talins?’

She swallowed. ‘In Talins? Of . . . of course.’

‘Good. I, and some colleagues of mine on the Closed Council, are concerned about the role that Grand Duke Orso means to play in Union politics. Our feeling – our very strong feeling – is that he should stick to bullying Styrians, and keep his nose out of our business.’ He gave a significant pause.

‘How do I—’

‘You will go to Talins. You will be my eyes in the city. A traitor, fleeing for her life, friendless and alone, seeking only a place for a new beginning. A beautiful yet wretched traitor, in desperate need of a strong arm to protect her. You get the idea.’

‘I suppose . . . I suppose that I could do that.’

Glokta snorted. ‘You had better.’

‘I will need money—’

‘Your assets have been seized by the Inquisition.’

‘Everything?’

‘You may have noticed that there is a great deal of rebuilding to do. The king needs every mark he can lay his hands on, and confessed traitors can hardly expect to keep their chattels in such times as these. I have arranged passage for you. When you arrive, make contact with the banking house of Valint and Balk. They will arrange a loan to get you started.’

‘Valint and Balk?’ Eider looked even more scared than before, if that was possible. ‘I would rather be in debt to anyone but them.’

‘I know the feeling. But it’s that or nothing.’

‘How will I—’

‘A woman of your resourcefulness? I am sure that you will find a way.’ He winced as he pushed himself up from his chair. ‘I want to be snowed in by your letters. What happens in the city. What Orso is about. Who he makes war with, who he makes peace with. Who are his allies and his enemies. You leave on the next tide.’ He turned back, briefly, at the door. ‘I’ll be watching.’

She nodded dumbly, wiping away the tears of relief with the back of one trembling hand. *First it is done to us, then we do it to others, then we order it done. Such is the way of things.*

‘Are you always drunk by this time in the morning?’

‘Your Eminence, you wound me.’ Nicomo Cosca grinned. ‘Usually I have been drunk for hours by now.’

Huh. We each find our ways of getting through the day. ‘I should thank you for all your help.’

The Styrian gave a flamboyant wave of one hand. A hand, Glokta noticed, flashing with a fistful of heavy rings. ‘To hell with your thanks, I have your money.’

‘And I think every penny well spent. I hope that you will remain in the city, and enjoy Union hospitality for a while longer.’

‘Do you know? I believe I will.’ The mercenary scratched thoughtfully at the rash on his neck leaving red fingernail marks through the flaky skin. ‘At least until the gold runs out.’

‘How quickly can you possibly spend what I have paid you?’

‘Oh, you would be amazed. I have wasted ten fortunes in my time and more besides. I look forward to wasting another.’ Cosca slapped his hands

down on his thighs, pushed himself up, strolled, somewhat unsteadily, to the door, and turned with a flourish. ‘Make sure you call on me when you next have a desperate last stand organised.’

‘My first letter will bear your name.’

‘Then I bid you . . . farewell!’ Cosca swept off his enormous hat and bowed low. Then, with a knowing grin, he stepped through the doorway, and was gone.

Glokta had moved the Arch Lector’s office to a large hall on the ground floor of the House of Questions. *Closer to the real business of the Inquisition – the prisoners. Closer to the questions, and the answers. Closer to the truth. And, of course, the real clincher . . . no stairs.*

There were well-tended gardens outside the large windows. The faint sound of a fountain splashing beyond the glass. But inside the room there was none of the ugly paraphernalia of power. The walls were plastered and painted simple white. The furniture was hard and functional. *The whetstone of discomfort has kept me sharp this long. No reason to let the edge grow dull, simply because I have run out of enemies. New enemies will present themselves, before too long.*

There were some heavy bookcases of dark wood. Several leather-covered desks, already stacked high with documents requiring his attention. Aside from the great round table with its map of the Union and its pair of bloody nail-marks, there was only one item of Sult’s furniture that Glokta had brought downstairs with him. The dark painting of bald old Zoller glowered down from above the simple fireplace. *Bearing an uncanny resemblance to a certain Magus I once knew. It is fitting, after all, that we maintain the proper perspective. Every man answers to somebody.*

There was a knocking at the door, and the head of Glokta’s secretary appeared at the gap. ‘The Lord Marshals have arrived, Arch Lector.’

‘Show them in.’

Sometimes, when old friends meet, things are instantly as they were, all those years before. The friendship resumes, untouched, as though there had been no interruption. Sometimes, but not now. Collem West was scarcely recognisable. His hair had fallen out in ugly patches. His face was shrunken, had a yellow tinge about it. His uniform hung slack from his bony shoulders, stained around the collar. He shuffled into the room, bent

over in an old man's stoop, leaning heavily on a stick. He looked like nothing so much as a walking corpse.

Glokta had expected something of the kind, of course, from what Ardee had told him. But the sick shock of disappointment and horror he felt at the sight still caught him by surprise. *Like returning to the happy haunt of one's youth, and finding it all in ruins. Deaths. They happen every day. How many lives have I wrecked with my own hands? What makes this one so hard to take?* And yet it was. He found himself lurching up from his chair, starting painfully forwards as if to lend some help.

'Your Eminence.' West's voice was fragile and jagged as broken glass. He made a weak effort at a smile. 'Or I suppose . . . I should call you brother.'

'West . . . Collem . . . it is good to see you.' *Good, and awful both at once.*

A cluster of officers followed West into the room. *The wonderfully competent Lieutenant Jalenhorm I remember, of course, but a Major now. And Brint too, made a Captain by his friend's swift advancement. Marshal Kroy we know and love from the Closed Council. Congratulations, all, on your advancement.* Another man brought up the rear of the party. A lean man with a face horribly burned. *But we, of all people, should hardly hold a repulsive disfigurement against him.* Each one of them frowned nervously towards West, as though ready to pounce forward if he should slump to the floor. Instead he shuffled to the round table and sagged trembling into the nearest chair.

'I should have come to you,' said Glokta. *I should have come to you far sooner.*

West made another effort at a smile, even more bilious than the last. Several of his teeth were missing. 'Nonsense. I know how busy you are, now. And I am feeling much better today.'

'Good, good. That is . . . good. Is there anything that I can get you?' *What could possibly help?* 'Anything at all.'

West shook his head. 'I do not think so. These gentlemen you know, of course. Apart from Sergeant Pike.' The burned man nodded to him.

'A pleasure.' *To meet someone even more maimed than myself, always.*

'I hear . . . happy news, from my sister.'

Glokta winced, almost unable to meet his old friend's eye. 'I should have sought your permission, of course. I surely would have, had there been time.'

‘I understand.’ West’s bright eyes were fixed on his. ‘She has explained it all. It is some kind of comfort to know that she’ll be well taken care of.’

‘On that you can depend. I will see to it. She will never be hurt again.’

West’s gaunt face twisted. ‘Good. Good.’ He rubbed gently at the side of his face. His fingernails were black, edged with dried blood, as though they were peeling from the flesh beneath. ‘There’s always a price to be paid, eh, Sand? For the things we do?’

Glokta felt his eye twitching. ‘It would seem so.’

‘I have lost some of my teeth.’

‘I see that, and can sympathise. Soup, I find . . .’ *I find utterly disgusting.*

‘I am . . . scarcely able to walk.’

‘I sympathise with that also. Your cane will be your best friend.’ *As it will soon be mine, I think.*

‘I am a pitiable shell of what I was.’

‘I truly feel your pain.’ *Truly. Almost more keenly than my own.*

West slowly shook his withered head. ‘How can you stand it?’

‘One step at a time, my old friend. Steer clear of stairs where possible, and mirrors, always.’

‘Wise advice.’ West coughed. An echoing cough, from right down beneath his ribs. He swallowed noisily. ‘I think my time is running out.’

‘Surely not!’ Glokta’s hand reached out for a moment, as if to rest on West’s shrunken shoulder, as if to offer comfort. He jerked it back, awkwardly. *It is not suited to the task.*

West licked at his empty gums. ‘This is how most of us go, isn’t it? No final charge. No moment of glory. We just . . . fall slowly apart.’

Glokta would have liked to say something optimistic. *But that rubbish comes from other mouths than mine. Younger, prettier mouths, with all their teeth, perhaps.* ‘Those who die on the battlefield are in some ways the lucky few. Forever young. Forever glorious.’

West nodded, slowly. ‘Here’s to the lucky few, then . . .’ His eyes rolled back, he swayed, then slumped sideways. Jalenhorm was the first forward, catching him before he hit the ground. He flopped in the big man’s arms, a long string of thin vomit splattering against the floor.

‘Back to the palace!’ snapped Kroy. ‘At once!’

Brint hurried to swing the doors open while Jalenhorm and Kroy steered West out of the room, draped between them with his arms over their

shoulders. His limp shoes scraped against the floor, his piebald head lolling. Glokta watched them go, standing helpless, his toothless mouth half open, as if to speak. As if to wish his friend good luck, or good health, or a merry afternoon. *None of them seem quite to fit the circumstance, however.*

The doors clattered shut and Glokta was left staring at them. His eyelid flickered, he felt wet on his cheek. *Not tears of compassion, of course. Not tears of grief. I feel nothing, fear nothing, care for nothing. They cut away the parts of me that could weep in the Emperor's prisons. This can only be salt water, and nothing more. Merely a broken reflex in a mutilated face. Farewell, brother. Farewell, my only friend. And farewell to the ghost of beautiful Sand dan Glokta, too. Nothing of him remains. All for the best, of course. A man in my position can afford no indulgences.*

He took a sharp breath, and wiped his face with the back of his hand. He limped to his desk, sat, composed himself for a moment, assisted by a sudden twinge in his toeless foot. He turned his attention to his documents. *Papers of confession, tasks outstanding, all the tedious business of government—*

He looked up. A figure had detached itself from the shadows behind one of the high book-cases and now stepped out into the room, arms folded. The man with the burned face who had come in with the officers. In the excitement of their exit, it seemed that he had remained behind.

'Sergeant Pike, was it?' murmured Glokta, frowning.

'That's the name I've taken.'

'Taken?'

The scarred face twisted into a mockery of a smile. *One even more hideous than my own, if that's possible.* 'Not surprising, that you shouldn't recognise me. My first week, there was an accident in a forge. Accidents often happen, in Angland.' *Angland? That voice . . . something about that voice . . .* 'Still nothing? Perhaps if I come closer?'

He sprang across the room without warning. Glokta was still struggling up from his seat as the man dived across the desk. They tumbled to the floor together in a cloud of flying paper, Glokta underneath, the back of his skull cracking against the stone, his breath all driven out in a long, agonised wheeze.

He felt the brush of steel against his neck. Pike's face was no more than a few inches from his, the mottled mass of burns picked out in particularly

revolting detail.

'How about now?' he hissed. 'Anything seem familiar?'

Glokta felt his left eye flickering as recognition washed over him like a wave of freezing water. *Changed, of course. Changed utterly and completely. And yet I know him.*

'Rews,' he breathed

'None other.' Rews bit off the words with grim satisfaction.

'You survived.' Glokta whispered it, first with amazement, then with mounting amusement. 'You survived! You're a far harder man than I gave you credit for! Far, far harder.' He started to chuckle, tears running down the side of his cheek again.

'Something funny?'

'Everything! You have to appreciate the irony. I have overcome so many powerful enemies, and it's Salem Rews with the knife at my neck! It's always the blade you don't see coming that cuts you deepest, eh?'

'You'll get no deeper cuts than this one.'

'Then cut away, my man, I am ready.' Glokta tipped his head back, stretched his neck out, pressing it up against the cold metal. 'I've been ready for a long time.'

Rews' fist worked around the grip of his knife. His burned face trembled, eyes narrowing to bright slits in their pink sockets. *Now.*

His mottled lips slid back from his teeth. The sinews in his neck stood out as he made ready to wield the blade. *Do it.*

Glokta's breath hissed quickly in and out, his throat tingling with anticipation. *Now, at last . . . now . . .*

But Rews' arm did not move.

'And yet you hesitate,' whispered Glokta through his empty gums. 'Not out of mercy, of course, not out of weakness. They froze all that out of you, eh? In Angland? You pause because you realise, in all that time dreaming of killing me, you never thought of what would be next. What will you truly have gained, with all your endurance? With all your cunning and your effort? Will you be hunted? Will you be sent back? I can offer you so much more.'

Rews' melted frown grew even harder. 'What could you give me? After this?'

‘Oh, this is nothing. I suffer twice the pain and ten times the humiliation getting up in the morning. A man like you could be very useful to me. A man . . . as hard as you have proved yourself to be. A man who has lost everything, including all his scruples, all his mercy, all his fear. We both have lost everything. We both have survived. I understand you, Rews, as no one else ever can.’

‘Pike is my name, now.’

‘Of course it is. Let me up, Pike.’

Slowly the knife slid away from his throat. The man who had been Salem Rews stood over him, frowning down. *Who could ever anticipate the turns that fate can take?* ‘Up, then.’

‘Easier said than done.’ Glokta dragged in a few sharp breaths, then growling with a great and painful effort he rolled over onto all fours. *A heroic achievement indeed*. He slowly tested his limbs, wincing as his twisted joints clicked. *Nothing broken. No more broken than usual, anyway.* He reached out and took the handle of his fallen cane between two fingers, dragged it towards him through the scattered papers. He felt the point of the blade pressing into his back.

‘Don’t take me for a fool, Glokta. If you try anything—’

He clutched at the edge of the desk and dragged himself up. ‘You’ll cut my liver out and all the rest. Don’t worry. I am far too crippled to try anything worse than shit myself. I have something to show you, though. Something that I feel sure you will appreciate. If I’m wrong, well . . . you can slit my throat a little later.’

Glokta lurched out of the heavy door of his office, Pike sticking as close to his shoulder as a shadow, the knife kept carefully out of sight.

‘Stay,’ he snapped at the two Practicals in the ante-room, hobbling on past the frowning secretary at the huge desk. Out into the wide hallway running through the heart of the House of Questions and Glokta limped faster, cane clicking against the tiles. It hurt him to do it, but he held his head back, gave a cold wrinkle to his lip. Out of the corners of his eyes he saw the Clerks, the Practicals, the Inquisitors, bowing, sliding backwards, clearing away. *How they fear me. More than any man in Adua, and with good reason. How things have changed. And yet, how they have stayed the same*. His leg, his neck, his gums. These things were as they had always been. *And always will be. Unless I am tortured again, of course.*

‘You look well,’ Glokta tossed over his shoulder. ‘Aside from your hideous facial burns, of course. You lost weight.’

‘Starving can do that.’

‘Indeed, indeed. I lost a great deal of weight in Gurkhul. And not just from the pieces they cut out of me. This way.’

They turned through a heavy door flanked by frowning Practicals, past an open gate of iron bars. Into a long and windowless corridor, sloping steadily downwards, lit by too few lanterns and filled with slow shadows. The walls were rendered and whitewashed, though none too recently. There was a seedy feel to the place, and a smell of damp. *Just as there always is*. The clicking of Glokta’s cane, the hissing of his breath, the rustling of his white coat, all fell dead on the chill, wet air.

‘Killing me will bring you scant satisfaction, you know.’

‘We shall see.’

‘I doubt it. I was hardly the one responsible for your little trip northwards. I did the work perhaps, but others gave the orders.’

‘They were not my friends.’

Glokta snorted. ‘Please. Friends are people one pretends to like in order to make life bearable. Men like us have no need of such indulgences. It is our enemies by which we are measured.’ *And here are mine.* Sixteen steps confronted him. *That old, familiar flight.* Cut from smooth stone, a little worn towards the centre.

‘Steps. Bastard things. If I could torture one man, do you know who it would be?’ Pike’s face was a single, expressionless scar. ‘Well, never mind.’ Glokta struggled to the bottom without incident, limped on a few more painful strides to a heavy wooden door, bound with iron.

‘We are here.’ Glokta slid a bunch of keys from the pocket of his white coat, flicked through them until he found the right one, unlocked the door, and went in.

Arch Lector Sult was not the man he used to be. *But then none of us are, quite*. His magnificent shock of white hair was plastered greasily to his gaunt skull, dry blood matted in a yellow-brown mass on one side. His piercing blue eyes had lost their commanding sparkle, sunken as they were in deep sockets and rimmed with angry pink. He had been relieved of his clothes, and his sinewy old man’s body, somewhat hairy around the shoulders, was smeared with the grime of the cells. He looked, in fact, like

nothing so much as a mad old beggar. *Can this truly once have been one of the most powerful men in the wide Circle of the World? You would never guess. A salutary lesson to us all. The higher you climb, the further there is to fall.*

'Glokta!' he snarled, thrashing helplessly, chained to his chair. 'You treacherous, twisted bastard!'

Glokta held up his white-gloved hand, the purple stone on his ring of office glinting in the harsh lamplight. 'I believe *your Eminence* is the proper term of address.'

'You?' Sult barked sharp laughter. 'Arch Lector? A withered, pitiable husk of a man? You disgust me!'

'Don't give me that.' Glokta lowered himself, wincing, into the other chair. 'Disgust is for the innocent.'

Sult glared up at Pike, looming menacingly over the table, his shadow falling across the polished case containing Glokta's instruments. 'What is this thing?'

'This is an old friend of ours, Master Sult, but recently returned from the wars in the North, and seeking new opportunities.'

'My congratulations! I never believed that you could find an assistant even more hideous than yourself!'

'You are unkind, but thankfully we are not easily offended. Let us call him equally hideous.' *And just as ruthless, too, I hope.*

'When will be my trial?'

'Trial? Why ever would I want one of those? You are presumed dead and I have made no effort to deny it.'

'I demand the right to address the Open Council!' Sult struggled pointlessly with his chains. 'I demand . . . curse you! I demand a hearing!'

Glokta snorted. 'Demand away, but look around you. No one is interested in listening, not even me. We all are far too busy. The Open Council stands in indefinite recess. The Closed Council is all changed, and you are forgotten. I run things now. More completely than you could ever have dreamed of doing.'

'On the leash of that devil Bayaz!'

'Correct. Maybe in time I'll work some looseness into his muzzle, just as I did into yours. Enough to get things my own way, who knows?'

'Never! You'll never be free of him!'

‘We’ll see.’ Glokta shrugged. ‘But there are worse fates than being the first among slaves. Far worse. I have seen them.’ *I have lived them.*

‘You fool! We could have been free!’

‘No. We couldn’t. And freedom is far overrated in any case. We all have our responsibilities. We all owe something to someone. Only the entirely worthless are entirely free. The worthless and the dead.’

‘What does it matter now?’ Sult grimaced down at the table. ‘What does any of it matter? Ask your questions.’

‘Oh, we’re not here for that. Not this time. Not for questions, not for truth, not for confessions. I have my answers already.’ *Then why do I do this? Why?* Glokta leaned slowly forwards across the table. ‘We are here for our amusement.’

Sult stared at him for a moment, then he shrieked with wild laughter. ‘Amusement? You’ll never have your teeth back! You’ll never have your leg back! You’ll never have your life back!’

‘Of course not, but I can take yours.’ Glokta turned, stiffly, slowly, painfully, and he gave a toothless grin. ‘Practical Pike, would you be so good as to show our prisoner the instruments?’

Pike frowned down at Glokta. He frowned down at Sult. He stood there for a long moment, motionless.

Then he stepped forward, and lifted the lid of the case.

‘Does the devil know he is a devil?’
Elizabeth Madox Roberts

The Beginning

The sides of the valley were coated in white snow. The black road ran through it like an old scar, down to the bridge, over the river, up to the gates of Carleon. Black sprouts of sedge, tufts of black grass, black stones poked up through the clean white blanket. The black branches of the trees were each picked out on top with their own line of white. The city was a huddle of white roofs and black walls, crowded in around the hill, pressed into the fork in the black river under a stony grey sky.

Logen wondered if this was how Ferro Maljinn saw the world. Black and white, and nothing else. No colours. He wondered where she was now, what she was doing. If she thought about him.

Most likely not.

‘Back again.’

‘Aye,’ said Shivers. ‘Back.’ He hadn’t had much to say the whole long ride from Uffrith. They might have saved each other’s lives, but conversation was another matter. Logen reckoned he still wasn’t Shivers’ favourite man. Doubted that he ever would be.

They rode down in silence, a long file of hard riders beside the black stream, no more than an icy trickle. Horses and men snorted out smoke, harness jingled sharp on the cold air. They rode over the bridge, hooves thumping on the hollow wood, on to the gate where Logen had spoken to Bethod. The gate he’d thrown him down from. The grass had grown back, no doubt, in the circle where he’d killed the Feared, then the snow had fallen down and covered it. So it was with all the acts of men, in the end. Covered over and forgotten.

There was no one out to cheer for him, but that was no surprise. The Bloody-Nine arriving was never any cause for celebration, especially not in

Carleon. Hadn't turned out too well for anyone the first time he visited. Nor any of the times after. Folk were no doubt barred into their houses, scared that they'd be the first to get burned alive.

He swung down from his horse, left Red Hat and the rest of the boys to see to themselves. He strode up through the cobbled street, up the steep slope towards the gateway of the inner wall, Shivers at his shoulder. A couple of Carls watched him come. A couple of Dow's boys, rough-looking bastards. One of them gave him a grin with half the teeth missing. 'The king!' he shouted, waving his sword in the air.

'The Bloody-Nine!' shouted the other, rattling his shield. 'King o' the Northmen!'

He crunched across the quiet courtyard, snow piled up into the corners, over to the high doors of Bethod's great hall. He raised his hands and pushed them creaking open. It wasn't much warmer inside than out in the snow. The high windows were open at the far end, the noise of the cold, cold river roaring from far below. Skarling's Chair stood on its raised-up platform, at the top of the steps, casting a long shadow across the rough floorboards towards him.

Someone was sitting in it, Logen realised, as his eyes got used to the dark. Black Dow. His axe and his sword leaned up against the side of the chair, the glint of sharpened metal in the darkness. Just like him, that. Always kept his weapons close to hand.

Logen grinned at him. 'Getting comfortable, Dow?'

'Bit hard on the arse, being honest, but it's better'n dirt for sitting in.'

'Did you find Calder and Scale?'

'Aye. I found 'em.'

'Dead, then, are they?'

'Not yet. Thought I'd try something different. We been talking.'

'Talking is it? To those two bastards?'

'I can think o' worse. Where's the Dogman at?'

'Still back there, trading words with the Union, sorting out an understanding.'

'Grim?'

Logen shook his head. 'Back to the mud.'

'Huh. Well, there it is. Makes this easier, anyway.' Dow's eyes flickered sideways.

‘Makes what easier?’ Logen looked round. Shivers was standing right at his shoulder, scowling as if he had someone’s murder in mind. No need to ask whose. Steel gleamed beside him in the shadows. A blade, out and ready. He could’ve stabbed Logen in the back with time to spare. But he hadn’t done, and he didn’t now. It seemed as if they all stayed still for quite a while, frozen as the cold valley out beyond the windows.

‘Shit on this.’ Shivers tossed the knife away clattering across the floor. ‘I’m better’n you, Bloody-Nine. I’m better than the pair o’ you. You can get your own work done, Black Dow. I’m done with it.’ He turned round and strode out, shoving his way past the two Carls from the gate, just now coming the other way. One of them hefted his shield as he frowned at Logen. The other one pulled the doors shut, swung the bar down with a final-sounding clunk.

Logen slid the Maker’s sword out of its sheath, turned his head and spat on the boards. ‘Like that, is it?’

‘Course it is,’ said Dow, still sat in Skarling’s chair. ‘If you’d ever looked a stride further than the end o’ your nose you’d know it.’

‘What about the old ways, eh? What about your word?’

‘The old ways are gone. You killed ’em. You and Bethod. Men’s words ain’t worth much these days. Well then?’ he called over his shoulder. ‘Now’s your chance, ain’t it?’

Logen felt the moment. A lucky choice, maybe, but he’d always had plenty of luck, good and bad. He dived sideways, heard the rattle of the flatbow at the same moment, rolled across the floor and came up in a crouch as the bolt clattered against the wall behind him. He saw a figure in the dark now, kneeling up at the far end of the hall. Calder. Logen heard his curse, fishing for another bolt.

‘Bloody-Nine, you broken dog!’ Scale came pounding out of the shadows, boots battering the floorboards, an axe in his great fists with a blade big as a cart-wheel. ‘Here’s your death!’

Logen stayed where he was, crouching loose and ready, and he felt himself smile. The odds were against him, maybe, but that was nothing new. It was almost a relief, not to have to think. Fine words and politics, none of that meant anything to him. But this? This he understood.

The blade crashed into the boards, sent splinters flying. Logen had already rolled out of the way. Now he backed off, watching, moving, letting Scale

cleave the air around him. The air healed quick, after all. The next blow flashed sideways and Logen dodged back, let it chop a great lump of plaster from the wall. He stepped in closer as Scale snarled again, his furious little eyes bulging, ready to swing his axe round in a blow to split the world.

The pommel of the Maker's sword crunched into his mouth before he got the chance, jerked his head up, spots of black blood and a chunk of white tooth flying. He staggered back and Logen followed him. Scale's eyes rolled down, axe going up high, opening his bloody mouth to make another bellow. Logen's boot rammed hard into the side of his leg. His knee bent back the wrong way with a sharp pop and he dropped to the boards, axe flying from his hands, his roar turning to a shriek of pain.

'My knee! Ah! Fuck! My knee!' He thrashed on the floor, blood running down his chin, trying to kick his way back with only one good leg.

Logen laughed at him. 'You bloated pig. I warned you, didn't I?'

'By the fucking dead!' barked Dow. He sprang up out of Skarling's chair, axe and sword in his hands. 'If you want a thing done fucking right, you'd best get ready to set your own hand to it!'

Logen would've liked to stab Scale right through his fat head, but there were too many other men needed watching. The two Carls were still standing by the door. Calder was loading up his next bolt. Logen sidled into space, trying to keep his eye on all of them at once, and Dow most of all. 'Aye, you faithless bastard!' he shouted. 'Let's have you!'

'Faithless, me?' Dow snorted as he came on slow down the steps, one at a time. 'I'm a dark bastard, aye, I know what I am. But I'm nothing to you. I know my friends from my enemies. I never killed my own. Bethod was right about one thing, Bloody-Nine. You're made of death. If I can put an end to you, d'you know what? That'll be the best thing I've done in my life.'

'That all?'

Dow showed his teeth. 'That, and I'm just plain sick o' taking your fucking say-so.'

He came on fast as a snake, axe swinging over, sword flashing across waist high. Logen dodged the axe, met the blade with his own, metal clanging on metal. Dow caught him in his sore ribs with his knee and sent him gasping back towards the wall, then came at him again, blades leaving bright traces in the darkness. Logen sprang out of the way, rolled and came

up, strutting out into the middle of the hall again, sword hanging loose from his hand.

'That it?' he asked, smiling through the pain in his side.

'Just getting the blood flowing.'

Dow leaped forward, made to go right and came left instead, sword and axe sweeping down together. Logen saw them coming, weaved away from the axe, turned the sword off his own and stepped in, growling. Dow jerked back as the Maker's blade hissed through the air right in front of his face, stumbled away a step or two. His eye twitched, some red leaking down his cheek from a nick just under it. Logen grinned, spun the grip of his sword round in his hand. 'Blood's flowing now, eh?'

'Aye.' Dow gave a grin of his own. 'Just like old times.'

'I should've killed you then.'

'Damn right you should've.' Dow circled round him, always moving, weapons gleaming in the cold light from the tall windows. 'But you love to play the good man, don't you? Do you know what's worse than a villain? A villain who thinks he's a hero. A man like that, there's nothing he won't do, and he'll always find himself an excuse. We've had one ruthless bastard make himself King o' the North, and I'll be damned before I see a worse.' He feinted forward and Logen jerked back.

He heard the click of Calder's flatbow again and saw the bolt flash right between them. Dow scowled over at him. 'You trying to kill me? You loose another bolt and you're spitted, you hear?'

'Stop pissing around and kill him, then!' snapped Calder, cranking away at his flatbow.

'Kill him!' bellowed Scale, from somewhere in the shadows.

'I'm working at it, pig.' Dow jerked his head at the two Carls by the door. 'You two going to pitch in or what?' They looked at each other, none too keen. Then they came forward into the hall, their round shields up, their eyes on Logen, herding him towards one corner.

Logen bared his teeth as he backed off. 'That's how you'll get it done, is it?'

'I'd rather kill you fair. But kill you crooked?' Dow shrugged his shoulders. 'Just as good. I ain't in the business o' giving chances. Go on then! At him!'

The two of them closed in, cautious, Dow moving off to the side. Logen scrambled back, trying to look scared and waiting for some kind of chance. It wasn't long coming. One of the Carls stepped a touch too close, let his shield drop low. He chose a bad moment to raise his axe and a bad way to do it. There was a click as the Maker's sword took his forearm off, left it hanging from his elbow by a scrap of chain-mail. He stumbled forward, dragging in a great wheezing breath, making ready to scream, blood spurting out of the stump of his arm and splattering on the boards. Logen chopped a great gash out of his helmet and he dropped down on his knees.

'Gwarghh . . .' he muttered, blood pouring down the side of his face. His eyes rolled up to the ceiling and he flopped on his side. The other Carl jumped over his body, roaring at the top of his lungs. Logen caught his sword, their blades scraping together, then he barged into the man's shield with his shoulder, sent him sprawling on his arse. He gave a wail, the Carl, one boot sticking up. Logen swung the Maker's sword down and split that foot in half up to his ankle.

Quick footsteps came up under the Carl's shriek. Logen spun, saw Black Dow charging at him, face crushed up into a killing grin.

'Die!' he hissed. Logen lurched away, the blade just missing him on one side, the axe on the other. He tried to swing the Maker's sword but Dow was too quick and too clever, shoved Logen back with his boot and sent him staggering.

'Die, Bloody-Nine!' Logen dodged, parried, stumbled as Dow came on again, no pauses and no mercy. Steel glinted in the darkness, blades lashing, killing blows, every one.

'Die, you evil fucker!' Dow's sword chopped down and Logen only just brought his own round in time to block it. The axe came out of nowhere, up from underneath, clattered into the crosspiece and tore Logen's blade spinning from his numb hand. He wobbled back a couple of strides and stood, heaving in air, sweat tickling at his neck.

It was quite a scrape he was in. He'd been in some bad ones alright, and lived to sing the songs, but it was hard to see how this could get much worse. Logen nodded towards the Maker's sword, lying on the boards just next to Dow's boot. 'Don't suppose you fancy giving a man a fair chance, and letting me have that blade, eh?'

Dow grinned wider than ever. 'What's my name? White Dow?'

Logen had a knife to hand, of course. He always did, and more than one. His eyes flickered from the notched blade of Dow's sword to the glinting edge of his axe and back. No amount of knives were going to be a match for those, not in Black Dow's hands. Then there was Calder's flatbow still rattling away as he tried to load the bastard thing again. He wouldn't miss forever. The Carl with the split foot was dragging himself squealing towards the door, on his way to let some more men in and finish the job. If Logen stood and fought he was a dead man, Bloody-Nine or not. So it came to a choice between dying and a chance at living, and that's no choice at all.

Once you know what has to be done, it's better to do it, than to live with the fear of it. That's what Logen's father would have said. So he turned towards the tall windows. The tall, open windows with the bright white sunlight and the cold wind pouring through, and he ran at them.

He heard men shouting behind, but he paid them no mind. He kept running, breath hissing, long strips of light wobbling closer. He was up the steps in a couple of bounds, flashed past Skarling's Chair, faster and faster. His right foot clomped down on the hollow floorboards. His left foot slapped down on the stone window sill. He sprang out into empty space with all the strength he had left, and for a moment he was free.

Then he began to fall. Fast. The rough walls, then the steep cliff face flashed past – grey rock, green moss, patches of white snow, all tumbling around him.

Logen turned over slowly in the air, limbs flailing pointlessly, too scared to scream. The rushing wind whipped at his eyes, tugged at his clothes, plucked the breath out of his mouth. He'd chosen this? Didn't seem like such a clever choice, right then, as he plunged down towards the river. But then say one thing for Logen Ninefingers, say that—

The water came up to meet him. It hit him in the side like a charging bull, punched the air out of his lungs, knocked the sense out of his head, sucked him in and down into the cold darkness . . .

Acknowledgments

Four people without whom:

Bren Abercrombie, whose eyes are sore from reading it
Nick Abercrombie, whose ears are sore from hearing about it
Rob Abercrombie, whose fingers are sore from turning the pages
Lou Abercrombie, whose arms are sore from holding me up

Then, at the House of Questions,
all those who assisted in this testing interrogation,
but particularly:

Superior Spanton, Practical Weir,
and, of course, Inquisitor Redfearn.

You can put away the instruments.

I confess . . .

BEST SERVED COLD

JOE
ABERCROMBIE

For Grace
One day you will read this
And be slightly worried

Table of Contents

Dedication
Title Page

Benna Murcatto Saves a Life

I – TALINS

Land of Opportunity
The Bone-Thief
Fish out of Water
Six and One
Bloody Instructions

II – WESTPORT

Poison
Science and Magic
The Safest Place in the World
Evil Friends
Two Twos
Plans and Accidents
Repaid in Full

III – SIPANI

Fogs and Whispers
The Arts of Persuasion
The Life of the Drinker
Left Out
A Few Bad Men
The Peacemakers
Cooking up Trouble
Sex and Death

That's Entertainment
What Happened

IV – VISSERINE

Vengeance, Then
Downwards
Rats in a Sack
The Forlorn Hope
Mercy and Cowardice
The Odd Couple
Darkness
The Connoisseur
Vile Jelly
Other People's Scores
The Fencing Master

V – PURANTI

Sixes
The Eye-Maker
Prince of Prudence
Neither Rich nor Poor
Heroic Efforts, New Beginnings
The Traitor
King of Poisons
No Worse
Harvest Time
The Old New Captain General

VI – OSPRIA

His Plan of Attack
Politics
No More Delays

All Business
The Fate of Styria
To the Victors . . .
So Much for Nothing
Shifting Sands

VII – TALINS

Return of the Native
The Lion’s Skin
Preparation
Rules of War
One Nation
All Dust
The Inevitable
Thus the Whirligig . . .
Seeds
All Change
Happy Endings

Acknowledgements

Benna Murcatto Saves a Life

The sunrise was the colour of bad blood. It leaked out of the east and stained the dark sky red, marked the scraps of cloud with stolen gold. Underneath it the road twisted up the mountainside towards the fortress of Fontezarmo – a cluster of sharp towers, ash-black against the wounded heavens. The sunrise was red, black and gold.

The colours of their profession.

'You look especially beautiful this morning, Monza.'

She sighed, as if that was an accident. As if she hadn't spent an hour preening herself before the mirror. 'Facts are facts. Stating them isn't a gift. You only prove you're not blind.' She yawned, stretched in her saddle, made him wait a moment longer. 'But I'll hear more.'

He noisily cleared his throat and held up one hand, a bad actor preparing for his grand speech. 'Your hair is like to . . . a veil of shimmering sable!'

'You pompous cock. What was it yesterday? A curtain of midnight. I liked that better, it had some poetry to it. Bad poetry, but still.'

'Shit.' He squinted up at the clouds. 'Your eyes, then, gleam like piercing sapphires, beyond price!'

'I've got stones in my face, now?'

'Lips like rose petals?'

She spat at him, but he was ready and dodged it, the phlegm clearing his horse and falling on the dry stones beside the track. 'That's to make your roses grow, arsehole. You can do better.'

'Harder every day,' he muttered. 'That jewel I bought looks wonderful well on you.'

She held up her right hand to admire it, a ruby the size of an almond, catching the first glimmers of sunlight and glistening like an open wound. 'I've had worse gifts.'

'It matches your fiery temper.'

She snorted. 'And my bloody reputation.'

'Piss on your reputation! Nothing but idiots' chatter! You're a dream. A vision. You look like . . .' He snapped his fingers. 'The very Goddess of War!'

‘Goddess, eh?’

‘Of War. You like it?’

‘It’ll do. If you can kiss Duke Orso’s arse half so well, we might even get a bonus.’

Benna puckered his lips at her. ‘I love nothing more of a morning than a faceful of his Excellency’s rich, round buttocks. They taste like . . . power.’

Hooves crunched on the dusty track, saddles creaked and harness rattled. The road turned back on itself, and again. The rest of the world dropped away below them. The eastern sky bled out from red to butchered pink. The river crept slowly into view, winding through the autumn woods in the base of the steep valley. Glittering like an army on the march, flowing swift and merciless towards the sea. Towards Talins.

‘I’m waiting,’ he said.

‘For what?’

‘My share of the compliments, of course.’

‘If your head swells any further it’ll fucking burst.’ She twitched her silken cuffs up. ‘And I don’t want your brains on my new shirt.’

‘Stabbed!’ Benna clutched one hand to his chest. ‘Right here! Is this how you repay my years of devotion, you heartless bitch?’

‘How dare you presume to be devoted to me, peasant? You’re like a tick devoted to a tiger!’

‘Tiger? Hah! When they compare you to an animal they usually pick a snake.’

‘Better than a maggot.’

‘Whore.’

‘Coward.’

‘Murderer.’

She could hardly deny that one. Silence settled on them again. A bird trilled from a thirsty tree beside the road.

Benna’s horse drew gradually up beside hers, and ever so gently he murmured, ‘You look especially beautiful this morning, Monza.’

That brought a smile to the corner of her mouth. The corner he couldn’t see. ‘Well. Facts are facts.’

She spurred round one more steep bend, and the outermost wall of the citadel thrust up ahead of them. A narrow bridge crossed a dizzy ravine to

the gatehouse, water sparkling as it fell away beneath. At the far end an archway yawned, welcoming as a grave.

'They've strengthened the walls since last year,' muttered Benna. 'I wouldn't fancy trying to storm the place.'

'Don't pretend you'd have the guts to climb the ladder.'

'I wouldn't fancy telling someone else to storm the place.'

'Don't pretend you'd have the guts to give the orders.'

'I wouldn't fancy watching you tell someone else to storm the place.'

'No.' She leaned gingerly from her saddle and frowned down at the plummeting drop on her left. Then she peered up at the sheer wall on her right, battlements a jagged black edge against the brightening sky. 'It's almost as if Orso's worried someone might try to kill him.'

'He's got enemies?' breathed Benna, eyes round as saucers with mock amazement.

'Only half of Styria.'

'Then . . . we've got enemies?'

'More than half of Styria.'

'But I've tried so hard to be popular . . .' They trotted between two dour-faced soldiers, spears and steel caps polished to a murderous glint. Hoofbeats echoed in the darkness of the long tunnel, sloping gradually upwards. 'You have that look, now.'

'What look?'

'No more fun today.'

'Huh.' She felt the familiar frown gripping her face. 'You can afford to smile. You're the good one.'

It was a different world beyond the gates, air heavy with lavender, shining green after the grey mountainside. A world of close-clipped lawns, of hedges tortured into wondrous shapes, of fountains throwing up glittering spray. Grim guardsmen, the black cross of Talins stitched into their white surcoats, spoiled the mood at every doorway.

'Monza . . .'

'Yes?'

'Let's make this the last season on campaign,' Benna wheedled. 'The last summer in the dust. Let's find something more comfortable to do. Now, while we're young.'

‘What about the Thousand Swords? Closer to ten thousand now, all looking to us for orders.’

‘They can look elsewhere. They joined us for plunder and we’ve given them plenty. They’ve no loyalty beyond their own profit.’

She had to admit the Thousand Swords had never represented the best of mankind, or even the best of mercenaries. Most of them were a step above the criminal. Most of the rest were a step below. But that wasn’t the point. ‘You have to stick at something in your life,’ she grunted.

‘I don’t see why.’

‘That’s you all over. One more season and Visserine will fall, and Rogont will surrender, and the League of Eight will be just a bad memory. Orso can crown himself King of Styria, and we can melt away and be forgotten.’

‘We deserve to be remembered. We could have our own city. You could be the noble Duchess Monzcarro of . . . wherever—’

‘And you the fearless Duke Benna?’ She laughed at that. ‘You stupid arse. You can scarcely govern your own bowels without my help. War’s a dark enough trade, I draw the line at politics. Orso crowned, then we retire.’

Benna sighed. ‘I thought we were mercenaries. Cosca never stuck to an employer like this.’

‘I’m not Cosca. And anyway, it’s not wise to say no to the Lord of Talins.’

‘You just love to fight.’

‘No. I love to win. Just one more season, then we can see the world. Visit the Old Empire. Tour the Thousand Isles. Sail to Adua and stand in the shadow of the House of the Maker. Everything we talked about.’ Benna pouted, just as he always did when he didn’t get his way. He pouted, but he never said no. It scratched at her, sometimes, that she always had to make the choices. ‘Since we’ve clearly only got one pair of balls between us, don’t you ever feel the need to borrow them yourself?’

‘They look better on you. Besides, you’ve got all the brains. It’s best they stay together.’

‘What do you get from the deal?’

Benna grinned at her. ‘The winning smile.’

‘Smile, then. For one more season.’ She swung down from her saddle, jerked her sword belt straight, tossed the reins at the groom and strode for the inner gatehouse. Benna had to hurry to catch up, getting tangled with his

own sword on the way. For a man who earned his living from war, he'd always been an embarrassment where weapons were concerned.

The inner courtyard was split into wide terraces at the summit of the mountain, planted with exotic palms and even more heavily guarded than the outer. An ancient column said to come from the palace of Scarpius stood tall in the centre, casting a shimmering reflection in a round pool teeming with silvery fish. The immensity of glass, bronze and marble that was Duke Orso's palace towered around it on three sides like a monstrous cat with a mouse between its paws. Since the spring they'd built a vast new wing along the northern wall, its festoons of decorative stonework still half-shrouded in scaffolding.

'They've been building,' she said.

'Of course. How could Prince Ario manage with only ten halls for his shoes?'

'A man can't be fashionable these days without at least twenty rooms of footwear.'

Benna frowned down at his own gold-buckled boots. 'I've no more than thirty pairs all told. I feel my shortcomings most keenly.'

'As do we all,' she muttered. A half-finished set of statues stood along the roofline. Duke Orso giving alms to the poor. Duke Orso gifting knowledge to the ignorant. Duke Orso shielding the weak from harm.

'I'm surprised he hasn't got one of the whole of Styria tonguing his arse,' whispered Benna in her ear.

She pointed to a partly chiselled block of marble. 'That's next.'

'Benna!'

Count Foscar, Orso's younger son, rushed around the pool like an eager puppy, shoes crunching on fresh-raked gravel, freckled face all lit up. He'd made an ill-advised attempt at a beard since Monza had last seen him but the sprinkling of sandy hairs only made him look more boyish. He might have inherited all the honesty in his family, but the looks had gone elsewhere. Benna grinned, threw one arm around Foscar's shoulders and ruffled his hair. An insult from anyone else, from Benna it was effortlessly charming. He had a knack of making people happy that always seemed like magic to Monza. Her talents lay in the opposite direction.

'Your father here yet?' she asked.

'Yes, and my brother too. They're with their banker.'

‘How’s his mood?’

‘Good, so far as I can tell, but you know my father. Still, he’s never angry with you two, is he? You always bring good news. You bring good news today, yes?’

‘Shall I tell him, Monza, or—’

‘Borletta’s fallen. Cantain’s dead.’

Foscar didn’t celebrate. He hadn’t his father’s appetite for corpses. ‘Cantain was a good man.’

That was a long way from the point, as far as Monza could see. ‘He was your father’s enemy.’

‘A man you could respect, though. There are precious few of them left in Styria. He’s really dead?’

Benna blew out his cheeks. ‘Well, his head’s off, and spiked above the gates, so unless you know one hell of a physician . . .’

They passed through a high archway, the hall beyond dim and echoing as an emperor’s tomb, light filtering down in dusty columns and pooling on the marble floor. Suits of old armour stood gleaming to silent attention, antique weapons clutched in steel fists. The sharp clicking of boot heels snapped from the walls as a man in a dark uniform paced towards them.

‘Shit,’ Benna hissed in her ear. ‘That reptile Ganmark’s here.’

‘Leave it be.’

‘There’s no way that cold-blooded bastard’s as good with a sword as they say—’

‘He is.’

‘If I was half a man, I’d—’

‘You’re not. So leave it be.’

General Ganmark’s face was strangely soft, his moustaches limp, his pale grey eyes always watery, lending him a look of perpetual sadness. The rumour was he’d been thrown out of the Union army for a sexual indiscretion involving another officer, and crossed the sea to find a more broad-minded master. The breadth of Duke Orso’s mind was infinite where his servants were concerned, provided they were effective. She and Benna were proof enough of that.

Ganmark nodded stiffly to Monza. ‘General Murcatto.’ He nodded stiffly to Benna. ‘General Murcatto. Count Foscar, you are keeping to your exercises, I hope?’

‘Sparring every day.’

‘Then we will make a swordsman of you yet.’

Benna snorted. ‘That, or a bore.’

‘Either one would be something,’ droned Ganmark in his clipped Union accent. ‘A man without discipline is no better than a dog. A soldier without discipline is no better than a corpse. Worse, in fact. A corpse is no threat to his comrades.’

Benna opened his mouth but Monza talked over him. He could make an arse of himself later, if he pleased. ‘How was your season?’

‘I played my part, keeping your flanks free of Rogont and his Osprians.’

‘Stalling the Duke of Delay?’ Benna smirked. ‘Quite the challenge.’

‘No more than a supporting role. A comic turn in a great tragedy, but one appreciated by the audience, I hope.’

The echoes of their footsteps swelled as they passed through another archway and into the towering rotunda at the heart of the palace. The curving walls were vast panels of sculpture showing scenes from antiquity. Wars between demons and magi, and other such rubbish. High above, the great dome was frescoed with seven winged women against a stormy sky – armed, armoured and angry-looking. The Fates, bringing destinies to earth. Aropella’s greatest work. She’d heard it had taken him eight years to finish. Monza never got over how tiny, weak, utterly insignificant this space made her feel. That was the point of it.

The four of them climbed a sweeping staircase, wide enough for twice as many to walk abreast. ‘And where have your comic talents taken you?’ she asked Ganmark.

‘Fire and murder, to the gates of Puranti and back.’

Benna curled his lip. ‘Any actual fighting?’

‘Why ever would I do that? Have you not read your Stolicus? “An animal fights his way to victory—”’

‘“A general marches there,”’ Monza finished for him. ‘Did you raise many laughs?’

‘Not for the enemy, I suppose. Precious few for anyone, but that is war.’

‘I find time to chuckle,’ threw in Benna.

‘Some men laugh easily. It makes them winning dinner companions.’ Ganmark’s soft eyes moved across to Monza’s. ‘I note you are not smiling.’

‘I will. Once the League of Eight are finished and Orso is King of Styria. Then we can all hang up our swords.’

‘In my experience swords do not hang comfortably from hooks. They have a habit of finding their way back into one’s hands.’

‘I daresay Orso will keep you on,’ said Benna. ‘Even if it’s only to polish the tiles.’

Ganmark did not give so much as a sharp breath. ‘Then his Excellency will have the cleanest floors in all of Styria.’

A pair of high doors faced the top of the stairs, gleaming with inlaid wood, carved with lions’ faces. A thick-set man paced up and down before them like a loyal old hound before his master’s bedchamber. Faithful Carpi, the longest-serving captain in the Thousand Swords, the scars of a hundred engagements marked out on his broad, weathered, honest face.

‘Faithful!’ Benna seized the old mercenary’s big slab of a hand. ‘Climbing a mountain, at your age? Shouldn’t you be in a brothel somewhere?’

‘If only.’ Carpi shrugged. ‘But his Excellency sent for me.’

‘And you, being an obedient sort . . . obeyed.’

‘That’s why they call me Faithful.’

‘How did you leave things in Borletta?’ asked Monza.

‘Quiet. Most of the men are quartered outside the walls with Andiche and Victus. Best if they don’t set fire to the place, I thought. I left some of the more reliable ones in Cantain’s palace with Sesaria watching over them. Old-timers, like me, from back in Cosca’s day. Seasoned men, not prone to impulsiveness.’

Benna chuckled. ‘Slow thinkers, you mean?’

‘Slow but steady. We get there in the end.’

‘Going in, then?’ Foscar set his shoulder to one of the doors and heaved it open. Ganmark and Faithful followed. Monza paused a moment on the threshold, trying to find her hardest face. She looked up and saw Benna smiling at her. Without thinking, she found herself smiling back. She leaned and whispered in his ear.

‘I love you.’

‘Of course you do.’ He stepped through the doorway, and she followed.

Duke Orso’s private study was a marble hall the size of a market square. Lofty windows marched in bold procession along one side, standing open, a keen breeze washing through and making the vivid hangings twitch and

rustle. Beyond them a long terrace seemed to hang in empty air, overlooking the steepest drop from the mountain's summit.

The opposite wall was covered with towering panels, painted by the foremost artists of Styria, displaying the great battles of history. The victories of Stolicus, of Harod the Great, of Farans and Verturio, all preserved in sweeping oils. The message that Orso was the latest in a line of royal winners was hard to miss, even though his great-grandfather had been a usurper, and a common criminal besides.

The largest painting of them all faced the door, ten strides high at the least. Who else but Grand Duke Orso? He was seated upon a rearing charger, his shining sword raised high, his piercing eye fixed on the far horizon, urging his men to victory at the Battle of Etrea. The painter seemed to have been unaware that Orso hadn't come within fifty miles of the fighting.

But then fine lies beat tedious truths every time, as he had often told her. The Duke of Talins himself sat crabbed over a desk, wielding a pen rather than a sword. A tall, gaunt, hook-nosed man stood at his elbow, staring down as keenly as a vulture waiting for thirsty travellers to die. A great shape lurked near them, in the shadows against the wall. Gobba, Orso's bodyguard, fat-necked as a great hog. Prince Ario, the duke's eldest son and heir, lounged in a gilded chair nearer at hand. He had one leg crossed over the other, a wine glass dangling carelessly, a bland smile balanced on his blandly handsome face.

'I found these beggars wandering the grounds,' called Foscar, 'and thought I'd commend them to your charity, Father!'

'Charity?' Orso's sharp voice echoed around the cavernous room. 'I am not a great admirer of the stuff. Make yourselves comfortable, my friends, I will be with you shortly.'

'If it isn't the Butcher of Caprile,' murmured Ario, 'and her little Benna too.'

'Your Highness. You look well.' Monza thought he looked an indolent cock, but kept it to herself.

'You too, as ever. If all soldiers looked as you did, I might even be tempted to go on campaign myself. A new bauble?' Ario waved his own jewel-encrusted hand limply towards the ruby on Monza's finger.

'Just what was to hand when I was dressing.'

‘I wish I’d been there. Wine?’

‘Just after dawn?’

He glanced heavy-lidded towards the windows. ‘Still last night as far as I’m concerned.’ As if staying up late was a heroic achievement.

‘I will.’ Benna was already pouring himself a glass, never to be outdone as far as showing off went. Most likely he’d be drunk within the hour and embarrass himself, but Monza was tired of playing his mother. She strolled past the monumental fireplace held up by carven figures of Juvens and Kanedias, and towards Orso’s desk.

‘Sign here, and here, and here,’ the gaunt man was saying, one bony finger hovering over the documents.

‘You know Mauthis, do you?’ Orso gave a sour glance in his direction. ‘My leash-holder.’

‘Always your humble servant, your Excellency. The Banking House of Valint and Balk agrees to this further loan for the period of one year, after which they regret they must charge interest.’

Orso snorted. ‘As the plague regrets the dead, I’ll be bound.’ He scratched out a parting swirl on the last signature and tossed down his pen. ‘Everyone must kneel to someone, eh? Make sure you extend to your superiors my infinite gratitude for their indulgence.’

‘I shall do so.’ Mauthis collected up the documents. ‘That concludes our business, your Excellency. I must leave at once if I mean to catch the evening tide for Westport—’

‘No. Stay a while longer. We have one other matter to discuss.’

Mauthis’ dead eyes moved towards Monza, then back to Orso. ‘As your Excellency desires.’

The duke rose smoothly from his desk. ‘To happier business, then. You do bring happy news, eh, Monzcarro?’

‘I do, your Excellency.’

‘Ah, whatever would I do without you?’ There was a trace of iron grey in his black hair since she’d seen him last, perhaps some deeper lines at the corners of his eyes, but his air of complete command was impressive as ever. He leaned forwards and kissed her on both cheeks, then whispered in her ear, ‘Ganmark can lead soldiers well enough, but for a man who sucks cocks he hasn’t the slightest sense of humour. Come, tell me of your victories in the open air.’ He left one arm draped around her shoulders and

guided her, past the sneering Prince Ario, through the open windows onto the high terrace.

The sun was climbing now, and the bright world was full of colour. The blood had drained from the sky and left it a vivid blue, white clouds crawling high above. Below, at the very bottom of a dizzy drop, the river wound through the wooded valley, autumn leaves pale green, burned orange, faded yellow, angry red, light glinting silver on fast-flowing water. To the east, the forest crumbled away into a patchwork of fields – squares of fallow green, rich black earth, golden crop. Further still and the river met the grey sea, branching out in a wide delta choked with islands. Monza could just make out the suggestion of tiny towers there, buildings, bridges, walls. Great Talins, no bigger than her thumbnail.

She narrowed her eyes against the stiff breeze, pushed some stray hair out of her face. 'I never tire of this view.'

'How could you? It's why I built this damn place. Here I can keep one eye always on my subjects, as a watchful parent should upon his children. Just to make sure they don't hurt themselves while they play, you understand.'

'Your people are lucky to have such a just and caring father,' she lied smoothly.

'Just and caring.' Orso frowned thoughtfully towards the distant sea. 'Do you think that is how history will remember me?'

Monza thought it incredibly unlikely. 'What did Bialoveld say? "History is written by the victors."'

The duke squeezed her shoulder. 'All this, and well read into the bargain. Ario is ambitious enough, but he has no insight. I'd be surprised if he could read to the end of a signpost in one sitting. All he cares about is whoring. And shoes. My daughter Terez, meanwhile, weeps most bitterly because I married her to a king. I swear, if I had offered great Euz as the groom she would have whined for a husband better fitting her station.' He gave a heavy sigh. 'None of my children understand me. My great-grandfather was a mercenary, you know. A fact I do not like to advertise.' Though he told her every other time they met. 'A man who never shed a tear in his life, and wore on his feet whatever was to hand. A low-born fighting man, who seized power in Talins by the sharpness of his mind and sword together.' More by blunt ruthlessness and brutality, the way Monza had heard the tale.

‘We are from the same stock, you and I. We have made ourselves, out of nothing.’

Orso had been born to the wealthiest dukedom in Styria and never done a hard day’s work in his life, but Monza bit her tongue. ‘You do me too much honour, your Excellency.’

‘Less than you deserve. Now tell me of Borletta.’

‘You heard about the battle on the High Bank?’

‘I heard you scattered the League of Eight’s army, just as you did at Sweet Pines! Ganmark says Duke Salier had three times your number.’

‘Numbers are a hindrance if they’re lazy, ill-prepared and led by idiots. An army of farmers from Borletta, cobblers from Affoia, glass-blowers from Visserine. Amateurs. They camped by the river, thinking we were far away, scarcely posted guards. We came up through the woods at night and caught them at sunrise, not even in their armour.’

‘I can see Salier now, the fat pig, waddling from his bed to run!’

‘Faithful led the charge. We broke them quickly, captured their supplies.’

‘Turned the golden cornfields crimson, I was told.’

‘They hardly even fought. Ten times as many drowned trying to swim the river as died fighting. More than four thousand prisoners. Some ransoms were paid, some not, some men were hanged.’

‘And few tears shed, eh, Monza?’

‘Not by me. If they were so keen to live, they could’ve surrendered.’

‘As they did at Caprile?’

She stared straight back into Orso’s black eyes. ‘Just as they did at Caprile.’

‘Borletta is besieged, then?’

‘Fallen already.’

The duke’s face lit up like a boy’s on his birthday. ‘Fallen? Cantain surrendered?’

‘When his people heard of Salier’s defeat, they lost hope.’

‘And people without hope are a dangerous crowd, even in a republic.’

‘Especially in a republic. A mob dragged Cantain from the palace, hanged him from the highest tower, opened the gates and threw themselves on the mercy of the Thousand Swords.’

‘Hah! Slaughtered by the very people he laboured to keep free. There’s the gratitude of the common man, eh, Monza? Cantain should have taken

my money when I offered. It would have been cheaper for both of us.'

'The people are falling over themselves to become your subjects. I've given orders they should be spared, where possible.'

'Mercy, eh?'

'Mercy and cowardice are the same,' she snapped out. 'But you want their land, not their lives, no? Dead men can't obey.'

Orso smiled. 'Why can my sons not mark my lessons as you have? I entirely approve. Hang only the leaders. And Cantain's head above the gates. Nothing encourages obedience like a good example.'

'Already rotting, with those of his sons.'

'Fine work!' The Lord of Talins clapped his hands, as though he never heard such pleasing music as the news of rotting heads. 'What of the takings?'

The accounts were Benna's business, and he came forwards now, sliding a folded paper from his chest pocket. 'The city was scoured, your Excellency. Every building stripped, every floor dug up, every person searched. The usual rules apply, according to our terms of engagement. Quarter for the man that finds it, quarter for his captain, quarter for the generals,' and he bowed low, unfolding the paper and offering it out, 'and quarter for our noble employer.'

Orso's smile broadened as his eyes scanned down the figures. 'My blessing on the Rule of Quarters! Enough to keep you both in my service a little longer.' He stepped between Monza and Benna, placed a gentle hand on each of their shoulders and led them back through the open windows. Towards the round table of black marble in the centre of the room, and the great map spread out upon it. Ganmark, Ario and Faithful had already gathered there. Gobba still lurked in the shadows, thick arms folded across his chest. 'What of our one-time friends and now our bitter enemies, the treacherous citizens of Visserine?'

'The fields round the city are burned up to the gates, almost.' Monza scattered carnage across the countryside with a few waves of her finger. 'Farmers driven off, livestock slaughtered. It'll be a lean winter for fat Duke Salier, and a leaner spring.'

'He will have to rely on the noble Duke Rogont and his Osprians,' said Ganmark, with the faintest of smiles.

Prince Ario snickered. ‘Much talk blows down from Ospria, always, but little help.’

‘Visserine is poised to drop into your lap next year, your Excellency.’

‘And with it the heart is torn from the League of Eight.’

‘The crown of Styria will be yours.’

The mention of crowns teased Orso’s smile still wider. ‘And we have you to thank, Monzcarro. I do not forget that.’

‘Not only me.’

‘Curse your modesty. Benna has played his part, and our good friend General Ganmark, and Faithful too, but no one could deny this is your work. Your commitment, your single-mindedness, your swiftness to act! You shall have a great triumph, just as the heroes of ancient Aulcus did. You shall ride through the streets of Talins and my people will shower you with flower petals in honour of your many victories.’ Benna was grinning, but Monza couldn’t join him. She’d never had much taste for congratulations. ‘They will cheer far louder for you, I think, than they ever will for my own sons. They will cheer far louder even than they do for me, their rightful lord, to whom they owe so much.’ It seemed that Orso’s smile slipped, and his face looked tired, and sad, and worn without it. ‘They will cheer, in fact, a little too loudly for my taste.’

There was the barest flash of movement at the corner of her eye, enough to make her bring up her hand on an instinct.

The wire hissed taut around it, snatching it up under her chin, crushing it chokingly tight against her throat.

Benna started forwards. ‘Mon—’ Metal glinted as Prince Ario stabbed him in the neck. He missed his throat, caught him just under the ear.

Orso carefully stepped back as blood speckled the tiles with red. Foscar’s mouth fell open, wine glass dropping from his hand, shattering on the floor.

Monza tried to scream, but only spluttered through her half-shut windpipe, made a sound like a honking pig. She fished at the hilt of her dagger with her free hand but someone caught her wrist, held it fast. Faithful Carpi, pressed up tight against her left side.

‘Sorry,’ he muttered in her ear, pulling her sword from its scabbard and flinging it clattering across the room.

Benna stumbled, gurgling red drool, one hand clutched to the side of his face, black blood leaking out between white fingers. His other hand

fumbled for his sword while Ario watched him, frozen. He drew a clumsy foot of steel before General Ganmark stepped up and stabbed him, smoothly and precisely – once, twice, three times. The thin blade slid in and out of Benna's body, the only sound the soft breath from his gaping mouth. Blood shot across the floor in long streaks, began to leak out into his white shirt in dark circles. He tottered forwards, tripped over his own feet and crashed down, half-drawn sword scraping against the marble underneath him.

Monza strained, every muscle trembling, but she was held helpless as a fly in honey. She heard Gobba grunting with effort in her ear, his stubbly face rubbing against her cheek, his great body warm against her back. She felt the wire cut slowly into the sides of her neck, deep into the side of her hand, caught fast against her throat. She felt the blood running down her forearm, into the collar of her shirt.

One of Benna's hands crawled across the floor, reaching out for her. He lifted himself an inch or two, veins bulging from his neck. Ganmark leaned forwards and calmly ran him through the heart from behind. Benna quivered for a moment, then sagged down and was still, pale cheek smeared with red. Dark blood crept out from under him, worked its way along the cracks between the tiles.

'Well.' Ganmark leaned down and wiped his sword on the back of Benna's shirt. 'That's that.'

Mauthis watched, frowning. Slightly puzzled, slightly irritated, slightly bored. As though examining a set of figures that wouldn't quite add.

Orso gestured at the body. 'Get rid of that, Ario.'

'Me?' The prince's lip curled.

'Yes, you. And you can help him, Foscar. The two of you must learn what needs to be done to keep our family in power.'

'No!' Foscar stumbled away. 'I'll have no part of this!' He turned and ran from the room, his boots slapping against the marble floor.

'That boy is soft as syrup,' muttered Orso at his back. 'Ganmark, help him.'

Monza's bulging eyes followed them as they dragged Benna's corpse out through the doors to the terrace, Ganmark grim and careful at the head end, Ario cursing as he daintily took one boot, the other smearing a red trail after them. They heaved Benna up onto the balustrade and rolled him off. Like that he was gone.

‘Ah!’ squawked Ario, waving one hand. ‘Damn it! You scratched me!’

Ganmark stared back at him. ‘I apologise, your Highness. Murder can be a painful business.’

The prince looked around for something to wipe his bloody hands on. He reached for the rich hangings beside the window.

‘Not there!’ snapped Orso. ‘That’s Kantic silk, at fifty scales a piece!’

‘Where, then?’

‘Find something else, or leave them red! Sometimes I wonder if your mother told the truth about your paternity, boy.’ Ario wiped his hands sulkily on the front of his shirt while Monza stared, face burning from lack of air. Orso frowned over at her, a blurred black figure through the wet in her eyes, the hair tangled across her face. ‘Is she still alive? Whatever are you about, Gobba?’

‘Fucking wire’s caught on her hand,’ hissed the bodyguard.

‘Find another way to be done with her, then, lackwit.’

‘I’ll do it.’ Faithful pulled the dagger from her belt, still pinning her wrist with his other hand. ‘I really am sorry.’

‘Just get to it!’ growled Gobba.

The blade went back, steel glinting in a shaft of light. Monza stomped down on Gobba’s foot with all the strength she had left. The bodyguard grunted, grip slipping on the wire, and she dragged it away from her neck, growling, twisting hard as Carpi stabbed at her.

The blade went well wide of the mark, slid in under her bottom rib. Cold metal, but it felt burning hot, a line of fire from her stomach to her back. It slid right through and the point pricked Gobba’s gut.

‘Gah!’ He let go the wire and Monza whooped in air, started shrieking mindlessly, lashed at him with her elbow and sent him staggering. Faithful was caught off guard, fumbled the knife as he pulled it out of her and sent it spinning across the floor. She kicked at him, missed his groin and caught his hip, bent him over. She snatched at a dagger on his belt, pulled it from its sheath, but her cut hand was clumsy and he caught her wrist before she could ram the blade into him. They wrestled with it, teeth bared, gasping spit in each other’s faces, lurching back and forth, their hands sticky with her blood.

‘Kill her!’

There was a crunch and her head was full of light. The floor cracked against her skull, slapped her in the back. She spat blood, mad screams guttering to a long drawn croak, clawing at the smooth floor with her nails.

'Fucking bitch!' The heel of Gobba's big boot cracked down on her right hand and sent pain lancing up her forearm, tore a sick gasp from her. His boot crunched again across her knuckles, then her fingers, then her wrist. At the same time Faithful's foot was thudding into her ribs, over and over, making her cough and shudder. Her shattered hand twisted, turned sideways on. Gobba's heel crashed down and crushed it flat into the cold marble with a splintering of bone. She flopped back, hardly able to breathe, the room turning over, history's painted winners grinning down.

'You stabbed me, you dumb old bastard! You stabbed me!'

'You're hardly even cut, fathead! You should've kept a hold on her!'

'I should stab the useless pair of you!' hissed Orso's voice. 'Just get it done!'

Gobba's great fist came down, dragged Monza up by her throat. She tried to grab at him with her left hand but all her strength had leaked out through the hole in her side, the cuts in her neck. Her clumsy fingertips only smeared red traces across his stubbly face. Her arm was dragged away, twisted sharply behind her back.

'Where's Hermon's gold?' came Gobba's rough voice. 'Eh, Murcatto? What did you do with the gold?'

Monza forced her head up. 'Lick my arse, cocksucker.' Not clever, perhaps, but from the heart.

'There never was any gold!' snapped Faithful. 'I told you that, pig!'

'There's this much.' One by one, Gobba twisted the battered rings from her dangling fingers, already bloating, turning angry purple, bent and shapeless as rotten sausages. 'Good stone, that,' he said, peering at the ruby. 'Seems a waste of decent flesh, though. Why not give me a moment with her? A moment's all it would take.'

Prince Ario tittered. 'Speed isn't always something to be proud of.'

'For pity's sake!' Orso's voice. 'We're not animals. Off the terrace and let us be done. I am late for breakfast.'

She felt herself dragged, head lolling. Sunlight stabbed at her. She was lifted, limp boots scraping on stone. Blue sky turning. Up onto the

balustrade. The breath scraped at her nose, shuddered in her chest. She twisted, kicked. Her body, struggling vainly to stay alive.

'Let me make sure of her.' Ganmark's voice.

'How sure do we need to be?' Blurry through the bloody hair across her eyes she saw Orso's lined face. 'I hope you understand. My great-grandfather was a mercenary. A low-born fighting man, who seized power by the sharpness of his mind and sword together. I cannot allow another mercenary to seize power in Talins.'

She meant to spit in his face, but all she did was blow bloody drool down her own chin. 'Fuck yourse—'

Then she was flying.

Her torn shirt billowed and flapped against her tingling skin. She turned over, and over, and the world tumbled around her. Blue sky with shreds of cloud, black towers at the mountain top, grey rock face rushing past, yellow-green trees and sparkling river, blue sky with shreds of cloud, and again, and again, faster, and faster.

Cold wind ripped at her hair, roared in her ears, whistled between her teeth along with her terrified breath. She could see each tree, now, each branch, each leaf. They surged up towards her. She opened her mouth to scream—

Twigs snatched, grabbed, lashed at her. A broken branch knocked her spinning. Wood cracked and tore around her as she plunged down, down, and crashed into the mountainside. Her legs splintered under her plummeting weight, her shoulder broke apart against firm earth. But rather than dashing her brains out on the rocks, she only shattered her jaw against her brother's bloody chest, his mangled body wedged against the base of a tree.

Which was how Benna Murcatto saved his sister's life.

She bounced from the corpse, three-quarters senseless, and down the steep mountainside, over and over, flailing like a broken doll. Rocks, and roots, and hard earth clubbed, punched, crushed her, as if she was battered apart with a hundred hammers.

She tore through a patch of bushes, thorns whipping and clutching. She rolled, and rolled, down the sloping earth in a cloud of dirt and leaves. She tumbled over a tree root, crumpled on a mossy rock. She slid slowly to a stop, on her back, and was still.

‘Huuuurrrrhhh . . .’

Stones clattered down around her, sticks and gravel. Dust slowly settled. She heard wind, creaking in the branches, crackling in the leaves. Or her own breath, creaking and crackling in her broken throat. The sun flickered through black trees, jabbing at one eye. The other was dark. Flies buzzed, zipping and swimming in the warm morning air. She was down with the waste from Orso’s kitchens. Sprawled out helpless in the midst of the rotten vegetables, and the cooking slime, and the stinking offal left over from the last month’s magnificent meals. Tossed out with the rubbish.

‘Huuurrhhh . . .’

A jagged, mindless sound. She was embarrassed by it, almost, but couldn’t stop making it. Animal horror. Mad despair. The groan of the dead, in hell. Her eye darted desperately around. She saw the wreck of her right hand, a shapeless, purple glove with a bloody gash in the side. One finger trembled slightly. Its tip brushed against torn skin on her elbow. The forearm was folded in half, a broken-off twig of grey bone sticking through bloody silk. It didn’t look real. Like a cheap theatre prop.

‘Huurrhhh . . .’

The fear had hold of her now, swelling with every breath. She couldn’t move her head. She couldn’t move her tongue in her mouth. She could feel the pain, gnawing at the edge of her mind. A terrible mass, pressing up against her, crushing every part of her, worse, and worse, and worse.

‘Huurhh . . . uurh . . .’

Benna was dead. A streak of wet ran from her flickering eye and she felt it trickle slowly down her cheek. Why was she not dead? How could she not be dead?

Soon, please. Before the pain got any worse. Please, let it be soon.

‘Uurh . . . uh . . . uh.’

Please, death.

I

TALINS

‘To have a good enemy, choose a friend: he knows where to strike’

Diane de Poitiers

***J**appo Murcatto never said why he had such a good sword, but he knew well how to use it. Since his son was by five years his younger child and sickly too, from a tender age he passed on the skill to his daughter. Monzcarro had been her father’s mother’s name, in the days when her family had pretended at nobility. Her own mother had not cared for it in the least, but since she had died giving birth to Benna that scarcely mattered.*

Those were peaceful years in Styria, which were as rare as gold. At ploughing time Monza would hurry behind her father while the blade scraped through the dirt, weeding any big stones from the fresh black earth and throwing them into the wood. At reaping time she would hurry behind her father while his scythe-blade flashed, gathering the cut stalks into sheaves.

‘Monza,’ he would say, smiling down at her, ‘what would I do without you?’ She helped with the threshing and tossed the seed, split logs and drew water. She cooked, swept, washed, carried, milked the goat. Her hands were always raw from some kind of work. Her brother did what he could, but he was small, and ill, and could do little. Those were hard years, but they were happy ones.

When Monza was fourteen, Jappo Murcatto caught the fever. She and Benna watched him cough, and sweat, and wither. One night her father seized Monza by her wrist, and stared at her with bright eyes.

‘*Tomorrow, break the ground in the upper field, or the wheat won’t rise in time. Plant all you can.’ He touched her cheek. ‘It’s not fair that it should fall to you, but your brother is so small. Watch over him.’ And he was dead.*

Benna cried, and cried, but Monza's eyes stayed dry. She was thinking about the seed that needing planting, and how she would do it. That night Benna was too scared to sleep alone, and so they slept together in her narrow bed, and held each other for comfort. They had no one else now.

The next morning, in the darkness, Monza dragged her father's corpse from the house, through the woods behind and rolled it into the river. Not because she had no love in her, but because she had no time to bury him.

By sunrise she was breaking the ground in the upper field.

Land of Opportunity

First thing Shivers noticed as the boat wallowed in towards the wharves, it was nothing like as warm as he'd been expecting. He'd heard the sun always shone in Styria. Like a nice bath, all year round. If Shivers had been offered a bath like this he'd have stayed dirty, and probably had a few sharp words to say besides. Talins huddled under grey skies, clouds bulging, a keen breeze off the sea, cold rain speckling his cheek from time to time and reminding him of home. And not in a good way. Still, he was set on looking at the sunny side of the case. Probably just a shitty day was all. You get 'em everywhere.

There surely was a seedy look about the place, though, as the sailors scuttled to make the boat fast to the dock. Brick buildings lined the grey sweep of the bay, narrow windowed, all squashed in together, roofs slumping, paint peeling, cracked-up render stained with salt, green with moss, black with mould. Down near the slimy cobbles the walls were plastered over with big papers, slapped up at all angles, ripped and pasted over each other, torn edges fluttering. Faces on them, and words printed. Warnings, maybe, but Shivers weren't much of a reader. Specially not in Styrian. Speaking the language was going to be enough of a challenge.

The waterfront crawled with people, and not many looked happy. Or healthy. Or rich. There was quite the smell. Or to be more precise, a proper reek. Rotten salt fish, old corpses, coal smoke and overflowing latrine pits rolled up together. If this was the home of the grand new man he was hoping to become, Shivers had to admit to being more'n a touch disappointed. For the briefest moment he thought about paying over most of what he had left for a trip straight back home to the North on the next tide. But he shook it off. He was done with war, done with leading men to death, done with killing and all that went along with it. He was set on being a better man. He was going to do the right thing, and this was where he was going to do it.

'Right, then.' He gave the nearest sailor a cheery nod. 'Off I go.' He got no more'n a grunt in return, but his brother used to tell him it was what you gave out that made a man, not what you got back. So he grinned like he'd

got a merry send-off, strode down the clattering gangplank and into his brave new life in Styria.

He'd scarcely taken a dozen paces, staring up at looming buildings on one side, swaying masts on the other, before someone barged into him and near knocked him sideways.

'My apologies,' Shivers said in Styrian, keeping things civilised. 'Didn't see you there, friend.' The man kept going, didn't even turn. That prickled some at Shivers' pride. He had plenty of it still, the one thing his father had left him. He hadn't lived through seven years of battles, skirmishes, waking with snow on his blanket, shit food and worse singing so he could come down here and get shouldered.

But being a bastard was crime and punishment both. Let go of it, his brother would've told him. Shivers was meant to be looking on the sunny side. So he took a turn away from the docks, down a wide road and into the city. Past a clutch of beggars on blankets, waving stumps and withered limbs. Through a square where a great statue stood of a frowning man, pointing off to nowhere. Shivers didn't have a clue who he was meant to be, but he looked pretty damn pleased with himself. The smell of cooking wafted up, made Shivers' guts grumble. Drew him over to some kind of stall where they had sticks of meat over a fire in a can.

'One o' them,' said Shivers, pointing. Didn't seem much else needed saying, so he kept it simple. Less chance of mistakes. When the cook told him the price he near choked on his tongue. Would've got him a whole sheep in the North, maybe even a breeding pair. The meat was half fat and the rest gristle. Didn't taste near so good as it had smelled, but by that point it weren't much surprise. It seemed most things in Styria weren't quite as advertised.

The rain had started up stronger now, flitting down into Shivers' eyes as he ate. Not much compared to storms he'd laughed through in the North, but enough to damp his mood a touch, make him wonder where the hell he'd rest his head tonight. It trickled from mossy eaves and broken gutters, turned the cobbles dark, made the people hunch and curse. He came from the close buildings and onto a wide river bank, all built up and fenced in with stone. He paused a moment, wondering which way to go.

The city went on far as he could see, bridges upstream and down, buildings on the far bank even bigger than on this side – towers, domes,

roofs, going on and on, half-shrouded and turned dreamy grey by the rain. More torn papers flapping in the breeze, letters daubed over 'em too with bright coloured paint, streaks running down to the cobbled street. Letters high as a man in places. Shivers peered over at one set, trying to make some sense of it.

Another shoulder caught him, right in the ribs, made him grunt. This time he whipped round snarling, little meat stick clutched in his fist like he might've clutched a blade. Then he took a breath. Weren't all that long ago Shivers had let the Bloody-Nine go free. He remembered that morning like it was yesterday, the snow outside the windows, the knife in his hand, the rattle as he'd let it fall. He'd let the man who killed his brother live, passed up revenge, all so he could be a better man. Step away from blood. Stepping away from a loose shoulder in a crowd was nothing to sing about.

He forced half a smile back on and walked the other way, up onto the bridge. Silly thing like the knock of a shoulder could leave you cursing for days, and he didn't want to poison his new beginning 'fore it even got begun. Statues stood on either side, staring off above the water, monsters of white stone streaky with bird droppings. People flooded past, one kind of river flowing over the other. People of every type and colour. So many he felt like nothing in the midst of 'em. Bound to have a few shoulders catch you in a place like this.

Something brushed his arm. Before he knew it he'd grabbed someone round the neck, was bending him back over the parapet twenty strides above the churning water, gripping his throat like he was strangling a chicken. 'Knock me, you bastard?' he snarled in Northern. 'I'll cut your fucking eyes out!'

He was a little man, and he looked bloody scared. Might've been a head shorter'n Shivers, and not much more than half his weight. Getting over the first red flush of rage, Shivers realised this poor fool had barely even touched him. No malice in it. How come he could shrug off big wrongs then lose his temper over nothing? He'd always been his own worst enemy.

'Sorry, friend,' he said in Styrian, and meaning it too. He let the man slither down, brushed the crumpled front of his coat with a clumsy hand. 'Real sorry about that. Little . . . what do you call it . . . mistake is all. Sorry. Do you want . . .' Shivers found he was offering the stick, one last shred of fatty meat still clinging to it. The man stared. Shivers winced. 'Course he

didn’t want that. Shivers hardly wanted it himself. ‘Sorry . . .’ The man turned and dashed off into the crowd, looking once over his shoulder, scared, like he’d just survived being attacked by a madman. Maybe he had. Shivers stood on the bridge, frowned down at that brown water churning past. Same sort of water they had in the North, it had to be said.

Seemed being a better man might be harder work than he’d thought.

The Bone-Thief

When her eyes opened, she saw bones. Bones long and short, thick and thin, white, yellow, brown. Covering the peeling wall from floor to ceiling. Hundreds of them. Nailed up in patterns, a madman's mosaic. Her eyes rolled down, sore and sticky. A tongue of fire flickered in a sooty hearth. On the mantelpiece above, skulls grinned emptily at her, neatly stacked three high.

Human bones, then. Monza felt her skin turn icy cold.

She tried to sit up. The vague sense of numb stiffness flared into pain so suddenly she nearly puked. The darkened room lurched, blurred. She was held fast, lying on something hard. Her mind was full of mud, she couldn't remember how she'd got here.

Her head rolled sideways and she saw a table. On the table was a metal tray. On the tray was a careful arrangement of instruments. Pincers, pliers, needles and scissors. A small but very businesslike saw. A dozen knives at least, all shapes and sizes. Her widening eyes darted over their polished blades – curved, straight, jagged edges cruel and eager in the firelight. A surgeon's tools?

Or a torturer's?

'Benna?' Her voice was a ghostly squeak. Her tongue, her gums, her throat, the passages in her nose, all raw as skinned meat. She tried to move again, could scarcely lift her head. Even that much effort sent a groaning stab through her neck and into her shoulder, set off a dull pulsing up her legs, down her right arm, through her ribs. The pain brought fear with it, the fear brought pain. Her breath quickened, shuddering and wheezing through her sore nostrils.

Click, click.

She froze, silence prickling at her ears. Then a scraping, a key in a lock. Frantically now she squirmed, pain bursting in every joint, ripping at every muscle, blood battering behind her eyes, thick tongue wedged into her teeth to stop herself screaming. A door creaked open and banged shut. Footsteps on bare boards, hardly making a sound, but each one still a jab of fear in her throat. A shadow reached out across the floor – a huge shape, twisted,

monstrous. Her eyes strained to the corners, nothing she could do but wait for the worst.

A figure came through the doorway, walked straight past her and over to a tall cupboard. A man no more than average height, in fact, with short fair hair. The misshapen shadow was caused by a canvas sack over one shoulder. He hummed tunelessly to himself as he emptied it, placing each item carefully on its proper shelf, then turning it back and forth until it faced precisely into the room.

If he was a monster, he seemed an everyday sort of one, with an eye for the details.

He swung the doors gently shut, folded his empty bag once, twice, and slid it under the cupboard. He took off his stained coat and hung it from a hook, brushed it down with a brisk hand, turned and stopped dead. A pale, lean face. Not old, but deeply lined, with harsh cheekbones and eyes hungry bright in bruised sockets.

They stared at each other for a moment, both seeming equally shocked. Then his colourless lips twitched into a sickly smile.

'You are awake!'

'Who are you?' A terrified scratch in her dried-up throat.

'My name is not important.' He spoke with the trace of a Union accent. 'Suffice it to say I am a student of the physical sciences.'

'A healer?'

'Among other things. As you may have gathered, I am an enthusiast, chiefly, for bones. Which is why I am so glad that you . . . fell into my life.' He grinned again, but it was like the skulls' grins, never touching his eyes.

'How did . . .' She had to wrestle with the words, jaw stiff as rusted hinges. It was like trying to talk with a turd in her mouth, and hardly better tasting. 'How did I get here?'

'I need bodies for my work. They are sometimes to be found where I found you. But I have never before found one still alive. I would judge you to be a spectacularly lucky woman.' He seemed to think about it for a moment. 'It would have been luckier still if you had not fallen in the first place but . . . since you did—'

'Where's my brother? Where's Benna?'

'Benna?'

Memory flooded back in a blinding instant. Blood pumping from between her brother's clutching fingers. The long blade sliding through his chest while she watched, helpless. His slack face, smeared with red.

She gave a croaking scream, bucked and twisted. Agony flashed up every limb and made her squirm the more, shudder, retch, but she was held fast. Her host watched her struggle, waxy face empty as a blank page. She sagged back, spitting and moaning as the pain grew worse and worse, gripping her like a giant vice, steadily tightened.

'Anger solves nothing.'

All she could do was growl, snatched breaths slurping through her gritted teeth.

'I imagine you are in some pain, now.' He pulled open a drawer in the cupboard and took out a long pipe, bowl stained black. 'I would try to get used to it, if you can.' He stooped and fished a hot coal from the fire with a set of tongs. 'I fear that pain will come to be your constant companion.'

The worn mouthpiece loomed at her. She'd seen husk-smokers often enough, sprawling like corpses, withered to useless husks themselves, caring for nothing but the next pipe. Husk was like mercy. A thing for the weak. For the cowardly.

He smiled his dead-man's smile again. 'This will help.'

Enough pain makes a coward of anyone.

The smoke burned at her lungs and made her sore ribs shake, each choke sending new shocks to the tips of her fingers. She groaned, face screwing up, struggling again, but more weakly, now. One more cough, and she lay limp. The edge was gone from the pain. The edge was gone from the fear and the panic. Everything slowly melted. Soft, warm, comfortable. Someone made a long, low moan. Her, maybe. She felt a tear run down the side of her face.

'More?' This time she held the smoke as it bit, blew it tickling out in a shimmering plume. Her breath came slower, and slower, the surging of blood in her head calmed to a gentle lapping.

'More?' The voice washed over her like waves on the smooth beach. The bones were blurred now, glistening in haloes of warm light. The coals in the grate were precious jewels, sparkling every colour. There was barely any pain, and what there was didn't matter. Nothing did. Her eyes flickered pleasantly, then even more pleasantly drifted shut. Mosaic patterns danced

and shifted on the insides of her eyelids. She floated on a warm sea, honey sweet . . .

‘Back with us?’ His face flickered into focus, hanging limp and white as a flag of surrender. ‘I was worried, I confess. I never expected you to wake, but now that you have, it would be a shame if—’

‘Benna?’ Monza’s head was still floating. She grunted, tried to work one ankle, and the grinding ache brought the truth back, crushed her face into a hopeless grimace.

‘Still sore? Perhaps I have a way to lift your spirits.’ He rubbed his long hands together. ‘The stitches are all out, now.’

‘How long did I sleep?’

‘A few hours.’

‘Before that?’

‘Just over twelve weeks.’ She stared back, numb. ‘Through the autumn, and into winter, and the new year will soon come. A fine time for new beginnings. That you have woken at all is nothing short of miraculous. Your injuries were . . . well, I think you will be pleased with my work. I know I am.’

He slid a greasy cushion from under the bench and propped her head up, handling her as carelessly as a butcher handles meat, bringing her chin forwards so she could look down at herself. So there was no choice but to. Her body was a lumpy outline under a coarse grey blanket, three leather belts across chest, hips and ankles.

‘The straps are for your own protection, to prevent you rolling from the bench while you slept.’ He hacked out a sudden chuckle. ‘We wouldn’t want you breaking anything, would we? Ha . . . ha! Wouldn’t want to break anything.’ He unbuckled the last of the belts, took the blanket between thumb and forefinger while she stared down, desperate to know, and desperate not to know at once.

He whipped it away like a showman displaying his prize exhibit.

She hardly recognised her own body. Stark naked, gaunt and withered as a beggar’s, pale skin stretched tight over ugly knobbles of bone, stained all over with great black, brown, purple, yellow blooms of bruise. Her eyes darted over her own wasted flesh, steadily widening as she struggled to take it in. She was slit all over with red lines. Dark and angry, edged with raised

pink flesh, stippled with the dots of pulled stitches. There were four, one above the other, following the curves of her hollow ribs on one side. More angled across her hips, down her legs, her right arm, her left foot.

She'd started to tremble. This butchered carcass couldn't be her body. Her breath hissed through her rattling teeth, and the blotched and shrivelled ribcage heaved in time. 'Uh . . .' she grunted. 'Uh . . .'

'I know! Impressive, eh?' He leaned forwards over her, following the ladder of red marks on her chest with sharp movements of his hand. 'The ribs here and the breastbone were quite shattered. It was necessary to make incisions to repair them, you understand, and to work on the lung. I kept the cutting to the minimum, but you can see that the damage—'

'Uh . . .'

'The left hip I am especially pleased with.' Pointing out a crimson zigzag from the corner of her hollow stomach down to the inside of her withered leg, surrounded on both sides by trails of red dots. 'The thighbone, here, unfortunately broke into itself.' He clicked his tongue and poked a finger into his clenched fist. 'Shortening the leg by a fraction, but, as luck would have it, your other shin was shattered, and I was able to remove the tiniest section of bone to make up the difference.' He frowned as he pushed her knees together, then watched them roll apart, feet flopping hopelessly outwards. 'One knee slightly higher than the other, and you won't stand quite so tall but, considering—'

'Uh . . .'

'Set, now.' He grinned as he squeezed gently at her shrivelled legs from the tops of her thighs down to her knobbly ankles. She watched him touching her, like a cook kneading at a plucked chicken, and hardly felt it. 'All quite set, and the screws removed. A wonder, believe me. If the doubters at the academy could see this now they wouldn't be laughing. If my old master could see this, even he—'

'Uh . . .' She slowly raised her right hand. Or the trembling mockery of a hand that dangled from the end of her arm. The palm was bent, shrunken, a great ugly scar where Gobba's wire had cut into the side. The fingers were crooked as tree roots, squashed together, the little one sticking out at a strange angle. Her breath hissed through gritted teeth as she tried to make a fist. The fingers scarcely moved, but the pain still shot up her arm and made bile burn the back of her throat.

‘The best I could do. Small bones, you see, badly damaged, and the tendons of the little finger were quite severed.’ Her host seemed disappointed. ‘A shock, of course. The marks will fade . . . somewhat. But really, considering the fall . . . well, here.’ The mouthpiece of the husk-pipe came towards her and she sucked on it greedily. Clung to it with her teeth as if it was her only hope. It was.

He tore a tiny piece from the corner of the loaf, the kind you might feed birds with. Monza watched him do it, mouth filling with sour spit. Hunger or sickness, there wasn’t much difference. She took it dumbly, lifted it to her lips, so weak that her left hand trembled with the effort, forced it between her teeth and down her throat.

Like swallowing broken glass.

‘Slowly,’ he murmured, ‘very slowly, you have eaten nothing but milk and sugar-water since you fell.’

The bread caught in her craw and she retched, gut clamping up tight around the knife-wound Faithful had given her.

‘Here.’ He slid his hand round her skull, gentle but firm, lifted her head and tipped a bottle of water to her lips. She swallowed, and again, then her eyes flicked towards his fingers. She could feel unfamiliar lumps there, down the side of her head. ‘I was forced to remove several pieces of your skull. I replaced them with coins.’

‘Coins?’

‘Would you rather I had left your brains exposed? Gold does not rust. Gold does not rot. An expensive treatment, of course, but if you had died, I could always have recouped my investment, and since you have not, well . . . I consider it money well spent. Your scalp will feel somewhat lumpy, but your hair will grow back. Such beautiful hair you have. Black as midnight.’

He let her head fall gently back against the bench and his hand lingered there. A soft touch. Almost a caress.

‘Normally I am a taciturn man. Too much time spent alone, perhaps.’ He flashed his corpse-smile at her. ‘But I find you . . . bring out the best in me. The mother of my children is the same. You remind me of her, in a way.’

Monza half-smiled back, but in her gut she felt a creeping of disgust. It mingled with the sickness she was feeling every so often, now. That sweating need.

She swallowed. ‘Could I—’

‘Of course.’ He was already holding the pipe out to her.

‘Close it.’

‘It won’t close!’ she hissed, three of the fingers just curling, the little one still sticking out straight, or as close to straight as it ever came. She remembered how nimble-fingered she used to be, how sure, and quick, and the frustration and the fury were sharper even than the pain. ‘They won’t close!’

‘For weeks you have been lying here. I did not mend you so you could smoke husk and do nothing. Try harder.’

‘Do you want to fucking try?’

‘Very well.’ His hand closed relentlessly around hers and forced the bent fingers into a crunching fist. Her eyes bulged from her head, breath whistling too fast for her to scream.

‘I doubt you understand how much I am helping you.’ He squeezed tighter and tighter. ‘One cannot grow without pain. One cannot improve without it. Suffering drives us to achieve great things.’ The fingers of her good hand plucked and scrabbled uselessly at his fist. ‘Love is a fine cushion to rest upon, but only hate can make you a better person. There.’ He let go of her and she sagged back, whimpering, watched her trembling fingers come gradually halfway open, scars standing out purple.

She wanted to kill him. She wanted to shriek every curse she knew. But she needed him too badly. So she held her tongue, sobbed, gasped, ground her teeth, smacked the back of her head against the bench.

‘Now, close your hand.’ She stared into his face, empty as a fresh-dug grave. ‘Now, or I must do it for you.’

She growled with the effort, whole arm throbbing to the shoulder. Gradually, the fingers inched closed, the little one still sticking straight. ‘There, you fucker!’ She shook her numb, knobbly, twisted fist under his nose. ‘There!’

‘Was that so hard?’ He held the pipe out to her and she snatched it from him. ‘You need not thank me.’

‘And we will see if you can take the—’

She squealed, knees buckling, would have fallen if he hadn’t caught her.

‘Still?’ He frowned. ‘You should be able to walk. The bones are knitted. Pain, of course, but . . . perhaps a fragment within one of the joints, still. Where does it hurt?’

‘Everywhere!’ she snarled at him.

‘I trust this is not simply your stubbornness. I would hate to open the wounds in your legs again unnecessarily.’ He hooked one arm under her knees and lifted her without much effort back onto the bench. ‘I must go for a while.’

She clutched at him. ‘You’ll be back soon?’

‘Very soon.’

His footsteps vanished down the corridor. She heard the front door click shut, the sound of the key scraping in the lock.

‘Son of a fucking whore.’ And she swung her legs down from the bench. She winced as her feet touched the floor, bared her teeth as she straightened up, growled softly as she let go of the bench and stood on her own feet.

It hurt like hell, and it felt good.

She took a long breath, gathered herself and began to waddle towards the far side of the room, pains shooting through her ankles, knees, hips, into her back, arms held out wide for balance. She made it to the cupboard and clung to its corner, slid open the drawer. The pipe lay inside, a jar of bubbly green glass beside it with some black lumps of husk in the bottom. How she wanted it. Her mouth was dry, her palms sticky with sick need. She slapped the drawer closed and hobbled back to the bench. Everything was still pierced with cold aches, but she was getting stronger each day. Soon she’d be ready. But not yet.

Patience is the parent of success, Stolicus wrote.

Across the room, and back, growling through her clenched teeth. Across the room and back, lurching and grimacing. Across the room and back, whimpering, wobbling, spitting. She leaned against the bench, long enough to get her breath.

Across the room and back again.

The mirror had a crack across it, but she wished it had been far more broken.

Your hair is like a curtain of midnight!

Shaved off down the left side of her head, grown back to a scabby stubble. The rest hung lank, tangled and greasy as old seaweed.

Your eyes gleam like piercing sapphires, beyond price!

Yellow, bloodshot, lashes gummed to clumps, rimmed red-raw in sockets purple-black with pain.

Lips like rose petals?

Cracked, parched, peeling grey with yellow scum gathered at the corners. There were three long scabs across her sucked-in cheek, sore brown against waxy white.

You look especially beautiful this morning, Monza . . .

On each side of her neck, withered down to a bundle of pale cords, the red scars left by Gobba's wire. She looked like a woman just dead of the plague. She looked scarcely better than the skulls stacked on the mantelpiece.

Beyond the mirror, her host was smiling. 'What did I tell you? You look well.'

The very Goddess of War!

'I look a fucking carnival curiosity!' she sneered, and the ruined crone in the mirror sneered back at her.

'Better than when I found you. You should learn to look on the happy side of the case.' He tossed the mirror down, stood and pulled on his coat. 'I must leave you for the time being, but I will be back, as I always am. Continue working the hand, but keep your strength. Later I must cut into your legs and establish the cause of your difficulty in standing.'

She forced a sickly smile onto her face. 'Yes. I see.'

'Good. Soon, then.' He threw his canvas bag over his shoulder. His footsteps creaked down the corridor, the lock closed. She counted slowly to ten.

Off the bench and she snatched up a pair of needles and a knife from the tray. She limped to the cupboard, ripped open the drawer, stuffed the pipe into the pocket of the borrowed trousers hanging from her hip bones, the jar with it. She lurched down the hall, boards creaking under bare feet. Into the bedroom, grimacing as she fished the old boots from under the bed, grunting as she pulled them on.

Out into the corridor again, her breath hissing with effort, and pain, and fear. She knelt down by the front door, or at least lowered herself by

creaking degrees until her burning knees were on the boards. It was a long time since she'd worked a lock. She fished and stabbed with the needles, twisted hand fumbling.

'Turn, you bastard. Turn.'

Luckily the lock wasn't good. The tumblers caught, turned with a satisfying clatter. She grabbed the knob and hauled the door open.

Night, and a hard one. Cold rain lashed an overgrown yard, rank weeds edged with the slightest glimmer of moonlight, crumbling walls slick with wet. Beyond a leaning fence bare trees rose up, darkness gathered under their branches. A rough night for an invalid to be out of doors. But the chill wind whipping at her face, the clean air in her mouth, felt almost like being alive again. Better to freeze free than spend another moment with the bones. She ducked out into the rain, hobbled across the garden, nettles snatching at her. Into the trees, between their glistening trunks, and she struck away from the track and didn't look back.

Up a long slope, bent double, good hand dragging at the muddy ground, pulling her on. She grunted at each slipping footfall, every muscle screeching at her. Black rain dripped from black branches, pattered on fallen leaves, crept through her hair and plastered it across her face, crept through her stolen clothes and stuck them to her sore skin.

'One more step.'

She had to make some distance from the bench, and the knives, and that slack, white, empty face. That face, and the one in the mirror.

'One more step . . . one more step . . . one more step.'

The black ground lurched past, her hand trailing against the wet mud, the tree roots. She followed her father as he pushed the plough, long ago, hand trailing through the turned earth for stones.

What would I do without you?

She knelt in the cold woods beside Cosca, waiting for the ambush, her nose full of that damp, crisp smell of trees, her heart bursting with fear and excitement.

You have a devil in you.

She thought of whatever she needed to so she could keep going, memories rushing on ahead of her clumsy boots.

Off the terrace and let us be done.

She stopped, stood bent over, shuddering smoky breaths into the wet night. No idea how far she'd come, where she'd started, where she was going. For now, it hardly mattered.

She wedged her back against a slimy tree-trunk, prised at her belt buckle with her good hand, shoved at it with the side of the other one. It took her a teeth-gritted age to finally get the damn thing open. At least she didn't have to pull her trousers down. They sagged off her bony arse and down her scarred legs under their own weight. She paused a moment, wondering how she'd get them back up.

One battle at a time, Stolicus wrote.

She grabbed a low branch, slick with rain, lowered herself under it, right hand cradled against her wet shirt, bare knees trembling.

'Come on,' she hissed, trying to make her knotted bladder unclench. 'If you need to go, just go. Just go. Just—'

She grunted with relief, piss spattering into the mud along with the rain, trickling down the hillside. Her right leg was burning worse than ever, wasted muscles quivering. She winced as she tried to move her hand down the branch, shift her weight to her other leg. In a sick instant one foot flew out from under her and she went over backwards, breath whooping in, reason all blotted out by the dizzy memory of falling. She bit her tongue as her head cracked down in the mud, slid a stride or two, flailed to a stop in a wet hollow full of rotting leaves. She lay in the tapping rain, trousers tangled round her ankles, and wept.

It was a low moment, no doubt of that.

She bawled like a baby. Helpless, heedless, desperate. Her sobs racked her, choked her, made her mangled body shake. She didn't know the last time she'd cried. Never, maybe. Benna had done the weeping for both of them. Now all the pain and fear of a dozen black years and more came leaking out of her screwed-up face. She lay in the mud, and tortured herself with everything she'd lost.

Benna was dead, and everything good in her was dead with him. The way they made each other laugh. That understanding that comes from a life together, gone. He'd been home, family, friend and more, all killed at once. All snuffed out carelessly as a cheap candle. Her hand was ruined. She held the aching, mocking remnant of it to her chest. The way she used to draw a sword, use a pen, firmly shake a hand, all crushed under Gobba's boot. The

way she used to walk, run, ride, all scattered broken down the mountainside under Orso's balcony. Her place in the world, ten years' work, built with her own sweat and blood, struggled for, sweated for, vanished like smoke. All she'd worked for, hoped for, dreamed of.

Dead.

She worked her belt back up, dead leaves dragged up with it, and fumbled it shut. A few last sobs, then she snorted snot down, wiped the rest from under her nose on her cold hand. The life she'd had was gone. The woman she'd been was gone. What they'd broken could never be mended.

But there was no point weeping about it now.

She knelt in the mud, shivering in the darkness, silent. These things weren't just gone, they'd been stolen from her. Her brother wasn't just dead, he'd been murdered. Slaughtered like an animal. She forced her twisted fingers closed until they made a trembling fist.

'I'll kill them.'

She made herself see their faces, one by one. Gobba, the fat hog, lounging in the shadows. A waste of decent flesh. Her face twitched as she saw his boot stomp down across her hand, felt the bones splinter. Mauthis, the banker, his cold eyes staring down at her brother's corpse. Inconvenienced. Faithful Carpi. A man who'd walked beside her, eaten beside her, fought beside her, year upon year. I really am sorry. She saw his arm go back, ready to stab her through, felt the wound niggling at her side, pressed at it through her wet shirt, dug her fingers into it back and front until it burned like fury.

'I'll kill them.'

Ganmark. She saw his soft, tired face. Flinched as his sword punched through Benna's body. That's that. Prince Ario, lounging in his chair, wine glass dangling. His knife cut Benna's neck open, blood bubbling between his fingers. She made herself see each detail, remember each word said. Foscar, too. I'll have no part of this. But that changed nothing.

'I'll kill them all.'

And Orso, last. Orso, who she'd fought for, struggled for, killed for. Grand Duke Orso, Lord of Talins, who'd turned on them over a rumour. Murdered her brother, left her broken for nothing. For a fear they'd steal his place. Her jaw ached, her teeth were clenched so hard. She felt his fatherly

hand on her shoulder and her shivering flesh crawled. She saw his smile, heard his voice echoing in her pounding skull.

What would I do without you?

Seven men.

She dragged herself up, chewing at her sore lip, and lurched off through the dark trees, water trickling from her sodden hair and down her face. The pain gnawed through her legs, her sides, her hand, her skull, but she bit down hard and forced herself on.

'I'll kill them . . . I'll kill them . . . I'll kill them . . .'

It hardly needed to be said. She was done with crying.

The old track was grown over, almost past recognition. Branches thrashed at Monza's aching body. Brambles snatched at her burning legs. She crept through a gap in the overgrown hedgerow and frowned down at the place where she'd been born. She wished she'd been able to make the stubborn soil bear a crop as well as it bloomed thorn and nettle now. The upper field was a patch of dead scrub. The lower was a mass of briar. The remains of the mean farmhouse peered sadly over from the edge of the woods, and she peered sadly back.

It seemed that time had given both of them a kicking.

She squatted, gritting her teeth as her withered muscles stretched around her crooked bones, listening to a few birds cawing at the sinking sun, watching the wind twitch the wild grass and snatch at the nettles. Until she was sure the place was every bit as abandoned as it looked. Then she gently worked the life back into her battered legs and limped for the buildings. The house where her father died was a tumbled-down shell and a rotted beam or two, its outline so small it was hard to believe she could ever have lived there. She, and her father, and Benna too. She turned her head and spat into the dry dirt. She hadn't come here for bitter-sweet remembrances.

She'd come for revenge.

The shovel was where she'd left it two winters ago, blade still bright under some rubbish in the corner of the roofless barn. Thirty strides into the trees. Hard to imagine how easily she'd taken those long, smooth, laughing steps as she waddled through the weeds, spade dragging behind her. Into the quiet woods, wincing at every footfall, broken patterns of sunlight dancing across the fallen leaves as the evening wore down.

Thirty strides. She hacked the brambles away with the edge of the shovel, finally managed to drag the rotten tree-trunk to one side and began to dig. It would've been some task with both her hands and both her legs. As she was now, it was a groaning, sweating, teeth-grinding ordeal. But Monza had never been one to give up halfway, whatever the costs. You have a devil in you, Cosca used to tell her, and he'd been right. He'd learned it the hard way.

Night was coming on when she heard the hollow clomp of metal against wood. She scraped the last soil away, prised the iron ring from the dirt with broken fingernails. She strained, growled, stolen clothes stuck cold to her scarred skin. The trapdoor came open with a squealing of metal and a black hole beckoned, a ladder half-seen in the darkness.

She worked her way down, painstakingly slow since she'd no interest in breaking any more bones. She fumbled in the black until she found the shelf, wrestled with the flint in her bad joke of a hand and finally got the lamp lit. Light flared out weakly around the vaulted cellar, glittering along the metal edges of Benna's precautions, sitting safe, just as they'd left them.

He always had liked to plan ahead.

Keys hung from a row of rusted hooks. Keys to empty buildings, scattered across Styria. Places to hide. A rack along the left-hand wall bristled with blades, long and short. She opened a chest beside it. Clothes, carefully folded, never worn. She doubted they'd even fit her wasted body now. She reached out to touch one of Benna's shirts, remembering him picking out the silk for it, caught sight of her own right hand in the lamplight. She snatched up a pair of gloves, threw one away and shoved the maimed thing into the other, wincing as she worked the fingers, the little one still sticking out stubbornly straight.

Wooden boxes were stacked at the back of the cellar, twenty of them all told. She hobbled to the nearest one and pushed back the lid. Hermon's gold glittered at her. Heaps of coins. A small fortune in that box alone. She touched her fingertips gingerly to the side of her skull, felt the ridges under her skin. Gold. There's so much more you can do with it than just hold your head together.

She dug her hand in and let coins trickle between her fingers. The way you somehow have to if you find yourself alone with a box of money. These would be her weapons. These, and . . .

She let her gloved hand trail across the blades on the rack, stopped and went back one. A long sword of workmanlike grey steel. It didn't have much in the way of ornamental flourishes, but there was a fearsome beauty about it still, to her eye. The beauty of a thing fitted perfectly to its purpose. It was a Calvez, forged by the best swordsmith in Styria. A gift from her to Benna, not that he'd have known the difference between a good blade and a carrot. He'd worn it for a week then swapped it for an overpriced length of scrap metal with stupid gilt basketwork.

The one he'd been trying to draw when they killed him.

She curled her fingers round the cold grip, strange in her left hand, and slid a few inches of steel from the sheath. It shone bright and eager in the lamplight. Good steel bends, but never breaks. Good steel stays always sharp and ready. Good steel feels no pain, no pity and, above all, no remorse.

She felt herself smile. The first time in months. The first time since Gobba's wire hissed tight around her neck.

Vengeance, then.

Fish out of Water

The cold wind swept in from the sea and gave the docks of Talins a damn good blasting. Or a damn bad one, depending how well dressed you were. Shivers weren't that well dressed at all. He pulled his thin coat tight round his shoulders, though he might as well not have bothered, for all the good it did him. He narrowed his eyes and squinted miserably into the latest gust. He was earning his name today, alright. He had been for weeks.

He remembered sitting warm by the fire, up in the North in a good house in Uffrith, with a belly full of meat and a head full of dreams, talking to Vossula about the wondrous city of Talins. He remembered it with some bitterness, because it was that bloody merchant, with his dewy eyes and his honey tales of home, who'd talked him into this nightmare jaunt to Styria.

Vossula had told him that the sun always shone in Talins. That was why Shivers had sold his good coat before he set off. Didn't want to end up sweating, did he? Seemed now, as he shivered like a curled-up autumn leaf only just still clinging to its branch, that Vossula had been doing some injury to the truth.

Shivers watched the restless waves chew at the quay, throwing icy spray over the few rotting skiffs stirring at their rotting wharves. He listened to the hawsers creaking, to the ill seabirds croaking, to the wind making a loose shutter rattle, to the grunts and grumbles of the men around him. All of 'em huddled on the docks for the sniff of a chance at work, and there'd never been in one place such a crowd of sad stories. Grubby and gaunt, ragged clothes and pinched-in faces. Desperate men. Men just like Shivers, in other words. Except they'd been born here. He'd been stupid enough to choose this.

He slid the last hard heel of bread from his inside pocket as carefully as a miser breaking out his hoard, took a nibble from the end, making sure to taste every crumb of it. Then he caught the man nearest to him staring, licking his pale lips. Shivers felt his shoulders slump, broke some off and handed it over.

'Thanks, friend,' as he wolfed it down.

‘No bother,’ said Shivers, though he’d spent hours chopping logs for it. Quite a lot of painful bother, in fact. The rest of ’em were all looking now, big sad eyes like pups needed feeding. He threw up his hands. ‘If I had bread for everyone, why the fuck would I be stood here?’

They turned away grumbling. He snorted cold snot up and spat it out. Aside from some stale bread it was the only thing to have passed his lips that morning, and going in the wrong direction. He’d come with a pocketful of silver, and a faceful of smiles, and a swelling chestful of happy hope. Ten weeks in Styria, and all three of those were emptied to the bitter dregs.

Vossula had told him the people of Talins were friendly as lambs, welcomed foreigners like guests. He’d found nothing but scorn, and a lot of folk keen to use any rotten trick to relieve him of his dwindling money. They weren’t just handing out second chances on the street corners here. No more’n they had been in the North.

A boat had come in now, was tying off at the quay, fishers scurrying over and around it, hauling at ropes and cursing at sailcloth. Shivers felt the rest of the desperate perking up, wondering if there might be a shift of work for one of ’em. He felt a dismal little flair of hope in his own chest, however hard he tried to keep it down, and stood up keen on tiptoes to watch.

Fish slid from the nets onto the dockside, squirming silver in the watery sun. It was a good, honest trade, fishing. A life on the salty brine where no sharp words are spoken, all men set together against the wind, plucking the shining bounty from the sea, and all that. A noble trade, or so Shivers tried to tell himself, in spite of the stink. Any trade that’d have him seemed pretty noble about then.

A man weathered as an old gatepost hopped down from the boat and strutted over, all self-importance, and the beggars jostled each other to catch his eye. The captain, Shivers guessed.

‘Need two hands,’ he said, pushing his battered cap back and looking those hopeful, hopeless faces over. ‘You, and you.’

Hardly needed saying Shivers weren’t one of ’em. His head sagged along with the rest as he watched the lucky pair hurrying back to the boat after its captain. One was the bastard he gave his bread to, didn’t so much as look round, let alone put in a word for him. Maybe it was what you gave out that made a man, not what you got back, like Shivers’ brother used to say, but getting back’s a mighty good thing to stop you starving.

‘Shit on this.’ And he started after them, picking his way between the fishers sorting their flapping catch into buckets and barrows. Wearing the friendliest grin he could muster, he walked up to where the captain was busying himself on the deck. ‘Nice boat you got here,’ he tried, though it was a slimy tub of shit far as he could see.

‘And?’

‘Would you think of taking me on?’

‘You? What d’you know about fish?’

Shivers was a proven hand with axe, blade, spear and shield. A Named Man who’d led charges and held lines across the North and back. Who’d taken a few bad wounds and given out a lot of worse. But he was set on doing better’n that, and he was clinging to the notion tight as a drowning man to driftwood.

‘I used to fish a lot, when I was a boy. Down by the lake, with my father.’ His bare feet crunching in the shingle. The light glistening on the water. His father’s smile, and his brother’s.

But the captain didn’t come over nostalgic. ‘Lake? Sea-fishing’s what we do, boy.’

‘Sea-fishing, I’ve got to say, I’ve had no practice at.’

‘Then why you wasting my bloody time? I can get plenty of Styrian fishers for my measure, the best hands, all with a dozen years at sea.’ He waved at the idle men lining the dock, looked more like they’d spent a dozen years in an ale-cup. ‘Why should I give work to some Northern beggar?’

‘I’ll work hard. Had some bad luck is all. I’m just asking for a chance.’

‘So are we all, but I’m not hearing why I should be the one to give it you.’

‘Just a chance is—’

‘Away from my boat, you big pale bastard!’ The captain snatched up a length of rough wood from the deck and had himself a step forwards, as if he was set to beat a dog. ‘Get off, and take your bad luck with you!’

‘I may be no kind of fisher, but I’ve always had a talent for making men bleed. Best put that stick down before I make you fucking eat it.’ Shivers gave a look to go with the warning. A killing look, straight out of the North. The captain faltered, stopped, stood there grumbling. Then he tossed his stick away and started shouting at one of his own people.

Shivers hunched his shoulders and didn't look back. He trudged to the mouth of an alley, past the torn bills pasted on the walls, the words daubed over 'em. Into the shadows between the crowded buildings, and the sounds of the docks went muffled at his back. It had been the same story with the smiths, and with the bakers, and with every damn trade in this damn city. There'd even been a cobbler who'd looked like a good enough sort until he told Shivers to fuck himself.

Vossula had said there was work everywhere in Styria, all you had to do was ask. It seemed, for reasons he couldn't fathom, that Vossula had been lying out of his arse the whole way. Shivers had asked him all kinds of questions. But it occurred to him now, as he sank down on a slimy doorstep with his worn-out boots in the gutter and some fish-heads for company, he hadn't asked the one question he should've. The one question staring him in the face ever since he got here.

Tell me, Vossula – if Styria's such a slice of wonder, why the hell are you up here in the North?

'Fucking Styria,' he hissed in Northern. He had that pain behind his nose meant he was close to weeping, and he was that far gone he was scarcely even shamed. Caul Shivers. Rattleneck's son. A Named Man who'd faced death in all weathers. Who'd fought beside the biggest names in the North – Rudd Threetrees, Black Dow, the Dogman, Harding Grim. Who'd led the charge against the Union near the Cumnur. Who'd held the line against a thousand Shanka at Dunbrec. Who'd fought seven days of murder up in the High Places. He almost felt a smile tugging at his mouth to think of the wild, brave times he'd come out alive from. He knew he'd been shitting himself the whole way, but what happy days those seemed now. Least he hadn't been alone.

He looked up at the sound of footsteps. Four men were ambling into the alley from the docks, the way he'd come. They had that sorry look men can get when they've got mischief in mind. Shivers hunched into his doorway, hoping whatever mischief they were planning didn't include him.

His heart took a downward turn as they gathered in a half-circle, standing over him. One had a bloated-up red nose, the kind you get from too much drinking. Another was bald as a boot-toe, had a length of wood held by his leg. A third had a scraggy beard and a mouthful of brown teeth. Not a pretty set of men, and Shivers didn't reckon they had anything pretty in mind.

The one at the front grinned down, a nasty-looking bastard with a pointed rat-face. ‘What you got for us?’

‘I wish I’d something worth the taking. But I’ve not. You might as well just go your way.’

Rat Face frowned at his bald mate, annoyed they might get nothing. ‘Your boots, then.’

‘In this weather? I’ll freeze.’

‘Freeze. See if I care a shit. Boots, now, before we give you a kicking for the sport of it.’

‘Fucking Talins,’ mouthed Shivers under his breath, the ashes of self-pity in his throat suddenly flaring up hot and bloody. It gnawed at him to come this low. Bastards had no use for his boots, just wanted to make themselves feel big. But it’d be a fool’s fight four against one, and with no weapon handy. A fool’s choice to get killed for some old leather, however cold it was.

He crouched down, muttering as he started to pull his boots off. Then his knee caught Red Nose right in his fruits and doubled him over with a breathy sigh. Surprised himself as much as he did them. Maybe going barefoot was more’n his pride would stretch to. He smashed Rat Face on the chin, grabbed him by the front of his coat and rammed him back into one of his mates, sent them sprawling over together, yelping like cats in a rainstorm.

Shivers dodged the bald bastard’s stick as it came down and shrugged it off his shoulder. The man came stumbling past, off balance, mouth wide open. Shivers planted a punch right on the point of his hanging chin and snapped his head up, then hooked his legs away with one boot, sent him squawking onto his back and followed him down. Shivers’ fist crunched into his face – two, three, four times, and made a right mess of it, spattering blood up the arm of Shivers’ dirty coat.

He scrambled away, leaving Baldy spitting teeth into the gutter. Red Nose was still curled up wailing with his hands between his legs. But the other two had knives out now, sharp metal glinting. Shivers crouched, fists clenched, breathing hard, eyes flicking from one of ’em to the other and his anger wilting fast. Should’ve just given his boots over. Probably they’d be prising them off his cold, dead feet in a short and painful while. Bloody pride, that rubbish only did a man harm.

Rat Face wiped blood from under his nose. ‘Oh, you’re a dead man now, you Northern fuck! You’re good as a—’ His leg suddenly went from underneath him and he fell, shrieking, knife bouncing from his hand.

Someone slid out of the shadows behind him. Tall and hooded, sword held loose in a pale left fist, long, thin blade catching such light as there was in the alley and glinting murder. The last of the boot-thieves still standing, the one with the shitty teeth, stared at that length of steel with eyes big as a cow’s, his knife looking a piss-poor tool all of a sudden.

‘You might want to run for it.’ Shivers frowned, caught off guard. A woman’s voice. Brown Teeth didn’t need telling twice. He turned and sprinted off down the alley.

‘My leg!’ Rat Face was yelling, clutching at the back of his knee with one bloody hand. ‘My fucking leg!’

‘Stop whining or I’ll slit the other one.’

Baldy was lying there, saying nothing. Red Nose had finally fought his way moaning to his knees.

‘Want my boots, do you?’ Shivers took a step and kicked him in the fruits again, lifted him up and put him back down mewling on his face. ‘There’s one of ’em, bastard!’ He watched the newcomer, blood swooshswooshing behind his eyes, not sure how he came through that without getting some steel in his guts. Not sure if he might not still. This woman didn’t have the look of good news. ‘What d’you want?’ he growled at her.

‘Nothing you’ll have trouble with.’ He could see the corner of a smile inside her hood. ‘I might have some work for you.’

A big plate of meat and vegetables in some kind of gravy, slabs of doughy bread beside. Might’ve been good, might not have been, Shivers was too busy ramming it into his face to tell. Most likely he looked a right animal, two weeks unshaved, pinched and greasy from dossing in doorways, and not even good ones. But he was far past caring how he looked, even with a woman watching.

She still had her hood up, though they were out of the weather now. She stayed back against the wall, where it was dark. She tipped her head forwards when folk came close, tar-black hair hanging across one cheek. He’d worked out a notion of her face anyway, in the moments when he could drag his eyes away from his food, and he reckoned it was a good one.

Strong, with hard bones in it, a fierce line of jaw and a lean neck, a blue vein showing up the side. Dangerous, he reckoned, though that wasn't such a clever guess since he'd seen her slit the back of a man's knee with small regret. Still, there was something in the way her narrow eyes held him that made him nervous. Calm and cold, as if she'd already got his full measure, and knew just what he'd do next. Knew better'n he did. She had three long marks down one cheek, old cuts still healing. She had a glove on her right hand, and scarcely used it. A limp too he'd noticed on the way here. Caught up in some dark business, maybe, but Shivers didn't have so many friends he could afford to be picky. Right then, anyone who fed him had the full stretch of his loyalty.

She watched him eat. 'Hungry?'

'Somewhat.'

'Long way from home?'

'Somewhat.'

'Had some bad luck?'

'More'n my share. But I made some bad choices, too.'

'The two go together.'

'That is a fact.' He tossed knife and spoon clattering down onto the empty plate. 'I should've thought it through.' He wiped up the gravy with the last slice of bread. 'But I've always been my own worst enemy.' They sat facing each other in silence as he chewed it. 'You've not told me your name.'

'No.'

'Like that, is it?'

'I'm paying, aren't I? It's whatever way I say it is.'

'Why are you paying? A friend of mine . . .' He cleared his throat, starting to doubt whether Vossula had been any kind of friend. 'A man I know told me to expect nothing for free in Styria.'

'Good advice. I need something from you.'

Shivers licked at the inside of his mouth and it tasted sour. He had a debt to this woman, now, and he wasn't sure what he'd have to pay. By the look of her, he reckoned it might cost him dear. 'What do you need?'

'First of all, have a bath. No one's going to deal with you in that state.'

Now the hunger and the cold were gone, they'd left a bit of room for shame. 'I'm happier not stinking, believe it or not. I got some fucking pride left.'

‘Good for you. Bet you can’t wait to get fucking clean, then.’

He worked his shoulders around, uncomfortable. He had this feeling like he was stepping into a pool with no idea how deep it might be. ‘Then what?’

‘Not much. You go into a smoke-house and ask for a man called Sajaam. You say Nicomo demands his presence at the usual place. You bring him to me.’

‘Why not do that yourself?’

‘Because I’m paying you to do it, fool.’ She held up a coin in her gloved fist. Silver glinted in the firelight, design of weighing scales stamped into the bright metal. ‘You bring Sajaam to me, you get a scale. You decide you still want fish, you can buy yourself a barrelful.’

Shivers frowned. For some fine-looking woman to come out of nowhere, more’n likely save his life, then make him a golden offer? His luck had never been anywhere near that good. But eating had only reminded him how much he used to enjoy doing it. ‘I can do that.’

‘Good. Or you can do something else, and get fifty.’

‘Fifty?’ Shivers’ voice was an eager croak. ‘This a joke?’

‘You see me laughing? Fifty, I said, and if you still want fish you can buy your own boat and have change for some decent tailoring, how’s that?’

Shivers tugged somewhat shamefacedly at the frayed edge of his coat. With that much he could hop the next boat back to Uffrith and kick Vossula’s skinny arse from one end of the town to the other. A dream that had been his one source of pleasure for some time. ‘What do you want for fifty?’

‘Not much. You go into a smoke-house and ask for a man called Sajaam. You say Nicomo demands his presence at the usual place. You bring him to me.’ She paused for a moment. ‘Then you help me kill a man.’

It was no surprise, if he was honest with himself for once. There was only one kind of work that he was really good at. Certainly only one kind that anyone would pay him fifty scales for. He’d come here to be a better man. But it was just like the Dogman had told him. Once your hands are bloody, it ain’t so easy to get ’em clean.

Something poked his thigh under the table and he near jumped out of his chair. The pommel of a long knife lay between his legs. A fighting knife,

steel crosspiece gleaming orange, its sheathed blade in the woman's gloved hand.

'Best take it.'

'I didn't say I'd kill anyone.'

'I know what you said. The blade's just to show Sajaam you mean business.'

He had to admit he didn't much care for a woman surprising him with a knife between his thighs. 'I didn't say I'd kill anyone.'

'I didn't say you did.'

'Right then. Just as long as you know.' He snatched the blade from her and slid it down inside his coat.

The knife pressed against his chest as he walked up, nuzzling at him like an old lover back for more. Shivers knew it was nothing to be proud of. Any fool can carry a knife. But even so, he wasn't sure he didn't like the weight of it against his ribs. Felt like being someone again.

He'd come to Styria looking for honest work. But when the purse runs empty, dishonest work has to do. Shivers couldn't say he'd ever seen a place with a less honest look about it than this one. A heavy door in a dirty, bare, windowless wall, with a big man standing guard on each side. Shivers could tell it in the way they stood – they had weapons, and were right on the edge of putting 'em to use. One was a dark-skinned Southerner, black hair hanging around his face.

'Need something?' he asked, while the other gave Shivers the eyeball.

'Here to see Sajaam.'

'You armed?' Shivers slid out the knife, held it up hilt first, and the man took it off him. 'With me, then.' The hinges creaked as the door swung open.

The air was thick on the other side, hazy with sweet smoke. It scratched at Shivers' throat and made him want to cough, prickled at his eyes and made them water. It was dim and quiet, too sticky warm for comfort after the nip outside. Lamps of coloured glass threw patterns across the stained walls – green, and red, and yellow flares in the murk. The place was like a bad dream.

Curtains hung about, dirty silk rustling in the gloom. Folk sprawled on cushions, half-dressed and half-asleep. A man lay on his back, mouth wide

open, pipe dangling from his hand, trace of smoke still curling from the bowl. A woman was pressed against him, on her side. Both their faces were beaded with sweat, slack as corpses. Looked like an uneasy cross between delight and despair, but tending towards the latter.

'This way.' Shivers followed his guide through the haze and down a shadowy corridor. A woman leaning in a doorway watched him pass with dead eyes, saying nothing. Someone was grunting somewhere, 'Oh, oh, oh,' almost bored.

Through a curtain of clicking beads and into another big room, less smoky but more worrying. Men were scattered about it, an odd mix of types and colours. Judging by their looks, all used to violence. Eight were sitting at a table strewn with glasses, bottles and small money, playing cards. More lounged about in the shadows. Shivers' eye fell right away on a nasty-looking hatchet in easy reach of one, and he didn't reckon it was the only weapon about. A clock was nailed up on the wall, innards dangling, swinging back and forth, tick, tock, tick, loud enough to set his nerves jangling even worse.

A big man sat at the head of the table, the chief's place if this had been the North. An old man, face creased like leather past its best. His skin was oily dark, short hair and beard dusted with iron grey. He had a gold coin he was fiddling with, flipping it across his knuckles from one side of his hand back to the other. The guide leaned down to whisper in his ear, then handed across the knife. His eyes and the eyes of the others were on Shivers, now. A scale was starting to seem a small reward for the task, all of a sudden.

'You Sajaam?' Louder than Shivers had in mind, voice squeaky from the smoke.

The old man's smile was a yellow curve in his dark face. 'Sajaam is my name, as all my sweet friends will confirm. You know, you can tell an awful lot about a man from the style of weapon he carries.'

'That so?'

Sajaam slid the knife from its sheath and held it up, candlelight glinting on steel. 'Not a cheap blade, but not expensive either. Fit for the job, and no frills at the edges. Sharp, and hard, and meaning business. Am I close to the mark?'

'Somewhere round it.' It was plain he was one of those who loved to prattle on, so Shivers didn't bother to mention that it weren't even his knife.

Less said, sooner he could be on his way.

'What might your name be, friend?' Though the friend bit didn't much convince.

'Caul Shivers.'

'Brrrr.' Sajaam shook his big shoulders around like he was cold, to much chuckling from his men. Easily tickled, by the look of things. 'You are a long, long way from home, my man.'

'Don't I fucking know it. I've a message for you. Nicomo demands your presence.'

The good humour drained from the room quick as blood from a slit throat. 'Where?'

'The usual place.'

'Demands, does he?' A couple of Sajaam's people were moving away from the walls, hands creeping in the shadows. 'Awfully bold of him. And why would my old friend Nicomo send a big white Northman with a blade to talk to me?' It came to Shivers about then that, for reasons unknown, the woman might've landed him right in the shit. Clearly she weren't this Nicomo character. But he'd swallowed his fill of scorn these last few weeks, and the dead could have him before he tongued up any more.

'Ask him yourself. I didn't come here to swap questions, old man. Nicomo demands your presence in the usual place, and that's all. Now get off your fat black arse before I lose my temper.'

There was a long and ugly pause, while everyone had a think about that. 'I like it,' grunted Sajaam. 'You like that?' he asked one of his thugs.

'It's alright, I guess, if that style o' thing appeals.'

'On occasion. Large words and bluster and hairy-chested manliness. Too much gets boring with great speed, but a little can sometimes make me smile. So Nicomo demands my presence, does he?'

'He does,' said Shivers, no choice but to let the current drag him where it pleased, and hope to wash up whole.

'Well, then.' The old man tossed his cards down on the table and slowly stood. 'Let it never be said old Sajaam reneged on a debt. If Nicomo is calling . . . the usual place it is.' He pushed the knife Shivers had brought through his belt. 'I'll keep hold of this though, hmmm? Just for the moment.'

It was late when they got to the place the woman had showed him and the rotten garden was dark as a cellar. Far as Shivers could tell it was empty as one too. Just torn papers twitching on the night air, old news hanging from the slimy bricks.

'Well?' snapped Sajaam. 'Where's Cosca?'

'Said she'd be here,' Shivers muttered, half to himself.

'She?' His hand was on the hilt of the knife. 'What the hell are you—'

'Over here, you old prick.' She slid out from behind a tree-trunk and into a scrap of light, hood back. Now Shivers saw her clearly, she was even finer-looking than he'd thought, and harder-looking too. Very fine, and very hard, with a sharp red line down the side of her neck, like the scars you see on hanged men. She had this frown – brows drawn in hard, lips pressed tight, eyes narrowed and fixed in front. Like she'd decided to break a door down with her head, and didn't care a shit for the results.

Sajaam's face had gone slack as a soaked shirt. 'You're alive.'

'Still sharp as ever, eh?'

'But I heard—'

'No.'

Didn't take long for the old man to scrape himself together. 'You shouldn't be in Talins, Murcatto. You shouldn't be within a hundred miles of Talins. Most of all, you shouldn't be within a hundred miles of me.' He cursed in some language Shivers didn't know, then tipped his face back towards the dark sky. 'God, God, why could you not have sent me an honest life to lead?'

The woman snorted. 'Because you haven't the guts for it. That and you like money too much.'

'All true, regrettably.' They might've talked like old friends, but Sajaam's hand hadn't left the knife. 'What do you want?'

'Your help killing some men.'

'The Butcher of Caprile needs my help killing, eh? As long as none of them are too close to Duke Orso—'

'He'll be the last.'

'Oh, you mad bitch.' Sajaam slowly shook his head. 'How you love to test me, Monzcarro. How you always loved to test us all. You'll never do it. Never, not if you wait until the sun burns out.'

‘What if I could, though? Don’t tell me it hasn’t been your fondest wish all these years.’

‘All these years when you were spreading fire and murder across Styria in his name? Happy to take his orders and his coin, lick his arse like a puppy dog with a new bone? Is it those years you mean? I don’t recall you offering your shoulder for me to weep upon.’

‘He killed Benna.’

‘Is that so? The bills said Duke Rogont’s agents got you both.’ Sajaam was pointing out some old papers stirring on the wall behind her shoulder. A woman’s face on ’em, and a man’s. Shivers realised, and with a sharp sinking in his gut, the woman’s face was hers. ‘Killed by the League of Eight. Everyone was so very upset.’

‘I’m in no mood for jokes, Sajaam.’

‘When were you ever? But it’s no joke. You were a hero round these parts. That’s what they call you when you kill so many people the word murderer falls short. Orso gave the big speech, said we all had to fight harder than ever to avenge you, and everyone wept. I am sorry about Benna. I always liked the boy. But I made peace with my devils. You should do the same.’

‘The dead can forgive. The dead can be forgiven. The rest of us have better things to do. I want your help, and I’m owed. Pay up, bastard.’

They frowned at each other for a long moment. Then the old man heaved up a long sigh. ‘I always said you’d be the death of me. What’s your price?’

‘A point in the right direction. An introduction here or there. That’s what you do, now, isn’t it?’

‘I know some people.’

‘Then I need to borrow a man with a cold head and a good arm. A man who won’t get flustered at blood spilled.’

Sajaam seemed to think about that. Then he turned his head and called over his shoulder. ‘You know a man like that, Friendly?’

Footsteps scraped out of the darkness from the way Shivers had come. Seemed there’d been someone following them, and doing it well. The woman slid into a fighting crouch, eyes narrowed, left hand on her sword hilt. Shivers would’ve reached for a weapon too, if he’d had one, but he’d sold all his own in Uffrith and given the knife over to Sajaam. So he settled for a nervous twitching of his fingers, which wasn’t a scrap of use to anyone.

The new arrival trudged up, stooped over, eyes down. He was a half-head or more shorter than Shivers but had a fearsome solid look to him, thick neck wider than his skull, heavy hands dangling from the sleeves of a heavy coat.

'Friendly,' Sajaam was all smiles at the surprise he'd pulled, 'this is an old friend of mine, name of Murcatto. You're going to work for her a while, if you have no objection.' The man shrugged his weighty shoulders. 'What did you say your name was, again?'

'Shivers.'

Friendly's eyes flickered up, then back to the floor, and stayed there. Sad eyes and strange. Silence for a moment.

'Is he a good man?' asked Murcatto.

'This is the best man I know of. Or the worst, if you stand on his wrong side. I met him in Safety.'

'What had he done to be locked in there with the likes of you?'

'Everything and more.'

More silence. 'For a man called Friendly, he's not got much to say.'

'My very thoughts when I first met him,' said Sajaam. 'I suspect the name was meant with some irony.'

'Irony? In a prison?'

'All kinds of people end up in prison. Some of us even have a sense of humour.'

'If you say so. I'll take some husk as well.'

'You? More your brother's style, no? What do you want husk for?'

'When did you start asking your customers why they want your goods, old man?'

'Fair point.' He pulled something from his pocket, tossed it to her and she snatched it out of the air.

'I'll let you know when I need something else.'

'I shall tick off the hours! I always swore you'd be the death of me, Monzcarro.' Sajaam turned away. 'The death of me.'

Shivers stepped in front of him. 'My knife.' He didn't understand the fine points of what he'd heard, but he could tell when he was caught up in something dark and bloody. Something where he was likely to need a good blade.

‘My pleasure.’ Sajaam slapped it back into Shivers’ palm, and it weighed heavy there. ‘Though I advise you to find a larger blade if you plan on sticking with her.’ He glanced round at them, slowly shaking his head. ‘You three heroes, going to put an end to Duke Orso? When they kill you, do me a favour? Die quickly and keep my name out of it.’ And with that cheery thought he ambled off into the night.

When Shivers turned back, the woman called Murcatto was looking him right in the eye. ‘What about you? Fishing’s a bastard of a living. Almost as hard as farming, and even worse-smelling.’ She held out her gloved hand and silver glinted in the palm. ‘I can still use another man. You want to take your scale? Or you want fifty more?’

Shivers frowned down at that shining metal. He’d killed men for a lot less, when he thought about it. Battles, feuds, fights, in all settings and all weathers. But he’d had reasons, then. Not good ones, always, but something to make it some kind of right. Never just murder, blood bought and paid for.

‘This man we’re going to kill . . . what did he do?’

‘He got me to pay fifty scales for his corpse. Isn’t that enough?’

‘Not for me.’

She frowned at him for a long moment. That straight-ahead look that was already giving him the worries, somehow. ‘So you’re one of them, eh?’

‘One o’ what?’

‘One of those men that like reasons. That need excuses. You’re a dangerous crowd, you lot. Hard to predict.’ She shrugged. ‘But if it helps. He killed my brother.’

Shivers blinked. Hearing those words, from her mouth, brought that day right back somehow, sharper than he’d remembered it for years. Seeing his father’s grey face, and knowing. Hearing his brother was killed, when he’d been promised mercy. Swearing vengeance over the ashes in the long hall, tears in his eyes. An oath he’d chosen to break, so he could walk away from blood and be a better man.

And here she was, out of nowhere, offering him another chance at vengeance. He killed my brother. Felt as if he would’ve said no to anything else. But maybe he just needed the money.

‘Shit on it, then,’ he said. ‘Give me the fifty.’

Six and One

The dice came up six and one. The highest dice can roll and the lowest. A fitting judgement on Friendly's life. The pit of horror to the heights of triumph. And back.

Six and one made seven. Seven years old, when Friendly committed his first crime. But six years later that he was first caught, and given his first sentence. When they first wrote his name in the big book, and he earned his first days in Safety. Stealing, he knew, but he could hardly remember what he stole. He certainly could not remember why. His parents had worked hard to give him all he needed. And yet he stole. Some men are born to do wrong, perhaps. The judges had told him so.

He scooped the dice up, rattled them in his fist, then let them free across the stones again, watched them as they tumbled. Always that same joy, that anticipation. Dice just thrown can be anything until they stop rolling. He watched them turning, chances, odds, his life and the life of the Northman. All the lives in the great city of Talins turning with them.

Six and one.

Friendly smiled, a little. The odds of throwing six and one a second time were one in eighteen. Long odds, some would say, looking forward into the future. But looking into the past, as he was now, there was no chance of any other numbers. What was coming? Always full of possibilities. What was past? Done, and hardened, like dough turned to bread. There was no going back.

'What do the dice say?'

Friendly glanced up as he gathered the dice with the edge of his hand. He was a big man, this Shivers, but with none of that stringiness tall men sometimes get. Strong. But not like a farmer, or a labourer. Not slow. He understood the work. There were clues, and Friendly knew them all. In Safety, you have to reckon the threat a man poses in a moment. Reckon it, and deal with it, and never blink.

A soldier, maybe, and fought in battles, by his scars, and the set of his face, and the look in his eye as they waited to do violence. Not comfortable, but ready. Not likely to run or get carried away. They are rare, men that

keep a sharp head when the trouble starts. There was a scar on his thick left wrist that, if you looked at it a certain way, was like the number seven. Seven was a good number today.

'Dice say nothing. They are dice.'

'Why roll 'em, then?'

'They are dice. What else would I do with them?'

Friendly closed his eyes, closed his fist around the dice and pressed them to his cheek, feeling their warm, rounded edges against his palm. What numbers did they hold for him now, waiting to be released? Six and one again? A flicker of excitement. The odds of throwing six and one for a third time were three hundred and twenty-four to one. Three hundred and twenty-four was the number of cells in Safety. A good omen.

'They're here,' whispered the Northman.

There were four of them. Three men and a whore. Friendly could hear the vague tinkling of her night-bell on the chill air, one of the men laughing. They were drunk, shapeless outlines lurching down the darkened alley. The dice would have to wait.

He sighed, wrapped them carefully in their soft cloth, once, twice, three times, and he tucked them up tight, safe into the darkness of his inside pocket. He wished that he was tucked up tight, safe in the darkness, but things were what they were. There was no going back. He stood and brushed the street scum from his knees.

'What's the plan?' asked Shivers.

Friendly shrugged. 'Six and one.'

He pulled his hood up and started walking, hunched over, hands thrust into his pockets. Light from a high window cut across the group as they came closer. Four grotesque carnival masks, leering with drunken laughter. The big man in the centre had a soft face with sharp little eyes and a greedy grin. The painted woman tottered on her high shoes beside him. The man on the left smirked across at her, lean and bearded. The one on the right was wiping a tear of happiness from his grey cheek.

'Then what?' he shrieked through his gurgling, far louder than there was a need for.

'What d'you think? I kicked him 'til he shat himself.' More gales of laughter, the woman's falsetto tittering a counterpoint to the big man's bass. 'I said, Duke Orso likes men who say yes, you lying—'

‘Gobba?’ asked Friendly.

His head snapped round, smile fading from his soft face. Friendly stopped. He had taken forty-one steps from the place where he rolled the dice. Six and one made seven. Seven times six was forty-two. Take away the one . . .

‘Who’re you?’ growled Gobba.

‘Six and one.’

‘What?’ The man on the right made to shove Friendly away with a drunken arm. ‘Get out of it, you mad fu—’

The cleaver split his head open to the bridge of his nose. Before his mate on the left’s mouth had fallen all the way open, Friendly was across the road and stabbing him in the body. Five times the long knife punched him through the guts, then Friendly stepped back and slashed his throat on the backhand, kicked his legs away and brought him tumbling to the cobbles.

There was a moment’s pause as Friendly breathed out, long and slow. The first man had the single great wound yawning in his skull, a black splatter of brains smeared over his crossed eyes. The other had the five stab wounds in his body, and blood pouring from his cut throat.

‘Good,’ said Friendly. ‘Six and one.’

The whore started screaming, spots of dark blood across one powdered cheek.

‘You’re a dead man!’ roared Gobba, taking a stumbling step back, fumbling a bright knife from his belt. ‘I’ll kill you!’ But he did not come on.

‘When?’ asked Friendly, blades hanging loose from his hands. ‘Tomorrow?’

‘I’ll—’

Shivers’ stick cracked down on the back of Gobba’s skull. A good blow, right on the best spot, crumpling his knees easily as paper. He flopped down, slack cheek thumping against the cobbles, knife clattering from his limp fist, out cold.

‘Not tomorrow. Not ever.’ The woman’s shriek sputtered out. Friendly turned his eyes on her. ‘Why aren’t you running?’ She fled into the darkness, teetering on her high shoes, whimpering breath echoing down the street, her night-bell jangling after.

Shivers frowned down at the two leaking corpses in the road. The two pools of blood worked their way along the cracks between the cobblestones,

touched, mingled and became one. ‘By the dead,’ he muttered in his Northern tongue.

Friendly shrugged. ‘Welcome to Styria.’

Bloody Instructions

Monza stared down at her gloved hand, lips curled back hard from her teeth, and flexed the three fingers that still worked – in and out, in and out, gauging the pattern of clicks and crunches that came with every closing of her fist. She felt oddly calm considering that her life, if you could call it a life, was balanced on a razor's edge.

Never trust a man beyond his own interests, Verturio wrote, and the murder of Grand Duke Orso and his closest was no one's idea of an easy job. She couldn't trust this silent convict any further than she could trust Sajaam, and that was about as far as she could piss. She had a creeping feeling the Northman was halfway honest, but she'd thought that about Orso, with results that had hardly been happy. It would've been no great surprise to her if they'd brought Gobba in smiling, ready to drag her back to Fontezarmo so they could drop her down the mountain a second time.

She couldn't trust anyone. But she couldn't do it alone.

Hurried footsteps scuffled up outside. The door banged open and three men came through. Shivers was on the right, Friendly on the left. Gobba hung between them, head dangling, an arm over each of their shoulders, his boot-toes scraping through the sawdust scattered across the ground. So it seemed she could trust the pair of them this far, at least.

Friendly dragged Gobba to the anvil – a mass of scarred black iron bolted down in the centre of the floor. Shivers had a length of chain, a manacle on each end, looping it round and round the base. All the while he had this fixed frown. As if he'd got some morals, and they were stinging.

Nice things, morals, but prone to chafe at times like this.

The two men worked well together for a beggar and a convict. No time or movement wasted. No sign of nerves, given they were going about a murder. But then Monza had always had a knack for picking the right men for a job. Friendly snapped the manacles shut on the bodyguard's thick wrists. Shivers reached out and turned the knob on the lamp, the flame fluttering up behind the glass, light spilling out around the grubby forge.

'Wake him up.'

Friendly flung a bucket of water in Gobba's face. He coughed, dragged in a breath, shook his head, drops flicking from his hair. He tried to stand and the chain rattled, snatching him back down. He glared around, little eyes hard.

'You stupid bastards! You're dead men, the pair of you! Dead! Don't you know who I am? Don't you know who I work for?'

'I know.' Monza did her best to walk smoothly, the way she used to, but couldn't quite manage it. She limped into the light, pushing back her hood.

Gobba's fat face crinkled up. 'No. Can't be.' His eyes went wide. Then wider still. Shock, then fear, then horror. He lurched back, chains clinking. 'No!'

'Yes.' And she smiled, in spite of the pain. 'How fucked are you? You've put weight on, Gobba. More than I've lost, even. Funny, how things go. Is that my stone you've got there?'

He had the ruby on his little finger, red glimmer on black iron. Friendly reached down, twisted it off and tossed it over to her. She snatched it out of the air with her left hand. Benna's last gift. The one they'd smiled at together as they rode up the mountain to see Duke Orso. The thick band was scratched, bent a little, but the stone still sparkled bloodily as ever, the colour of a slit throat.

'Somewhat damaged when you tried to kill me, eh, Gobba? But weren't we all?' It took her a while to fumble it onto her left middle finger, but in the end she twisted it past the knuckle. 'Fits this hand just as well. Piece of luck, that.'

'Look! We can make a deal!' There was sweat beading Gobba's face now. 'We can work something out!'

'I already did. Don't have a mountain to hand, I'm afraid.' She slid the hammer from the shelf – a short-hafted lump hammer with a block of heavy steel for a head – and felt her knuckles shift as she closed her gloved hand tight around it. 'So I'm going to break you apart with this, instead. Hold him, would you?' Friendly folded Gobba's right arm and forced it onto the anvil, clawing fingers spread out pale on the dark metal. 'You should've made sure of me.'

'Orso'll find out! He'll find out!'

'Of course he will. When I throw him off his own terrace, if not before.'

'You'll never do it! He'll kill you!'

‘He already did, remember? It didn’t stick.’

Veins stood out on Gobba’s neck as he struggled, but Friendly had him fast, for all his bulk. ‘You can’t beat him!’

‘Maybe not. I suppose we’ll see. There’s only one thing I can tell you for sure.’ She raised the hammer high. ‘You won’t.’

The head came down on his knuckles with a faintly metallic crunch – once, twice, three times. Each blow jarred her hand, sent pain shooting up her arm. But a lot less pain than shot up Gobba’s. He gasped, yelped, trembled, Friendly’s slack face pressed up against his taut one. Gobba jerked back from the anvil, his hand turning sideways on. Monza felt herself grinning as the hammer hissed down and crushed it flat. The next blow caught his wrist and turned it black.

‘Looks worse even than mine did.’ She shrugged. ‘Well. When you pay a debt, it’s only good manners to add some interest. Get the other hand.’

‘No!’ squealed Gobba, dribbling spit. ‘No! Think of my children!’

‘Think of my brother!’

The hammer smashed his other hand apart. She aimed each blow carefully, taking her time, both eyes on the details. Fingertips. Fingers. Knuckles. Thumb. Palm. Wrist.

‘Six and six,’ grunted Friendly, over Gobba’s roars of pain.

The blood was surging in Monza’s ears. She wasn’t sure she’d heard him right. ‘Eh?’

‘Six times, and six times.’ He let go of Orso’s bodyguard and stood, brushing his palms together. ‘With the hammer.’

‘And?’ she snapped at him, no clue how that mattered.

Gobba was bent over the anvil, legs braced, dragging on the manacles and spraying spit as he tried vainly to shift the great thing with all his strength, blackened hands flopping.

She leaned towards him. ‘Did I tell you to get up?’ The hammer split his kneecap with a sharp bang. He crumpled onto the floor on his back, was dragging in the air to scream when the hammer crunched into his leg again and snapped it back the wrong way.

‘Hard work, this.’ She winced at a twinge in her shoulder as she dragged her coat off. ‘But then I’m not as limber as I was.’ She rolled her black shirtsleeve up past the long scar on her forearm. ‘You always did tell me you knew how to make a woman sweat, eh, Gobba? And to think I laughed

at you.' She wiped her face on the back of her arm. 'Shows you what I know. Unhook him.'

'You sure?' asked Friendly.

'Worried he'll bite your ankles? Let's make a chase of it.' The convict shrugged, then leaned down to unlock the cuffs around Gobba's wrists. Shivers was frowning at her from the darkness. 'Something wrong?' she snapped at him.

He stayed silent.

Gobba dragged himself to nowhere through the dirty sawdust with his elbows, broken leg slithering along behind. He made a kind of mindless groan while he did it. Something like the ones she'd made when she lay broken at the foot of the mountain beneath Fontezarmo.

'Huuuurrrrhhhh . . .'

Monza wasn't enjoying this half as much as she'd hoped, and it was making her angrier than ever. Something about those groans was intensely annoying. Her hand was pulsing with pain. She forced a smile onto her face and limped after him, pretended to enjoy it more.

'I've got to say I'm disappointed. Didn't Orso always like to boast about what a hard man he had for a bodyguard? I suppose now we'll find out how hard you really are. Softer than this hammer, I'd—'

Her foot slipped and she yelped as she went over on her ankle, tottered against the brick-lined side of a furnace, put her left hand down to steady herself. It took her a moment to realise the thing was still scalding hot.

'Shit!' Stumbling back the other way like a clown, kicking a bucket and sending dirty water showering up the side of her leg. 'Fuck!'

She leaned down over Gobba and lashed petulantly at him with the hammer, suddenly, stupidly angry she'd embarrassed herself. 'Bastard! Bastard!' He grunted and gurgled as the steel head thudded into his ribs. He tried to curl up and half-dragged her over on top of him, twisting her leg.

Pain lanced up her hip and made her screech. She dug at the side of his head with the haft of the hammer until she'd torn his ear half-off. Shivers took a step forwards but she'd already wrenched herself free. Gobba blubbered, somehow dragged himself up to sitting, back against a big water butt. His hands had swollen up to twice the size they had been. Purple, flopping mittens.

'Beg!' she hissed. 'Beg, you fat fucker!'

But Gobba was too busy staring at the mincemeat on the end of his arms, and screaming. Hoarse, short, slobbery screams.

‘Someone might hear.’ Friendly looked like he didn’t care much either way.

‘Better shut him up, then.’

The convict leaned over the barrel from behind with a wire between his fists, hooked Gobba under the neck and dragged him up hard, cutting his bellows down to slippery splutters.

Monza squatted in front of him so their faces were level, her knees burning as she watched the wire cut into his fat neck. Just the way it had cut into hers. The scars it had left on her itched. ‘How does it feel?’ Her eyes flickered over his face, trying to squeeze some sliver of satisfaction from it. ‘How does it feel?’ Though no one knew better than her. Gobba’s eyes bulged, his jowls trembled, turning from pink, to red, to purple. She pushed herself up to standing. ‘I’d say it’s a waste of good flesh. But it isn’t.’

She closed her eyes and let her head drop back, sucked a long breath in through her nose as she tightened her grip on the hammer, lifted it high.

‘Betray me and leave me alive?’

It came down between Gobba’s piggy eyes with a sharp bang like a stone slab splitting. His back arched, his mouth yawned wide but no sound came out.

‘Take my hand and leave me alive?’

The hammer hit him in the nose and caved his face in like a broken egg. His body crumpled, shattered leg jerking, jerking.

‘Kill my brother and leave me alive?’

The last blow broke his skull wide open. Black blood bubbled down his purple skin. Friendly let go the wire and Gobba slid sideways. Gently, gracefully almost, he rolled over onto his front, and was still.

Dead. You didn’t have to be an expert to see that. Monza winced as she forced her aching fingers open and the hammer clattered down, its head gleaming red, a clump of hair stuck to one corner.

One dead. Six left.

‘Six and one,’ she muttered to herself. Friendly stared at her, eyes wide, and she wasn’t sure why.

‘What’s it like?’ Shivers, watching her from the shadows.

‘What?’

‘Revenge. Does it feel good?’

Monza wasn’t sure she felt much of anything beyond the pain pulsing through her burned hand and her broken hand, up her legs and through her skull. Benna was still dead, she was still broken. She stood there frowning, and didn’t answer.

‘You want me to get rid of this?’ Friendly waved an arm at the corpse, a heavy cleaver gleaming in his other hand.

‘Make sure he won’t be found.’

Friendly grabbed Gobba’s ankle and started dragging him back towards the anvil, leaving a bloody trail through the sawdust. ‘Chop him up. Into the sewers. Rats can have him.’

‘Better than he deserves.’ But Monza felt the slightest bit sick. She needed a smoke. Getting to that time of day. A smoke would settle her nerves. She pulled out a small purse, the one with fifty scales in it, and tossed it to Shivers.

Coins snapped together inside as he caught it. ‘That’s it?’

‘That’s it.’

‘Right.’ He paused, as though he wanted to say something but couldn’t think what. ‘Sorry about your brother.’

She looked at his face in the lamplight. Really looking, trying to guess him out. He knew next to nothing about her or Orso. Next to nothing about anything, at a first glance. But he could fight, she’d seen that. He’d walked into Sajaam’s place alone, and that took courage. A man with courage, with morals, maybe. A man with pride. That meant he might have some loyalty too, if she could get a grip on it. And loyal men were a rare commodity in Styria.

She’d never spent much time alone. Benna had always been beside her. Or behind her, at any rate. ‘You’re sorry.’

‘That’s right. I had a brother.’ He started to turn for the door.

‘You need more work?’ She kept her eyes fixed on his as she came forwards, and while she did it she slid her good hand around behind her back and found the handle of the knife there. He knew her name, and Orso’s, and Sajaam’s, and that was enough to get them all killed ten times over. One way or another, he had to stay.

‘More work like this?’ He frowned down at the bloodstained sawdust under her boots.

‘Killing. You can say it.’ She thought about whether to stab him down into the chest or up under the jaw, or wait until he’d turned and take his back. ‘What did you think it’d be? Milking a goat?’

He shook his head, long hair swaying. ‘Might sound foolish to you, but I came here to be a better man. You got your reasons, sure, but this feels like a bastard of a stride in the wrong direction.’

‘Six more men.’

‘No. No. I’m done.’ As if he was trying to convince himself. ‘I don’t care how much—’

‘Five thousand scales.’

His mouth was already open to say no again, but this time the word didn’t come. He stared at her. Shocked at first, then thoughtful. Working out how much money that really was. What it might buy him. Monza had always had a knack for reckoning a man’s price. Every man has one.

She took a step forwards, looking up into his face. ‘You’re a good man, I see that, and a hard man too. That’s the kind of man I need.’ She let her eyes flick down to his mouth, and then back up. ‘Help me. I need your help, and you need my money. Five thousand scales. Lot easier to be a better man with that much money behind you. Help me. I daresay you could buy half the North with that. Make a king of yourself.’

‘Who says I want to be a king?’

‘Be a queen, if you please. I can tell you what you won’t be doing, though.’ She leaned in, so close she was almost breathing on his neck. ‘Begging for work. You ask me, it’s not right, a proud man like you in that state. Still.’ And she looked away. ‘I can’t force you.’

He stood there, weighing the purse. But she’d already taken her hand off her knife. She already knew his answer. Money is a different thing to every man, Bialoveld wrote, but always a good thing.

When he looked up his face had turned hard. ‘Who do we kill?’

The time was she’d have smirked sideways to see Benna smirking back at her. We won again. But Benna was dead, and Monza’s thoughts were on the next man to join him. ‘A banker.’

‘A what?’

‘A man who counts money.’

‘He makes money counting money?’

‘That’s right.’

‘Some strange fashions you folk have down here. What did he do?’

‘He killed my brother.’

‘More vengeance, eh?’

‘More vengeance.’

Shivers gave a nod. ‘Reckon I’m hired, then. What do you need?’

‘Give Friendly a hand taking out the rubbish, then we’re gone tonight. No point loitering in Talins.’

Shivers looked towards the anvil, and he took a sharp breath. Then he pulled out the knife she’d given him, walked over to where Friendly was starting work on Gobba’s corpse.

Monza looked down at her left hand, rubbed a few specks of blood from the back. Her fingers were trembling some. From killing a man earlier, from not killing one just now, or from needing a smoke, she wasn’t sure.

All three, maybe.

II

WESTPORT

‘Men become accustomed to poison by degrees’

Victor Hugo

The first year they were always hungry, and Benna had to beg in the village while Monza worked the ground and scavenged in the woods. The second year they took a better harvest, and grew roots in a patch by the barn, and got some bread from old Destort the miller when the snows swept in and turned the valley into a place of white silence.

The third year the weather was fine, and the rain came on time, and Monza raised a good crop in the upper field. As good a crop as her father had ever brought in. Prices were high because of troubles over the border. They would have money, and the roof could be mended, and Benna could have a proper shirt. Monza watched the wind make waves in the wheat, and she felt that pride at having made something with her own hands. That pride her father used to talk about.

A few days before reaping time, she woke in the darkness and heard sounds. She shook Benna from his sleep beside her, one hand over his mouth. She took her father’s sword, eased open the shutters, and together they stole through the window and into the woods, hid in the brambles behind a tree-trunk.

There were black figures in front of the house, torches flickering in the darkness.

‘Who are they?’

‘Shhhh.’

She heard them break the door down, heard them crashing through the house and the barn.

‘What do they want?’

‘Shhhh.’

They spread out around the field and set their torches to it, and the fire ate through the wheat until it was a roaring blaze. She heard someone cheering. Another laughing.

Benna stared, face dim-lit with shifting orange, tear-tracks glistening on his thin cheeks. ‘But why would they . . . why would they . . . ?’

‘Shhhh.’

Monza watched the smoke rolling up into the clear night. All her work. All her sweat and pain. She stayed there long after the men had gone, and watched it burn.

In the morning more men came. Folk from around the valley, hard-faced and vengeful, old Destort at their head with a sword at his hip and his three sons behind him.

‘Came through here too then, did they? You’re lucky to be alive. They killed Crevi and his wife, up the valley. Their son too.’

‘What are you going to do?’

‘We’re going to track them, then we’re going to hang them.’

‘We’ll come.’

‘You might be better—’

‘We’ll come.’

Destort had not always been a miller, and he knew his business. They caught up with the raiders the next night, working their way back south, camped around fires in the woods without even a proper guard. More thieves than soldiers. Farmers among them too, just from one side of the border rather than the other, chosen to settle some made-up grievance while their lords were busy settling theirs.

‘Anyone ain’t ready to kill best stay here.’ Destort drew his sword and the others made their cleavers, and their axes, and their makeshift spears ready.

‘Wait!’ hissed Benna, clinging at Monza’s arm.

‘No.’

She ran quiet and low, her father’s sword in her hand, fires dancing through the black trees. She heard a cry, a clash of metal, the sound of a bowstring.

She came out from the bushes. Two men crouched by a campfire, a pot steaming over it. One had a thick beard, a wood-axe in his fist. Before he lifted it halfway Monza slashed him across the eyes and he fell down, screaming. The other turned to run and she spitted him through the back

before he got a stride. The bearded man roared and roared, hands clutching at his face. She stabbed him in the chest, and he groaned out a few wet breaths, then stopped.

She frowned down at the two corpses while the sounds of fighting slowly petered out. Benna crept from the trees, and he took the bearded man's purse from his belt, and he tipped a heavy wedge of silver coins out into his palm.

'He has seventeen scales.'

It was twice as much as the whole crop had been worth. He held the other man's purse out to her, eyes wide. 'This one has thirty.'

'Thirty?' Monza looked at the blood on her father's sword, and thought how strange it was that she was a murderer now. How strange it was that it had been so easy to do. Easier than digging in the stony soil for a living. Far, far easier. Afterwards, she waited for the remorse to come upon her. She waited for a long time.

It never came.

Poison

It was just the kind of afternoon that Morveer most enjoyed. Crisp, even chilly, but perfectly still, immaculately clear. The bright sun flashed through the bare black branches of the fruit trees, found rare gold among dull copper tripod, rods and screws, struck priceless sparks from the tangle of misted glassware. There was nothing finer than working out of doors on a day like this, with the added advantage that any lethal vapours released would harmlessly dissipate. Persons in Morveer's profession were all too frequently despatched by their own agents, after all, and he had no intention of becoming one of their number. Quite apart from anything else, his reputation would never recover.

Morveer smiled upon the rippling lamp flame, nodded in time to the gentle rattling of condenser and retort, the soothing hiss of escaping steam, the industrious pop and bubble of boiling reagents. As the drawing of the blade to the master swordsman, as the jingle of coins to the master merchant, so were these sounds to Morveer. The sounds of his work well done. It was with comfortable satisfaction, therefore, that he watched Day's face, creased with concentration, through the distorting glass of the tapered collection flask.

It was a pretty face, undoubtedly: heart-shaped and fringed with blonde curls. But it was an unremarkable and entirely unthreatening variety of prettiness, further softened by a disarming aura of innocence. A face that would attract a positive response, but excite little further comment. A face that would easily slip the mind. It was for her face, above all, that Morveer had selected her. He did nothing by accident.

A jewel of moisture formed at the utmost end of the condenser. It stretched, bloated, then finally tore itself free, tumbled sparkling through space and fell silently to the bottom of the flask.

'Excellent,' muttered Morveer.

More droplets swelled and broke away in solemn procession. The last of them clung reluctantly at the edge, and Day reached out and gently flicked the glassware. It fell, and joined the rest, and looked, for all the world, like a little water in the bottom of a flask. Barely enough to wet one's lips.

‘And carefully, now, my dear, so very, very carefully. Your life hangs by a filament. Your life, and mine too.’

She pressed her tongue into her lower lip, ever so carefully twisted the condenser free and set it down on the tray. The rest of the apparatus followed, piece by slow piece. She had fine, soft hands, Morveer’s apprentice. Nimble yet steady, as indeed they were required to be. She pressed a cork carefully into the flask and held it up to the light, the sunshine making liquid diamonds of that tiny dribble of fluid, and she smiled. An innocent, a pretty, yet an entirely forgettable smile. ‘It doesn’t look much.’

‘That is the entire point. It is without colour, odour or taste. And yet the most infinitesimal drop consumed, the softest mist inhaled, the gentlest touch upon the skin, even, will kill a man in minutes. There is no antidote, no remedy, no immunity. Truly . . . this is the King of Poisons.’

‘The King of Poisons,’ she breathed, with suitable awe.

‘Keep this knowledge close to your heart, my dear, to be used only in the extreme of need. Only against the most dangerous, suspicious and cunning of targets. Only against those intimately acquainted with the poisoner’s art.’

‘I understand. Caution first, always.’

‘Very good. That is the most valuable of lessons.’ Morveer sat back in his chair, making a steeple of his fingers. ‘Now you know the deepest of my secrets. Your apprenticeship is over, but . . . I hope you will continue, as my assistant.’

‘I’d be honoured to stay in your service. I still have much to learn.’

‘So do we all, my dear.’ Morveer jerked his head up at the sound of the gate bell tinkling in the distance. ‘So do we all.’

Two figures were approaching the house down the long path through the orchard, and Morveer snapped open his eyeglass and trained it upon them. A man and a woman. He was very tall, and powerful-looking with it, wearing a threadbare coat, long hair swaying. A Northman, from his appearance.

‘A primitive,’ he muttered, under his breath. Such men were prone to savagery and superstition, and he held them in healthy contempt.

He trained the eyeglass on the woman, now, though she was dressed much like a man. She looked straight towards the house, unwavering. Straight towards him, it almost seemed. A beautiful face, without doubt, edged with

coal-black hair. But it was a hard and unsettling variety of beauty, further sharpened by a brooding appearance of grim purpose. A face that at once issued a challenge and a threat. A face that, having been glimpsed, one would not quickly forget. She did not compare with Morveer's mother in beauty, of course, but who could? His mother had almost transcended the human in her goodly qualities. Her pure smile, kissed by the sunlight, was etched for ever into Morveer's memory as if it were a—

'Visitors?' asked Day.

'The Murcatto woman is here.' He snapped his fingers towards the table. 'Clear all this away. With the very greatest care, mark you! Then bring wine and cakes.'

'Do you want anything in them?'

'Only plums and apricots. I mean to welcome my guests, not kill them.' Not until he had heard what they had to say, at least.

While Day swiftly cleared the table, furnished it with a cloth and drew the chairs back in around it, Morveer took some elementary precautions. Then he arranged himself in his chair, highly polished knee-boots crossed in front of him and hands clasped across his chest, very much the country gentleman enjoying the winter air of his estate. Had he not earned it, after all?

He rose with his most ingratiating smile as his visitors came in close proximity to the house. The Murcatto woman walked with the slightest hint of a limp. She covered it well, but over long years in the trade Morveer had sharpened his perceptions to a razor point, and missed no detail. She wore a sword on her right hip, and it appeared to be a good one, but he paid it little mind. Ugly, unsophisticated tools. Gentlemen might wear them, but only the coarse and wrathful would stoop to actually use one. She wore a glove on her right hand, suggesting she had something she was keen to hide, because her left was bare, and sported a blood-red stone big as his thumbnail. If it was, as it certainly appeared to be, a ruby, it was one of promisingly great value.

'I am—'

'You are Monzcarro Murcatto, once captain general of the Thousand Swords, recently in the service of Duke Orso of Talins.' Morveer thought it best to avoid that gloved hand, and so he offered out his left, palm upwards, in a gesture replete with humbleness and submission. 'A Kantic gentleman

of our mutual acquaintance, one Sajaam, told me to expect your visit.' She gave it a brief shake, firm and businesslike. 'And your name, my friend?' Morveer leaned unctuously forwards and folded the Northman's big right hand in both of his.

'Caul Shivers.'

'Indeed, indeed, I have always found your Northern names delightfully picturesque.'

'You've found 'em what now?'

'Nice.'

'Oh.'

Morveer held his hand a moment longer, then let it free. 'Pray have a seat.' He smiled upon Murcatto as she worked her way into her chair, the barest phantom of a grimace on her face. 'I must confess I was expecting you to be considerably less beautiful.'

She frowned at that. 'I was expecting you to be less friendly.'

'Oh, I can be decidedly unfriendly when it is called for, believe me.' Day silently appeared and slid a plate of sweet cakes onto the table, a tray with a bottle of wine and glasses. 'But it is hardly called for now, is it? Wine?'

His visitors exchanged a loaded glance. Morveer grinned as he pulled the cork and poured himself a glass. 'The two of you are mercenaries, but I can only assume you do not rob, threaten and extort from everyone you meet. Likewise, I do not poison my every acquaintance.' He slurped wine noisily, as though to advertise the total safety of the operation. 'Who would pay me then? You are safe.'

'Even so, you'll forgive us if we pass.'

Day reached for a cake. 'Can I—'

'Gorge yourself.' Then to Murcatto. 'You did not come here for my wine, then.'

'No. I have work for you.'

Morveer examined his cuticles. 'The deaths of Grand Duke Orso and sundry others, I presume.' She sat in silence, but it suited him to speak as though she had demanded an explanation. 'It scarcely requires a towering intellect to make the deduction. Orso declares you and your brother killed by agents of the League of Eight. Then I hear from your friend and mine Sajaam that you are less deceased than advertised. Since there has been no tearful reunion with Orso, no happy declaration of your miraculous

survival, we can assume the Osprian assassins were in fact . . . a fantasy. The Duke of Talins is a man of notoriously jealous temper, and your many victories made you too popular for your master's taste. Do I come close to the mark?'

'Close enough.'

'My heartfelt condolences, then. Your brother, it would appear, could not be with us, and I understood you were inseparable.' Her cold blue eyes had turned positively icy now. The Northman loomed grim and silent beside her. Morveer carefully cleared his throat. Blades might be unsophisticated tools, but a sword through the guts killed clever men every bit as thoroughly as stupid ones. 'You understand that I am the very best at my trade.'

'A fact,' said Day, detaching herself from her sweetmeat for a moment. 'An unchallengeable fact.'

'The many persons of quality upon whom I have utilised my skills would so testify, were they able, but, of course, they are not.'

Day sadly shook her head. 'Not a one.'

'Your point?' asked Murcatto.

'The best costs money. More money than you, having lost your employer, can, perhaps, afford.'

'You've heard of Somenu Hermon?'

'The name is familiar.'

'Not to me,' said Day.

Morveer took it upon himself to explain. 'Hermon was a destitute Kantic immigrant who rose to become, supposedly, the richest merchant in Musselia. The luxury of his lifestyle was notorious, his largesse legendary.'

'And?'

'Alas, he was in the city when the Thousand Swords, in the pay of Grand Duke Orso, captured Musselia by stealth. Loss of life was kept to a minimum, but the city was plundered, and Hermon never heard from again. Nor was his money. The assumption was that this merchant, as merchants often do, greatly exaggerated his wealth, and beyond his gaudy and glorious accoutrements possessed . . . precisely . . . nothing.' Morveer took a slow sip of wine, peering at Murcatto over the rim of his glass. 'But others would know far better than I. The commanders of that particular campaign were . . . what were the names now? A brother and sister . . . I believe?'

She stared straight back at him, eyes undeviating. ‘Hermon was far wealthier than he pretended to be.’

‘Wealthier?’ Morveer wriggled in his chair. ‘Wealthier? Oh my! The advantage to Murcatto! See how I squirm at the mention of so infinite a sum of bountiful gold! Enough to pay my meagre fees two dozen times and more, I do not doubt! Why . . . my overpowering greed has left me quite . . .’ He lifted his open hand and slapped it down against the table with a bang. ‘Paralysed.’

The Northman toppled slowly sideways, slid from his chair and thumped onto the patchy turf beneath the fruit trees. He rolled gently over onto his back, knees up in the air in precisely the form he had taken while sitting, body rigid as a block of wood, eyes staring helplessly upwards.

‘Ah,’ observed Morveer as he peered over the table. ‘The advantage to Morveer, it would seem.’

Murcatto’s eyes flicked sideways, then back. A flurry of twitches ran up one side of her face. Her gloved hand trembled on the tabletop by the slightest margin, and then lay still.

‘It worked,’ murmured Day.

‘How could you doubt me?’ Morveer, liking nothing better than a captive audience, could not resist explaining how it had been managed. ‘Yellowseed oil was first applied to my hands.’ He held them up, fingers outspread. ‘In order to prevent the agent affecting me, you understand. I would not want to find myself suddenly paralysed, after all. That would be a decidedly unpleasant experience!’ He chuckled to himself, and Day joined him at a higher pitch while she bent down to check the Northman’s pulse, second cake wedged between her teeth. ‘The active ingredient was a distillation of spider venom. Extremely effective, even on touch. Since I held his hand for longer, your friend has taken a much heavier dose. He’ll be lucky to move today . . . if I choose to let him move again, of course. You should have retained the power of speech, however.’

‘Bastard,’ Murcatto grunted through frozen lips.

‘I see that you have.’ He rose, slipped around the table and perched himself beside her. ‘I really must apologise, but you understand that I am, as you have been, a person at the precarious summit of my profession. We of extraordinary skills and achievements are obliged to take extraordinary precautions. Now, unimpeded by your ability to move, we can speak with

absolute candour on the subject of . . . Grand Duke Orso.' He swilled around a mouthful of wine, watched a little bird flit between the branches. Murcatto said nothing, but it hardly mattered. Morveer was happy to speak for them both.

'You have been done a terrible wrong, I see that. Betrayed by a man who owed you so much. Your beloved brother killed and you rendered . . . less than you were. My own life has been littered with painful reverses, believe me, so I entirely empathise. But the world is brimming with the awful and we humble individuals can only alter it by . . . small degrees.' He frowned over at Day, munching noisily.

'What?' she grunted, mouth full.

'Quietly if you must, I am trying to expound.' She shrugged, licking her fingers with entirely unnecessary sucking sounds. Morveer gave a disapproving sigh. 'The carelessness of youth. She will learn. Time marches in only one direction for us all, eh, Murcatto?'

'Spare me the fucking philosophy,' she forced through tight lips.

'Let us confine ourselves to the practical, then. With your notable assistance, Orso has made himself the most powerful man in Styria. I would never pretend to have your grasp of all things military, but it scarcely takes Stolicus himself to perceive that, following your glorious victory at the High Bank last year, the League of Eight are on the verge of collapse. Only a miracle will save Visserine when summer comes. The Osprians will treat for peace or be crushed, depending on Orso's mood, which, as you know far better than most, tends towards crushings. By the close of the year, barring accidents, Styria will have a king at last. An end to the Years of Blood.' He drained his glass and waved it expansively. 'Peace and prosperity for all and sundry! A better world, surely? Unless one is a mercenary, I suppose.'

'Or a poisoner.'

'On the contrary, we find more than ample employment in peacetime too. In any case, my point is that killing Grand Duke Orso – quite apart from the apparent impossibility of the task – seems to serve nobody's interests. Not even yours. It will not bring your brother back, or your hand, or your legs.' Her face did not flicker, but that might merely have been due to paralysis. 'The attempt will more than likely end in your death, and possibly even in mine. My point is that you have to stop this madness, my dear Monzcarro. You have to stop it at once, and give it no further thought.'

Her eyes were pitiless as two pots of poison. ‘Only death will stop me. Mine, or Orso’s.’

‘No matter the cost? No matter the pain? No matter who’s killed along the path?’

‘No matter,’ she growled.

‘I find myself entirely convinced as to your level of commitment.’

‘Everything.’ The word was a snarl.

Morveer positively beamed. ‘Then we can do business. On that basis, and no other. What do I never deal in, Day?’

‘Half-measures,’ his assistant murmured, eyeing the one cake left on the plate.

‘Correct. How many do we kill?’

‘Six,’ said Murcatto, ‘including Orso.’

‘Then my rate shall be ten thousand scales per secondary, payable upon proof of their demise, and fifty thousand for the Duke of Talins himself.’

Her face twitched slightly. ‘Poor manners, to negotiate while your client is helpless.’

‘Manners would be ludicrous in a conversation about murder. In any case, I never haggle.’

‘Then we have a deal.’

‘I am so glad. Antidote, please.’

Day pulled the cork from a glass jar, dipped the very point of a thin knife into the syrupy reduction in its bottom and handed it to him, polished handle first. He paused, looking into Murcatto’s cold blue eyes.

Caution first, always. This woman they called the Serpent of Talins was dangerous in the extreme. If Morveer had not known it from her reputation, from their conversation, from the employment she had come to engage him for, he could have seen it at a single glance. He most seriously considered the possibility of giving her a fatal jab instead, throwing her Northern friend in the river and forgetting the whole business.

But to kill Grand Duke Orso, the most powerful man in Styria? To shape the course of history with one deft twist of his craft? For his deed, if not his name, to echo through the ages? What finer way to crown a career of achieving the impossible? The very thought made him smile the wider.

He gave a long sigh. ‘I hope I will not come to regret this.’ And he jabbed the back of Murcatto’s hand with the point of the knife, a single bead of

dark blood slowly forming on her skin.

Within a few moments the antidote was already beginning to take effect. She winced as she turned her head slowly one way, then the other, worked the muscles in her face. ‘I’m surprised,’ she said.

‘Truly? How so?’

‘I was expecting a Master Poisoner.’ She rubbed at the mark on the back of her hand. ‘Who’d have thought I’d get such a little prick?’

Morveer felt his grin slip. It only took him a moment to regain his composure, of course. Once he had silenced Day’s giggle with a sharp frown. ‘I hope your temporary helplessness was not too great an inconvenience. I am forgiven, am I not? If the two of us are to cooperate, I would hate to have to labour beneath a shadow.’

‘Of course.’ She worked the movement back into her shoulders, the slightest smile at one corner of her mouth. ‘I need what you have, and you want what I have. Business is business.’

‘Excellent. Magnificent. Un . . . paralleled.’ And Morveer gave his most winning smile.

But he did not believe it for a moment. This was a most deadly job, and with a most deadly employer. Monzcarro Murcatto, the notorious Butcher of Caprile, was not a person of the forgiving variety. He was not forgiven. He was not even in the neighbourhood. From now on it would have to be caution first, second and third.

Science and Magic

Shivers pulled his horse up at the top of the rise. The country sloped away, a mess of dark fields with here or there a huddled farm or village, a stand of bare trees. No more'n a dozen miles distant, the line of the black sea, the curve of a wide bay, and along its edge a pale crust of city. Tiny towers clustered on three hills above the chilly brine, under an iron-grey sky.

'Westport,' said Friendly, then clicked his tongue and moved his horse on.

The closer they came to the damn place the more worried Shivers got. And the more sore, cold and bored besides. He frowned at Murcatto, riding on her own ahead, hood up, a black figure in a black landscape. The cart's wheels clattered round on the road. The horses clopped and snorted. Some crows caw-cawed from the bare fields. But no one was talking.

They'd been a grim crowd all the way here. But then they'd a grim purpose in mind. Nothing else but murder. Shivers wondered what his father would've made of that. Rattleneck, who'd stuck to the old ways tight as a barnacle to a boat and always looked for the right thing to do. Killing a man you never met for money didn't seem to fit that hole however you twisted it around.

There was a sudden burst of high laughter. Day, perched on the cart next to Morveer, a half-eaten apple in her hand. Shivers hadn't heard much laughter in a while, and it drew him like a moth to flame.

'What's funny?' he asked, starting to grin along at the joke.

She leaned towards him, swaying with the cart. 'I was just wondering, when you fell off your chair like a turtle tipped over, if you soiled yourself.'

'I was of the opinion you probably did,' said Morveer, 'but doubted we could have smelled the difference.'

Shivers' smile was stillborn. He remembered sitting in that orchard, frowning across the table, trying to look dangerous. Then he'd felt twitchy, then dizzy. He'd tried to lift his hand to his head, found he couldn't. He'd tried to say something about it, found he couldn't. Then the world tipped over. He didn't remember much else.

'What did you do to me?' He lowered his voice. 'Sorcery?'

Day sprayed bits of apple as she burst out laughing. ‘Oh, this just gets better.’

‘And I said he would be an uninspiring travelling companion.’ Morveer chuckled. ‘Sorcery. I swear. It’s like one of those stories.’

‘Those big, thick, stupid books! Magi and devils and all the rest!’ Day was having herself quite the snigger. ‘Stupid stories for children!’

‘Alright,’ said Shivers. ‘I think I get it. I’m slow as a fucking trout in treacle. Not sorcery. What, then?’

Day smirked. ‘Science.’

Shivers didn’t much care for the sound of it. ‘What’s that? Some other kind of magic?’

‘No, it most decidedly is not,’ sneered Morveer. ‘Science is a system of rational thought devised to investigate the world and establish the laws by which it operates. The scientist uses those laws to achieve an effect. One which might easily appear magical in the eyes of the primitive.’ Shivers struggled with all the long Styrian words. For a man who reckoned himself clever, Morveer had a fool’s way of talking, seemed meant to make the simple difficult. ‘Magic, conversely, is a system of lies and nonsense devised to fool idiots.’

‘Right y’are. I must be the stupidest bastard in the Circle of the World, eh? It’s a wonder I can hold my own shit in without paying mind to my arse every minute.’

‘The thought had occurred.’

‘There is magic,’ grumbled Shivers. ‘I’ve seen a woman call up a mist.’

‘Really? And how did it differ from ordinary mist? Magic coloured? Green? Orange?’

Shivers frowned. ‘The usual colour.’

‘So a woman called, and there was mist.’ Morveer raised one eyebrow at his apprentice. ‘A wonder indeed.’ She grinned, teeth crunching into her apple.

‘I’ve seen a man marked with letters, made one half of him proof against any blade. Stabbed him myself, with a spear. Should’ve been a killing blow, but didn’t leave a mark.’

‘Oooooh!’ Morveer held both hands up and wiggled his fingers like a child playing ghost. ‘Magic letters! First, there was no wound, and then . . .

there was no wound? I recant! The world is stuffed with miracles.' More tittering from Day.

'I know what I've seen.'

'No, my mystified friend, you think you know. There is no such thing as magic. Certainly not here in Styria.'

'Just treachery,' sang Day, 'and war, and plague, and money to be made.'

'Why did you favour Styria with your presence, anyway?' asked Morveer. 'Why not stay in the North, swaddled in the magic mists?'

Shivers rubbed slowly at the side of his neck. Seemed a strange reason, now, and he felt even more of a fool saying it. 'I came here to be a better man.'

'Starting from where you are, I hardly think that would prove too difficult.'

Shivers had some pride still, and this prick's sniggering was starting to grate on it. He'd have liked to just knock him off his cart with an axe. But he was trying to do better, so he leaned over instead and spoke in Northern, nice and careful. 'I think you've got a head full of shit, which is no surprise because your face looks like an arse. You little men are all the same. Always trying to prove how clever y'are so you've something to be proud of. But it don't matter how much you laugh at me, I've won already. You'll never be tall.' And he grinned right round his face. 'Seeing across a crowded room will always be a dream to you.'

Morveer frowned. 'And what is that jabber supposed to mean?'

'You're the fucking scientist. You work it out.'

Day snorted with high laughter until Morveer caught her with a hard glance. She was still smiling, though, as she stripped the apple core to the pips and tossed it away. Shivers dropped back and watched the empty fields slither by, turned earth half-frozen with a morning frost. Made him think of home. He gave a sigh, and it smoked out against the grey sky. The friends Shivers had made in his life had all been fighters. Carls and Named Men, comrades in the line, most back in the mud, now, one way or another. He reckoned Friendly was the closest thing he'd get to that in the midst of Styria, so he gave his horse a nudge in the flanks and brought it up next to the convict.

'Hey.' Friendly didn't say a word. He didn't even move his head to show he'd heard. Silence stretched out. Looking at that brick wall of a face it was

hard to picture the convict a bosom companion, chuckling away at his jokes. But a man's got to clutch at some hope, don't he? 'You were a soldier, then?'

Friendly shook his head.

'But you fought in battles?'

And again.

Shivers ploughed on as if he'd said yes. Not much other choice, now. 'I fought in a few. Charged in the mist with Bethod's Carls north of the Cumnur. Held the line next to Rudd Threetrees at Dunbrec. Fought seven days in the mountains with the Dogman. Seven desperate days, those were.'

'Seven?' asked Friendly, one heavy brow twitching with interest.

'Aye,' sighed Shivers. 'Seven.' The names of those men and those places meant nothing to no one down here. He watched a set of covered carts coming the other way, men with steel caps and flatbows in their hands frowning at him from their seats. 'Where did you learn to fight, then?' he asked, the smear of hope at getting some decent conversation drying out quick.

'In Safety.'

'Eh?'

'Where they put you when they catch you for a crime.'

'Why keep you safe after that?'

'They don't call it Safety because you're safe there. They call it Safety because everyone else is safe from you. They count out the days, months, years they'll keep you. Then they lock you in, deep down, where the light doesn't go, until the days, months, years have all rubbed past, and the numbers are all counted down to nothing. Then you say thank you, and they let you free.'

Sounded like a barbaric way of doing things to Shivers. 'You do a crime in the North, you pay a gild on it, make it right. That, or if the chieftain decides, they hang you. Maybe put the bloody cross in you, if you've done murders. Lock a man in a hole? That's a crime itself.'

Friendly shrugged. 'They have rules there that make sense. There's a proper time for each thing. A proper number on the great clock. Not like out here.'

'Aye. Right. Numbers, and that.' Shivers wished he'd never asked.

Friendly hardly seemed to hear him. ‘Out here the sky is too high, and every man does what he pleases when he likes, and there are no right numbers for anything.’ He was frowning off towards Westport, still just a sweep of hazy buildings round the cold bay. ‘Fucking chaos.’

They got to the city walls about midday, and there was already a long line of folk waiting to get in. Soldiers stood about the gate, asking questions, going through a pack or a chest, poking half-hearted at a cart with their spear-butts.

‘The Aldermen have been nervous since Borletta fell,’ said Morveer from his seat. ‘They are checking everyone who enters. I will do the talking.’ Shivers was happy enough to let him, since the prick loved the sound of his own voice so much.

‘Your name?’ asked the guard, eyes infinitely bored.

‘Reevrom,’ said the poisoner, with a massive grin. ‘A humble merchant from Puranti. And these are my associates—’

‘Your business in Westport?’

‘Murder.’ An uncomfortable silence. ‘I hope to make a veritable killing on the sale of Osprian wines! Yes, indeed, I hope to make a killing in your city.’ Morveer chuckled at his own joke and Day tittered away beside him.

‘This one doesn’t look like the kind we need.’ Another guard was frowning up at Shivers.

Morveer kept chuckling. ‘Oh, no need to worry on his account. The man is practically a retard. Intellect of a child. Still, he is good for shifting a barrel or two. I keep him on out of sentiment as much as anything. What am I, Day?’

‘Sentimental,’ said the girl.

‘I have too much heart. Always have had. My mother died when I was very young, you see, a wonderful woman—’

‘Get on with it!’ someone called from behind them.

Morveer took hold of the canvas sheet covering the back of the wagon. ‘Do you want to check—’

‘Do I look like I want to, with half of Styria to get through my bloody gate? On.’ The guard waved a tired hand. ‘Move on.’

The reins snapped, the cart rolled into the city of Westport, and Murcatto and Friendly rode after. Shivers came last, which seemed about usual lately.

Beyond the walls it was crushed in tight as a battle, and not much less frightening. A paved road struck between high buildings, bare trees planted on either side, crammed with a shuffling tide of folk every shape and colour. Pale men in sober cloth, narrow-eyed women in bright silks, black-skinned men in white robes, soldiers and sell-swords in chain mail and dull plate. Servants, labourers, tradesmen, gentlemen, rich and poor, fine and stinking, nobles and beggars. An awful lot of beggars. Walkers and riders came surging up and away in a blur, horses and carts and covered carriages, women with a weight of piled-up hair and an even greater weight of jewellery, carried past on teetering chairs by pairs of sweating servants.

Shivers had thought Talins was rammed full with strange variety. Westport was way worse. He saw a line of animals with great long necks being led through the press, linked by thin chains, tiny heads swaying sadly about on top. He squeezed his eyes shut and shook his head, but when he opened them the monsters were still there, heads bobbing over the milling crowd, not even remarked upon. The place was like a dream, and not the pleasant kind.

They turned down a narrower way, hemmed in by shops and stalls. Smells jabbed at his nose one after another – fish, bread, polish, fruit, oil, spice and a dozen others he'd no idea of – and they made his breath catch and his stomach lurch. Out of nowhere a boy on a passing cart shoved a wicker cage in Shivers' face and a tiny monkey inside hissed and spat at him, near knocking him from his saddle in surprise. Shouts battered at his ears in a score of different tongues. A kind of a chant came floating up over the top of it, louder and louder, strange but beautiful, made the hairs on his arms bristle.

A building with a great dome loomed over one side of a square, six tall turrets sprouting from its front wall, golden spikes gleaming on their roofs. It was from there the chanting was coming. Hundreds of voices, deep and high together, mingling into one.

'It's a temple.' Murcatto had dropped back beside him, her hood still up, not much more of her face showing than her frown.

If Shivers was honest, he was more'n a bit feared of her. It was bad enough that he'd watched her break a man apart with a hammer and give every sign of enjoying it. But he'd had this creeping feeling afterwards, when they were bargaining, that she was on the point of stabbing him. Then

there was that hand she always kept a glove on. He couldn't remember ever being scared of a woman before, and it made him shamed and nervous at once. But he could hardly deny that, apart from the glove, and the hammer, and the sick sense of danger, he liked the looks of her. A lot. He wasn't sure he didn't like the danger a bit more than was healthy too. All added up to not knowing what the hell to say from one moment to the next.

'Temple?'

'Where the Southerners pray to God.'

'God, eh?' Shivers' neck ached as he squinted up at those spires, higher than the tallest trees in the valley where he was born. He'd heard some folk down South thought there was a man in the sky. A man who'd made the world and saw everything. Had always seemed a mad kind of a notion, but looking at this Shivers weren't far from believing it himself. 'Beautiful.'

'Maybe a hundred years ago, when the Gurkish conquered Dawah, a lot of Southerners fled before them. Some crossed the water and settled here, and they raised up temples in thanks for their salvation. Westport is almost as much a part of the South as it's a part of Styria. But then it's part of the Union too, since the Aldermen finally had to pick a side, and bought the High King his victory over the Gurkish. They call this place the Crossroads of the World. Those that don't call it a nest of liars, anyway. There are people settled here from across the Thousand Isles, from Suljuk and Sikkur, from Thond and the Old Empire. Northmen even.'

'Anything but those stupid bastards.'

'Primitives, to a man. I hear some of them grow their hair long like women. But they'll take anyone here.' Her gloved finger pointed out a long row of men on little platforms at the far end of the square. A strange bloody crowd, even for this place. Old and young, tall and short, fat and bony, some with strange robes or headgear, some half-naked and painted, one with bones through his face. A few had signs behind 'em in all kinds of letters, beads or baubles hanging. They danced and capered, threw their arms up, stared at the sky, dropped on their knees, wept, laughed, raged, sang, screamed, begged, all blathering away over each other in more languages than Shivers had known about.

'Who the hell are these bastards?' he muttered.

'Holy men. Or madmen, depending who you ask. Down in Gurkhul, you have to pray how the Prophet tells you. Here each man can worship as he

pleases.'

'They're praying?'

Murcatto shrugged. 'More like they're trying to convince everyone else that they know the best way.'

People stood watching 'em. Some nodding along with what they were saying. Some shaking their heads, laughing, shouting back even. Some just stood there, bored. One of the holy men, or the madmen, started screaming at Shivers as he rode past in words he couldn't make a smudge of sense from. He knelt, stretching out his arms, beads round his neck rattling, voice raw with pleading. Shivers could see it in his red-rimmed eyes – he thought this was the most important thing he'd ever do.

'Must be a nice feeling,' said Shivers.

'What must?'

'Thinking you know all the answers . . .' He trailed off as a woman walked past with a man on a lead. A big, dark man with a collar of shiny metal, carrying a sack in either hand, his eyes kept on the ground. 'You see that?'

'In the South most men either own someone or are owned themselves.'

'That's a bastard custom,' muttered Shivers. 'I thought you said this was part o' the Union, though.'

'And they love their freedom over in the Union, don't they? You can't make a man a slave there.' She nodded towards some more, being led past meek and humble in a line. 'But if they pass through no one's freeing them, I can tell you that.'

'Bloody Union. Seems those bastards always want more land. There's more of 'em than ever in the North. Uffrith's full of 'em, since the wars started up again. And what do they need more land for? You should see that city they've got already. Makes this place look a village.'

She looked sharply across at him. 'Adua?'

'That's the one.'

'You've been there?'

'Aye. I fought the Gurkish there. Got me this mark.' And he pulled back his sleeve to show the scar on his wrist. When he looked back she had an odd look in her eye. You might almost have called it respect. He liked seeing it. Been a while since anyone looked at him with aught but contempt.

'Did you stand in the shadow of the House of the Maker?' she asked.

‘Most of the city’s in the shadow of that thing one time o’ day or another.’

‘What was it like?’

‘Darker’n outside it. Shadows tend to be, in my experience.’

‘Huh.’ The first time Shivers had seen anything close to a smile on her face, and he reckoned it suited her. ‘I always said I’d go.’

‘To Adua? What’s stopping you?’

‘Six men I need to kill.’

Shivers puffed out his cheeks. ‘Ah. That.’ A surge of worry went through him, and he wondered afresh just why the hell he’d ever said yes. ‘I’ve always been my own worst enemy,’ he muttered.

‘Stick with me, then.’ Her smile had widened some. ‘You’ll soon have worse. We’re here.’

Not all that heartening, as a destination. A narrow alley, dim as dusk. Crumbling buildings crowded in, shutters rotten and peeling, sheets of plaster cracking away from damp bricks. He led his horse after the cart and through a dim archway while Murcatto swung the creaking doors shut behind them and shot the rusted bolt. Shivers tethered his horse to a rotting post in a yard strewn with weeds and fallen tiles.

‘A palace,’ he muttered, staring up towards the square of grey sky high above, the walls all round coated with dried-up weeds, the shutters hanging miserable from their hinges. ‘Once.’

‘I took it for the location,’ said Murcatto, ‘not the décor.’

They made for a gloomy hall, empty doorways leading into empty chambers. ‘Lot of rooms,’ said Shivers.

Friendly nodded. ‘Twenty-two.’

Their boots thump, thumped on the creaking staircase as they made their way up through the rotten guts of the building.

‘How are you going to begin?’ Murcatto was asking Morveer.

‘I already have. Letters of introduction have been sent. We have a sizeable deposit to entrust to Valint and Balk tomorrow morning. Sizeable enough to warrant the attention of their most senior officer. I, my assistant and your man Friendly will infiltrate the bank disguised as a merchant and his associates. We will meet with – then seek out an opportunity to kill – Mauthis.’

‘Simple as that?’

‘Seizing an opportunity is more often than not the key in these affairs, but if the moment does not present itself, I will be laying the groundwork for a more . . . structured approach.’

‘What about the rest of us?’ asked Shivers.

‘Our employer, obviously, is possessed of a memorable visage and might be recognised, while you,’ and Morveer sneered back down the stairs at him, ‘stand out like a cow among the wolves, and would be no more useful than one. You are far too tall and far too scarred and your clothes are far too rural for you to belong in a bank. As for that hair—’

‘Pfeeesh,’ said Day, shaking her head.

‘What’s that supposed to mean?’

‘Exactly how it sounded. You are simply far, far too . . .’ Morveer swirled one hand around. ‘North.’

Murcatto unlocked a flaking door at the top of the last flight of steps and shoved it open. Muddy daylight leaked through and Shivers followed the others out blinking into the sun.

‘By the dead.’ A jumble of mismatched roofs every shape and pitch stretched off all round – red tiles, grey slates, white lead, rotting thatch, bare rafters caked with moss, green copper streaked with dirt, patched with canvas and old leather. A tangle of leaning gables, garrets, beams, paint peeling and sprouting with weeds, dangling gutters and crooked drains, bound up with chains and sagging washing lines, built all over each other at every angle and looking like the lot might slide off into the streets any moment. Smoke belched up from countless chimneys, cast a haze that made the sun a sweaty blur. Here and there a tower poked or a dome bulged above the chaos, the odd tangle of bare wood where some trees had beaten the odds and managed to stick out a twig. The sea was a grey smudge in the distance, the masts of ships in the harbour a far-off forest, shifting uneasily with the waves.

From up here the city seemed to make a great hiss. Noise of work and play, of men and beasts, calls of folk selling and buying, wheels rattling and hammers clanging, splinters of song and scraps of music, joy and despair all mixed up together like stew in a great pot.

Shivers edged to the lichen-crusted parapet beside Murcatto and peered over. People trickled up and down a cobbled lane far below, like water in

the bottom of a canyon. A monster of a building loomed up on the other side.

Its wall was a sheer cliff of smooth-cut pale stone, with a pillar every twenty strides that Shivers couldn't have got both arms around, crusted at the top with leaves and faces carved out of stone. There was a row of small windows at maybe twice the height of a man, then another above, then a row of much bigger ones, all blocked by metal grilles. Above that, all along the line of the flat roof, about level with where Shivers was standing, a hedge of black iron spikes stuck out, like the spines on a thistle.

Morveer grinned across at it. 'Ladies, gentlemen and savages, I give you the Westport branch . . . of the Banking House . . . of Valint and Balk.'

Shivers shook his head. 'Place looks like a fortress.'

'Like a prison,' murmured Friendly.

'Like a bank,' sneered Morveer.

The Safest Place in the World

The banking hall of the Westport office of Valint and Balk was an echoing cavern of red porphyry and black marble. It had all the gloomy splendour of an emperor's mausoleum, the minimum light necessary creeping in through small, high windows, their thick bars casting cross-hatched shadows across the shining floor. A set of huge marble busts stared smugly down from on high: great merchants and financiers of Styrian history, by the look of them. Criminals made heroes by colossal success. Morveer wondered whether Somenu Hermon was among them, and the thought that the famous merchant might indirectly be paying his wages caused his smirk to expand by the slightest margin.

Sixty clerks or more attended identical desks loaded with identical heaps of papers, each with a huge, leather-bound ledger open before him. All manner of men, with all colours of skin, some sporting the skullcaps, turbans or characteristic hairstyles of one Kantic sect or other. The only prejudice here was in favour of those who could turn the fastest coin. Pens rattled in ink bottles, nibs scratched on heavy paper, pages crackled as they were turned. Merchants stood in clumps and haggles, conversing in whispers. Nowhere was a single coin in evidence. The wealth here was made of words, of ideas, of rumours and lies, too valuable to be held captive in gaudy gold or simple silver.

It was a setting intended to awe, to amaze, to intimidate, but Morveer was not a man to be intimidated. He belonged here perfectly, just as he did everywhere and nowhere. He swaggered past a long queue of well-dressed supplicants with the air of studied self-satisfaction that always accompanied new money. Friendly lumbered in his wake, strongbox held close, and Day tiptoed demurely at the rear.

Morveer snapped his fingers at the nearest clerk. 'I have an appointment with . . .' He consulted his letter for effect. 'One Mauthis. On the subject of a sizeable deposit.'

'Of course. If you would wait for one moment.'

'One, but no more. Time and money are the same.'

Morveer inconspicuously studied the arrangements for security. It would have been an understatement to call them daunting. He counted twelve armed men stationed around the hall, as comprehensively equipped as the King of the Union's bodyguard. There had been another dozen outside the towering double-doors.

'The place is a fortress,' muttered Day under her breath.

'But considerably better defended,' replied Morveer.

'How long is this going to take?'

'Why?'

'I'm hungry.'

'Already? For pity's sake! You will not starve if you—Wait.'

A tall man had emerged from a high archway, gaunt-faced with a prominent beak of a nose and thinning grey hair, arrayed in sombre robes with a heavy fur collar. 'Mauthis,' murmured Morveer, from Murcatto's exhaustive description. 'Our intended.'

He was walking behind a younger man, curly haired and with a pleasant smile, not at all richly dressed. So unexceptional, in fact, he would have had a fine appearance for a poisoner. And yet Mauthis, though supposedly in charge of the bank, hurried after with hands clasped, as though he was the junior. Morveer sidled closer, bringing them within earshot.

'. . . Master Sulfur, I hope you will inform our superiors that everything is under complete control.' Mauthis had, perhaps, the very slightest note of panic in his voice. 'Absolute and complete—'

'Of course,' answered the one called Sulfur, offhand. 'Though I rarely find our superiors need informing as to how things stand. They are watching. If everything is under complete control, I am sure they will already be satisfied. If not, well . . .' He smiled wide at Mauthis, and then at Morveer, and Morveer noticed he had different-coloured eyes, one blue, one green. 'Good day.' And he strode away and was soon lost in the crowds.

'May I be of assistance?' grated Mauthis. He looked as if he had never laughed in his life. He was running out of time to try it now.

'I certainly hope you may. My name is Reevrom, a merchant of Puranti.' Morveer tittered inwardly at his own joke, as he did whenever he utilised the alias, but his face showed nothing but the warmest bonhomie as he offered his hand.

‘Reevrom. I have heard of your house. A privilege to make your acquaintance.’ Mauthis disdained to shake it, and kept a carefully inoffensive distance between them. Evidently a cautious man. Just as well, for his sake. The tiny spike on the underside of Morveer’s heavy middle-finger ring was loaded with scorpion venom in a solution of Leopard Flower. The banker would have sat happily through their meeting, then dropped dead within the hour.

‘This is my niece,’ continued Morveer, not in the least downhearted by his failed attempt. ‘I have been entrusted with the responsibility of escorting her to an introduction with a potential suitor.’ Day looked up from beneath her lashes with perfectly judged shyness. ‘And this is my associate.’ He glanced sideways at Friendly and the man frowned back. ‘I do him too much credit. My bodyguard, Master Charming. He is not a great conversationalist, but when it comes to bodyguarding, he is . . . barely adequate in truth. Still, I promised his old mother that I would take him under my—’

‘You have come here on a matter of business?’ droned Mauthis.

Morveer bowed. ‘A sizeable deposit.’

‘I regret that your associates must remain behind, but if you would care to follow me we would, of course, be happy to accept your deposit and prepare a receipt.’

‘Surely my niece—’

‘You must understand that, in the interests of security, we can make no exceptions. Your niece will be perfectly comfortable here.’

‘Of course, of course you will, my dear. Master Charming! The strongbox! ’ Friendly handed the metal case over to a bespectacled clerk, left tottering under its weight. ‘Now wait here, and get up to no mischief!’ Morveer gave a heavy sigh as he followed Mauthis into the depths of the building, as though he had insurmountable difficulties securing competent help. ‘My money will be safe here?’

‘The bank’s walls are at no point less than twelve feet in thickness. There is only one entrance, guarded by a dozen well-armed men during the day, sealed at night with three locks, made by three different locksmiths, the keys kept by three separate employees. Two parties of men constantly patrol the exterior of the bank until morning. Even then the interior is kept under watch by a most sharp-eyed and competent guard.’ He gestured towards a

bored-looking man in a studded leather jerkin, seated at a desk to the side of the hallway.

'He is locked in?'

'All night.'

Morveer worked his mouth with some discomfort. 'Most comprehensive arrangements.'

He pulled out his handkerchief and pretended to cough daintily into it. The silk was soaked in Mustard Root, one of an extensive range of agents to which he had himself long since developed an immunity. He needed only a few moments unobserved, then he could clasp it to Mauthis' face. The slightest inhalation and the man would cough himself to bloody death within moments. But the clerk laboured along between them with the strongbox in his arms, and not the slightest opportunity was forthcoming. Morveer was forced to tuck the lethal cloth away, then narrow his eyes as they turned into a long hallway lined with huge paintings. Light poured in from above, the very roof, far overhead, fashioned from a hundred thousand diamond panes of glass.

'A ceiling of windows!' Morveer turned slowly round and round, head back. 'Truly a wonder of architecture!'

'This is an entirely modern building. Your money could not be more secure anywhere, believe me.'

'The depths of ruined Aulcus, perhaps?' joked Morveer, as an overblown artist's impression of the ancient city passed by on their left.

'Not even there.'

'And making a withdrawal would be considerably more testing, I imagine! Ha ha. Ha ha.'

'Quite so.' The banker did not display even the inkling of a smile. 'Our vault door is a foot thickness of solid Union steel. We do not exaggerate when we say this is the safest place in the Circle of the World. This way.'

Morveer was ushered into a voluminous chamber panelled with oppressively dark wood, ostentatious yet still uncomfortable, tyrannised by a desk the size of a poor man's house. A sombre oil was set above a looming fireplace: a heavyset bald man glowering down as though he suspected Morveer of being up to no good. Some Union bureaucrat of the dusty past, he suspected. Zoller, maybe, or Bialoveld.

Mauthis took up a high, hard seat and Morveer found one opposite while the clerk lifted the lid of the strongbox and began to count out the money, using a coin-stacker with practised efficiency. Mauthis watched, scarcely blinking. At no stage did he touch either case or coins himself. A cautious man. Damnably, infuriatingly cautious. His slow eyes slid across the desk.

'Wine?'

Morveer raised an eyebrow at the distorted glassware behind the windows of a towering cabinet. 'Thank you, no. I become quite flustered under its influence, and between the two of us have frequently embarrassed myself. I decided, in the end, to abstain entirely, and stick to selling it to others. The stuff is . . . poison.' And he gave a huge smile. 'But don't let me stop you.' He slid an unobtrusive hand into a hidden pocket within his jacket where the vial of Star Juice was waiting. It would be a small effort to mount a diversion and introduce a couple of drops to Mauthis' glass while he was—

'I too avoid it.'

'Ah.' Morveer released the vial and instead plucked a folded paper from his inside pocket quite as if that had been his intention from the first. He unfolded it and pretended to read while his eyes darted about the office. 'I counted five thousand . . .' He took in the style of lock upon the door, the fashion of its construction, the frame within which it was set. 'Two hundred . . .' The tiles from which the floor was made, the panels on the walls, the render of the ceiling, the leather of Mauthis' chair, the coals on the unlit fire. 'And twelve scales.' Nothing seemed promising.

Mauthis showed no emotion at the number. Fortunes and small change, all one. He opened the heavy cover of a huge ledger upon his desk. He licked one finger and flicked steadily through the pages, paper crackling. Morveer felt a warm satisfaction spread out from his stomach to every extremity at the sight, and it was only with an effort that he prevented himself from whooping with triumph. He settled for a prim smile. 'Takings from my last trip to Sipani. Wine from Ospria is always a profitable venture, even in these uncertain times. Not everyone has our temperance, Master Mauthis, I am happy to say!'

'Of course.' The banker licked his finger once again as he turned the last few pages.

'Five thousand, two hundred and eleven,' said the clerk.

Mauthis' eyes flickered up. 'Trying to get away with something?' 'Me?' Morveer passed it off with a false chuckle. 'Damn that man Charming, he can't count for anything! I swear he has no feel for numbers whatsoever.'

The nib of Mauthis' pen scratched across the ledger; the clerk hurried over and blotted the entry as his master neatly, precisely, emotionlessly prepared the receipt. The clerk carried it to Morveer and offered it to him along with the empty strongbox.

'A note for the full amount in the name of the Banking House of Valint and Balk,' said Mauthis. 'Redeemable at any reputable mercantile institution in Styria.'

'Must I sign anything?' asked Morveer hopefully, his fingers closing around the pen in his inside pocket. It doubled as a highly effective blowgun, the needle concealed within containing a lethal dose of—

'No.'

'Very well.' Morveer smiled as he folded the paper and slid it away, taking care that it did not catch on the deadly edge of his scalpel. 'Better than gold, and a great deal lighter. For now, then, I take my leave. It has been a decided pleasure.' And he held out his hand again, poisoned ring glinting. No harm in making the effort.

Mauthis did not move from his chair. 'Likewise.'

Evil Friends

It had been Benna's favourite place in Westport. He'd dragged her there twice a week while they were in the city. A shrine of mirrors and cut glass, polished wood and glittering marble. A temple to the god of male grooming. The high priest – a small, lean barber in a heavily embroidered apron – stood sharply upright in the centre of the floor, chin pointed to the ceiling, as though he'd been expecting them that very moment to enter.

'Madam! A delight to see you again!' He blinked for a moment. 'Your husband is not with you?'

'My brother.' Monza swallowed. 'And no, he . . . won't be back. I've an altogether tougher challenge for you—'

Shivers stepped through the doorway, gawping about as fearfully as a sheep in a shearing pen. She opened her mouth to speak but the barber cut her off. 'I believe I see the problem.' He made a sharp circuit of Shivers while the Northman frowned down at him. 'Dear, dear. All off?'

'What?'

'All off,' said Monza, taking the barber by the elbow and pressing a quarter into his hand. 'Go gently, though. I doubt he's used to this and he might startle.' She realised she was making him sound like a horse. Maybe that was giving him too much credit.

'Of course.' The barber turned, and gave a sharp intake of breath. Shivers had already taken his new shirt off and was looming pale and sinewy in the doorway, unbuckling his belt.

'He means your hair, fool,' said Monza, 'not your clothes.'

'Uh. Thought it was odd, but, well, Southern fashions . . .' Monza watched him as he sheepishly buttoned his shirt back up. He had a long scar from his shoulder across his chest, pink and twisted. She might've thought it ugly once, but she'd had to change her opinions on scars, along with a few other things.

Shivers lowered himself into the chair. 'Had this hair all my life.'

'Then it is past time you were released from its suffocating embrace. Head forwards, please.' The barber produced his scissors with a flourish and Shivers lurched out of his seat.

‘You think I’m letting a man I never met near my face with a blade?’

‘I must protest! I trim the heads of Westport’s finest gentlemen!’

‘You.’ Monza caught the barber’s shoulder as he backed away and marched him forwards. ‘Shut up and cut hair.’ She slipped another quarter into his apron pocket and gave Shivers a long look. ‘You, shut up and sit still.’

He sidled back into the chair and clung so tight to its arms that the tendons stood from the backs of his hands. ‘I’m watching you,’ he growled.

The barber gave a long sigh and with lips pursed began to work.

Monza wandered around the room while the scissors snip-snipped behind her. She walked along a shelf, absently pulling the stoppers from the coloured bottles, sniffing at the scented oils inside. She caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror. A hard face, still. Thinner, leaner, sharper even than she used to be. Eyes sunken from the nagging pain up her legs, from the nagging need for the husk that made the pain go away.

You look especially beautiful this morning, Monza . . .

The idea of a smoke stuck in her mind like a bone in her craw. Each day the need crept up on her earlier. More time spent sick, sore and twitchy, counting the minutes until she could creep off and be with her pipe, sink back into soft, warm nothingness. Her fingertips tingled at the thought, tongue working hungrily around her dry mouth.

‘Always worn it long. Always.’ She turned back into the room. Shivers was wincing like a torture victim as tufts of cut hair tumbled down and built up on the polished boards under the chair. Some men clam up when they’re nervous. Some men blather. It seemed Shivers was in the latter camp. ‘Guess my brother had long hair and I went and did the same. Used to try and copy him. Looked up to him. Little brothers, you know . . . What was your brother like?’

She felt her cheek twitch, remembering Benna’s grinning face in the mirror, and hers behind it. ‘He was a good man. Everyone loved him.’

‘My brother was a good man. Lot better’n me. My father thought so, anyway. Never missed a chance to tell me . . . I mean, just saying, nothing strange ’bout long hair where I come from. Folk got other things to cut in a war than their hair, I guess. Black Dow used to laugh at me, ’cause he’d always hacked his right off, so as not to get in the way in a fight. But then

he'd give a man shit about anything, Black Dow. Hard mouth. Hard man. Only man harder was the Bloody-Nine his self. I reckon—'

'For someone with a weak grip on the language, you like to talk, don't you? You know what I reckon?'

'What?'

'People talk a lot when they've nothing to say.'

Shivers heaved out a sigh. 'Just trying to make tomorrow that bit better than today is all. I'm one of those . . . you've got a word for it, don't you?'

'Idiots?'

He looked sideways at her. 'It was a different one I had in mind.'

'Optimists.'

'That's the one. I'm an optimist.'

'How's it working out for you?'

'Not great, but I keep hoping.'

'That's optimists. You bastards never learn.' She watched Shivers' face emerging from that tangle of greasy hair. Hard-boned, sharp-nosed, with a nick of a scar through one eyebrow. It was a good face, in so far as she cared. She found she cared more than she'd thought she would. 'You were a soldier, right? What do they call them up in the North . . . a Carl?'

'I was a Named Man, as it goes,' and she could hear the pride in his voice.

'Good for you. So you led men?'

'I had some looking to me. My father was a famous man, my brother too. A little some of that rubbed off, maybe.'

'So why throw it away? Why come down here to be nothing?'

He looked at her in the mirror while the scissors clicked round his face. 'Morveer said you were a soldier yourself. A famous one.'

'Not that famous.' It was only half a lie. Infamous was closer to it.

'That'd be a strange job for a woman, where I come from.'

She shrugged. 'Easier than farming.'

'So you know war, am I right?'

'Yes.'

'Daresay you've seen some battles. You've seen men killed.'

'Yes.'

'Then you've seen what goes with it. The marches, the waiting, the sickness. Folk raped, robbed, crippled, burned out who've done nought to deserve it.'

Monza thought of her own field burning, all those years ago. ‘You’ve got a point, you can out and say it.’

‘That blood only makes more blood. That settling one score only starts another. That war gives a bastard of a sour taste to any man that’s not half-mad, and it only gets worse with time.’ She didn’t disagree. ‘So you know why I’d rather be free of it. Make something grow. Something to be proud of, instead of just breaking. Be . . . a good man, I guess.’

Snip, snip. Hair tumbled down and gathered on the floor. ‘A good man, eh?’

‘That’s right.’

‘So you’ve seen dead men yourself?’

‘I’ve seen my share.’

‘You’ve seen a lot together?’ she asked. ‘Stacked up after the plague came through, spread out after a battle?’

‘Aye, I’ve seen that.’

‘Did you notice some of those corpses had a kind of glow about them? A sweet smell like roses on a spring morning?’

Shivers frowned. ‘No.’

‘The good men and the bad, then – all looked about the same, did they? They always did to me, I can tell you that.’ It was his turn to stay quiet. ‘If you’re a good man, and you try to think about what the right thing is every day of your life, and you build things to be proud of so bastards can come and burn them in a moment, and you make sure and say thank you kindly each time they kick the guts out of you, do you think when you die, and they stick you in the mud, you turn into gold?’

‘What?’

‘Or do you turn to fucking shit like the rest of us?’

He nodded slowly. ‘You turn to shit, alright. But maybe you can leave something good behind you.’

She barked empty laughter at him. ‘What do we leave behind but things not done, not said, not finished? Empty clothes, empty rooms, empty spaces in the ones who knew us? Mistakes never made right and hopes rotted down to nothing?’

‘Hopes passed on, maybe. Good words said. Happy memories, I reckon.’

‘And all those dead men’s smiles you’ve kept folded up in your heart, they were keeping you warm when I found you, were they? How did they

taste when you were hungry? They raise a smile, even, when you were desperate?'

Shivers puffed out his cheeks. 'Hell, but you're a ray of sunshine. Might be they did me some good.'

'More than a pocketful of silver would've?'

He blinked at her, then away. 'Maybe not. But I reckon I'll try to keep thinking my way, just the same.'

'Hah. Good luck, good man.' She shook her head as if she'd never heard such stupidity. Give me only evil men for friends, Verturio wrote. Them I understand.

A last quick clicking of the scissors and the barber stepped away, dabbing at his own sweaty brow with the back of one sleeve. 'And we are all finished.'

Shivers stared into the mirror. 'I look a different man.'

'Sir looks like a Styrian aristocrat.'

Monza snorted. 'Less like a Northern beggar, anyway.'

'Maybe.' Shivers looked less than happy. 'I daresay that's a better-looking man there. A cleverer man.' He ran one hand through his short dark hair, frowning at his reflection. 'Not sure if I trust that bastard, though.'

'And to finish . . .' The barber leaned forwards, a coloured crystal bottle in his hands, and squirted a fine mist of perfume over Shivers' head.

The Northman was up like a cat off hot coals. 'What the fuck?' he roared, big fists clenched, shoving the man away and making him totter across the room with a squeal.

Monza burst out laughing. 'Looks of a Styrian nobleman, maybe.' She pulled out a couple more quarters and tucked them into the gaping barber's apron pocket. 'The manners might be a while coming, though.'

It was getting dark when they came back to the crumbling mansion, Monza with her hood drawn up and Shivers striding proudly along in his new coat. A cold rain flitted down into the ruined courtyard, a single lamp burned in a window on the first floor. She frowned towards it, and then at Shivers, found the grip of the knife in the back of her belt with her left hand. Best to be ready for every possibility. Up the creaking stairs a peeling door stood ajar, light spilling out across the boards. She stepped up and poked it open with her boot.

A pair of burning logs in the soot-blackened fireplace barely warmed the chamber on the other side. Friendly stood beside the far window, peering through the shutters towards the bank. Morveer had some sheets of paper spread out on a rickety old table, marking his place with an ink-spotted hand. Day sat on the tabletop with her legs crossed, peeling an orange with a dagger. 'Definite improvement,' she grunted, giving Shivers a glance.

'Oh, I cannot but agree.' Morveer grinned. 'A dirty, long-haired idiot left the building this morning. A clean, short-haired idiot has returned. It must be magic.'

Monza let go the grip of her knife while Shivers muttered angrily to himself in Northern. 'Since you're not crowing your own praises, I'm guessing the job's not done.'

'Mauthis is a most cautious and well-protected man. The bank is far too heavily guarded during the day.'

'On his way to the bank, then.'

'He leaves by an armoured carriage with a dozen guards in attendance. To try and intercept them would be too great a risk.'

Shivers tossed another log on the fire and held his palms out towards it. 'At his house?'

'Pah,' sneered Morveer. 'We followed him there. He lives on a walled island in the bay where several of the city's Aldermen have their estates. The public are not admitted. We have no method of gaining advance access to the building even if we can deduce which one is his. How many guards, servants, family members would be in attendance? All unknown. I flatly refuse to attempt a job of this difficulty on conjecture. What do I never take, Day?'

'Chances.'

'Correct. I deal in certainties, Murcatto. That is why you came to me. I am hired for a certain man most certainly dead, not for a butcher's mess and your target slipped away in the chaos. We are not in Caprile, now—'

'I know where we are, Morveer. What's your plan, then?'

'I have gathered the necessary information and devised a sure means of achieving the desired effect. I need only gain access to the bank during the hours of darkness.'

'And how do you plan to do that?'

'How do I plan to do that, Day?'

‘Through the rigorous application of observation, logic and method.’

Morveer flashed his smug little smile again. ‘Precisely so.’

Monza glanced sideways at Benna. Except Benna was dead, and Shivers was in his place. The Northman raised his eyebrows, blew out a long sigh and looked back to the fire. Give me only evil men for friends, Verturio wrote. But there had to be a limit.

Two Twos

The dice came up two twos. Two times two is four. Two plus two is four. Add the dice, or multiply, the same result. It made Friendly feel helpless, that thought. Helpless but calm. All these people struggling to get things done, but whatever they did, it turned out the same. The dice were full of lessons. If you knew how to read them.

The group had formed two twos. Morveer and Day were one pair. Master and apprentice. They had joined together, they stayed together, they laughed together at everyone else. But now Friendly saw that Murcatto and Shivers were forming a pair of their own. They crouched next to each other at the parapet, black outlines against the dim night sky, staring across towards the bank, an immense block of thicker darkness. He had often seen that it was in the nature of people to form pairs. Everyone except him. He was left alone, in the shadows. Maybe there was something wrong with him, the way the judges had said.

Sajaam had chosen him to form a pair with, in Safety, but Friendly had no illusions. Sajaam had chosen him because he was useful. Because he was feared. As feared as anyone in the darkness. But Sajaam had not pretended any differently. He was the only honest man that Friendly knew, and so it had been an honest arrangement. It had worked so well that Sajaam had made enough money in prison to buy his freedom from the judges. But he was an honest man and so, when he was free, he had not forgotten Friendly. He had come back and bought his freedom too.

Outside the walls, where there were no rules, things were different. Sajaam had other business, and Friendly was left alone again. He did not mind, though. He was used to it, and had the dice for company. So he found himself here, in the darkness, on a roof in Westport, in the dead of winter. With these two mismatched pairs of dishonest people.

The guards came in two twos as well, four at a time, and two groups of four, following each other endlessly around the bank all night. It was raining now, a half-frozen sleet spitting down. Still they followed each other, round, and round, and round through the darkness. One party trudged along the lane beneath, well armoured, polearms shouldered.

‘Here they come again,’ said Shivers.

‘I see that,’ sneered Morveer. ‘Start a count.’

Day’s whisper came through the night, high and throaty. ‘One . . . two . . . three . . . four . . . five . . .’ Friendly stared open-mouthed at her lips moving, the dice forgotten by his limp hand. His own mouth moved silently along with hers. ‘Twenty-two . . . twenty-three . . . twenty-four . . .’

‘How to reach the roof?’ Morveer was musing. ‘How to reach the roof?’

‘Rope and grapple?’ asked Murcatto.

‘Too slow, too noisy, too uncertain. The rope would be left in plain view the entire time, even supposing we could firmly set a grapple. No. We need a method that allows for no accidents.’

Friendly wished they would shut their mouths so he could listen to Day’s counting. His cock was aching hard from listening to it. ‘One hundred and twelve . . . one hundred and thirteen . . .’ He let his eyes close, let his head fall back against the wall, one finger moving back and forth in time. ‘One hundred and eighty-two . . . one hundred and eighty-three . . .’

‘No one could climb up there free,’ came Murcatto’s voice. ‘Not anyone. Too smooth, too sheer. And the spikes to worry on.’

‘I am in complete agreement.’

‘Up from inside the bank, then.’

‘Impossible. Entirely too many eyes. It must be up the walls, then in via the great windows in the roof. At least the lane is deserted during the hours of darkness. That is something in our favour.’

‘What about the other sides of the building?’

‘The north face is considerably busier and better lit. The east contains the primary entrance, with an additional party of four guards posted all night. The south is identical to this face, but without the advantage of our having access to an adjacent roof. No. This wall is our only option.’

Friendly saw the faint flicker of light down below in the lane. The next patrol, two times two guards, two plus two guards, four guards working their steady way around the bank.

‘All night they keep this up?’

‘There are two other parties of four that relieve them. They maintain their vigil uninterrupted until daybreak.’

‘Two hundred and ninety-one . . . two hundred and ninety-two . . . and here comes the next set.’ Day clicked her tongue. ‘Three hundred, give or

take.’

‘Three hundred,’ hissed Morveer, and Friendly could see his head shaking in the darkness. ‘Not enough time.’

‘Then how?’ snapped Monza.

Friendly swept the dice up again, felt their familiar edges pressing into his palm. It hardly mattered to him how they got into the bank, or even whether they ever did. His hopes mostly involved Day starting to count again.

‘There must be a way . . . there must be a—’

‘I can do it.’ They all looked round. Shivers was sitting against the parapet, white hands dangling.

‘You?’ sneered Morveer. ‘How?’

Friendly could just make out the curve of the Northman’s grin in the darkness. ‘Magic.’

Plans and Accidents

The guards grumbled their way down the lane. Four of 'em – breastplates, steel caps, halberd blades catching the light from their swinging lanterns. Shivers pressed himself deep into the doorway as they clattered past, waited a nervy moment, then padded across the lane and into the shadows beside the pillar he'd chosen. He started counting. Three hundred or so, to make it to the top and onto the roof. He looked up. Seemed a bastard of a long way. Why the hell had he said yes to this? Just so he could slap the smile off that idiot Morveer's face, and show Murcatto he was worth his money?

'Always my own worst enemy,' he whispered. Turned out he'd too much pride. That and a terrible weakness for fine-looking women. Who'd have thought it?

He pulled the rope out, two strides long with an eye at one end and a hook at the other. He cast a glance over the windows in the buildings facing him. Most were shuttered against the cold night, but a few were open, a couple still with lights burning inside. He wondered what the chances were of someone looking out and seeing him shinning up the side of a bank. Higher than he'd like, that was sure.

'Worst fucking enemy.' He got ready to climb up onto the pillar's base.

'Somewhere here.'

'Where, idiot?'

Shivers froze, rope dangling from his hands. Footsteps now, armour jingling. Bastard guards were coming back. They'd never done that in fifty circuits of the place. For all his chat about science, that bloody poisoner had made an arse of it and Shivers was the one left with his fruits dangling in the wind. He squeezed deeper into the shadows, felt the big flatbow on his back scraping stone. How the hell was he going to explain that? Just a midnight stroll, you know, all in black, taking the old bow for a walk.

If he bolted they'd see him, chase him, more'n likely stab him with something. Either way they'd know someone had been trying to creep into the bank and that would be the end of the whole business. If he stayed put . . . same difference, more or less, except the stabbing got a sight more likely.

The voices came closer. ‘Can’t be far away, all we bloody do is go round and round . . .’

One of ’em must’ve lost something. Shivers cursed his shitty luck, and not for the first time. Too late to run. He closed his fist round the grip of his knife. Footsteps thumped, just on the other side of the pillar. Why’d he taken her silver? Turned out he’d a terrible weakness for money too. He gritted his teeth, waited for—

‘Please!’ Murcatto’s voice. She walked out across the lane, hood back, long coat swishing. Might’ve been the first time Shivers had seen her without a sword. ‘I’m so, so sorry to bother you. I’m only trying to get home, but I seem to have got myself completely lost.’

One of the guards stepped round the pillar, his back to Shivers, and then another. They were no more than arm’s length away, between him and her. He could almost have reached out and touched their backplates.

‘Where you staying?’

‘With some friends, near the fountain on Lord Sabeldi Street, but I’m new in the city, and,’ she gave a hopeless laugh, ‘I’ve quite misplaced it.’

One of the guards pushed back his helmet. ‘I’ll say you have. Other side of town, that.’

‘I swear I’ve been wandering the city for hours.’ She began to move away, drawing the men gently after her. Another guard appeared, and another. All four now, with their backs still to Shivers. He held his breath, heart thumping so loud it was a wonder none of them could hear it. ‘If one of you gentlemen could point me in the right direction I’d be so grateful. Stupid of me, I know.’

‘No, no. Confusing place, Westport.’

‘’Specially at night.’

‘I get lost here myself, time to time.’ The men laughed, and Monza laughed along, still drawing ’em on. Her eye caught Shivers’ just for an instant, and they looked right at each other, and then she was gone round the next pillar, and the guards too, and their eager chatter drifted away. He closed his eyes, and slowly breathed out. Just as well he weren’t the only man around with a weakness for women.

He swung himself up onto the square base of the pillar, slid the rope around it and under his rump, hooked it to make a loop. No idea what the count was now, just knew he had to get up there fast. He set off, gripping

the stone with his knees and the edges of his boots, sliding the loop of rope up, then dragging it tight while he shifted his legs and set 'em again.

It was a trick his brother taught him, when he was a lad. He'd used it to climb the tallest trees in the valley and steal eggs. He remembered how they'd laughed together when he kept falling off near the bottom. Now he was using it to help kill folk, and if he fell off he'd be dead himself. Safe to say life hadn't turned out quite the way he'd hoped.

Still, he went up quick and smooth. Just like climbing a tree, except no eggs at the end of it and less chance of bark-splinters in your fruits. Hard work, though. He was sweating through by the time he made it up the pillar and still had the hardest part to go. He worked one hand into the mess of stonework at the top, unhooked the rope with the other and dragged it over his shoulder. Then he pulled himself up, fingers and toes digging holds out among the carvings, breath hissing, arms burning. He slipped one leg over a sculpture of a woman's frowning face and sat there, high above the lane, clinging to a pair of stone leaves and hoping they were stronger than the leafy kind.

He'd been in some better spots, but you had to look on the sunny side. It was the first time he'd had a woman's face between his legs in a while. He heard a hiss from across the lane, picked out Day's black shape on the roof. She pointed down. The next patrol were on their way.

'Shit.' He pressed himself tight to the stonework, trying to look like rock himself, hands tingling raw from gripping the hemp, hoping no one chose that moment to look up. They clattered by underneath and he let out a long hiss of air, heart pounding in his ears louder than ever. He waited for them to move off round the corner of the building, getting his breath back for the last stretch.

The spikes further along the walls were mounted on poles, could spin round and round. Impossible to get over. At the tops of the pillars, though, they were mortared to the stone. He took his gloves out – heavy smith's gloves, and pulled them on, then he reached up and worked his hands tight around two spikes, took a deep breath. He let go with his legs and swung free, drew himself up, staring a touch cross-eyed at the iron points in front of his face. Just like pulling yourself into the branches, except for the chance of taking your eye out, of course. Be nice to come out of this with both his eyes.

He swung one way, then heaved himself back the other and got one boot up on top. He twisted himself round, felt the spikes scrape against his thick jerkin, digging at his chest as he dragged himself over.

And he was up.

'Seventy-eight . . . seventy-nine . . . eighty . . .' Friendly's lips moved by themselves as he watched Shivers roll over the parapet and onto the roof of the bank.

'He made it,' whispered Day, voice squeaky with disbelief.

'And in good time too.' Morveer chuckled softly. 'Who would have thought he would climb . . . like an ape.'

The Northman stood, a darker shape against the dark night sky. He pulled the big flatbow off his back and started to fiddle with it. 'Let's hope he doesn't shoot like an ape,' whispered Day.

Shivers took aim. Friendly heard the soft click of the bowstring. A moment later he felt the bolt thud into his chest. He snatched hold of the shaft, frowning down. It hardly hurt at all.

'A happy circumstance that it has no point.' Morveer unhooked the wire from the flights. 'We would do well to avoid any further mishaps, and your untimely death would seem to qualify.'

Friendly tossed the blunt bolt away and tied the rope off to the end of the wire.

'You sure that thing will take his weight?' muttered Day.

'Suljuk silk cord,' said Morveer smugly. 'Light as down but strong as steel. It would take all three of us simultaneously, and no one looking up will see a thing.'

'You hope.'

'What do I never take, my dear?'

'Yes, yes.'

The black cord hissed through Friendly's hands as Shivers started reeling the wire back in. He watched it creep out across the space between the roofs, counting the strides. Fifteen and Shivers had the other end. They pulled it tight between them, then Friendly looped it through the iron ring they'd bolted to the roof timbers and began to knot it, once, twice, three times.

‘Are you entirely sure of that knot?’ asked Morveer. ‘There is no place in the plan for a lengthy drop.’

‘Twenty-eight strides,’ said Friendly.

‘What?’

‘The drop.’

A brief pause. ‘That is not helpful.’

A taut black line linked the two buildings. Friendly knew it was there, and still he could hardly see it in the darkness.

Day gestured towards it, curls stirred by the breeze. ‘After you.’

Morveer fumbled his way over the balustrade, breathing hard. In truth, the trip across the cord had not been a pleasant excursion by any stretch of the imagination. A chilly wind had blown up halfway and set his heart to hammering. There had been a time, during his apprenticeship to the infamous Moumah-yin-Bek, when he had executed such acrobatic exertions with a feline grace, but he suspected it was dwindling rapidly into his past along with a full head of hair. He took a moment to compose himself, wiped chill sweat from his forehead, then realised Shivers was sitting there, grinning at him.

‘Is there some manner of a joke?’ demanded Morveer.

‘Depends what makes you laugh, I reckon. How long will you be in there?’

‘Precisely as long as I need to be.’

‘Best move quicker than you did across that rope, then. You might still be climbing in when they open the place tomorrow.’ The Northman was still smiling as he slipped over the parapet and back across the cord, swift and sure for all his bulk.

‘If there is a God, he has cursed me through my acquaintance.’ Morveer gave only the briefest consideration to the notion of cutting the knot while the primitive was halfway across, then crept away down a narrow lead channel between low-pitched slopes of slate towards the centre of the building. The great glass roof glowed ahead of him, faint light glittering through thousands of distorting panes. Friendly squatted beside it, already unwinding a second length of cord from around his waist.

‘Ah, the modern age.’ Morveer knelt beside Day, pressing his hands gently to the expanse of glass. ‘What will they think of next?’

‘I feel blessed to live in such exciting times.’

‘So should we all, my dear.’ He carefully peered down into the bank’s interior. ‘So should we all.’ The hallway was barely lit, a single lamp burning at each end, bringing a precious gleam to the gilt frames of the huge paintings but leaving the doorways rich with shadow. ‘Banks,’ he whispered, a ghost of a smile on his face, ‘always trying to economise.’

He pulled out his glazing tools and began to prise away the lead with pliers, lifting each piece of glass out carefully with blobs of putty. The brilliance of his dexterity was quite undimmed by age, and it took him mere moments to remove nine panes, to snip the lead latticework with pincers and peel it back to leave a diamond-shaped hole ample for his purposes.

‘Perfect timing,’ he murmured. The light from the guard’s lantern crept up the panelled walls of the hallway, brought a touch of dawn to the dark canvases. His footsteps echoed as he passed by underneath them, giving vent to a booming yawn, his long shadow stretching out over the marble tiles. Morveer applied the slightest blast of air to his blowpipe.

‘Gah!’ The guard clapped a hand to the top of his head and Morveer ducked away from the window. There were footsteps below, a scuffling, a gurgle, then the loud thump and clatter of a toppling body. On peering back through the aperture the guard was plainly visible, spreadeagled on his back, lit lamp on its side by one outstretched hand.

‘Excellent,’ breathed Day.

‘Naturally.’

‘However much we talk about science, it always seems like magic.’

‘We are, one might say, the wizards of the modern age. The rope, if you please, Master Friendly.’ The convict tossed one end of the silken cord over, the other still knotted around his waist. ‘You are sure you can take my weight?’

‘Yes.’ There was indeed a sense of terrible strength about the silent man that lent even Morveer a level of confidence. With the rope secured by a knot of his own devising, he lowered first one soft shoe and then the other into the diamond-shaped opening. He worked his hips through, then his shoulders, and he was inside the bank.

‘Lower away.’ And down he drifted, as swiftly and smoothly as if lowered by a machine. His shoes touched the tiles and he slipped the knot with a jerk of his wrist, slid silently into a shadowy doorway, loaded blowgun ready in

one hand. He was expecting but the single guard within the building, but one should never become blinded by expectations.

Caution first, always.

His eyes rolled up and down the darkened hallway, his skin tingling with the excitement of the work under way. There was no movement. Only silence so complete it seemed almost a pressure against his prickling ears.

He looked up, saw Day's face at the gap and beckoned gently to her. She slid through as nimbly as a circus performer and glided down, their equipment folded around her body in a bandolier of black cloth. When her feet touched the ground she slipped free of the rope and crouched there, grinning.

He almost grinned back, then stopped himself. It would not do to let her know the warm admiration for her talents, judgement and character that had developed during their three years together. It would not do to let her even suspect the depth of his regard. It was when he did so that people inevitably betrayed his trust. His time in the orphanage, his apprenticeship, his marriage, his working life – all were scattered with the most poignant betrayals. Truly his heart bore many wounds. He would keep matters entirely professional, and thus protect them both. Him from her, and her from herself.

'Clear?' she hissed.

'As an empty squares board,' he murmured, standing over the stricken guard, 'and all according to plan. What do we most despise, after all?'

'Mustard?'

'And?'

'Accidents.'

'Correct. There are no such things as happy ones. Get his boots.'

With considerable effort they manoeuvred him down the hallway to his desk and into his chair. His head flopped back and he began to snore, long moustache fluttering gently around his lips.

'Ahhhhh, he sleeps like a babe. Props, if you please.'

Day handed him an empty spirits bottle and Morveer placed it carefully on the tiles beside the guard's boot. She passed him a half-full bottle, and he removed the stopper and sloshed a generous measure down the front of the guard's studded leather jerkin. Then he placed it carefully on its side by his dangling fingers, spirits leaking out across the tiles in an acrid puddle.

Morveer stepped back and framed the scene with his hands. ‘The tableau . . . is prepared. What employer does not suspect his nightwatchman of partaking, against his express instructions, of a measure or two after dark? Observe the slack features, the reek of strong spirits, the loud snoring. Ample grounds, upon his discovery at dawn, for his immediate dismissal. He will protest his innocence, but in the total absence of any evidence-’ he rummaged through the guard’s hair with his gloved fingers and plucked the spent needle from his scalp ‘-no further suspicions will be aroused. All perfectly as normal. Except it will not be normal, will it? Oh no. The silent halls of the Westport office . . . of the Banking House of Valint and Balk . . . will conceal a deadly secret.’ He blew out the flame of the guard’s lantern, sinking them into deeper darkness. ‘This way, Day, and do not dither.’

They crept together down the hallway, a pair of silent shadows, and stopped beside the heavy door to Mauthis’ office. Day’s picks gleamed as she bent down to work the lock. It only took a moment for her to turn the tumblers with a meaty clatter, and the door swung silently open.

‘Poor locks for a bank,’ as she slid her picks away.

‘They put the good locks where the money is.’

‘And we’re not here to steal.’

‘Oh no, no, we are rare thieves indeed. We leave gifts behind us.’ He padded around Mauthis’ monstrous desk and swung the heavy ledger open, taking care not to move it so much as a hair from its position. ‘The solution, if you please.’

She handed him the jar, full almost to the brim with thin paste, and he carefully twisted the cork out with a gentle thwop. He used a fine paintbrush for the application. The very tool for an artist of his incalculable talents. The pages crackled as he turned them, giving a flick of the brush to the corners of each and every one.

‘You see, Day? Swift, smooth and precise, but with every care. With every care, most of all. What kills most practitioners of our profession?’

‘Their own agents.’

‘Precisely so.’ With every care, therefore, he swung the ledger closed, its pages already close to dry, slid the paintbrush away and pressed the cork back into the jar.

‘Let’s go,’ said Day. ‘I’m hungry.’

‘Go?’ Morveer’s smile widened. ‘Oh no, my dear, we are far from finished. You must still earn your supper. We have a long night’s work ahead of us. A very long . . . night’s . . . work.’

‘Here.’

Shivers nearly jumped clean over the parapet, he was that shocked, lurched round, heart in his mouth. Murcatto crouched behind, grinning, breath leaving a touch of smoke about her shadowy face.

‘By the dead but you gave me a scare!’ he hissed.

‘Better than what those guards would’ve given you.’ She crept to the iron ring and tugged at the knot. ‘You made it up there, then?’ More’n a touch of surprise in her voice.

‘You ever doubt I’d do it?’

‘I thought you’d break your skull, if you even got high enough to fall.’

He tapped his head with a finger. ‘Least vulnerable part o’ me. Shake our friends off?’

‘Halfway to bloody Lord Sabeldi Street, I did. If I’d known they’d be that easily led I’d have hooked them in the first place.’

Shivers grinned. ‘Well, I’m glad you hooked ’em in the end, or they’d most likely have hooked me.’

‘Couldn’t have that. We’ve still got a lot of work to do.’ Shivers wriggled his shoulders, uncomfortable. It was easy to forget at times that the work they were about was killing a man. ‘Cold, eh?’

He snorted. ‘Where I come from, this is a summer day.’ He dragged the cork from the bottle and held it out to her. ‘This might help keep you warm.’

‘Well, that’s very thoughtful of you.’ She took a long swallow, and he watched the thin muscles in her neck shifting.

‘I’m a thoughtful man, for one out of a gang of hired killers.’

‘I’ll have you know that some hired killers are very nice people.’ She took another swig, then handed the bottle back. ‘None of this crew, of course.’

‘Hell, no, we’re shits to a man. Or woman.’

‘They’re in there? Morveer and his little echo?’

‘Aye, a while now, I reckon.’

‘And Friendly with them?’

‘He’s with them.’

‘Morveer say how long he’d be?’

‘Him, tell me anything? I thought I was the optimist.’

They crouched in cold silence, close together by the parapet, looking across at the dark outline of the bank. For some reason he felt very nervy. Even more than you’d expect going about a murder. He stole a sideways glance at her, then didn’t look away quite quick enough when she looked at him.

‘Not much for us to do but wait and get colder, then,’ she said.

‘Not much, I reckon. Unless you want to cut my hair any shorter.’

‘I’d be scared to get the scissors out in case you tried to strip.’

That brought a laugh from him. ‘Very good. Reckon that earns you another pull.’ He held out the bottle.

‘I’m quite the humorist, for a woman who hires killers.’ She came closer to take it. Close enough to give him a kind of tingle in the side that was near her. Close enough that he could feel the breath in his throat all of a sudden, coming quick. He looked away, not wanting to make a fool of himself any more than he’d been doing the last couple of weeks. Heard her tip the bottle, heard her drink. ‘Thanks again.’

‘Not a worry. Anything I can do, Chief, just let me know.’

When he turned his head she was looking right at him, lips pressed together in a hard line, eyes fixed on his, that way she had, like she was working out how much he was worth. ‘There is one other thing.’

Morveer pushed the last lips of lead into position with consummate delicacy and stowed his glazing tools.

‘Will that do?’ asked Day.

‘I doubt it will deflect a rainstorm, but it will serve until tomorrow. By then I suspect they will have considerably greater worries than a leaking window.’ He rolled the last smudges of putty away from the glass, then followed his assistant across the rooftop to the parapet. Friendly had already negotiated the cord, a squat shape on the other side of a chasm of empty air. Morveer peered over the edge. Beyond the spikes and the ornamental carvings, the smooth stone pillar dropped vertiginously to the cobbled lane. One of the groups of guards slogged past it, lamps bobbing.

‘What about the rope?’ Day hissed once they were out of earshot. ‘When the sun comes up someone will—’

‘No detail overlooked.’ Morveer grinned as he produced the tiny vial from an inside pocket. ‘A few drops will burn through the knot some time after we have crossed. We need only wait at the far side and reel it in.’

As far as could be ascertained by darkness, his assistant appeared unconvinced. ‘What if it burns more quickly than—’

‘It will not.’

‘Seems like an awful chance, though.’

‘What do I never take, my dear?’

‘Chances, but—’

‘You go first, then, by all means.’

‘You can count on it.’ Day swung quickly under the rope and swarmed across, hand over hand. It took her no longer than a count of thirty to make it to the other side.

Morveer uncorked the little bottle and allowed a few drops to fall onto the knots. Considering it, he allowed a few more. He had no desire to wait until sunup for the cursed thing to come apart. He allowed the next patrol to pass below, then clambered over the parapet with, it had to be admitted, a good deal less grace than his assistant had displayed. Still, there was no need for undue haste. Caution first, always. He took the rope in his gloved hands, swung beneath it, hooked one shoe over the top, lifted the other—

There was a harsh ripping sound, and the wind blew suddenly cold about his knee.

Morveer peered down. His trouser-leg had caught upon a spike bent upwards well above the others, and torn almost as far as his rump. He thrashed his foot, trying to untangle it, but only succeeded in entrapping it more thoroughly.

‘Damn it.’ Plainly, this had not been part of the plan. Faint smoke was curling now from the balustrade around which the rope was knotted. It appeared the acid was acting more swiftly than anticipated.

‘Damn it.’ He swung himself back to the roof of the bank and perched beside the smoking knot, gripping the rope with one hand. He slid his scalpel from an inside pocket, reached forwards and cut the flapping cloth away from the spike with a few deft strokes. One, two, three and it was almost done, neat as a surgeon. The final stroke and—

‘Ah!’ He realised with annoyance, then mounting horror, that he had nicked his ankle with the blade. ‘Damn it!’ The edge was tainted with

Larync tincture and, since the stuff had always given him a swell of nausea in the mornings, he had allowed his resistance to it to fade. It would not be fatal. Not of itself. But it might cause him to drop off a rope, and he had developed no immunity to a flailing plunge onto hard, hard cobblestones. The irony was bitter indeed. Most practitioners of his profession were killed, after all, by their own agents.

He pulled one glove off with his teeth and fumbled through his many pockets for that particular antidote, gurgling curses around the leather, swaying this way and that as the chill wind gusted up and spread gooseflesh all the way down his bare leg. Tiny tubes of glass rattled against his fingertips, each one etched with a mark that enabled him to identify it by touch.

Under the circumstances, though, the operation was still a testing one. He burped and felt a rush of nausea, a sudden painful shifting in his stomach. His fingers found the right mark. He let the glove fall from his mouth, pulled the phial from his coat with a trembling hand, dragged the cork out with his teeth and sucked up the contents.

He gagged on the bitter extract, spluttered sour spit down onto the faraway cobbles. He clung tight to the rope, fighting dizziness, the black street seeming to tip round and around him. He was a child again, and helpless. He gasped, whimpered, clung on with both hands. As desperately as he had clung to his mother's corpse when they came to take him.

Slowly the antidote had its effect. The dark world steadied, his stomach ceased its mad churning. The lane was beneath him, the sky above, back in their customary positions. His attention was drawn sharply to the knots again, smoking more than ever now and making a slight hissing sound. He could distinctly smell the acrid odour as they burned through.

'Damn it!' He hooked both legs over the rope and set off, pitifully weak from the self-administered dose of Larync. The air hissed in his throat, tightened now by the unmistakable grip of fear. If the cord burned through before he reached the other side, what then? His guts cramped up and he had to pause for a moment, teeth gritted, wobbling up and down in empty air.

On again, but he was lamentably fatigued. His arms trembled, his hands shuffled, bare palm and bare leg burning from friction. Well beyond halfway now, and creeping onwards. He let his head hang back, sucking in

air for one more effort. He saw Friendly, an arm out towards him, big hand no more than a few strides distant. He saw Day, staring, and Morveer wondered with some annoyance if he could detect the barest hint of a smile on her shadowy face.

Then there was a faint ripping sound from the far end of the rope.

The bottom dropped out of Morveer's stomach and he was falling, falling, swinging downwards, chill air whooshing in through his gaping mouth. The side of the crumbling building plunged towards him. He started to let go a mad wail, just like the one he made when they tore him from his mother's dead hand. There was a sickening impact that drove his breath out, cut his scream off, tore the cord from his grasping hands.

There was a crashing, a tearing of wood. He was falling, clawing at the air, mind a cauldron of mad despair, eyes bulging sightless. Falling, arms flailing, legs kicking helplessly, the world reeling around him, wind rushing at his face. Falling, falling . . . no further than a stride or two. His cheek slapped against floorboards, fragments of wood clattering down around him.

'Eh?' he muttered.

He was shocked to find himself snatched around the neck, dragged into the air and rammed against a wall with bowel-loosening force, breath driven out in a long wheeze for the second time in a few moments.

'You! What the fuck?' Shivers. The Northman was, for some reason still obscure, entirely naked. The grubby room behind him was dimly lit by some coals banked up in a grate. Morveer's eyes wandered down to the bed. Murcatto was in it, propped up on her elbows, rumpled shirt hanging open, breasts flattened against her ribs. She peered at him with no more than a mild surprise, as if she'd opened her front door to see a visitor she had not been expecting until later.

Morveer's mind clicked into place. Despite the embarrassment of the position, the residual pulsing of mortal terror and the tingling scratches on his face and hands, he began to chuckle. The rope had snapped ahead of time and, by some freak but hugely welcome chance, he had swung down in a perfect arc and straight through the rotten shutters of one of the rooms in the crumbling house. One had to appreciate the irony.

'It seems there is such a thing as a happy accident after all!' he cackled.

Murcatto squinted over from the bed, eyes somewhat unfocused. She had a set of curious scars, he noticed, following the lines of her ribs on one side.

'Why you smoking?' she croaked.

Morveer's eyes slid to the husk-pipe on the boards beside the bed, a ready explanation for her lack of surprise at the unorthodox manner of his entrance. 'You are confused, but it is easy to see why. I believe it is you that has been smoking. That stuff is absolute poison, you realise. Absolute—'

Her arm stretched out, limp finger pointing towards his chest. 'Smoking, idiot.' He looked down. A few acrid wisps were curling up from his shirt.

'Damn it!' he squeaked as Shivers took a shocked step back and let him fall. He tore his jacket off, fragments of glass from the shattered acid bottle tinkling to the boards. He scrabbled with his shirt, the front of which had begun to bubble, ripped it open and flung it on the floor. It lay there, smoking noticeably and filling the grubby chamber with a foul reek. The three of them stared at it, by a turn of fate that surely no one could have anticipated, all now at least half-naked.

'My apologies.' Morveer cleared his throat. 'Plainly, this was not part of the plan.'

Repaid in Full

Monza frowned at the bed, and she frowned at Shivers in it. He lay flat out, blanket rumpled across his stomach. One big long arm hung off the edge of the mattress, white hand lying limp on its back against the floorboards. One big foot stuck from under the blanket, black crescents of dirt under the nails. His face was turned towards her, peaceful as a child's, eyes shut, mouth slightly open. His chest, and the long scar across it, rose and fell gently with his breathing.

By the light of day, it all seemed like a serious error.

She tossed the coins at Shivers and they jingled onto his chest and scattered across the bed. He jerked awake, blinking around.

'Whassis?' He stared blearily down at the silver stuck to his chest.

'Five scales. More than a fair price for last night.'

'Eh?' He pushed sleep out of his eye with two fingers. 'You're paying me?' He shoved the coins off his skin and onto the blanket. 'I feel something like a whore.'

'Aren't you one?'

'No. I've got some pride.'

'So you'll kill a man for money, but you won't suck a cunt for it?' She snorted. 'There's morals for you. You want my advice? Take the five and stick to killing in future. That you've got a talent for.'

Shivers rolled over and dragged the blanket up around his neck. 'Shut the door on your way out, eh? It's dreadful cold in here.'

The blade of the Calvez slashed viciously at the air. Cuts left and right, high and low. She spun in the far corner of the courtyard, boots shuffling across the broken paving, lunging with her left arm, bright point darting out chest-high. Her quick breath smoked around her face, shirt stuck to her back in spite of the cold.

Her legs were a little better each day. They still burned when she moved quickly, were stiff as old twigs in the morning and ached like fury by evening time, but at least she could almost walk without grimacing. There was some spring in her knees even, for all their clicking. Her shoulder and

her jaw were loosening. The coins under her scalp barely hurt when she pressed them.

Her right hand was as ruined as ever, though. She tucked Benna's sword under her arm and pulled the glove off. Even that was painful. The twisted thing trembled, weak and pale, the scar from Gobba's wire lurid purple round the side. She winced as she forced the crooked fingers closed, little one still stubbornly straight. The thought that she'd be cursed with this hideous liability for the rest of her life brought on a sudden rush of fury.

'Bastard,' she hissed through gritted teeth, and dragged the glove back on. She remembered her father giving her a sword to hold for the first time, no more than eight years old. She remembered how heavy it had felt, how strange and unwieldy in her right hand. It hardly felt much better now, in her left. But she had no choice but to learn.

To start from nothing, if that was what it took.

She faced a rotten shutter, blade out straight towards it, wrist turned flat to the ground. She snapped out three jabs and the point tore three slats from the frame, one above the other. She snarled as she twisted her wrist and slashed downwards, splitting it clean in two, splinters flying.

Better. Better each day.

'Magnificent.' Morveer stood in a doorway, a few fresh scratches across one cheek. 'There is not a shutter in Styria that will dare oppose us.' He ambled forwards into the courtyard, hands clasped behind him. 'I daresay you were even more impressive when your right hand still functioned.'

'I'll worry about that.'

'A great deal, I should think. Recovered from your . . . exertions of last night with our Northern acquaintance?'

'My bed, my business. And you? Recovered from your little drop through my window?'

'No more than a scratch or two.'

'Shame.' She slapped the Calvez back into its sheath. 'Is it done?'

'It will be.'

'He's dead?'

'He will be.'

'When?'

Morveer grinned up at the square of pale sky above them. 'Patience is the first of virtues, General Murcatto. The bank has only just opened its doors,

and the agent I used takes some time to work. Jobs done well are rarely done quickly.'

'But it will work?'

'Oh, absolutely so. It will be . . . masterful.'

'I want to see it.'

'Of course you do. Even in my hands the science of death is never utterly precise, but I would judge about an hour's time to be the best moment. I strongly caution you to touch nothing within the bank, however.' He turned away, wagging one finger at her over his shoulder. 'And take care you are not recognised. Our work together is only just commencing.'

The banking hall was busy. Dozens of clerks worked at heavy desks, bent over great ledgers, their pens scratching, rattling, scratching again. Guards stood bored about the walls, watching half-heartedly or not watching at all. Monza weaved between primped and pretty groups of wealthy men and women, slid between their oiled and bejewelled rows, Shivers shouldering his way through after. Merchants and shopkeepers and rich men's wives, bodyguards and lackeys with strongboxes and money bags. As far as she could tell it was an ordinary day's monumental profits for the Banking House of Valint and Balk.

The place Duke Orso got his money.

Then she caught a glimpse of a lean man with a hook nose, speaking to a group of fur-trimmed merchants and with a clerk flanking him on either side, ledgers tucked under their arms. That vulture face sprang from the crowds like a spark in a cellar, and set a fire in her. Mauthis. The man she'd come to Westport to kill. And it hardly needed saying that he looked very much alive.

Somebody called out over in the corner of the hall but Monza's eyes were fixed ahead, jaw suddenly clenched tight. She started to push through the queues towards Orso's banker.

'What're you doing?' Shivers hissed in her ear, but she shook him off, shoved a man in a tall hat out of her way.

'Give him some air!' somebody shouted. People were looking around, muttering, craning up to see something, the orderly queues starting to dissolve. Monza kept going, closer now, and closer. Closer than was sensible. She had no idea what she'd do when she got to Mauthis. Bite him?

Say hello? She was less than ten paces away – as near as she'd been when he peered down at her dying brother.

Then the banker gave a sudden wince. Monza slowed, easing carefully through the crowd. She saw Mauthis double over as if he'd been punched in the stomach. He coughed, and again – hard, retching coughs. He took a lurching step and clutched at the wall. People were moving all around, the place echoing with curious whispers, the odd strange shout.

'Stand back!'

'What is it?'

'Turn him over!'

Mauthis' eyes shimmered with wet, veins bulging from his thin neck. He clawed at one of the clerks beside him, knees buckling. The man staggered, guiding his master slowly to the floor.

'Sir? Sir?'

An atmosphere of breathless fascination seemed to have gripped the whole hall, teetering on the brink of fear. Monza edged closer, peering over a velvet-clad shoulder. Mauthis' starting eyes met hers, and they stared straight at each other. His face was stretched tight, skin turning red, fibres of muscle standing rigid. One quivering arm raised up towards her, one bony finger pointing.

'Muh,' he mouthed, 'Muh . . . Muh . . .'

His eyes rolled back and he started to dance, legs flopping, back arching, jerking madly around on the marble tiles like a landed fish. The men about him stared down, horrified. One of them was doubled up by a sudden coughing fit. People were shouting all over the banking hall.

'Help!'

'Over here!'

'Somebody!'

'Some air, I said!'

A clerk lurched up from his desk, chair clattering over, hands at his throat. He staggered a few steps, face turning purple, then crashed down, a shoe flying off one kicking foot. One of the clerks beside Mauthis was on his knees, fighting for breath. A woman gave a piercing scream.

'By the dead—' came Shivers' voice.

Pink foam frothed from the banker's wide-open mouth. His thrashing settled to a twitching. Then to nothing. His body sagged back, empty eyes

goggling up over Monza's shoulder, towards the grinning busts ranged round the walls.

Two dead. Five left.

'Plague!' somebody shrieked, and as if a general had roared for the charge on a battlefield, the place was plunged instantly into jostling chaos. Monza was nearly barged over as one of the merchants who'd been talking to Mauthis turned to run. Shivers stepped up and gave him a shove, sent him sprawling on top of the banker's corpse. A man with skewed eyeglasses clutched at her, bulging eyes horribly magnified in his pink face. She punched on an instinct with her right hand, gasped as her twisted knuckles jarred against his cheek and sent a jolt of pain to her shoulder, chopped at him with the heel of her left and knocked him over backwards.

No plague spreads quicker than panic, Stolicus wrote, nor is more deadly.

The veneer of civilisation was peeled suddenly away. The rich and self-satisfied were transformed into animals. Those in the way were flung aside. Those that fell were given no mercy. She saw a fat merchant punch a well-dressed lady in the face and she collapsed with a squeal, was kicked to the wall, wig twisted across her bloody face. She saw an old man huddled on the floor, trampled by the mob. A strongbox banged down, silver coins spilling, ignored, kicked across the floor by milling shoes. It was like the madness of a rout. The screaming and the jostling, the swearing and the stink of fear, the scattering of bodies and broken junk.

Someone shoved at her and she lashed out with an elbow, felt something crunch, spots of blood on her cheek. She was caught up by the crush like a twig in a river, jabbed at, twisted, torn and tangled. She was carried snarling through the doorway and into the street, feet scarcely touching the ground, people pressing, thrashing, wriggling up against her. She was swept sideways, slipped from the steps, twisted her leg on the cobbles and lurched against the wall of the bank.

She felt Shivers grab her by the elbow and half-lead, half-carry her off. A couple of the bank's guards stood, trying ineffectually to stem the flow of panic with the hafts of their halberds. There was a sudden surge in the crowd and Monza was carried back. Between flailing arms she saw a man quivering on the ground, coughing red foam onto the cobbles. A wall of horrified, fascinated faces twitched and bobbed as people fought to get away from him.

Monza felt dizzy, mouth sour. Shivers strode beside her, breathing fast through his nose, glancing back over his shoulder. They rounded the corner of the bank and made for the crumbling house, the maddened clamour fading behind them. She saw Morveer, standing at a high window like a wealthy patron enjoying the theatre from his private box. He grinned down, and waved with one hand.

Shivers growled something in his own tongue as he heaved the heavy door open and Monza came after him. She snatched up the Calvez and made straight for the stairs, taking them two at a time, hardly noticing the burning in her knees.

Morveer still stood by the window when she got there, his assistant cross-legged on the table, munching her way through half a loaf of bread. 'There seems to be quite the ruckus down in the street!' The poisoner turned into the room, but his smile vanished as he saw Monza's face. 'What? He's alive?'

'He's dead. Dozens of them are.'

Morveer's eyebrows went up by the slightest fraction. 'An establishment of that nature, the books will be in constant movement around the building. I could not take the risk that Mauthis would end up working from another. What do I never take, Day?'

'Chances. Caution first, always.' Day tore off another mouthful of bread, and mumbled around it. 'That's why we poisoned them all. Every ledger in the place.'

'This isn't what we agreed,' Monza growled.

'I rather think it is. Whatever it takes, you told me, no matter who gets killed along the way. Those are the only terms under which I work. Anything else allows for misunderstandings.' Morveer looked somewhat puzzled, somewhat amused. 'I am well aware that some individuals are uncomfortable with wholesale murder, but I certainly never anticipated that you, Monzcarro Murcatto, the Serpent of Talins, the Butcher of Caprile, would be one. You need not worry about the money. Mauthis will cost you ten thousand, as we agreed. The rest are free of—'

'It's not a question of money, fool!'

'Then what is the question? I undertook a piece of work, as commissioned by you, and was successful, so how can I be at fault? You say you never had in mind any such result, and did not undertake the work yourself, so how

can you be at fault? The responsibility seems to drop between us, then, like a turd straight from a beggar's arse and into an open sewer, to be lost from sight for ever and cause nobody any further discomfort. An unfortunate misunderstanding, shall we say? An accident? As if a sudden wind blew up, and a great tree fell, and caught every little insect in that place and squashed . . . them . . . dead !'

'Squashed 'em,' chirped Day.

'If your conscience nags at you—'

Monza felt a stab of anger, gloved hand gripping the sword's scabbard painfully hard, twisted bones clicking as they shifted. 'Conscience is an excuse not to do what needs doing. This is about keeping control. We'll stick to one dead man at a time from now on.'

'Will we indeed?'

She took a sudden stride into the room and the poisoner edged away, eyes flickering nervously down to her sword, then back. 'Don't test me. Not ever. One . . . at a time . . . I said.'

Morveer carefully cleared his throat. 'You are the client, of course. We will proceed as you dictate. There really is no cause to get angry.'

'Oh, you'll know if I get angry.'

He gave a pained sigh. 'What is the tragedy of our profession, Day?'

'No appreciation.' His assistant popped the last bit of crust into her mouth.

'Precisely so. Come, we will take a turn about the city while our employer decides which name on her little list next merits our attentions. The atmosphere in here feels somewhat tainted by hypocrisy.' He marched out with an air of injured innocence. Day looked up from under her sandy lashes, shrugged, stood, brushed crumbs from the front of her shirt, then followed her master.

Monza turned back to the window. The crowds had mostly broken up. Groups of nervous city watch had appeared, blocking off the street before the bank, keeping a careful distance from the still shapes sprawled out on the cobbles. She wondered what Benna would've said to this. Told her to calm down, most likely. Told her to think it through.

She grabbed a chest with both hands and snarled as she flung it across the room. It smashed into the wall, sending lumps of plaster flying, clattered down and sagged open, clothes spilling out across the floor.

Shivers stood there in the doorway, watching her. ‘I’m done.’

‘No!’ She swallowed. ‘No. I still need your help.’

‘Standing up and facing a man, that’s one thing . . . but this—’

‘The rest will be different. I’ll see to it.’

‘Nice, clean murders? I doubt it. You set your mind to killing, it’s hard to pick the number of the dead.’ Shivers slowly shook his head. ‘Morveer and his fucking like might be able to step away from it and smile, but I can’t.’

‘So what?’ She walked slowly to him, the way you might walk to a skittish horse, trying to stop it bolting with your eyes. ‘Back to the North with fifty scales for the journey? Grow your hair and go back to bad shirts and blood on the snow? I thought you had pride. I thought you wanted to be better than that.’

‘That’s right. I wanted to be better.’

‘You can be. Stick. Who knows? Maybe you can save some lives, that way.’ She laid her left hand gently on his chest. ‘Steer me down the righteous path. Then you can be good and rich at once.’

‘I’m starting to doubt a man can be both.’

‘Help me. I have to do this . . . for my brother.’

‘You sure? The dead are past helping. Vengeance is for you.’

‘For me then!’ She forced her voice to drop soft again. ‘There’s nothing I can do to change your mind?’

His mouth twisted. ‘Going to toss me another five, are you?’

‘I shouldn’t have done that.’ She slid her hand up, traced the line of his jaw, trying to judge the right words, pitch the right bargain. ‘You didn’t deserve it. I lost my brother, and he’s all I had. I don’t want to lose someone else . . .’ She let it hang in the air.

There was a strange look in Shivers’ eye, now. Part angry, part hungry, part ashamed. He stood there silent for a long moment, and she felt the muscles clenching and unclenching on the side of his face.

‘Ten thousand,’ he said.

‘Six.’

‘Eight.’

‘Done.’ She let her hand fall, and they stared at each other. ‘Get packed, we leave within the hour.’

‘Right.’ He slunk guiltily out of the door without meeting her eye and left her there, alone.

And that was the trouble with good men. Just so damned expensive.

III

SIPANI

> ‘The belief in a supernatural source of evil is not necessary;
> men alone are quite capable of every wickedness’
>
> *Joseph Conrad*

Not *two weeks later, men came over the border looking to even the tally, and they hanged old Destort and his wife, and burned the mill. A week after that his sons set out for vengeance, and Monza took down* her father’s sword and went with them, Benna snivelling along behind. She was glad to go. She had lost the taste for farming.

They left the valley to settle a score, and for two years they did not stop. Others joined them, men who had lost their work, their farms, their families. Before too long it was them burning crops, breaking into farmhouses, taking what they could find. Before too long it was them doing the hangings. Benna grew up quickly, and sharpened to a merciless edge. What other choice? They avenged killings, then thefts, then slights, then the rumours of slights. There was war, so there was never any shortage of wrongs to avenge.

Then, at the end of summer, Talins and Musselia made peace with nothing gained on either side but corpses. A man with a gold-edged cloak rode into the valley with soldiers behind him and forbade reprisals. Destort’s sons and the rest split up, took their spoils with them, went back to what they had been doing before the madness started or found new madness to take a hand in. By then, Monza’s taste for farming had grown back.

They made it as far as the village.

A vision of martial splendour stood at the edge of the broken fountain in a breastplate of shining steel, a sword hilt set with glinting gemstones at his hip. Half the valley had gathered to listen to him speak.

‘My name is Nicomo Cosca, captain of the Company of the Sun – a noble brotherhood fighting with the Thousand Swords, greatest mercenary brigade

in Styria! We have a Paper of Engagement from the young Duke Rogont of Ospria and are looking for men! Men with experience of war, men with courage, men with a love of adventure and a taste for money! Are any of you sick of grubbing in the mud for a living? Do any of you hope for something better? For honour? For glory? For riches? Join us!'

'We could do that,' Benna hissed.

'No,' said Monza, 'I'm done with fighting.'

'There will be little fighting!' shouted Cosca, as if he could guess her thoughts. 'That I promise you! And what there is you will be well paid for thrice over! A scale a week, plus shares of booty! And there will be plenty of booty, lads, believe me! Our cause is just . . . or just enough, and victory is a certainty.'

'We could do that!' hissed Benna. 'You want to go back to tossing mud? Broken down tired every night and dirt under your fingernails? I won't!'

Monza thought of the work she would have just to clear the upper field, and how much she might make from doing it. A line had formed of men keen to join the Company of the Sun, beggars and farmers mostly. A black-skinned notary took their names down in a ledger.

Monza shoved past them.

'I am Monzcarro Murcatto, daughter of Jappo Murcatto, and this is my brother Benna, and we are fighters. Can you find work for us in your company?'

Cosca frowned at her, and the black-skinned man shook his head. 'We need men with experience of war. Not women and boys.' He tried to move her away with his arm.

She would not be moved. 'We've experience. More than these scrapings.'

'I've work for you,' said one of the farmers, made bold by signing his mark on the paper. 'How about you suck my cock?' He laughed at that. Until Monza knocked him down in the mud and made him swallow half his teeth with the heel of her boot.

Nicomo Cosca watched this methodical display with one eyebrow slightly raised. 'Sajaam, the Paper of Engagement. Does it specify men, exactly? What is the wording?'

The notary squinted at a document. 'Two hundred cavalry and two hundred infantry, those to be persons well equipped and of quality. Persons is all it says.'

‘And quality is such a vague term. You, girl! Murcatto! You are hired, and your brother too. Make your marks.’

She did so, and so did Benna, and as simply as that they were soldiers of the Thousand Swords. Mercenaries. The farmer clutched at Monza’s leg.

‘My teeth.’

‘Pick through your shit for them,’ she said.

Nicomo Cosca, famed soldier of fortune, led his new hirings from the village to the sound of a merry pipe, and they camped under the stars that night, gathered round fires in the darkness, talking of making it rich in the coming campaign.

Monza and Benna huddled together with their blanket around their shoulders. Cosca came out of the murk, firelight glinting on his breastplate. ‘Ah! My war-children! My lucky mascots! Cold, eh?’ He swept his crimson cloak off and tossed it down to them. ‘Take this. Might keep the frost from your bones.’

‘What d’you want for it?’

‘Take it with my compliments, I have another.’

‘Why?’ she grunted, suspicious.

‘“‘A captain looks first to the comfort of his men, then to his own,” Stolicus said.’

‘Who’s he?’ asked Benna.

‘Stolicus? Why, the greatest general of history!’ Monza stared blankly at him. ‘An emperor of old. The most famous of emperors.’

‘What’s an emperor?’ asked Benna.

Cosca raised his brows. ‘Like a king, but more so. You should read this.’ He slid something from a pocket and pressed it into Monza’s hand. A small book, with a red cover scuffed and scarred.

‘I will.’ She opened it and frowned at the first page, waiting for him to go.

‘Neither of us can read,’ said Benna, before Monza could shut him up.

Cosca frowned, twisting one corner of his waxed moustache between finger and thumb. Monza was waiting for him to tell them to go back to the farm, but instead he lowered himself slowly and sat cross-legged beside them. ‘Children, children.’ He pointed at the page. ‘This here is the letter “A”.’

Fogs and Whispers

Sipani smelled of rot and old salt water, of coal smoke, shit and piss, of fast living and slow decay. Made Shivers feel like puking, though the smell mightn't have mattered so much if he could've seen his hand before his face. The night was dark, the fog so thick that Monza, walking close enough to touch, weren't much more than a ghostly outline. His lamp scarcely lit ten cobbles in front of his boots, all shining with cold dew. More than once he'd nearly stepped straight off into water. It was easily done. In Sipani, water was hiding round every corner.

Angry giants loomed up, twisted, changed to greasy buildings and crept past. Figures charged from the mist like the Shanka did at the Battle of Dunbrec, then turned out to be bridges, railings, statues, carts. Lamps swung on poles at corners, torches burned by doorways, lit windows glowed, hanging in the murk, treacherous as marsh-lights. Shivers would set his course by one set, squinting through the mist, only to see a house start drifting. He'd blink, and shake his head, the ground shifting dizzily under his boots. Then he'd realise it was a barge, sliding past in the water beside the cobbled way, bearing its lights off into the night. He'd never liked cities, fog or salt water. The three together were like a bad dream.

'Bloody fog,' Shivers muttered, holding his lamp higher, as though that helped. 'Can't see a thing.'

'This is Sipani,' Monza tossed over her shoulder. 'City of Fogs. City of Whispers.'

The chill air was full of strange sounds, alright. Everywhere the slap, slop of water, the creaking of ropes as rowing boats squirmed on the shifting canals. Bells tolling in the darkness, folk calling out, all kinds of voices. Prices. Offers. Warnings. Jokes and threats spilling over each other. Dogs barked, cats hissed, rats skittered, birds croaked. Snatches of music, lost in the mist. Ghostly laughter fluttered past on the other side of the seething water, lamps bobbing through the gloom as some revel wended into the night from tavern, to brothel, to gambling den, to smoke-house. Made Shivers' head spin, and left him sicker than ever. Felt like he'd been sick for weeks. Ever since Westport.

Footsteps echoed from the darkness and Shivers pressed himself against the wall, right hand on the haft of the hatchet tucked in his coat. Men loomed up and away, brushing past him. Women too, one holding a hat to her piled-up hair as she ran. Devil faces, smeared with drunken smiles, reeling past in a flurry and gone into the night, mist curling behind their flapping cloaks.

'Bastards,' hissed Shivers after them, letting go his axe and peeling himself away from the sticky wall. 'Lucky I didn't split one of 'em.'

'Get used to it. This is Sipani. City of Revels. City of Rogues.'

Rogues were in long supply, alright. Men slouched around steps, on corners, beside bridges, dishing out hard looks. Women too, black outlines in doorways, lamps glowing behind, some of 'em hardly dressed in spite of the cold. 'A scale!' one called at him from a window, letting one thin leg dangle in the murk. 'For a scale you get the night of your life! Ten bits then! Eight!'

'Selling themselves,' Shivers grunted.

'Everyone's selling themselves,' came Monza's muffled voice. 'This is—'

'Yes, yes. This is fucking Sipani.'

Monza stopped and he nearly walked into her. She pushed her hood back and squinted at a narrow doorway in a wall of crumbling brickwork. 'This is it.'

'You take a man to all the finest places, eh?'

'Maybe later you'll get the tour. For now we've got business. Look dangerous.'

'Right y'are, Chief.' Shivers stood up tall and fixed his hardest frown. 'Right y'are.'

She knocked, and not long after the door wobbled open. A woman stared out from a dim-lit hallway, long and lean as a spider. She had a way of standing, hips loose and tilted to one side, arm up on the doorframe, one thin finger tapping at the wood. Like the fog was hers, and the night, and them too. Shivers brought his lamp up a touch closer. A hard, sharp face with a knowing smile, spattered with freckles, short red hair sprouting all ways from her head.

'Shylo Vitari?' asked Monza.

'You'll be Murcatto, then.'

'That's right.'

‘Death suits you.’ She narrowed her eyes at Shivers. Cold eyes, with a hint of a cruel joke in ’em. ‘Who’s your man?’

He spoke for himself. ‘Name’s Caul Shivers, and I’m not hers.’

‘No?’ She grinned at Monza. ‘Whose is he, then?’

‘I’m my own.’

She gave a sharp laugh at that. Seemed everything about her had an edge on it. ‘This is Sipani, friend. Everyone belongs to someone. Northman, eh?’

‘That a problem?’

‘Got tossed down a flight of stairs by one once. Haven’t been entirely comfortable around them since. Why Shivers?’

She caught him off balance with that one. ‘What?’

‘Up in the North, the way I heard it, a man earns his name. Great deeds done, and all that. Why Shivers?’

‘Er . . .’ The last thing he needed was to look the fool in front of Monza. He was still hoping to make it back into her bed at some point. ‘Because my enemies shiver with fear when they face me,’ he lied.

‘That so?’ Vitari stood back from the door, giving him a mocking grin as he ducked under the low lintel. ‘You must have some cowardly bloody enemies.’

‘Sajaam says you know people here,’ said Monza as the woman led them into a narrow sitting room, barely lit by some smoky coals on a grate.

‘I know everyone.’ She took a steaming pot off the fire. ‘Soup?’

‘Not me,’ said Shivers, leaning against the wall and folding his arms over his chest. He’d been a lot more careful about hospitality since he met Morveer.

‘Nor me,’ said Monza.

‘Suit yourselves.’ Vitari poured a mug out for herself and sat, folding one long leg over the other, pointed toe of her black boot rocking backwards and forwards.

Monza took the only other chair, wincing a touch as she lowered herself into it. ‘Sajaam says you can get things done.’

‘And just what is it that the two of you need doing?’

Monza glanced across at Shivers, and he shrugged back at her. ‘I hear the King of the Union is coming to Sipani.’

‘So he is. Seems he’s got it in mind that he’s the great statesman of the age.’ Vitari smiled wide, showing two rows of clean, sharp teeth. ‘He’s

going to bring peace to Styria.'

'Is he now?'

'That's the rumour. He's brought together a conference to negotiate terms, between Grand Duke Orso and the League of Eight. He's got all their leaders coming – those who are still alive, at least, Rogont and Salier at the front. He's got old Sotorius to play host – neutral ground here in Sipani, is the thinking. And he's got his brothers-in-law on their way, to speak for their father.'

Monza craned forwards, eager as a buzzard at a carcass. 'Ario and Foscar both?'

'Ario and Foscar both.'

'They're going to make peace?' asked Shivers, and soon regretted saying anything. The two women each gave him their own special kind of sneer.

'This is Sipani,' said Vitari. 'All we make here is fog.'

'And that's all anyone will be making at this conference, you can depend on that.' Monza eased herself back into her chair, scowling. 'Fogs and whispers.'

'The League of Eight is splitting at the seams. Borletta fallen. Cantain dead. Visserine will be under siege when the weather breaks. No talk's going to change that.'

'Ario will sit, and smirk, and listen, and nod. Scatter a little trail of hopes that his father will make peace. Right up until Orso's troops appear outside the walls of Visserine.'

Vitari lifted her cup again, narrow eyes on Monza. 'And the Thousand Swords alongside them.'

'Salier and Rogont and all the rest will know that well enough. They're no fools. Misers and cowards, maybe, but no fools. They're only playing for time to manoeuvre.'

'Manoeuvre?' asked Shivers, chewing on the strange word.

'Wriggle,' said Vitari, showing him her teeth again. 'Orso won't make peace, and the League of Eight aren't looking for it. The only man who's come here hoping for anything but fog is his August Majesty, but they say he's got a talent for self-deception.'

'Comes with the crown,' said Monza, 'but he's nothing to me. Ario and Foscar are my business. What will they be about, other than feeding lies to their brother-in-law?'

‘There’s going to be a masked ball in honour of the king and queen at Sotorius’ palace on the first night of the conference. Ario and Foscar will be there.’

‘That’ll be well guarded,’ said Shivers, doing his best to keep up. Didn’t help that he thought he could hear a child crying somewhere.

Vitari snorted. ‘A dozen of the best-guarded people in the world, all sharing a room with their bitterest enemies? There’ll be more soldiers than at the Battle of Adua, I’ll be bound. Hard to think of a spot where the brothers would be less vulnerable.’

‘What else, then?’ snapped Monza.

‘We’ll see. I’m no friend of Ario’s, but I know someone who is. A close, close friend.’

Monza’s black brows drew in. ‘Then we should be talking to—’

The door creaked suddenly open and Shivers spun round, hatchet already halfway out.

A child stood in the doorway. A girl maybe eight years old, dressed in a too-long shift with bony ankles and bare feet sticking out the bottom, red hair poking from her head in a tangled mess. She stared at Shivers, then Monza, then Vitari with wide blue eyes. ‘Mama. Cas is crying.’

Vitari knelt down and smoothed the little girl’s hair. ‘Never you mind, baby, I hear. Try and soothe him. I’ll be up soon as I can, and sing to you all.’

‘Alright.’ The girl gave Shivers another look, and he pushed his axe away, somewhat shamefaced, and tried to make a grin. She backed off and pulled the door shut.

‘My boy’s got a cough,’ said Vitari, her voice with its hard edge again. ‘One gets ill, then they all get ill, then I get ill. Who’d be a mother, eh?’

Shivers lifted his brows. ‘Can’t say I’ve got the equipment.’

‘Never had much luck with family,’ said Monza. ‘Can you help us?’

Vitari’s eyes flickered over to Shivers, and back. ‘Who else you got along with you?’

‘A man called Friendly, as muscle.’

‘Good, is he?’

‘Very,’ said Shivers, thinking of the two men hacked bloody on the streets of Talins. ‘Bit strange, though.’

‘You need to be in this line of work. Who else?’

‘A poisoner and his assistant.’

‘A good one?’

‘According to him. Name of Morveer.’

‘Gah!’ Vitari looked as if she’d the taste of piss in her mouth. ‘Castor Morveer? That bastard’s about as trustworthy as a scorpion.’

Monza looked back, hard and level. ‘Scorpions have their uses. Can you help us, I asked?’

Vitari’s eyes were two slits, shining in the firelight. ‘I can help you, but it’ll cost. If we can get the job done, something tells me I won’t be welcome in Sipani any more.’

‘Money isn’t a problem. Just as long as you can get us close. You know someone who can help with that?’

Vitari drained her mug, then tossed the dregs hissing onto the coals. ‘Oh, I know all kinds of people.’

The Arts of Persuasion

It was early, and the twisting streets of Sipani were quiet. Monza hunched in a doorway, coat wrapped tight around her, hands wedged under her armpits. She'd been hunched there for an hour at least, steadily getting colder, breathing fog into the foggy air. The edges of her ears and her nostrils tingled unpleasantly. It was a wonder the snot hadn't frozen in her nose. But she could be patient. She had to be.

Nine-tenths of war is waiting, Stolicus wrote, and she felt he'd called it low.

A man wheeled past a barrow heaped with straw, tuneless whistling deadened by the thinning mist, and Monza's eyes slid after him until he became a murky outline and was gone. She wished Benna was with her.

And she wished he'd brought his husk pipe with him.

She shifted her tongue in her dry mouth, trying to push the thought out of her mind, but it was like a splinter under her thumbnail. The painful, wonderful bite at her lungs, the taste of the smoke as she let it curl from her mouth, her limbs growing heavy, the world softening. The doubt, the anger, the fear all leaking away . . .

Footsteps clapped on wet flagstones and a pair of figures rose out of the gloom. Monza stiffened, fists clenching, pain flashing through her twisted knuckles. A woman in a bright red coat edged with gold embroidery. 'Hurry up!' Snapped in a faint Union accent to a man lumbering along behind with a heavy trunk on one shoulder. 'I do not mean to be late again—'

Vitari's shrill whistle cut across the empty street. Shivers slid from a doorway, loomed up behind the servant and pinned his arms. Friendly came out of nowhere and sank four heavy punches into his gut before he could even shout, sent him to the cobbles blowing vomit.

Monza heard the woman gasp, caught a glimpse of her wide-eyed face as she turned to run. Before she'd gone a step Vitari's voice echoed out of the gloom ahead. 'Carlot dan Eider, unless I'm much mistaken!'

The woman in the red coat backed towards the doorway where Monza was standing, one hand held up. 'I have money! I can pay you!'

Vitari sauntered out of the murk, loose and easy as a mean cat in her own garden. ‘Oh, you’ll pay alright. I must say I was surprised when I learned Prince Ario’s favourite mistress was in Sipani. I heard you could hardly be dragged from his bedchamber.’ Vitari herded her towards the doorway and Monza backed off, into the dim corridor, wincing at the sharp pains through her legs as she started to move.

‘Whatever the League of Eight are paying, I’ll—’

‘I don’t work for them, and I’m hurt by the assumption. Don’t you remember me? From Dagoska? Don’t you remember trying to sell the city to the Gurkish? Don’t you remember getting caught?’ And Monza saw her let something drop and clatter against the cobbles – a cross-shaped blade, dancing and rattling on the end of a chain.

‘Dagoska?’ Eider’s voice had a note of strange terror in it now. ‘No! I’ve done everything he asked! Everything! Why would he—’

‘Oh, I don’t work for the Cripple any more.’ Vitari leaned in close. ‘I’ve gone freelance.’

The woman in the red coat stumbled back over the threshold and into the corridor. She turned and saw Monza waiting, gloved hand slack on the pommel of her sword. She stopped dead, ragged breath echoing from the damp walls. Vitari shut the door behind them, latch dropping with a final-sounding click.

‘This way.’ She gave Eider a shove and she nearly fell over her own coat-tails. ‘If it please you.’ Another shove as she found her feet and she sprawled through the doorway on her face. Vitari dragged her up by one arm and Monza followed them slowly into the room beyond, jaw clenched tight.

Like her jaw, the room had seen better days. The crumbling plaster was stained with black mould, bubbling up with damp, the stale air smelled of rot and onions. Day leaned back in one corner, a carefree smile on her face as she buffed a plum the colour of a fresh bruise against her sleeve. She offered it to Eider.

‘Plum?’

‘What? No!’

‘Suit yourself. They’re good though.’

‘Sit.’ Vitari shoved Eider into the rickety chair that was the only furniture. Usually a good thing, getting the only seat. But not now. ‘They say history

moves in circles but who'd ever have thought we'd meet like this again? It's enough to bring tears to our eyes, isn't it? Yours, anyway.'

Carlot dan Eider didn't look like crying any time soon, though. She sat upright, hands crossed in her lap. Surprising composure, under the circumstances. Dignity, almost. She was past the first flush of youth, but a most striking woman still, and everything carefully plucked, painted and powdered to make the best show of it. A necklace of red stones flashed around her throat, gold glittered on her long fingers. She looked more like a countess than a mistress, as out of place in the rotting room as a diamond ring in a rubbish heap.

Vitari prowled slowly around the chair, leaning down to hiss in her ear. 'You're looking well. Always did know how to land on your feet. Quite the tumble, though, isn't it? From head of the Guild of Spicers to Prince Ario's whore?'

Eider didn't even flinch. 'It's a living. What do you want?'

'Just to talk.' Vitari's voice purred low and husky as a lover's. 'Unless we don't get the answers we want. Then I'll have to hurt you.'

'No doubt you'll enjoy that.'

'It's a living.' She punched Ario's mistress suddenly in the ribs, hard enough to twist her in the chair. She doubled up, gasping, and Vitari leaned over her, bringing her fist up again. 'Another?'

'No!' Eider held her hand up, teeth bared, eyes flickering round the room then back to Vitari. 'No . . . ah . . . I'll be helpful. Just . . . just tell me what you need to know.'

'Why are you down here, ahead of your lover?'

'To make arrangements for the ball. Costumes, masks, all kinds of—'

Vitari's fist thumped into her side in just the same spot, harder than the first time, the sharp thud echoing off the damp walls. Eider whimpered, arms wrapped around herself, took a shuddering breath then coughed it out, face twisted with pain. Vitari leaned down over her like a black spider over a bound-up fly. 'I'm losing patience. Why are you here?'

'Ario's putting on . . . another kind of celebration . . . afterwards. For his brother. For his brother's birthday.'

'What kind of celebration?'

'The kind for which Sipani is famous.' Eider coughed again, turned her head and spat, a few wet specks settling across the shoulder of her beautiful

coat.

'Where?'

'At Cardotti's House of Leisure. He's hired the whole place for the night. For him, and for Foscar, and for their gentlemen. He sent me here to make the arrangements.'

'He sent his mistress to hire whores?'

Monza snorted. 'Sounds like Ario. What arrangements?'

'To find entertainers. To make the place ready. To make sure it's safe. He . . . trusts me.'

'More fool him.' Vitari chuckled. 'I wonder what he'd do if he knew who you really worked for, eh? Who you really spy for? Our mutual friend at the House of Questions? Our crippled friend from his Majesty's Inquisition? Keeping an eye on Styrian business for the Union, eh? You must have trouble remembering who you're supposed to betray from week to week.'

Eider glowered back at her, arms still folded around her battered ribs. 'It's a living.'

'A dying, if Ario learns the truth. One little note is all it would take.'

'What do you want?'

Monza stepped from the shadows. 'I want you to help us get close to Ario, and to Foscar. I want you to let us into Cardotti's House of Leisure on the night of this celebration of yours. When it comes to arranging the entertainments, I want you to hire who we say, when we say, how we say. Do you understand?'

Eider's face was very pale. 'You mean to kill them?' No one spoke, but the silence said plenty. 'Orso will guess I betrayed him! The Cripple will know I betrayed him! There aren't two worse enemies in the Circle of the World! You might as well kill me now!'

'Alright.' The blade of the Calvez rang gently as she drew it. Eider's eyes went wide.

'Wait—'

Monza reached out, resting the glinting point of the sword in the hollow between Eider's collarbones, and gently pushed. Ario's mistress arched back over the chair, hands opening and closing helplessly.

'Ah! Ah!' Monza twisted her wrist, steel flashing as the slender blade tilted one way and the other, the point grinding, digging, screwing ever so slowly into Eider's neck. A line of dark blood trickled from the wound it

made and crept down her breastbone. Her squealing grew more shrill, more urgent, more terrified. ‘No! Ah! Please! No!’

‘No?’ Monza held her there, pinned over the back of the chair. ‘Not quite ready to die after all? Not many of us are, when it comes to the moment.’ She slid the Calvez free and Eider rocked forwards, touching one trembling fingertip to her bloody neck, breath coming in ragged gasps.

‘You don’t understand. It isn’t just Orso! It isn’t just the Union! They’re both backed by the bank. By Valint and Balk. Owned by the bank. The Years of Blood are no more than a sideshow to them. A skirmish. You’ve no idea whose garden you’re pissing in—’

‘Wrong.’ Monza leaned down and made Eider shrink back. ‘I don’t care. There’s a difference.’

‘Now?’ asked Day.

‘Now.’

The girl’s hand darted out and pricked Eider’s ear with a glinting needle. ‘Ah!’

Day yawned as she slipped the splinter of metal into an inside pocket. ‘Don’t worry, it’s slow-working. You’ve got at least a week.’

‘Until what?’

‘Until you get sick.’ Day took a bite out of her plum and juice ran down her chin. ‘Bloody hell,’ she muttered, catching it with a fingertip.

‘Sick?’ breathed Eider.

‘Really, really sick. A day after that you’ll be deader than Juvens.’

‘Help us, you get the antidote, and at least the chance to run.’ Monza rubbed the blood from the point of Benna’s sword with gloved thumb and forefinger. ‘Try and tell anyone what we’re planning, here or in the Union, Orso, or Ario, or your friend the Cripple, and . . .’ She slid the blade back into its sheath and slapped the hilt home with a sharp snap. ‘One way or another, Ario will be short one mistress.’

Eider stared round at them, one hand still pressed to her neck. ‘You evil bitches.’

Day gave the plum pit a final suck then tossed it away. ‘It’s a living.’

‘We’re done.’ Vitari dragged Ario’s mistress to her feet by one elbow and started marching her towards the door.

Monza stepped in front of them. ‘What will you be telling your battered manservant, when he comes round?’

‘That . . . we were robbed?’

Monza held out her gloved hand. Eider’s face fell even further. She unclasped her necklace and dropped it into Monza’s palm, then followed it with her rings. ‘Convincing enough?’

‘I don’t know. You seem like the kind of woman to put up a struggle.’ Monza punched her in the face. She squawked, stumbled, would’ve fallen if Vitari hadn’t caught her. She looked up, blood leaking from her nose and her split lip, and for an instant she had this strange expression. Hurt, yes. Afraid, of course. But more angry than either one. Like the look Monza had herself, maybe, when they threw her from the balcony.

‘Now we’re done,’ she said.

Vitari yanked at Eider’s elbow and dragged her out into the hallway, towards the front door, their footsteps scraping against the grubby boards. Day gave a sigh, then pushed herself away from the wall and brushed plaster-dust from her backside. ‘Nice and neat.’

‘No thanks to your master. Where is he?’

‘I prefer employer, and he said there were some errands he had to run.’

‘Errands?’

‘That a problem?’

‘I paid for the master, not the dog.’

Day grinned. ‘Woof, woof. There’s nothing Morveer can do that I can’t.’

‘That so?’

‘He’s getting old. Arrogant. That rope burning through was nearly the death of him, in Westport. I wouldn’t want any carelessness like that to interfere with your business. Not for what you’re paying. No one worse to have next to you than a careless poisoner.’

‘You’ll get no argument from me on that score.’

Day shrugged. ‘Accidents happen all the time in our line of work. Especially to the old. It’s a young person’s trade, really.’ She sauntered out into the corridor, passed Vitari stalking back the other way. The look of glee was long gone from her sharp face, and the swagger with it. She lifted one black boot and shoved the chair angrily away into one corner.

‘There’s our way in, then,’ she said.

‘Seems so.’

‘Just what I promised you.’

‘Just what you promised.’

‘Ario and Foscar, both together, and a way to get to them.’

‘A good day’s work.’

They looked at each other, and Vitari ran her tongue around the inside of her mouth as if it tasted bitter. ‘Well.’ She shrugged her bony shoulders. ‘It’s a living.’

The Life of the Drinker

‘A drink, a drink, a drink. Where can a man find a drink?’ Nicomo Cosca, famed soldier of fortune, tottered against the A wall of the alley, rooting through his purse yet again with quivering fingers. There was still nothing in it but a tuft of grey fluff. He dug it out, blew it from his fingertips and watched it flutter gently down. All his fortune.

‘Bastard purse!’ He flung it in the gutter in a feeble rage. Then he thought better of it and had to stoop to pick it up, groaning like an old man. He was an old man. A lost man. A dead man, give or take a final rattle of breath. He sank slowly to his knees, gazing at his broken reflection in the black water gathered between the cobblestones.

He would have given all he owned for the slightest taste of liquor. He owned nothing, it had to be said. But his body was his, still. His hands, which had raised up princes to the heights of power and flung them down again. His eyes, which had surveyed the turning points of history. His lips, which had softly kissed the most celebrated beauties of the age. His itching cock, his aching guts, his rotting neck, he would happily have sold it all for a single measure of grape spirit. But it was hard to see where he would find a buyer.

‘I have become myself . . . an empty purse.’ He raised his leaden arms imploringly and roared into the murky night. ‘Someone give me a fucking drink!’

‘Stop your mouth, arsehole!’ a rough voice called back, and then, with the clatter of shutters closing, the alley plunged into deeper gloom.

He had dined at the tables of dukes. He had sported in the beds of countesses. Cities had trembled at the name of Cosca.

‘How did it ever come . . . to this?’ He clambered up, swallowing the urge to vomit. He smoothed his hair back from his throbbing temples, fumbled with the limp ends of his moustaches. He made for the lane with something approaching his famous swagger of old. Out between the ghostly buildings and into a patch of lamplight in the mist, moist night breeze tickling at his sore face. Footsteps approached and Cosca lurched round, blinking.

‘Good sir! I find myself temporarily without funds, and wonder whether you would be willing to advance me a small loan until—’

‘Away and piss, beggar.’ The man shoved past, barging him against the wall.

Cosca’s skin flushed with greasy outrage. ‘You address none other than Nicomo Cosca, famed soldier of fortune!’ The effect was somewhat spoiled by the brittle cracking of his ravaged voice. ‘Captain general of the Thousand Swords! Ex-captain general, that is.’ The man made an obscene gesture as he disappeared into the fog. ‘I dined . . . at the beds . . . of dukes!’ Cosca collapsed into a fit of hacking coughs and was obliged to bend over, shaking hands on his shaking knees, aching ribcage going like a creaky bellows.

Such was the life of the drinker. A quarter on your arse, a quarter on your face, a quarter on your knees and the rest of your time bent over. He finally hawked up a great lump of phlegm, and with one last cough blew it spinning from his sore tongue. Would this be his legacy? Spit in a hundred thousand gutters? His name a byword for petty betrayal, avarice and waste? He straightened with a groan of the purest despair, staring up into nothingness, even the stars denied him by Sipani’s all-cloaking fog.

‘One last chance. That’s all I’m asking.’ He had lost count of the number of last chances he had wasted. ‘Just one more. God!’ He had never believed in God for an instant. ‘Fates!’ He had never believed in Fates either. ‘Anyone!’ He had never believed in anything much beyond the next drink. ‘Just one . . . more . . . chance.’

‘Alright. One more.’

Cosca blinked. ‘God? Is that . . . you?’

Someone chuckled. A woman’s voice, and a sharp, mocking, most ungodlike sort of a chuckle. ‘You can kneel if you like, Cosca.’

He squinted into the sliding mist, pickled brains spurred into something approaching activity. Someone knowing his name was unlikely to be a good thing. His enemies far outnumbered his friends, and his creditors far outnumbered both. He fished drunkenly for the hilt of his gilded sword, then realised he had pawned it months ago in Ospria and bought a cheap one. He fished drunkenly for the hilt of that instead, then realised he had pawned that one when he first reached Sipani. He let his shaky hand drop.

Not much lost. He doubted he could have swung a blade even if he'd had one.

'Who the bloody hell's out there? If I owe you money, make ready-' his stomach lurched and he gave vent to a long, acrid burp '-to die?'

A dark shape rose suddenly from the murk at his side and he spun, tripped over his own feet and went sprawling, head cracking against the wall and sending a blinding flash across his vision.

'So you're alive, still. You are alive, aren't you?' A long, lean woman, a sharp face mostly in shadow, spiky hair tinted orange. His mind fumbled sluggishly to recognition.

'Shylo Vitari, well I never.' Not an enemy, perhaps, but certainly not a friend. He propped himself up on one elbow, but from the way the street was spinning, decided that was far enough. 'Don't suppose you might consent . . . to buy a man a drink, might you?'

'Goat's milk?'

'What?'

'I hear it's good for the digestion.'

'They always said you had a flint for a heart, but I never thought even you would be so cold as to suggest I drink milk, damn you! Just one more shot of that old grape spirit.' A drink, a drink, a drink. 'Just one more and I'm done.'

'Oh, you're done alright. How long you been drunk this time?'

'I've a notion it was summer when I started. What is it now?'

'Not the same year, that's sure. How much money have you wasted?'

'All there is and more. I'd be surprised if there's a coin in the world that hasn't been through my purse at some point. But I seem to be out of funds right now, so if you could just spare some change—'

'You need to make a change, not spend some.'

He drew himself up, as far as his knees at least, and jabbed at his chest with a crabbing finger. 'Do you suppose the shrivelled, piss-soaked, horrified better part of me, the part that screams to be released from this torture, doesn't know that?' He gave a helpless shrug, aching body collapsing on itself. 'But for a man to change he needs the help of good friends, or, better yet, good enemies. My friends are all long dead, and my enemies, I am forced to admit . . . have better things to do.'

‘Not all of us.’ Another woman’s voice, but one that sent a creeping shiver of familiarity down Cosca’s back. A figure formed out of the gloom, mist sucked into smoky swirls after her flicking coat-tails.

‘No . . .’ he croaked.

He remembered the moment he first laid eyes on her: a wild-haired girl of nineteen with a sword at her hip and a bright stare rich with anger, defiance and the slightest fascinating hint of contempt. There was a hollowness to her face now, a twist of pain about her mouth. The sword hung on the other side, gloved right hand resting slack on the pommel. Her eyes still had that unwavering sharpness, but there was more anger, more defiance and a long stretch more contempt. Who could blame her for that? Cosca was beyond contemptible, and knew it.

He had sworn a thousand times to kill her, of course, if he ever saw her again. Her, or her brother, or Andiche, Victus, Sesaria, Faithful Carpi or any of the other treacherous bastards from the Thousand Swords who had once betrayed him. Stolen his place from him. Sent him fleeing from the battlefield at Afieri with his reputation and his clothes both equally tattered.

He had sworn a thousand times to kill her, but Cosca had broken all manner of oaths in his life, and the sight of her brought no rage. Instead what welled up in him was a mixture of worn-out self-pity, sappy joy and, most of all, piercing shame at seeing in her face how far he had fallen. He felt the ache in his nose, behind his cheeks, tears welling in his stinging eyes. For once he was grateful that they were red as wounds at the best of times. If he wept, no one could tell the difference.

‘Monza.’ He tried to tug his filthy collar straight, but his hands were shaking too badly to manage it. ‘I must confess I heard you were dead. I was meaning to take revenge, of course—’

‘On me or for me?’

He shrugged. ‘Difficult to remember . . . I stopped on the way for a drink.’

‘Smells like it was more than one.’ There was a hint of disappointment in her face that pricked at his insides almost worse than steel. ‘I heard you finally got yourself killed in Dagoska.’

He managed to lift one arm high enough to wave her words away. ‘There have always been false reports of my death. Wishful thinking, on the part of my many enemies. Where is your brother?’

‘Dead.’ Her face did not change.

‘Well. I’m sorry for that. I always liked the boy.’ The lying, gutless, scheming louse.

‘He always liked you.’ They had detested each other, but what did it matter now?

‘If only his sister had felt as warmly about me, things might be so much different.’

‘“Might be” takes us nowhere. We’ve all got . . . regrets.’

They looked at each other for a long moment, her standing, him on his knees. Not quite how he had pictured their reunion in his dreams. ‘Regrets. The cost of the business, Sazine used to tell me.’

‘Perhaps we should put the past behind us.’

‘I can hardly remember yesterday,’ he lied. The past weighed on him like a giant’s suit of armour.

‘The future, then. I’ve a job for you, if you’ll take it. Reckon you’re up to a job?’

‘What manner of job?’

‘Fighting.’

Cosca winced. ‘You always were far too attached to fighting. How often did I tell you? A mercenary has no business getting involved with that nonsense.’

‘A sword is for rattling, not for drawing.’

‘There’s my girl. I’ve missed you.’ He said it without thinking, had to cough down his shame and nearly coughed up a lung.

‘Help him up, Friendly.’

A big man had silently appeared while they were talking, not tall but heavyset, with an air of calm strength about him. He hooked Cosca under his elbow and pulled him effortlessly to his feet.

‘That’s a strong arm and a good deed,’ he gurgled over a rush of nausea. ‘Friendly is your name? Are you a philanthropist?’

‘A convict.’

‘I see no reason why a man cannot be both. My thanks in any case. Now if you could just point us in the direction of a tavern—’

‘The taverns will have to wait for you,’ said Vitari. ‘No doubt causing a slump in the wine industry. The conference begins in a week and we need you sober.’

‘I don’t do sober any more. Sober hurts. Did someone say conference?’

Monza was still watching him with those disappointed eyes. ‘I need a good man. A man with courage and experience. A man who won’t mind crossing Grand Duke Orso.’ The corner of her mouth curled up. ‘You’re as close as we could find at short notice.’

Cosca clung to the big man’s arm while the misty street tipped around. ‘From that list, I have . . . experience?’

‘I’ll take one of four, if he needs money too. You need money, don’t you, old man?’

‘Shit, yes. But not as much as I need a drink.’

‘Do the job right and we’ll see.’

‘I accept.’ He found he was standing tall, looking down at Monza now, chin held high. ‘We should have a Paper of Engagement, just like the old days. Written in swirly script, with all the accoutrements, the way Sajaam used to write them. Signed with red ink and . . . where can a man find a notary this time of night?’

‘Don’t worry. I’ll take your word.’

‘You must be the only person in Styria who would ever say that to me. But as you please.’ He pointed decisively down the street. ‘This way, my man, and try to keep up.’ He boldly stepped forwards, his leg buckled and he squawked as Friendly caught him.

‘Not that way,’ came the convict’s slow, deep voice. He slid one hand under Cosca’s arm and half-led him, half-carried him in the opposite direction.

‘You are a gentleman, sir,’ muttered Cosca.

‘I am a murderer.’

‘I see no reason why a man cannot be both . . .’ Cosca strained to focus on Vitari, loping along up ahead, then at the side of Friendly’s heavy face. Strange companions. Outsiders. Those no one else would find a use for. He watched Monza walking, the purposeful stride he remembered from long ago turned slightly crooked. Those who were willing to cross Grand Duke Orso. And that meant madmen, or those with no choices. Which was he?

The answer was in easy reach. There was no reason a man could not be both.

Left Out

Friendly's knife flashed and flickered, twenty strokes one way and twenty the other, grazing the whetstone with a sharpening kiss. There was little worse than a blunt knife and little better than a sharp one, so he smiled as he tested the edge and felt that cold roughness against his fingertip. The blade was keen.

'Cardotti's House of Leisure is an old merchant's palace,' Vitari was saying, voice chilly calm. 'Wood-built, like most of Sipani, round three sides of a courtyard with the Eighth Canal right at its rear.'

They had set up a long table in the kitchen at the back of the warehouse, and the six of them sat about it now. Murcatto and Shivers, Day and Morveer, Cosca and Vitari. On the table stood a model of a large wooden building on three sides of a courtyard. Friendly judged that it was one thirty-sixth the size of the real Cardotti's House of Leisure, though it was hard to be precise, and he liked very much to be precise.

Vitari's fingertip trailed along the windows on one side of the tiny building. 'There are kitchens and offices on the ground floor, a hall for husk and another for cards and dice.' Friendly pressed his hand to his shirt pocket and was comforted to feel his own dice nuzzling against his ribs. 'Two staircases in the rear corners. On the first floor thirteen rooms where guests are entertained—'

'Fucked,' said Cosca. 'We're all adults here, let's call it what it is.' His bloodshot eyes flickered up to the two bottles of wine on the shelf, then back. Friendly had noticed they did that a lot.

Vitari's finger drifted up towards the model's roof. 'Then, on the top floor, three large suites for the . . . fucking of the most valued guests. They say the Royal Suite in the centre is fit for an emperor.'

'Then Ario might just consider it fit for himself,' growled Murcatto.

The group had grown from five to seven, so Friendly cut each of the two loaves into fourteen slices, the blade hissing through the crust and sending up puffs of flour dust. There would be twenty-eight slices in all, four slices each. Murcatto would eat less, but Day would make up for it. Friendly hated to leave a slice of bread uneaten.

‘According to Eider, Ario and Foscar will have three or four dozen guests, some of them armed but not keen to fight, as well as six bodyguards. ’

‘She telling the truth?’ Shivers’ heavy accent.

‘Chance may play a part, but she won’t lie to us.’

‘Keeping charge o’ that many . . . we’ll need more fighters.’

‘Killers,’ interrupted Cosca. ‘Again, let’s call them what they are.’

‘Twenty, maybe,’ came Murcatto’s hard voice, ‘as well as you three.’ Twenty-three. An interesting number. Heat kissed the side of Friendly’s face as he unhooked the door of the old stove and pulled it creaking open. Twenty-three could be divided by no other number, except one. No parts, no fractions. No half-measures. Not unlike Murcatto herself. He hauled the big pot out with a cloth around his hands. Numbers told no lies. Unlike people.

‘How do we get twenty men inside without being noticed?’

‘It’s a revel,’ said Vitari. ‘There’ll be entertainers. And we’ll provide them.’

‘Entertainers?’

‘This is Sipani. Every other person in the city is an entertainer or a killer. Shouldn’t be too difficult to find a few who are both.’

Friendly was left out of the planning, but he did not mind. Sajaam had asked him to do what Murcatto said, and that was the end of it. He had learned long ago that life became much easier if you ignored what was not right before you. For now the stew was his only concern.

He dipped in his wooden spoon and took a taste, and it was good. He rated it forty-one out of fifty. The smell of cooking, the sight of the steam rising, the sound of the fizzing logs in the stove, it all put him in comforting mind of the kitchens in Safety. Of the stews, and soups, and porridge they used to make in the great vats. Long ago, back when there was an infinite weight of comforting stone always above his head, and the numbers added, and things made sense.

‘Ario will want to drink for a while,’ Murcatto was saying, ‘and gamble, and show off to his idiots. Then he’ll be brought up to the Royal Suite.’

Cosca split a crack-lipped grin. ‘Where women will be waiting for him, I take it?’

‘One with black hair and one with red.’ Murcatto exchanged a hard look with Vitari.

‘A surprise fit for an emperor,’ chuckled Cosca, wetly.

‘When Ario’s dead, which will be quickly, we’ll move next door and pay Foscar the same kind of visit.’ Murcatto shifted her scowl to Morveer. ‘They’ll have brought guards upstairs to watch things while they’re busy. You and Day can handle them.’

‘Can we indeed?’ The poisoner took a brief break from sneering at his fingernails. ‘A fit purpose for our talents, I am sure.’

‘Try not to poison half the city this time. We should be able to kill the brothers without raising any unwanted attention, but if something goes wrong, that’s where the entertainers come in.’

The old mercenary jabbed at the model with a quivery finger. ‘Take the courtyard first, the gaming and smoking halls, and from there secure the staircases. Disarm the guests and round them up. Politely, of course, and in the best taste. Keep control.’

‘Control.’ Murcatto’s gloved forefinger stabbed the tabletop. ‘That’s the word I want at the front of your tiny minds. We kill Ario, we kill Foscar. If any of the rest make trouble, you do what you have to, but keep the murder to a minimum. There’ll be trouble enough for us afterwards without a bloodbath. You all got that?’

Cosca cleared his throat. ‘Perhaps a drink would help me to commit it all to—’

‘I’ve got it.’ Shivers spoke over him. ‘Control, and as little blood as possible.’

‘Two murders.’ Friendly set the pot down in the middle of the table, ‘one and one, and no more. Food.’ And he began to ladle portions out into the bowls.

He would have liked very much to ensure that everyone had the exact same number of pieces of meat. The same number of pieces of carrot and onion too, the same number of beans. But by the time he had counted them out the food would have been cold, and he had learned that most people found that level of precision upsetting. It had led to a fight in the mess in Safety once, and Friendly had killed two men and cut a hand from another. He had no wish to kill anyone now. He was hungry. So he satisfied himself by giving each one of them the same number of ladles of stew, and coped with the deep sense of unease it left him.

‘This is good,’ gurgled Day, around a mouthful. ‘This is excellent. Is there more?’

‘Where did you learn to cook, my friend?’ Cosca asked.

‘I spent three years in the kitchens in Safety. The man who taught me used to be head cook to the Duke of Borletta.’

‘What was he doing in prison?’

‘He killed his wife, and chopped her up, and cooked her in a stew, and ate it.’

There was quiet around the table. Cosca noisily cleared his throat. ‘No one’s wife in this stew, I trust?’

‘The butcher said it was lamb, and I’ve no reason to doubt him.’ Friendly picked up his fork. ‘No one sells human meat that cheap.’

There was one of those uncomfortable silences that Friendly always seemed to produce when he said more than three words at once. Then Cosca gave a gurgling laugh. ‘Depends on the circumstances. Reminds me of when we found those children, do you remember, Monza, after the siege at Muris?’ Her scowl grew even harder than usual, but there was no stopping him. ‘We found those children, and we wanted to sell them on to some slavers, but you thought we could—’

‘Of course!’ Morveer almost shrieked. ‘Hilarious! What could possibly be more amusing than orphan children sold into slavery?’

There was another awkward silence while the poisoner and the mercenary gave each other a deadly glare. Friendly had seen men exchange that very look in Safety. When new blood came in, and prisoners were forced into a cell together. Sometimes two men would just catch each other wrong. Hate each other from the moment they met. Too different. Or too much the same. Things were harder to predict out here, of course. But in Safety, when you saw two men look at each other that way you knew, sooner or later, there would be blood.

A drink, a drink, a drink. Cosca’s eyes lurched from that preening louse Morveer and down to the poisoner’s full wine glass, around the glasses of the others, reluctantly back to his own sickening mug of water and finally to the wine bottle on the table, where his gaze was gripped as if by burning pincers. A quick lunge and he could have it. How much could he swallow before they wrestled it from his hands? Few men could drink faster when circumstances demanded—

Then he noticed Friendly watching him, and there was something in the convict's sad, flat eyes that made him think again. He was Nicomo Cosca, damn it! Or he had been once, at least. Cities had trembled, and so on. He had spent too many years never thinking beyond his next drink. It was time to look further. To the drink after next, at any rate. But change was not easy.

He could almost feel the sweat springing out of his skin. His head was pulsing, booming with pain. He clawed at his itchy neck but that only made it itch the more. He was smiling like a skull, he knew, and talking far too much. But it was smile, and talk, or scream his exploding head off.

'. . . saved my life at the siege of Muris, eh, Monza? At Muris, was it?' He hardly even knew how his cracking voice had wandered onto the subject. 'Bastard came at me out of nowhere. A quick thrust!' He nearly knocked his water cup over with a wayward jab of his finger. 'And she ran him through! Right through the heart, I swear. Saved my life. At Muris. Saved my . . . life . . .'

And he almost wished she had let him die. The kitchen seemed to be spinning, tossing, tipping wildly like the cabin of a ship in a fatal tempest. He kept expecting to see the wine slosh from the glasses, the stew spray from the bowls, the plates slide from the see-sawing table. He knew the only storm was in his head, yet still found himself clinging to the furniture whenever the room appeared to heel with particular violence.

'. . . wouldn't have been so bad if she hadn't done it again the next day. I took an arrow in the shoulder and fell in the damn moat. Everyone saw, on both sides. Making me look a fool in front of my friends is one thing, but in front of my enemies—'

'You've got it wrong.'

Cosca squinted up the table at Monza. 'I have?' Though he had to admit he could hardly remember his last sentence, let alone the events of a siege a dozen drunken years ago.

'It was me in the moat, you that jumped in to pull me out. Risked your life, and took an arrow doing it.'

'Seems astoundingly unlikely I'd have done a thing like that.' It was hard to think about anything beyond his violent need for a drink. 'But I'm finding it somewhat difficult to recall the details, I must confess. Perhaps if one of you could just see your way to passing me the wine I could—'

‘Enough.’ She had that same look she always used to have when she dragged him from one tavern or another, except even angrier, even sharper and even more disappointed. ‘I’ve five men to kill, and I’ve no time to be saving anyone any more. Especially from their own stupidity. I’ve no use for a drunk.’ The table was silent as they all watched him sweat.

‘I’m no drunk,’ croaked Cosca. ‘I simply like the taste of wine. So much so that I have to drink some every few hours or become violently ill.’ He clung to his fork while the room swayed around him, fixed his aching smile while they chuckled away. He hoped they enjoyed their laughter while they could, because Nicomo Cosca always laughed last. Provided he wasn’t being sick, of course.

Morveer was feeling left out. He was a scintillating conversationalist face to face, it hardly needed to be said, but had never been at his ease in large groups. This scenario reminded him unpleasantly of the dining room in the orphanage, where the larger children had amused themselves by throwing food at him, a terrifying prelude to the whisperings, beatings, dunkings and other torments in the nocturnal blackness of the dormitories.

Murcatto’s two new assistants, on the hiring of whom he had not been given even the most superficial consultation, were far from putting his mind at ease. Shylo Vitari was a torturer and broker in information, highly competent but possessed of an abrasive personality. He had collaborated with her once before, and the experience had not been a happy one. Morveer found the whole notion of inflicting pain with one’s own hands thoroughly repugnant. But she knew Sipani, so he supposed he could suffer her. For now.

Nicomo Cosca was infinitely worse. A notoriously destructive, treacherous and capricious mercenary with no code or scruple but his own profit. A drunkard, dissipater and womaniser with all the self-control of a rabid dog. A self-aggrandising backslider with an epically inflated opinion of his own abilities, he was everything Morveer was not. But now, as well as taking this dangerously unpredictable element into their confidence and involving him intimately in their plans, the group seemed to be paying court to the trembling shell. Even Day, his own assistant, was chortling at his jokes whenever she did not have her mouth full, which, admittedly, was but rarely.

‘. . . a group of miscreants hunched around a table in an abandoned warehouse?’ Cosca was musing, bloodshot eyes rolling round the table, ‘talking of masks, and disguises, and weaponry? I cannot imagine how a man of my high calibre ended up in such company. One would think there was some underhand business taking place!’

‘My own thoughts exactly!’ Morveer shrilly interjected. ‘I could never countenance such a stain upon my conscience. That is why I applied an extract of Widow’s Blossom to your bowls. I hope you all enjoy your last few agonising moments!’

Six faces frowned back at him, entirely silent.

‘A jest, of course,’ he croaked, realising instantly that his conversational foray had suffered a spectacular misfire. Shivers exhaled long and slow. Murcatto curled her tongue sourly around one canine tooth. Day was frowning down at her bowl.

‘I’ve taken more amusing punches in the face,’ said Vitari.

‘Poisoners’ humour.’ Cosca glowered across the table, though the effect was somewhat spoiled by the rattling of his fork against his bowl as his right hand vibrated. ‘A lover of mine was murdered by poison. I have had nothing but disgust for your profession ever since. And all its members, naturally.’

‘You can hardly expect me to take responsibility for the actions of every person in my line of work.’ Morveer thought it best not to mention that he had, in fact, been personally responsible, having been hired by Grand Duchess Sefeline of Ospria to murder Nicomo Cosca some fourteen years before. It was becoming a matter of considerable annoyance that he had missed the mark and killed his mistress instead.

‘I crush wasps whenever I find them, whether they have stung me or not. To my mind you people – if I can call you people – are all equally worthy of contempt. A poisoner is the filthiest kind of coward.’

‘Second only to a drunkard!’ returned Morveer with a suitable curling of his upper lip. ‘Such human refuse might almost evoke pity were they not so utterly repellent. No animal is more predictable. Like a befouled homing pigeon, the drunk returns ever to the bottle, unable to change. It is their one route of escape from the misery they leave in their wake. For them the sober world is so crowded with old failures and new fears that they suffocate in it. There is a true coward.’ He raised his glass and took a long, self-satisfied

gulp of wine. He was unused to drinking rapidly and felt, in fact, a powerful urge to vomit, but forced a queasy smile onto his face nonetheless.

Cosca's thin hand clutched the table with a white-knuckled intensity as he watched Morveer swallow. 'How little you understand me. I could stop drinking whenever I wish. In fact, I have already resolved to do so. I would prove it to you.' The mercenary held up one wildly flapping hand. 'If I could just get half a glass to settle these damn palsies!'

The others laughed, the tension diffused, but Morveer caught the lethal glare on Cosca's face. The old soak might have seemed harmless as a village dunce, but he had once been counted among the most dangerous men in Styria. It would have been folly to take such a man lightly, and Morveer was nobody's fool. He was no longer the orphan child who had blubbered for his mother while they kicked him.

Caution first, each and every time.

Monza sat still, said no more than she had to and ate less, gloved hand painfully clumsy with the knife. She left herself out, up here at the head of the table. The distance a general needs to keep from the soldiers, an employer from the hirelings, a wanted woman from everyone, if she's got any sense. It wasn't hard to do. She'd been keeping her distance for years and leaving Benna to do the talking, and the laughing, and be liked. A leader can't afford to be liked. Especially not a woman. Shivers kept glancing up the table towards her, and she kept not meeting his eye. She'd let things slip in Westport, made herself look weak. She couldn't let that happen again.

'The pair o' you seem pretty familiar,' Shivers was saying now, eyes moving between her and Cosca. 'Old friends, are you?'

'Family, rather!' The old mercenary waved his fork wildly enough to have someone's eye out. 'We fought side by side as noble members of the Thousand Swords, most famous mercenary brigade in the Circle of the World!' Monza frowned sideways at him. His old bloody stories were bringing back things done and choices made she'd sooner have left in the past. 'We fought across Styria and back, while Sazine was captain general. Those were the days to be a mercenary! Before things started to get . . . complicated.'

Vitari snorted. 'You mean bloody.'

‘Different words for the same thing. People were richer back then, and scared more easily, and the walls were all lower. Then Sazine took an arrow in the arm, then lost the arm, then died, and I was voted to the captain general’s chair.’ Cosca poked his stew around. ‘Burying that old wolf, I realised that fighting was too much hard work, and I, like most persons of quality, wished to do as little of it as possible.’ He gave Monza a twitchy grin. ‘So we split the brigade in two.’

‘You split the brigade in two.’

‘I took one half, and Monzcarro and her brother Benna took the other, and we spread a rumour we’d had a falling out. We hired ourselves out to both sides of every argument we could find – and we found plenty – and . . . pretended to fight.’

‘Pretended?’ muttered Shivers.

Cosca’s trembling knife and fork jabbed at each other in the air. ‘We’d march around for weeks at a time, picking the country clean all the while, mount the odd harmless skirmish for the show of it, then leave off at the end of each season a good deal richer but with no one dead. Well, a few of the rot, maybe. Every bit as profitable as having at the business in earnest, though. We even mounted a couple of fake battles, didn’t we?’

‘We did.’

‘Until Monza took an engagement with Grand Duke Orso of Talins, and decided she was done with fake battles. Until she decided to mount a proper charge, with swords well sharpened and swung in earnest. Until you decided to make a difference, eh, Monza? Shame you never told me we weren’t faking any more. I could’ve warned my boys and saved some lives that day.’

‘Your boys.’ She snorted. ‘Let’s not pretend you ever cared for anyone’s life but your own.’

‘There have been a few others I valued higher. I never profited by it, though, and neither did they.’ Cosca hadn’t taken his bloodshot eyes from Monza’s. ‘Which of your own people turned on you? Faithful Carpi, was it? Not so faithful in the end, eh?’

‘He was as faithful as you could wish for. Right up until he stabbed me.’

‘And now he’s taken the captain general’s chair, no doubt?’

‘I hear he’s managed to wedge his fat arse into it.’

‘Just as you slipped your skinny one into it after mine. But he couldn’t have taken anything without the consent of some other captains, could he? Fine lads, those. That bastard Andiche. That big leech Sesaria. That sneering maggot Victus. Were those three greedy hogs still with you?’

‘They still had their faces in the trough. All of them turned on me, I’m sure, just the way they turned on you. You’re telling me nothing I don’t know.’

‘No one thanks you, in the end. Not for the victories you bring them. Not for the money you make them. They get bored. And the first sniff of something better—’

Monza was out of patience. A leader can’t afford to look soft. Especially not a woman. ‘For such an expert on people, it’s a wonder you ended up a friendless, penniless drunk, eh, Cosca? Don’t pretend I didn’t give you a thousand chances. You wasted them all, like you wasted everything else. The only question that interests me is – are you set on wasting this one too? Can you do as I fucking tell you? Or are you set on being my enemy?’

Cosca only gave a sad smile. ‘In our line of work, enemies are things to be proud of. If experience has taught the two of us anything, it’s that your friends are the ones you need to watch. My congratulations to the cook.’ He tossed his fork down in his bowl, got up and strutted from the kitchen in almost a straight line. Monza frowned at the sullen faces he left around the table.

Never fear your enemies, Verturio wrote, but your friends, always.

A Few Bad Men

The warehouse was a draughty cavern, cold light finding chinks in the shutters and leaving bright lines across the dusty boards, across the empty crates piled up in one corner, across the old table in the middle of the floor. Shivers dropped into a rickety chair next to it, felt the grip of the knife Monza had given him pressing at his calf. A sharp reminder of what he'd been hired for. Life was getting way more dark and dangerous than back home in the North. As far as being a better man went, he was going backwards, and quicker every day.

So why the hell was he still here? Because he wanted Monza? He had to admit it, and the fact she'd been cold with him since Westport only made him want her more. Because he wanted her money? That too. Money was a damn good thing for buying stuff. Because he needed the work? He did. Because he was good at the work? He was.

Because he enjoyed the work?

Shivers frowned. Some men aren't stamped out for doing good, and he was starting to reckon he might be one of 'em. He was less and less sure with every day that being a better man was worth all the effort.

The sound of a door banging tugged him from his thoughts, and Cosca came down the creaking wooden steps from the rooms where they were sleeping, scratching slowly at the splatter of red rash up the side of his neck.

'Morning.'

The old mercenary yawned. 'So it seems. I can barely remember the last one of these I saw. Nice shirt.'

Shivers twitched at his sleeve. Dark silk, with polished bone buttons and clever stitching round the cuff. A good stretch fancier than he'd have picked out, but Monza had liked it. 'Hadn't noticed.'

'I used to be one for fine clothes myself.' Cosca dropped into a rickety chair next to Shivers. 'So did Monza's brother, for that matter. He had a shirt just like that one, as I recall.'

Shivers weren't sure what the old bastard was getting at, but he was sure he didn't like it. 'And?'

'Spoken much about her brother, has she?' Cosca had a strange little smile, like he knew something Shivers didn't.

'She told me he's dead.'

‘So I hear.’

‘She told me she’s not happy about it.’

‘Most decidedly not.’

‘Something else I should know?’

‘I suppose we could all be wiser than we are. I’ll leave that up to her, though.’

‘Where is she?’ snapped Shivers, patience drying up.

‘Monza?’

‘Who else?’

‘She doesn’t want anyone to see her face that doesn’t have to. But not to worry. I have hired fighting men all across the Circle of the World. And my fair share of entertainers too, as it goes. Do you have any issue with my taking charge of the proceedings?’

Shivers had a pile of issues with it. It was plain the only thing Cosca had taken charge of for a good long while was a bottle. After the Bloody-Nine killed his brother, and cut his head off, and had it nailed up on a standard, Shivers’ father had taken to drinking. He’d taken to drinking, and rages, and having the shakes. He’d stopped making good choices, and he’d lost the respect of his people, and he’d wasted all he’d built, and died leaving Shivers nought but sour memories.

‘I don’t trust a man who drinks,’ he growled, not bothered about dressing it up. ‘A man takes to drinking, then he gets weak, then his mind goes.’

Cosca sadly shook his head. ‘You have it back to front. A man’s mind goes, then he gets weak, then he takes to drink. The bottle is the symptom, not the cause. But though I am touched to my core by your concern, you need not worry on my account. I feel a great deal steadier today!’ He spread his hands out above the tabletop. It was true they weren’t shaking as bad as they had been. A gentle quiver rather than a mad jerk. ‘I’ll be back to my best before you know it.’

‘I can hardly wait to see that.’ Vitari strutted out from the kitchen, arms folded.

‘None of us can, Shylo!’ And Cosca slapped Shivers on the arm. ‘But enough about me! What criminals, footpads, thugs and other such human filth have you dug from the slimy backstreets of old Sipani? What fighting entertainers have you for our consideration? Musicians who murder? Deadly dancers? Singers with swords? Jugglers who . . . who . . .’

‘Kill?’ offered Shivers.

Cosca’s grin widened. ‘Brusque and to the point, as always.’

‘Brusque?’

‘Thick.’ Vitari slid into the last chair and unfolded a sheet of paper on the scarred tabletop. ‘First up, there’s a band I found playing for bits near the docks. I reckon they make a fair stretch more from robbing passers-by than serenading them, though.’

‘Rough-and-tumble fellows, eh? The very type we need.’ Cosca stretched out his scrawny neck like a cock about to crow. ‘Enter!’

The door squealed open and five men wandered in. Even where Shivers came from they would’ve been reckoned a rough-looking set. Greasy-haired. Pock-faced. Rag-dressed. Their eyes darted about, narrow and suspicious, dirty hands clutching a set of stained instruments. They shuffled up in front of the table, one of them scratching his groin, another prodding at a nostril with his drumstick.

‘And you are?’ asked Cosca.

‘We’re a band,’ the nearest said.

‘And has your band a name?’

They looked at each other. ‘No. Why would it?’

‘Your own names, then, if you please, and your specialities both as entertainer and fighter.’

‘My name’s Solter. I play the drum, and the mace.’ Flicking his greasy coat back to show the dull glint of iron. ‘I’m better with the mace, if I’m honest.’

‘I’m Morc,’ said the next in line. ‘Pipe, and cutlass.’

‘Olopin. Horn, and hammer.’

‘Olopin, as well.’ Jerking a thumb sideways. ‘Brother to this article. Fiddle, and blades.’ Whipping a pair of long knives from his sleeves and spinning ’em round his fingers.

The last had the most broken nose Shivers had ever seen, and he’d seen some bad ones. ‘Gurpi. Lute, and lute.’

‘You fight with your lute?’ asked Cosca.

‘I hits ’em with it just so.’ The man showed off a sideways swipe, then flashed two rows of shit-coloured teeth. ‘There’s a great-axe hidden in the body.’

‘Ouch. A tune, then, if you please, my fellows, and make it something lively!’

Shivers weren’t much for music, but even he could tell it was no fine playing. The drum was out of time. The pipe was tuneless tooting. The lute was flat, probably on account of all the ironware inside. But Cosca nodded along, eyes shut, like he’d never heard sweeter music.

‘My days, what multi-talented fellows you are!’ he shouted after a couple of bars, bringing the din to a stuttering halt. ‘You’re hired, each one of you, at forty scales per man for the night.’

‘Forty . . . scales . . . a man?’ gawped the drummer.

‘Paid on completion. But it will be tough work. You will undoubtedly be called upon to fight, and possibly even to play. It may have to be a fatal performance, for our enemies. You are ready for such a commitment?’

‘For forty scales a man?’ They were all grinning now. ‘Yes, sir, we are! For that much we’re fearless.’

‘Good men. We know where to find you.’

Vitari leaned across as the band made their way out. ‘Ugly set of bastards.’

‘One of the many advantages of a masked revel,’ whispered Cosca. ‘Stick ’em in motley and no one will be any the wiser.’

Shivers didn’t much care for the idea of trusting his life to those lot. ‘They’ll notice the playing, no?’

Cosca snorted. ‘People don’t visit Cardotti’s for the music.’

‘Shouldn’t we have checked how they fight?’

‘If they fight like they play we should have no worries.’

‘They play about as well as runny shit.’

‘They play like lunatics. With luck they fight the same way.’

‘That’s no kind of—’

‘I hardly thought of you as the fussy type.’ Cosca peered at Shivers down his long nose. ‘You need to learn to live a little, my friend. All victories worth the winning are snatched with vim and brio!’

‘With who?’

‘Carelessness,’ said Vitari.

‘Dash,’ said Cosca. ‘And seizing the moment.’

‘And what do you make of all this?’ Shivers asked Vitari. ‘Vim and whatever.’

‘If the plan goes smoothly we’ll get Ario and Foscar away from the others and—’ She snapped her fingers with a sharp crack. ‘Won’t matter much who strums the lute. Time’s running out. Four days until the great and good of Styria descend on Sipani for their conference. I’d find better men, in an ideal world. But this isn’t one.’

Cosca heaved a throaty sigh. ‘It most certainly is not. But let’s not be downhearted – a few moments in and we’re five men to the good! Now, if I could just get a glass of wine we’d be well on our way to—’

‘No wine,’ growled Vitari.

‘It’s coming to something when a man can’t even wet his throat.’ The old mercenary leaned close enough that Shivers could pick out the broken veins across his cheeks. ‘Life is a sea of sorrows, my friend. Enter!’

The next man barely fit through the warehouse door, he was that big. A few fingers taller than Shivers but a whole lot weightier. He had thick stubble across his great chunk of jaw and a mop of grey curls though he didn’t seem old. His heavy hands fussed with each other as he came towards the table, a bit stooped like he was shamed of his own size, boards giving a complaining creak every time one of his great boots came down.

Cosca whistled. ‘My, my, that is a big one.’

‘Found him in a tavern down by the First Canal,’ said Vitari, ‘drunk as shit but everyone too scared to move him. Hardly speaks a word of Styrian.’

Cosca leaned towards Shivers. ‘Perhaps you might take the lead with this one? The brotherhood of the North?’

Shivers didn’t remember there being that much brotherhood up there in the cold, but it was worth a try. The words felt strange in his mouth, it was that long since he’d used them. ‘What’s your name, friend?’

The big man looked surprised to hear Northern. ‘Greylock.’ He pointed at his hair. ‘S’always been this colour.’

‘What brought you all the way down here?’

‘Come looking for work.’

‘What sort o’ work?’

‘Whatever’ll have me, I reckon.’

‘Even if it’s bloody?’

‘Likely it will be. You’re a Northman?’

‘Aye.’

‘You look like a Southerner.’

Shivers frowned, drew his fancy cuffs back and out of sight under the table. ‘Well, I’m not one. Name’s Caul Shivers.’

Greylock blinked. ‘Shivers?’

‘Aye.’ He felt a flush of pleasure that the man knew his name. He still had his pride, after all. ‘You heard o’ me?’

‘You was at Uffrith, with the Dogman?’

‘That’s right.’

‘And Black Dow too, eh? Neat piece o’ work, the way I heard it.’

‘That it was. Took the city with no more’n a couple dead.’

‘No more’n a couple.’ The big man nodded slowly, eyes never leaving Shivers’ face. ‘That must’ve been real smooth.’

‘It was. He was a good chief for keeping folk alive, the Dogman. Best I took orders from, I reckon.’

‘Well, then. Since the Dogman ain’t here his self, it’d be my honour to stand shoulder to shoulder with a man like you.’

‘Right you are. Likewise. Pleased to have you along. He’s in,’ said Shivers in Styrian.

‘Are you sure?’ asked Cosca. ‘He has a certain . . . sourness to his eye that worries me.’

‘You need to learn to live a little,’ grunted Shivers. ‘Get some fucking brio in.’

Vitari snorted laughter and Cosca clutched his chest. ‘Gah! Run through with my own rapier! Well, I suppose you can have your little friend. What could we do with a pair of Northmen, now?’ He threw up one finger. ‘We could mount a re-enactment! A rendering of that famous Northern duel – you know the one, Fenris the Feared, or whatever, and . . . you know, what’s-his-name now . . .’

Shivers’ back went cold as he said the name. ‘The Bloody-Nine.’ ‘You’ve heard of it?’

‘I was there. Right in the thick. I held a shield at the edge of the circle.’

‘Excellent! You should be able to bring a frisson of historical accuracy to the proceedings, then.’

‘Frisson?’

‘Bit,’ grunted Vitari.

‘Why not just bloody say bit, then?’

But Cosca was too busy grinning at his own notion. ‘A whiff of violence! Ario’s gentlemen will lap it up! And what better excuse for weapons in plain sight?’ Shivers was a sight less keen. Dressing up as the man who killed his brother, a man he’d nearly killed himself, and pretending to fight. The one thing in its favour was he wouldn’t have to strum a lute, at least.

‘What’s he saying?’ rumbled Greylock in Northern.

‘The two of us are going to pretend to have a duel.’

‘Pretend?’

‘I know, but they pretend all kinds o’ shit down here. We’ll put a show on. Act it out, you know. Entertainment.’

‘The circle’s no laughing matter,’ and the big man didn’t look like laughing either.

‘Down here it is. First we pretend, then we might have some others to fight for real. Forty scales if you can make it work.’

‘Right you are, then. First we pretend. Then we fight for real. Got it.’ Greylock gave Shivers a long, slow look, then lumbered away.

‘Next!’ bellowed Cosca. A skinny man pranced through the doorway in orange tights and a bright red jacket, big bag in one hand. ‘Your name?’

‘I am none other than-’ he gave a fancy bow ‘-the Incredible Ronco!’

The old mercenary’s brows shot up as fast as Shivers’ heart sank. ‘And your specialities, both as entertainer and fighter?’

‘They are one and the same, sirs!’ Nodding to Cosca and Shivers. ‘My lady!’ Then to Vitari. He turned slowly round, reaching stealthily into his bag, then spun about, one hand to his face, cheeks puffed out—

There was a rustle and a blaze of brilliant fire shot from Ronco’s lips, close enough for Shivers to feel the heat sting his cheek. He would’ve dived from his chair if he’d had the time, but instead he was left rooted – blinking, staring, gasping, as his eyes got used to the darkness of the warehouse again. A couple of patches of fire clung to the table, one just beyond the ends of Cosca’s trembling fingers. The flames sputtered, in silence, and died, leaving behind a smell that made Shivers want to puke.

The Incredible Ronco cleared his throat. ‘Ah. A slightly more . . . vigorous demonstration than I intended.’

‘But damned impressive!’ Cosca wafted the smoke away from his face.

‘Undeniably entertaining, and undeniably deadly. You are hired, sir, at the price of forty scales for the night.’

The man beamed. ‘Delighted to be of service!’ He bowed even lower this time round. ‘Sirs! My lady! I take . . . my leave!’

‘You sure about that?’ asked Shivers as Ronco strutted to the door. ‘Bit of a worry, ain’t it? Fire in a wooden building?’

Cosca looked down his nose again. ‘I thought you Northmen were all wrath and bad teeth. If things turn sour, fire in a wooden building could be just the equaliser we need.’

‘The what we need, now?’

‘Leveller,’ said Vitari.

That seemed a bad word to pick. They called death the Great Leveller, up in the hills of the North. ‘Fire indoors could end up levelling the lot of us, and in case you didn’t notice, that bastard weren’t too precise. Fire is dangerous.’

‘Fire is pretty. He’s in.’

‘But won’t he—’

‘Ah.’ Cosca held up a silencing hand.

‘We should—’

‘Ah.’

‘Don’t tell me—’

‘Ah, I said! Do you not have the word “ah” in your country? Murcatto put me in charge of the entertainers and, with the greatest of respect, that means I say who is in. We are not taking votes. You concentrate on mounting a show to make Ario’s gentlemen cheer. I’ll handle the planning. How does that sound?’

‘Like a short cut to disaster,’ said Shivers.

‘Ah, disaster!’ Cosca grinned. ‘I can’t wait. Who have we to consider in the meantime?’

Vitari cocked one orange brow at her list. ‘Barti and Kummel – tumblers, acrobats, knife-artists and walkers on the high wire.’

Cosca nudged Shivers in the ribs with his elbow. ‘Walkers on the high wire, there you go. How could that end badly?’

The Peacemakers

It was a rare clear day in the City of Fogs. The air was crisp and cold, the sky was perfectly blue and the King of the Union's conference of peace was due to begin its noble work. The ragged rooflines, the dirty windows, the peeling doorways were all thick with onlookers, waiting eagerly for the great men of Styria to appear. They trickled down both gutters of the wide avenue below, a multicoloured confusion, pressing up against the grim grey lines of soldiers deployed to hold them back. The hubbub of the crowd was a weight on the air. Thousands of murmuring voices, stabbed through here and there by the shouts of hawkers, bellowed warnings, squeals of excitement. Like the sound of an army before a battle.

Nervously waiting for the blood to start spilling.

Five more dots, perched on the roof of a crumbling warehouse, were nothing to remark upon. Shivers stared down, big hands dangling over the parapet. Cosca had his boot propped carelessly on the cracked stonework, scratching at his scabby neck. Vitari leaned back against the wall, long arms folded. Friendly stood bolt upright to the side, seeming lost in a world of his own. The fact that Morveer and his apprentice were away on their own business gave Monza scant confidence. When she first met the poisoner, she hadn't trusted him at all. Since Westport, she trusted him an awful lot less. And these were her troops. She sucked in a long, bitter breath, licked her teeth and spat down into the crowd below.

When God means to punish a man, the Kantic scriptures say, he sends him stupid friends, and clever enemies.

'That's a lot o' people,' said Shivers, eyes narrowed against the chilly glare. Just the kind of stunning revelation Monza had come to expect from the man. 'An awful lot.'

'Yes.' Friendly's eyes flickered over the crowds, lips moving silently, giving Monza the worrying impression that he was trying to count them.

'This is nothing.' Cosca dismissed half of Sipani with an airy wave. 'You should have seen the throng that packed the streets of Ospria after my victory at the Battle of the Isles! They filled the air with falling flowers! Twice as many, at the least. You should have been there!'

‘I was there,’ said Vitari, ‘and there were half as many at the most.’

‘Does pissing on my dreams give you some sick satisfaction?’

‘A little.’ Vitari smirked at Monza, but she didn’t laugh. She was thinking of the triumph they’d put on for her in Talins, after the fall of Caprile. Or the massacre at Caprile, depending on who you asked. She remembered Benna grinning while she frowned, standing in his stirrups and blowing kisses to the balconies. The people chanting her name, even though Orso was riding in thoughtful silence just behind with Ario at his shoulder. She should’ve seen it coming then . . .

‘Here they are!’ Cosca shielded his eyes with one hand, leaning out dangerously far over the railing. ‘All hail our great leaders!’

The noise of the crowd swelled as the procession came into view. Seven mounted standard-bearers brought up the front, flags on lances all at the exact same angle – the illusion of equality deemed necessary for peace talks. The cockleshell of Sipani. The white tower of Ospria. The three bees of Visserine. The black cross of Talins. The symbols of Puranti, Affoia and Nicante stirred lazily in the breeze alongside them. A man in gilded armour rode behind, the golden sun of the Union drooping from his black lance.

Sotorius, Chancellor of Sipani, was the first of the great and good to appear. Or the mean and evil, depending on who you asked. He was truly ancient, with thin white hair and beard, hunched under the weight of the heavy chain of office he’d worn since long before Monza was born. He hobbled along doggedly with the aid of a cane and with the eldest of his many sons, probably in his sixties himself, at his elbow. Several columns of Sipani’s leading citizens followed, sun twinkling on jewels and polished leather, bright silk and cloth of gold.

‘Chancellor Sotorius,’ Cosca was noisily explaining to Shivers. ‘According to tradition, the host goes on foot. Still alive, the old bastard.’

‘Looks like he needs a rest though,’ muttered Monza. ‘Someone get the man a coffin.’

‘Not quite yet, I think. Half-blind he may be, but he still has clearer sight than most. The long-established master of the middle ground. One way or another he’s kept Sipani neutral for two decades. Right through the Years of Blood. Ever since I gave him a bloody nose at the Battle of the Isles!’

Vitari snorted. ‘Didn’t stop you taking his coin when it all turned sour with Sefeline of Ospria, as I recall.’

‘Why should it have? Paid soldiers can’t be too picky over their employers. You have to blow with the wind in this business. Loyalty on a mercenary is like armour on a swimmer.’ Monza frowned sideways, wondering whether that was meant for her, but Cosca was blathering on as though it meant nothing to anyone. ‘Still, he never suited me much, old Sotorius. It was a wedding of necessity, an unhappy marriage and, once victory was won, a divorce we were both happy to agree to. Peaceful men find little work for mercenaries, and the old Chancellor of Sipani has made a rich and glorious career from peace.’

Vitari sneered down at the wealthy citizens tramping by below. ‘Looks like he’s hoping to make an export of it.’

Monza shook her head. ‘One thing Orso will never be buying.’

The leaders of the League of Eight came next. Orso’s bitter enemies, which had meant Monza’s too, until her tumble down a mountain. They were attended by a regiment of hangers-on, all decked out in a hundred clashing liveries. Duke Rogont rode at the front on a great black charger, reins in one sure hand, giving the occasional nod to the crowds as someone shouted for him. He was a popular man, and was called on to nod often, almost to the point that his head bobbed like a turkey’s. Salier had somehow been wedged into the saddle of a stocky roan beside Rogont, pink jowls bulging out over the gilded collar of his uniform, on one side, then the other, in time to the movement of his labouring mount.

‘Who’s the fat man?’ asked Shivers.

‘Salier, Grand Duke of Visserine.’

Vitari sniggered. ‘For another month or two, maybe. He squandered his city’s soldiers in the summer.’ Monza had charged them down on the High Bank, with Faithful Carpi beside her. ‘His city’s food in the autumn.’ Monza had merrily burned the fields about the walls and driven off the farmers. ‘And he’s fast running out of allies.’ Monza had left Duke Cantain’s head rotting on the walls of Borletta. ‘You can almost see him sweating from here, the old bastard.’

‘Shame,’ said Cosca. ‘I always liked the man. You should see the galleries in his palace. The greatest collection of art in the world, or so he says. Quite the connoisseur. Kept the best table in Styria too, in his day.’

‘It shows,’ said Monza.

‘One does wonder how they get him in his saddle.’

‘Block and tackle,’ snapped Vitari.

Monza snorted. ‘Or dig a trench and ride the horse up underneath him.’ ‘What about the other one?’ asked Shivers.

‘Rogont, Grand Duke of Ospria.’

‘He looks the part.’ True enough. Tall and broad-shouldered with a handsome face and a mass of dark curls.

‘Looks it.’ Monza spat again. ‘But not much more.’

‘The nephew of my one-time employer, now thankfully deceased, the Duchess Sefeline.’ Cosca had made his neck bleed with his scratching. ‘They call him the Prince of Prudence. The Count of Caution. The Duke of Delay. A fine general, by all accounts, but doesn’t like to gamble.’

‘I’d be less charitable,’ said Monza.

‘Few people are less charitable than you.’

‘He doesn’t like to fight.’

‘No good general likes to fight.’

‘But every good general has to, from time to time. Rogont’s been pitted against Orso throughout the Years of Blood and never fought more than a skirmish. The man’s the best withdrawer in Styria.’

‘Toughest thing to manage, a retreat. Maybe he just hasn’t found his moment yet.’

Shivers gave a faraway sigh. ‘We’re all of us waiting for our moment.’

‘He’s wasted all his chances now,’ said Monza. ‘Once Visserine falls, the way to Puranti is open, and beyond that nothing but Ospria itself, and Orso’s crown. No more delays. The sand’s run through on caution.’

Rogont and Salier passed underneath them. The two men who, along with honest, honourable, dead Duke Cantain, had formed the League of Eight to defend Styria against Orso’s insatiable ambition. Or to frustrate his rightful claims so they could fight among themselves for whatever was left, depending on who you asked. Cosca had a faraway smile on his face as he watched them go. ‘You live long enough, you see everything ruined. Caprile, a shell of her former glory.’

Vitari grinned at Monza. ‘That was one of yours, no?’

‘Musselia most shamefully capitulated to Orso in spite of her impenetrable walls.’

Vitari grinned wider. ‘Wasn’t that one of yours too?’

‘Borletta fallen,’ Cosca lamented, ‘bold Duke Cantain dead.’

‘Yes,’ growled Monza, before Vitari could open her mouth.

‘The invincible League of Eight has withered to a company of five and will soon dwindle to a party of four, with three of those far from keen on the whole notion.’

Monza could just hear Friendly’s whisper, ‘Eight . . . five . . . four . . . three . . .’

Those three followed now, glittering households trailing them like the wake behind three ducks. Junior partners in the League – Lirozio, the Duke of Puranti, defiant in elaborate armour and even more elaborate moustaches. The young Countess Cotarda of Affoia – a pasty girl whose pale yellow silks weren’t helping her complexion, her uncle and first advisor, some said her first lover, hovering close at her shoulder. Patine came last, First Citizen of Nicante – his hair left wild, dressed in sackcloth with a knotted rope for a belt, to show he was no better than the lowest peasant in his care. The rumour was he wore silken undergarments and slept on a golden bed, and with no shortage of company. So much for the humility of the powerful.

Cosca was already looking to the next chapter in the procession of greatness. ‘By the Fates. Who are these young gods?’

They were a magnificent pair, there was no denying that. They rode identical greys with effortless confidence, arrayed in matching white and gold. Her snowy gown clung to her impossibly tall and slender form and spread out behind her, fretted with glittering thread. His gilded breastplate was polished to a mirror-glare, simple crown set with a single stone so big Monza could almost see its facets glittering a hundred strides distant.

‘How incredibly fucking regal,’ she sneered.

‘One can almost smell the majesty,’ threw in Cosca. ‘I would kneel if I thought my knees could bear it.’

‘His August Majesty, the High King of the Union.’ Vitari’s voice was greasy with irony. ‘And his queen, of course.’

‘Terez, the Jewel of Talins. She sparkles brightly, no?’

‘Orso’s daughter,’ Monza forced out through clenched teeth. ‘Ario and Foscar’s sister. Queen of the Union, and a royal cunt into the bargain.’

Even though he was a foreigner on Styrian soil, even though Union ambitions were treated with the greatest suspicion here, even though his wife was Orso’s daughter, the crowd found themselves cheering louder for a foreign king than they had for their own geriatric chancellor.

The people far prefer a leader who appears great, Bialoveld wrote, to one who is.

'Hardly the most neutral of mediators, you'd think.' Cosca puffed his cheeks out thoughtfully. 'Bound so tight to Orso and his brood you can hardly see the light between them. Husband, and brother, and son-in-law to Talins?'

'No doubt he considers himself above such earthly considerations.' Monza's lip curled as she watched the royal pair approach. It looked as if they'd ridden from the pages of a lurid storybook and out into the drab and slimy city by accident. Wings on their horses were all they needed to complete the fantasy. It was a wonder someone hadn't glued some on. Terez wore a great necklace of huge stones, flashing so brilliantly in the sun they were painful to look at.

Vitari was shaking her head. 'How many jewels can you pile on one woman?'

'Not many more without burying the bitch,' growled Monza. The ruby that Benna had given her seemed a child's trinket by comparison.

'Jealousy is a terrible thing, ladies.' Cosca nudged Friendly in the ribs. 'She seems well enough in my eyes, eh, my friend?' The convict said nothing. Cosca tried Shivers instead. 'Eh?'

The Northman glanced sideways at Monza, then away. 'Don't get the fuss, myself.'

'Well, a pretty pair, the two of you! I never met such cold-blooded fighting men. I may be past my prime but I'm nothing like so withered inside as you set of long faces. My heart can still be moved by a young couple in love.'

Monza doubted there could be that much fire between them, however they might grin at one another. 'Few years ago now, well before she was a queen in anything but her own mind, Benna had a bet with me that he could bed her.'

Cosca raised one brow. 'Your brother always liked to sow his seed widely, as I recall. The results?'

'Turned out he wasn't her type.' It had turned out Monza interested her a great deal more than Benna ever could.

A household even grander than the whole League of Eight had fielded followed respectfully behind the royal couple. A score at least of ladies-in-

waiting, each one dripping jewels of her own. A smattering of Lords of Midderland, Angland and Starikland, weighty furs and golden chains about their shoulders. Men-at-arms plodded behind, armour stained with dust from the hooves in front. Each man choking on the dirt of his betters. The ugly truth of power.

'King of the Union, eh?' mused Shivers, watching the royal couple move off. 'That there is the most powerful man in the whole Circle of the World?'

Vitari snorted. 'That there is the man he stands behind. Everyone kneels to someone. You don't know too much about politics, do you?'

'About what?'

'Lies. The Cripple rules the Union. That boy with all the gold is the mask he wears.'

Cosca sighed. 'If you looked like the Cripple, I daresay you'd get a mask too . . .'

Such cheering as there was moved off slowly after the king and queen, and left a sullen silence behind it. Quiet enough that Monza could hear the clattering of the wheels as a gilded carriage rattled down the avenue. Several score of grim guardsmen tramped in practised columns to either side, weapons less well polished than the Union's had been, but better used. A crowd of well-dressed and entirely useless gentlemen followed.

Monza closed her right fist tight, crooked bones shifting. The pain crept across her knuckles, through her hand, up her arm, and she felt her mouth twist into a grim smile.

'There they are,' said Cosca.

Ario sat on the right, draped over his cushions, swaying gently with the movement of the carriage, his customary look of lazy contempt smeared across his face. Foscar sat pale and upright beside him, head starting this way and that at every smallest sound. Preening tomcat and eager puppy dog, placed neatly together.

Gobba had been nothing. Mauthis had been just a banker. Orso would scarcely have remarked on the new faces around him when they were replaced. But Ario and Foscar were his sons. His precious flesh. His future. If she could kill them, it would be the next best thing to sticking the blade in Orso's own belly. Her smile grew, imagining his face as they brought him the news.

Your Excellency! Your sons . . . are dead . . .

A sudden shriek split the silence. ‘Murderers! Scum! Orso’s bastards!’ Some limbs flailed down in the crowd below, someone trying to break through the cordon of soldiers. ‘You’re a curse on Styria!’ There was a swell of angry mutterings, a nervous ripple spread out through the onlookers. Sotorius might have called himself neutral, but the people of Sipani had no love for Orso or his brood. They knew when he broke the League of Eight, they’d be next. Some men always want more.

A couple of the mounted gentlemen drew steel. Metal gleamed at the edge of the crowd, there was a thin scream. Foscar was almost standing in the carriage, staring off into the heaving mass of people. Ario pulled him down and slouched back in his seat, careless eyes fixed on his fingernails.

The disturbance was finished. The carriage rattled off, gentlemen finding their formation again, soldiers in the livery of Talins tramping behind. The last of them passed under the roof of the warehouse, and off down the avenue.

‘And the show is over,’ sighed Cosca, pushing himself from the railing and making for the door that led to the stairs.

‘I wish it could’ve gone on for ever,’ sneered Vitari as she turned away.

‘One thousand eight hundred and twelve,’ said Friendly.

Monza stared at him. ‘What?’

‘People. In the parade.’

‘And?’

‘One hundred and five stones in the queen’s necklace.’

‘Did I fucking ask?’

‘No.’ Friendly followed the others back to the stairs.

She stood there alone, frowning into the stiffening wind for a moment longer, glaring off up the avenue as the crowd began to disperse, her fist and her jaw still clenched aching tight.

‘Monza.’ Not alone. When she turned her head, Shivers was looking her in the eye, and from closer than she’d have liked. He spoke as if finding the words was hard work. ‘Seems like we haven’t . . . I don’t know. Since Westport . . . I just wanted to ask—’

‘Best if you don’t.’ She brushed past him and away.

Cooking up Trouble

Nicomo Cosca closed his eyes, licked his smiling lips, breathed in deep through his nose in anticipation and raised the bottle. A drink, a drink, a drink. The familiar promise of the tap of glass against his teeth, the cooling wetness on his tongue, the soothing movement of his throat as he swallowed . . . if only it hadn't been water.

He had crept from his sweat-soaked bed and down to the kitchen in his clammy nightshirt to hunt for wine. Or any old piss that could make a man drunk. Something to make his dusty bedroom stop shaking like a carriage gone off the road, banish the ants he felt were crawling all over his skin, sponge away his pounding headache, whatever the costs. Shit on change, and Murcatto's vengeance too.

He had hoped that everyone would be in bed, and squirmed with trembling frustration when he had seen Friendly at the stove, making porridge for breakfast. Now, though, he had to admit, he was strangely glad to have found the convict here. There was something almost magical about Friendly's aura of calmness. He had the utter confidence to stay silent and simply not care what anyone thought. Enough to take Cosca a rare step towards calmness himself. Not silence, though. Indeed he had been talking, virtually uninterrupted, since the first light began to creep through the chinks in the shutters and turn to dawn.

'. . . why the hell am I doing this, Friendly? Fighting, at my age? Fighting! I've never enjoyed that part of the business. And on the same side as that self-congratulating vermin Morveer! A poisoner? Stinking way to kill a man, that. And I am acutely aware, of course, that I am breaking the soldier's first rule.'

Friendly cocked one eyebrow a fraction as he slowly stirred the porridge. Cosca strongly suspected the convict knew exactly why he had come here, but if he did, he had better manners than to bring it up. Convicts, in the main, are wonderfully polite. Bad manners can be fatal in prison. 'First?' he asked.

'Never fight for the weaker side. Much though I have always despised Duke Orso with a flaming passion, there is a huge and potentially fatal gulf between hating the man and actually doing anything about it.' He thumped his fist gently against the tabletop and made the model of Cardotti's rattle

gently. ‘Particularly on behalf of a woman who already betrayed me once . . .’

Like a homing pigeon drawn endlessly back to its loved and hated cage, his mind was dragged back through nine wasted years to Afieri. He pictured the horses thundering down the long slope, sun flashing behind them, as he had so many times since in a hundred different stinking rooms, and bone-cheap boarding houses, and broken-down slum taverns across the Circle of the World. A fine pretence, he had thought as the cavalry drew closer, smiling through the haze of drink to see it done so well. He remembered the cold dismay as the horsemen did not slow. The sick lurch of horror as they crashed into his own slovenly lines. The mixture of fury, hopelessness, disgust and dizzy drunkenness as he scrambled onto his horse to flee, his ragtag brigade ripped apart around him and his reputation with it. That mixture of fury, hopelessness, disgust and dizzy drunkenness that had followed him as tightly as his shadow ever since. He frowned at the distorted reflection of his wasted face in the bubbly glass of the water bottle.

‘The memories of our glories fade,’ he whispered, ‘and rot away into half-arsed anecdotes, thin and unconvincing as some other bastard’s lies. The failures, the disappointments, the regrets, they stay raw as the moments they happened. A pretty girl’s smile, never acted on. A petty wrong we let another take the blame for. A nameless shoulder that knocked us in a crowd and left us stewing for days, for months. For ever.’ He curled his lip. ‘This is the stuff the past is made of. The wretched moments that make us what we are.’

Friendly stayed silent, and it drew Cosca out better than any coaxing.

‘And none more bitter than the moment Monzcarro Murcatto turned on me, eh? I should be taking my revenge on her, instead of helping her take hers. I should kill her, and Andiche, and Sesaria, and Victus, and all my other one-time bastard friends from the Thousand Swords. So what the shit am I doing here, Friendly?’

‘Talking.’

Cosca snorted. ‘As ever. I always had poor judgement where women were concerned.’ He barked with sudden laughter. ‘In truth, I always had dire judgement on every issue. That is what has made my life such a series of thrills.’ He slapped the bottle down on the table. ‘Enough penny

philosophy! The fact is I need the chance, I need to change and, much more importantly, I desperately need the money.' He stood up. 'Fuck the past. I am Nicomo Cosca, damn it! I laugh in the face of fear!' He paused for a moment. 'And I am going back to bed. My earnest thanks, Master Friendly, you make as fine a conversation as any man I've known.'

The convict looked away from his porridge for just a moment. 'I've hardly said a word.'

'Exactly.'

*

Morveer's morning repast was arranged upon the small table in his small bedchamber, once perhaps an upstairs storeroom in an abandoned warehouse in an insalubrious district of Sipani, a city he had always despised. Refreshment consisted of a misshapen bowl of cold oatmeal, a battered cup of steaming tea, a chipped glass of sour and lukewarm water. Beside them, in a neat row, stood seventeen various vials, bottles, jars and tins, each filled with its own pastes, liquids or powders in a range of colours from clear, to white, through dull buff to the verdant blue of the scorpion oil.

Morveer reluctantly spooned in a mouthful of mush. While he worked it around his mouth with scant relish, he removed the stoppers from the first four containers, slid a glinting needle from its packet, dipped it in the first and pricked the back of his hand. The second, and the same. The third, and the fourth, and he tossed the needle distastefully away. He winced as he watched a tiny bead of blood well from one of the prick-marks, then dug another spoonful from the bowl and sat back, head hanging, while the wave of dizziness swept over him.

'Damn Larync!' Still, it was far preferable that he should endure a tiny dose and a little unpleasantness every morning, than that a large dose, administered by malice or misadventure, should one day burst every blood vessel in his brain.

He forced down another mouthful of salty slop, opened the tin next in line, scooped out a tiny pinch of Mustard Root, held one nostril closed and snorted it up the other. He shivered as the powder burned at his nasal

passages, licked at his teeth as his mouth turned unpleasantly numb. He took a mouthful of tea, found it unexpectedly scalding as he swallowed and nearly coughed it back up.

'Damn Mustard Root!' That he had employed it against targets with admirable efficacy on several occasions gave him no extra love for consuming the blasted stuff himself. Quite the opposite. He gargled a mouthful of water in a vain attempt to sluice away the acrid taste, knowing full well that it would be creeping from the back of his nose for hours to come.

He lined up the next six receptacles, unscrewed, uncorked, uncapped them. He could have swallowed their contents one at a time, but long years of such breakfasts had taught him it was better to dispose of them all at once. So he squirted, flicked and dripped the appropriate amounts into his glass of water, mixed them carefully with his spoon, gathered himself and forced it back in three ugly swallows.

Morveer set the glass down, wiped the tears from under his eyes and gave vent to a watery burp. He felt a momentary nudge of nausea, but it swiftly calmed. He had been doing this every morning for twenty years, after all. If he was not accustomed to it by—

He dived for the window, flung the shutters open and thrust his head through just in time to spray his meagre breakfast into the rotten alley beside the warehouse. He gave a bitter groan as he slumped back, dashed the burning snot from his nose and picked his way unsteadily to the wash-stand. He scooped water from the basin and rubbed it over his face, stared at his reflection in the mirror as moisture dripped from his brows. The worst of it was that he would now have to force more oatmeal into his rebellious guts. One of the many unappreciated sacrifices he was forced to make, simply in order to excel.

The other children at the orphanage had never appreciated his special talents. Nor had his master, the infamous Moumah-yin-Bek. His wife had not appreciated him. His many apprentices had not. And now it seemed his latest employer, also, had no appreciation for his selfless, for his discomforting, for his – no, no, it was no exaggeration – heroic efforts on her behalf. That dissolute old wineskin Nicomo Cosca was afforded greater respect than he.

‘I am doomed,’ he murmured disconsolately. ‘Doomed to give, and give, and get nothing in return.’

A knock at the door, and Day’s voice. ‘You ready?’

‘Soon.’

‘They’re getting everyone together downstairs. We need to be off to Cardotti’s. Lay the groundwork. The importance of preparation and all that.’ It sounded as if she was talking with her mouth full. It would, in fact, have been a surprise had she not been.

‘I will catch up with you!’ He heard her footsteps moving off. There, at least, was one person with the requisite admiration for his magisterial skills, who rendered him the fitting respect, exceeded his lofty expectations. He was coming to rely on her a great deal, he realised, both practically and emotionally. More than was cautious, perhaps.

But even a man of Morveer’s extraordinary talents could not manage everything himself. He gave a long sigh, and turned from the mirror.

The entertainers, or the killers, for they were both, were scattered around the warehouse floor. Twenty-five of them, if Friendly counted himself. The three Gurkish dancers sat crossed-legged – two with their ornate cat-face masks pushed up on their oiled black hair. The last had her mask down, eyes glistening darkly behind the slanted eyeholes, rubbing carefully at a curved dagger. The band were already dressed in smart black jackets and tights striped grey and yellow, their silvered masks in the shape of musical notes, practising a jig they had finally managed to play half-decently.

Shivers stood nearby in a stained leather tunic with balding fur on the shoulders, a big round wooden shield on his arm and a heavy sword in the other hand. Greylock loomed opposite, an iron mask covering his whole face, a great club set with iron studs in his fists. Shivers was talking fast in Northern, showing how he was going to swing his sword, how he wanted Greylock to react, practising the show they would put on.

Barti and Kummel, the acrobats, wore tight-fitting chequered motley, arguing with each other in the tongue of the Union, one of them passionately waving a short stabbing sword. The Incredible Ronco watched from behind a mask painted vivid red, orange and yellow, like dancing flames. Beyond him the three jugglers were filling the air with a cascade of shining knives, flashing and flickering in the half-darkness. Others lounged

against crates, sat cross-legged on the floor, capered about, sharpened blades, tinkered with costumes.

Friendly hardly recognised Cosca himself, dressed in a velvet coat heavy with silver embroidery, a tall hat on his head and a long black cane in his hand with a heavy golden knob on the end. The rash on his neck was disguised with powder. His greying moustaches were waxed to twinkling curves, his boots were polished to a glistening shine, his mask was crusted with splinters of sparkling mirror, but his eyes sparkled more.

He swaggered towards Friendly with the smirk of a ringmaster at a circus. 'My friend, I hope you are well. My thanks again for your ear this morning.'

Friendly nodded, trying not to grin. There was something almost magical about Cosca's aura of good humour. He had the utter confidence to talk, and talk, and know he would be listened to, laughed with, understood. It almost made Friendly want to talk himself.

Cosca held something out. A mask in the shape of a pair of dice, showing double one with eyeholes where the spots should have been. 'I hoped you might do me the favour of minding the dice table tonight.'

Friendly took the mask from him with a trembling hand. 'I would like that very much.'

Their mad crew wound through the twisting streets as the morning mists were clearing – down grey alleys, over narrow bridges, through hazy, rotting gardens and along damp tunnels, footfalls hollow in the gloom. The treacherous water was never far off, Shivers wrinkling his nose at the salt stink of the canals.

Half the city was masked and in costume, and it seemed they all had something to celebrate. Folk who weren't invited to the great ball in honour of Sipani's royal visitors had their own revels planned, and a lot of 'em were getting started good and early. Some hadn't gone too wild with their costumes – holiday coats and dresses with a plain mask around their eyes. Some had gone wild, then further still – huge trousers, high shoes, gold and silver faces locked up in animal snarls and madman grins. Put Shivers in mind of the Bloody-Nine's face when he fought in the circle, devil smile spattered with blood. That did nothing for his nerves. Didn't help he was wearing fur and leather like he used to in the North, carrying a heavy sword

and shield not much different from ones he'd used in earnest. A crowd poured past all covered in yellow feathers, masks with great beaks, squawking like a flock of crazy seagulls. That did nothing for his nerves either.

Off in the mist, half-glimpsed round corners and across hazy squares, there were stranger shapes still, their hoots and warbles echoing down the wooden alleyways. Monsters and giants. Made Shivers' palms itch, thinking of the way the Feared rose out of the mist up at Dunbrec, bringing death with him. These were just silly bastards on stilts, of course, but still. You put a mask on a person, something weird happens. Changes the way they act along with the way they look. Sometimes they don't seem like people at all no more, but something else.

Shivers wouldn't have liked the flavour of it even if they hadn't been planning murder. Felt like the city was built on the borders of hell and devils were spilling out into the streets, mixing with the everyday and no one acting like there was much special about it. He had to keep reminding himself that, of all the strange and dangerous-seeming crowds, his was much the strangest and most dangerous they were likely to happen across. If there were devils in the city, he was one of the worst. Wasn't actually that comforting a thought, once it'd taken root.

'This way, my friends!' Cosca led them across a square planted with four clammy, leafless trees and a building loomed up from the gloom – a large wooden building on three sides of a courtyard. The same building that had been sitting on the kitchen table at the warehouse the last few days. Four well-armed guards were frowning around a gate of iron bars, and Cosca sprang smartly up the steps towards them, heels clicking. 'A fine morning to you, gentlemen!'

'Cardotti's is closed today,' the nearest growled back, 'and tonight too.'

'Not to us.' Cosca took in the mismatched troupe with a sweep of his cane. 'We are the entertainers for this evening's private function, selected and hired especially for the purpose by Prince Ario's consort, Carlot dan Eider. Now open that gate quick sharp, we have a great deal of preparation to attend to. In we come, my children, and don't dally! People must be entertained!'

The yard was bigger'n Shivers had been expecting, and a lot more of a disappointment too, since this was supposed to be the best brothel in the

world. A stretch of mossy cobbles with a couple of rickety tables and chairs, painted in flaking gilt. Lines were strung from upstairs windows, sheets flapping sluggishly as they dried. A set of wine-barrels were badly stacked in one corner. A bent old man was sweeping with a worn-out broom, a fat woman was giving what might've been some underwear a right thrashing on a washboard. Three skinny women sat about a table, bored. One had an open book in her hand. Another frowned at her nails as she worked 'em with a file. The last slouched in her chair, watching the entertainers file in while she blew smoke from a little clay chagga pipe.

Cosca sighed. 'There's nothing more mundane, or less arousing, than a whorehouse in the daytime, eh?'

'Seems not.' Shivers watched the jugglers find a space over in one corner and start to unpack their tools, gleaming knives among 'em.

'I've always thought it must be a fine enough life, being a whore. A successful one, at any rate. You get the days off, and when finally you are called upon to work you can get most of it done lying down.'

'Not much honour in it,' said Shivers.

'Shit at least makes flowers grow. Honour isn't even that useful.'

'What happens when you get old, though, and no one wants you no more? Seems to me all you're doing is putting off the despair and leaving a pack of regrets behind you.'

Below Cosca's mask, his smile had a sad twist. 'That's all any of us are doing, my friend. Every business is the same, and ours is no different. Soldiering, killing, whatever you want to call it. No one wants you when you get old.' He strutted past Shivers and into the courtyard, cane flicking backwards and forwards with each stride. 'One way or another, we're all of us whores!' He snatched a fancy cloth from a pocket, waved it at the three women as he passed and gave a bow. 'Ladies. A most profound honour.'

'Silly old cock,' Shivers heard one of them mutter in Northern, before she went back to her pipe. The band were already tuning up, making almost as sour a whine as when they were actually playing.

Two tall doorways led from the yard – left to the gaming hall, right to the smoking hall, from those to the two staircases. His eyes crept up the ivy-covered wall, herringbone planks of weather-darkened wood, to the row of narrow windows on the first floor. Rooms for the entertainment of guests. Higher still, to bigger windows of coloured glass, just under the roofline.

The Royal Suite, where the most valued visitors were welcomed. Where they planned to welcome Prince Ario and his brother Foscar in a few hours.

'Oy.' A touch on his shoulder, and he turned, and stood blinking.

A tall woman stood behind him, a shining black fur draped around her shoulders, long black gloves on her long arms, black hair scraped over to one side and hanging soft and smooth across her white face. Her mask was scattered with chips of crystal, eyes gleaming through the narrow slots and set on him.

'Er . . .' Shivers had to make himself look away from her chest, the shadow between her tits drawing his eyes like a bear's to a beehive. 'Something I can . . . you know . . .'

'I don't know, is there?' Her painted lips twisted up at one corner, part sneer and part smile. Seemed as if there was something familiar about that voice. Through the slit in her skirts he could just see the end of a long pink scar on her thigh.

'Monza?' he whispered.

'Who else as fine as this would have anything to say to the likes of you?' She eyed him up and down. 'This brings back memories. You look almost as much of a savage as when I first met you.'

'That's the idea, I reckon. You look, er . . .' He struggled for the word.

'Like a whore?'

'A damn pricey one, maybe.'

'I'd hate to look a cheap one. I'm headed upstairs, to wait for our guests. All goes well, I'll see you at the warehouse.'

'Aye. If all goes well.' Shivers' life had a habit of not going well. He frowned up at those stained-glass windows. 'You going to be alright?'

'Oh, I can handle Ario. I've been looking forward to it.'

'I know, but, I'm just saying . . . if you need me closer—'

'Stick your tiny mind to keeping things under control down here. Let me worry about me.'

'I'm worried enough that I can spare some.'

'Thought you were an optimist,' she tossed over her shoulder as she walked away.

'Maybe you talked me out of it,' he muttered at her back. He didn't like it much when she spoke to him that way, but he liked it a lot better'n when she wouldn't speak to him at all. He saw Greylock glowering at him as he

turned, and stabbed an angry finger at the big bastard. ‘Don’t just stand there! Let’s get this damn fake circle marked out, ’fore we get old!’

Monza was a long way from comfortable as she teetered through the gambling hall, Cosca beside her. She wasn’t used to the high shoes. She wasn’t used to the draught around her legs. Corsets were torture at the best of times, and it hardly helped that this one had two of the bones removed and replaced with long, thin knives, the points up between her shoulder blades and the grips hidden in the small of her back. Her ankles, and her knees, and her hips were already throbbing. The notion of a smoke tickled at the back of her mind, just like always, but she forced it away. She’d endured enough pain, these past few months. A little more was a light price to pay if it got her close to Ario. Close enough to stick a blade in his sneering face. The thought alone put some swagger back into her step.

Carlot dan Eider waited for them at the end of the room, standing with regal superiority between two card tables covered with grey sheets, wearing a red dress fit for an empress of legend.

‘Will you look at the two of us?’ sneered Monza as she came close. ‘A general dressed like a whore and a whore dressed like a queen. Everyone’s pretending to be someone else tonight.’

‘That’s politics.’ Ario’s mistress frowned over at Cosca. ‘Who’s this?’

‘Magister Eider, what a delightful and unexpected honour.’ The old mercenary bowed as he swept his hat off, exposing his scabrous, sweat-beaded bald patch. ‘I never dreamed the two of us would meet again.’

‘You!’ Eider stared coldly back at him. ‘I might have known you’d be caught up in this. I thought you died in Dagoska!’

‘So did I, but it turned out I was only very, very drunk.’

‘Not so drunk you couldn’t fumble your way to betraying me.’

The old mercenary shrugged. ‘It’s always a crying shame when honest people are betrayed. When it happens to the treacherous, though, one cannot avoid a certain sense of . . . cosmic justice.’ Cosca grinned from Eider, to Monza, and back. ‘Three people as loyal as us all on one side? I can hardly wait to see how this turns out.’

Monza’s guess was that it would turn out bloody. ‘When will Ario and Foscar get here?’

‘When Sotorius’ grand ball begins to break up. Midnight, or just before.’

‘We’ll be waiting.’

‘The antidote,’ snapped Eider. ‘I’ve done my part.’

‘You’ll get it when I get Ario’s head on a plate. Not before.’

‘What if something goes wrong?’

‘You’ll die along with the rest of us. Better hope things run smoothly.’

‘What’s to stop you from letting me die anyway?’

‘My dazzling reputation for fair play and good behaviour.’

Unsurprisingly, Eider didn’t laugh. ‘I tried to do the right thing in Dagoska.’ She jabbed at her chest with a finger. ‘I tried to do the right thing! I tried to save people! Look what it’s cost me!’

‘There might be a lesson in there about doing the right thing.’ Monza shrugged. ‘I’ve never had that problem.’

‘You can joke! Do you know what it’s like, to live in fear every moment?’

Monza took a quick step towards her and she shrank back against the wall. ‘Living in fear?’ she snarled, their masks almost scraping together. ‘Welcome to my fucking life! Now quit whining and smile for Ario and the other bastards at the ball tonight!’ She dropped her voice to a whisper. ‘Then bring him to us. Him and his brother. Do as I tell you, and you might still get a happy ending.’

She knew that neither one of them thought that very likely. There’d be precious few happy endings to tonight’s festivities.

Day turned the drill one last time, bit squealing through wood, then eased it gently free. A chink of light peeped up into the darkness of the attic and brightly illuminated a circular patch of her cheek. She grinned across at Morveer, and he was touched by a sudden bitter-sweet memory of his mother’s smiling face by candlelight. ‘We’re through.’

Now was hardly the time for nostalgia. He swallowed the upwelling of emotion and crept over, taking the greatest care to set his feet only upon the rafters. A black-clad leg bursting through the ceiling and kicking wildly would no doubt give Orso’s sons and their guards some cause for concern. Peering down through the hole, doubtless invisible among the thick mouldings, Morveer could see an opulent stretch of panelled corridor with a rich Gurkish carpet and two high doorways. A crown was carved into the wood above the nearest one.

‘Perfect positioning, my dear. The Royal Suite.’ From here they had an unobstructed view of guards stationed by either door. He reached into his jacket, and frowned. He patted at his other pockets, panic stabbing at him.

‘Damn it! I forgot my spare blowpipe! What if—’

‘I brought two extra, just in case.’

Morveer pressed one hand to his chest. ‘Thank the Fates. No! Damn the Fates. Thank your prudent planning. Where would I be without you?’

Day grinned her innocent little grin. ‘About where you are now, but with less charming company. Caution first, always.’

‘So true.’ He dropped his voice back to a whisper. ‘And here they come.’ Murcatto and Vitari appeared, both masked, powdered and dressed, or rather undressed, like the many female employees of the establishment. Vitari opened the door beneath the crown and entered. Murcatto glanced briefly up at the ceiling, nodded, then followed her. ‘They are within. So far all proceeds according to plan.’ But there was ample time yet for disasters. ‘The yard?’

Day wriggled on her stomach to the far edge of the attic where roof met rafters, and peered through the holes they had drilled overlooking the building’s central courtyard. ‘Looks as if they’re ready to welcome our guests. What now?’

Morveer crept to the minuscule, grubby window and brushed some cobwebs away with the side of one hand. The sun was sinking behind the ragged rooftops, casting a muddy flare over the City of Whispers. ‘The masked ball should soon be under way at Sotorius’ palace.’ On the far side of the canal, behind Cardotti’s House of Leisure, the torches were being lit, lamplight spilling from the windows in the black residences and into the blue evening. Morveer flicked the cobwebs from his fingers with some distaste. ‘Now we sit here in this mouldering attic, and wait for his Highness Prince Ario to arrive.’

Sex and Death

By darkness, Cardotti's House of Leisure was a different world. A fantasy land, as far removed from drab reality as the moon. The gaming hall was lit by three hundred and seventeen flickering candles. Friendly had counted them as they were hoisted up on tinkling chandeliers, bracketed to gleaming sconces, twisted into glittering candlesticks.

The sheets had been flung back from the gaming tables. One of the dealers was shuffling his cards, another was sitting, staring into space, a third carefully stacking up his counters. Friendly counted silently along with him. At the far end of the room an old man was oiling the lucky wheel. Not too lucky for those that played it, by Friendly's assessment of the odds. That was the strange thing about games of chance. The chances were always against the player. You might beat the numbers for a day, but you could never beat them in the end.

Everything shone like hidden treasure, and the women most of all. They were dressed now, and masked, transformed by warm candlelight into things barely human. Long, thin limbs oiled and powdered and dusted with glitter, eyes shining darkly through the eyeholes of gilded masks, lips and nails painted black-red like blood from a fatal wound.

The air was full of strange, frightening smells. There had been no women in Safety, and Friendly felt greatly on edge. He calmed himself by rolling the dice over and over, and adding the scores one upon another. He had reached already four thousand two hundred and . . .

One of the women swept past, her ruffled dress swishing against the Gurkish carpet, one long, bare leg sliding out from the blackness with each step. Two hundred and . . . His eyes seemed glued to that leg, his heart beating very fast. Two hundred and . . . twenty-six. He jerked his eyes away and back to the dice.

Three and two. Utterly normal, and nothing to worry about. He straightened, and stood waiting. Outside the window, in the courtyard, the guests were beginning to arrive.

‘Welcome, my friends, welcome to Cardotti’s! We have everything a growing boy needs! Dice and cards, games of skill and chance are this way! For those who relish the embrace of mother husk, that door! Wine and spirits on demand. Drink deep, my friends! There will be various entertainments mounted here in the yard throughout the evening! Dancing, juggling, music . . . even perhaps a little violence, for those with a taste for blood! As for female companionship, well . . . that you will find throughout the building . . .’

Men were pouring into the courtyard in a masked and powdered flow. The place was already heaving with expensively tailored bodies, the air thick with their braying chatter. The band were sawing out a merry tune in one corner of the yard, the jugglers flinging a stream of sparkling glasses high into the air in another. Occasionally one of the women would strut through, whisper to someone, lead him away into the building. And upstairs, no doubt. Cosca could not help wondering . . . could he be spared for a few moments?

‘Quite utterly charmed,’ he murmured, tipping his hat at a willowy blonde as she swayed past.

‘Stick to the guests!’ she snarled viciously in his face.

‘Only trying to lift the mood, my dear. Only trying to help.’

‘You want to help, you can suck a prick or two! I’ve enough to get through!’ Someone touched her on the shoulder and she turned, smiling radiantly, took him by the arm and swept away.

‘Who are all these bastards?’ Shivers, muttering in his ear. ‘Three or four dozen, weren’t we told, a few armed but not keen to fight? There must be twice that many in already!’

Cosca grinned as he clapped the Northman on the shoulder. ‘I know! Isn’t it a thrill when you throw a party and you get more guests than you expected? Somebody’s popular!’

Shivers did not look amused. ‘I don’t reckon it’s us! How do we keep control of all this?’

‘What makes you think I have the answers? In my experience, life rarely turns out the way you expect. We must bend with the circumstances, and simply do our best.’

‘Maybe six guards, weren’t we told? So who are they?’ The Northman jerked his head towards a grim-looking knot of men gathered in one corner,

all with polished breastplates over their padded black jackets, with serious masks of plain steel, serious swords and long knives at their hips, serious frowns on their chiselled jaws. Their eyes darted carefully about the yard as though looking for threats.

'Hmmm,' mused Cosca. 'I was wondering the same thing.'

'Wondering?' The Northman's big fist was uncomfortably tight round Cosca's arm. 'When does wondering turn into shitting yourself?'

'I've often wondered.' Cosca peeled the hand away. 'But it's a funny thing. I simply don't get scared.' He made off through the crowd, clapping backs, calling for drinks, pointing out attractions, spreading good humour wherever he went. He was in his element, now. Vice, and high living, but danger too.

He feared old age, failure, betrayal and looking a fool. Yet he never feared before a fight. Cosca's happiest moments had been spent waiting for battles to begin. Watching the countless Gurkish march upon the walls of Dagoska. Watching the forces of Sipani deploy before the Battle of the Isles. Scrambling onto his horse by moonlight when the enemy sallied from the walls of Muris. Danger was the thing he most enjoyed. Worries for the future, purged. Failures of the past, erased. Only the glorious now remained. He closed his eyes and sucked in air, felt it tingling pleasantly in his chest, heard the excited babbling of the guests. He scarcely even felt the need for a drink any more.

He snapped his eyes open to see two men stepping through the gate, others scraping away to make grovelling room for them. His Highness Prince Ario was dressed in a scarlet coat, silken cuffs drooping from his embroidered sleeves in a manner that implied he would never have to grip anything for himself. A spray of multicoloured feathers sprouted from the top of his golden mask, thrashing like a peacock's tail as he looked about him, unimpressed.

'Your Highness!' Cosca swept off his hat and bowed low. 'We are truly, truly honoured by your presence.'

'Indeed you are,' said Ario. 'And by the presence of my brother.' He wafted a languid hand at the man beside him, dressed all in spotless white with a mask in the form of half a golden sun, somewhat twitchy and reluctant-seeming, Cosca rather thought. Foscar, no doubt, though he had

grown a beard which very much suited him. ‘Not to mention that of our mutual friend, Master Sulfur.’

‘Alas, I cannot stay.’ A nondescript fellow had slipped in behind the two brothers. He had a curly head of hair, a simple suit and a faint smile. ‘So much to do. Never the slightest peace, eh?’ And he grinned at Cosca. Inside the holes of his plain mask, his eyes were different colours: one blue, one green. ‘I must to Talins tonight, and speak to your father. We cannot allow the Gurkish a free hand.’

‘Of course not. Damn those Gurkish bastards. Good journey to you, Sulfur.’ Ario gave the slightest bow of his head.

‘Good journey,’ growled Foscar, as Sulfur turned for the gate.

Cosca jammed his hat back on his head. ‘Well, your two honours are certainly most welcome! Please, enjoy the entertainments! Everything is at your disposal!’ He sidled closer, flashing his most mischievous grin. ‘The top floor of the building has been reserved for you and your brother. Your Highness will find, I rather think, a particularly surprising diversion in the Royal Suite.’

‘There, brother. Let us see if, in due course, we can divert you from your cares.’ Ario frowned towards the band. ‘By the heavens, could that woman not have found some better music?’

The thickening throng parted to let the brothers pass. Several sneering gentlemen followed in their wake, as well as four more of the grim men with their swords and armour. Cosca frowned after their shining backplates as they stepped through the door into the gaming hall.

Nicomo Cosca felt no fear, that was a fact. But a measure of sober concern at all these well-armed men seemed only prudent. Monza had asked for control, after all. He hopped over to the entrance and touched one of the guards outside upon his arm. ‘No more in tonight. We are full.’ He shut the gate in the man’s surprised face, turned the key in the lock and slipped it into his waistcoat pocket. Prince Ario’s friend Master Sulfur would have the honour of being the last man to pass through the front gate tonight.

He flung one arm up at the band. ‘Something livelier lads, strike up a tune! We are here to entertain!’

Morveer knelt, hunched in the darkness of the attic, peering from the eaves of the roof into the courtyard far below. Men in ostentatious attire formed

knots that swelled, dissolved, shifted and flowed in and out through the two doors that led into the building. They glittered and gleamed in pools of lamplight. Ribald exclamations and hushed chatter, poor music and good-natured laughter floated up through the night, but Morveer was not inclined to celebrate.

'Why so many?' he whispered. 'We were anticipating less than half this number. Something . . . is awry.'

A gout of incandescent flame went up into the frigid night and there was an eruption of clapping. That imbecile Ronco, endangering his own existence and that of every other person in the yard. Morveer slowly shook his head. If that was a good idea then he was the Emperor of—

Day hissed at him, and he fumbled his way back across the rafters, old wood creaking gently, and applied his eye to one of the holes. 'Someone's coming.'

A group of eight persons emerged from the stairway, all of them masked. Four were evidently guards, armoured in highly polished breastplates. Two were even more evidently women employed by Cardotti's. It was the final two men that were of interest to Morveer.

'Ario and Foscar,' whispered Day.

'So it would undoubtedly appear.' Orso's sons exchanged a brief word while their guards took up positions flanking the two doors. Then Ario bowed low, his snigger echoing faintly around the attic. He swaggered down the corridor to the second door, one of the women on each arm, leaving his brother to approach the Royal Suite.

Morveer frowned. 'Something is most seriously awry.'

*

It was an idiot's idea of what a king's bedchamber might look like. Everything was overpatterned, gaudy with gold and silver thread. The bed was a monstrous four-poster suffocated with swags of crimson silk. An obese cabinet burst with coloured liquor bottles. The ceiling was crusted with shadowy mouldings and an enormous, tinkling chandelier that hung

too low. The fireplace was carved like a pair of naked women holding up a plate of fruit, all in green marble.

There was a huge canvas in a gleaming frame on one wall – a woman with an improbable bosom bathing in a stream, and seeming to enjoy it a lot more than was likely. Monza never had understood why getting out a tit or two made for a better painting. But painters seemed to think it did, so tits is what you got.

'That bloody music's giving me a headache,' Vitari grumbled, hooking a finger under her corset and scratching at her side.

Monza jerked her head sideways. 'That fucking bed's giving me a headache. Especially against that wallpaper.' A particularly vile shade of azure blue and turquoise stripes with gilt stars splashed across them.

'Enough to drive a woman to smoking.' Vitari prodded at the ivory pipe lying on the marbled table beside the bed, a lump of husk in a cut-glass jar beside it. Monza hardly needed it drawn to her attention. For the last hour her eyes had rarely been off it.

'Mind on the job,' she snapped, jerking her eyes away and back towards the door.

'Always.' Vitari hitched up her skirt. 'Not easy with these bloody clothes. How does anyone—'

'Shhh.' Footsteps, coming down the corridor outside.

'Our guests. You ready?'

The grips of the two knives jabbed at the small of Monza's back as she shifted her hips. 'Bit late for second thoughts, no?'

'Unless you've decided you'd rather fuck them instead.'

'I think we'll stick to murder.' Monza slid her right hand up the window frame in what she hoped was an alluring pose. Her heart was thumping, the blood surging painfully loud in her ears.

The door creaked ever so slowly open, and a man stepped through into the room. He was tall and dressed all in white, his golden mask in the shape of half a rising sun. He had an impeccably trimmed beard, which failed to disguise a ragged scar down his chin. Monza blinked at him. He wasn't Ario. He wasn't even Foscar.

'Shit,' she heard Vitari breathe.

Recognition hit Monza like spit in the face. It wasn't Orso's son, but his son-in-law. None other than the great peacemaker himself, his August

Majesty, the High King of the Union.

*

‘Ready?’ asked Cosca.

Shivers cleared his throat one more time. It had felt like there was something stuck in it ever since he’d walked into this damn place. ‘Bit late for second thoughts, no?’

The old mercenary’s mad grin spread even wider. ‘Unless you’ve decided you’d rather fuck them instead. Gentlemen! Ladies! Your attention, please!’ The band stopped playing and the violin began to hack out a single, sawing note. It didn’t make Shivers feel much better.

Cosca jabbed with his cane, clearing the guests out of the circle they’d marked in the middle of the yard. ‘Step back, my friends, for you are in the gravest danger! One of the great moments of history is about to be acted out before your disbelieving eyes!’

‘When do I get a fuck?’ someone called, to ragged laughter.

Cosca leaped forwards, nearly took the man’s eye out on the end of his cane. ‘Once someone dies!’ The drum had joined in now, whack, whack, whack. Folk pressed round the circle by flickering torchlight. A ring of masks – birds and beasts, soldiers and clowns, leering skulls and grinning devils. Men’s faces underneath – drunk, bored, angry, curious. At the back, Barti and Kummel teetered on each other’s shoulders, whichever was on top clapping along with the drumbeats.

‘For your education, edification and enjoyment . . .’ Shivers hadn’t a clue what that meant. ‘Cardotti’s House of Leisure presents to you . . .’ He took a rough breath, hefting sword and shield, and pushed through into the circle. ‘The infamous duel between Fenris the Feared . . .’ Cosca flicked his cane out towards Greylock as he lumbered into the circle from the other side. ‘And Logen Ninefingers!’

‘He’s got ten fingers!’ someone called, making a ripple of drunken laughter.

Shivers didn’t join ’em. Greylock might’ve been a long way less frightening than the real Feared had been, but he was a long way clear of a comforting sight still, big as a house with that mask of black iron over his

face, left side of his shaved head and his great left arm painted blue. His club looked awful heavy and very dangerous, right then, clutched in those big fists. Shivers had to keep telling himself they were on the same side. Just pretending was all. Just pretending.

'You gentlemen would be well advised to make room!' shouted Cosca, and the three Gurkish dancers pranced round the edge of the circle, black-cat masks over their black faces, herding the guests towards the walls. 'There may be blood!'

'There'd better be!' Another wave of laughter. 'I didn't come here to watch a pair of idiots dance with each other!'

The onlookers whooped, whistled, booed. Mostly booed. Shivers somehow doubted his plan – hop around the circle for a few minutes flailing at the air, then stab Greylock between his arm and his side while the big man burst a bladder of pig blood – was going to get these fuckers clapping. He remembered the real duel, outside the walls of Carleon with the fate of all the North hanging on the outcome. The cold morning, the breath smoking on the air, the blood in the circle. The Carls gathered round the edge, shaking their shields, screaming and roaring. He wondered what those men would've made of this nonsense. Life took you down some strange paths, alright.

'Begin!' shouted Cosca, springing back into the crowd.

Greylock gave a mighty roar and came charging forwards, swinging the club and swinging it hard. Gave Shivers the bastard of a shock. He got his shield up in time, but the weight of the blow knocked him clean over, sliding across the ground on his arse, left arm struck numb. He sprawled out, all tangled up with his sword, nicked his eyebrow on the edge. Lucky not to get the point in his eye. He rolled, the club crashing down where he'd lain a moment before and sending stone chips flying. Even as he was clambering up, Greylock was at him again, looking like he meant deadly business, and Shivers had to scramble away with all the dignity of a cat in a wolf-pen. He didn't remember this being what they discussed. Seemed the big man meant to give these bastards a show to remember after all.

'Kill him!' Someone laughed.

'Give us some blood, you idiots!'

Shivers tightened his hand round the grip of the sword. He suddenly had a bad feeling. Even worse'n before.

Rolling dice normally made Friendly feel calm, but not tonight. He had a bad feeling. Even worse than before. He watched them tumble, clatter, spin, their clicking seeming to dig at his clammy skin, and come to rest.

'Two and four,' he said.

'We see the numbers!' snapped the man with the mask like a crescent moon. 'Damn dice hate me!' He tossed them angrily over, bouncing against the polished wood.

Friendly frowned as he scooped them up and rolled them gently back. 'Five and three. House wins.'

'It seems to be making a habit of it,' growled the one with the mask like a ship, and some of their friends muttered angrily. They were all of them drunk. Drunk and stupid. The house always makes a habit of winning, which is why it hosts games of chance in the first place. But it was hardly Friendly's job to educate them on that point. Someone at the far end of the room cried out with shrill delight as the lucky wheel brought up their number. A few of the card players clapped with mild disdain.

'Bloody dice.' Crescent Moon slurped from his glass of wine as Friendly carefully gathered up the counters and added them to his own swelling stacks. He was having trouble breathing, the air was so thick with strange smells – perfume, and sweat, and wine, and smoke. He realised his mouth was hanging open, and snapped it shut.

The King of the Union looked from Monza, to Vitari, and back – handsome, regal and most extremely unwelcome. Monza realised her mouth was hanging open, and snapped it shut.

'I mean no disrespect, but one of you will be more than adequate and I have . . . always had a weakness for dark hair.' He gestured to the door. 'I hope I will not offend by asking you to leave us. I will make sure you are paid.'

'How generous.' Vitari glanced sideways and Monza gave her the tiniest shrug, her mind flipping around like a frog in hot water as it sought desperately for a way clear of this self-made trap. Vitari pushed herself away from the wall and strutted to the door. She brushed the front of the king's coat with the back of her hand on the way past. 'Curse my red-haired mother,' she sneered. The door clicked shut.

‘A most . . .’ The king cleared his throat. ‘Pleasing room.’

‘You’re easily pleased.’

He snorted with laughter. ‘My wife would not say so.’

‘Few wives say good things about their husbands. That’s why they come to us.’

‘You misunderstand. I have her blessing. My wife is expecting our third child and therefore . . . well, that hardly interests you.’

‘I’ll seem interested whatever you say. That’s what I’m paid for.’

‘Of course.’ The king rubbed his hands somewhat nervously together. ‘Perhaps a drink.’

She nodded towards the cabinet. ‘There they are.’

‘Do you need one?’

‘No.’

‘No, of course, why would you?’ Wine gurgled from the bottle. ‘I suppose this is nothing new for you.’

‘No.’ Though in fact it was hard to remember the last time she’d been disguised as a whore in a room with a king. She had two choices. Bed him, or murder him. Neither one held much appeal. Killing Ario would make trouble enough. To kill a king – even Orso’s son-in-law – would be asking for a great deal more.

When faced with two dark paths, Stolicus wrote, a general should always choose the lighter. She doubted these were quite the circumstances he’d had in mind, but that changed nothing. She slid one hand around the nearest bedpost, lowered herself until she was sitting awkwardly on the garish covers. Then her eye fell on the husk pipe.

When faced with two dark paths, Farans wrote, a general should always find a third.

‘You seem nervous,’ she murmured.

The king had made it as far as the foot of the bed. ‘I must confess it’s been a long time since I visited . . . a place like this one.’

‘Something to calm you, then.’ She turned her back on him before he had the chance to say no, and began to fill the pipe. It didn’t take her long to make it ready. She did it every night, after all.

‘Husk? I’m not sure that I—’

‘You need your wife’s blessing for this too?’ She held it out to him.

‘Of course not.’

She stood, lifting the lamp, holding his eye, and set the flame to the bowl. His first breath in he coughed out straight away. The second not much later. The third he managed to hold, then blow out in a plume of white smoke.

'Your turn,' he croaked, pressing the pipe back into her hand as he sank down on the bed, smoke still curling up from the bowl and tickling her nose.

'I . . .' Oh, how she wanted it. She was trembling with her need for it. 'I . . .' Right there, right in her hand. But this was no time to indulge herself. She needed to stay in control.

His mouth curled up in a gormless grin. 'Whose blessing do you need?' he croaked. 'I promise I won't tell a . . . oh.'

She was already setting the flame to the grey-brown flakes, sucking the smoke in deep, feeling it burn at her lungs.

'Damn boots,' the king was saying as he tried to drag his highly polished footwear off. 'Don't bloody fit me. You pay . . . a hundred marks . . . for some boots . . . you expect them to—' One flew off and clattered into the wall, leaving a bright trace behind it. Monza was finding it hard to stand up.

'Again.' She held the pipe out.

'Well . . . where's the harm?' Monza stared at the lamp flame as it flared up. Shimmering, shining, all the colours of a hoard of priceless jewels, the crumbs of husk glowing orange, turning from sweet brown to blazing red to used-up grey ash. The king breathed a long plume of sweet-smelling smoke in her face and she closed her eyes and sucked it in. Her head was full of it, swelling with it, ready to burst open.

'Oh.'

'Eh?'

He stared around. 'That is . . . rather . . .'

'Yes. Yes it is.' The room was glowing. The pains in her legs had become pleasurable tickles. Her bare skin fizzed and tingled. She sank down, mattress creaking under her rump. Just her and the King of the Union, perched on an ugly bed in a whorehouse. What could've been more comfortable?

The king licked lazily at his lips. 'My wife. The queen. You know. Did I mention that? Queen. She does not always—'

'Your wife likes women,' Monza found she'd said. Then she snorted with laughter, and had to wipe some snot off her lip. 'She likes them a lot.'

The king's eyes were pink inside the eyeholes of his mask. They crawled lazily over her face. 'Women? What were we talking of?' He leaned forwards. 'I don't feel . . . nervous . . . any more.' He slid one clumsy hand up the side of her leg. 'I think . . .' he muttered, working his tongue around his mouth. 'I . . . think . . .' His eyes rolled up and he flopped back on the bed, arms outspread. His head tipped slowly sideways, mask skewing across his face, and he was still, faint snoring echoing in Monza's ears.

He looked so peaceful there. She wanted to lie down. She was always thinking, thinking, worrying, thinking. She needed to rest. She deserved to. But there was something nagging at her – something she needed to do first. What was it? She drifted to her feet, swaying uncertainly.

Ario.

'Uh. That's it.' She left his Majesty sprawled across the bed and made for the door, the room tipping one way and then the other, trying to catch her out. Tricky bastard. She bent down and tore one of the high shoes off, tottered sideways and nearly fell. She flung the other away and it floated gently through the air, like an anchor sinking through water. She had to force her eyes open wide as she looked at the door, because there was a mosaic of blue glass between her and the world, candle flames beyond it leaving long, blinding smears across her sight.

Morveer nodded to Day, and she nodded back, a deeper black shape crouched in the fizzing darkness of the attic, the slightest strip of blue light across her grin. Behind her, the joists, the laths, the rafters were all black outlines touched down the edges with the faintest glow. 'I will deal with the pair beside the Royal Suite,' he whispered. 'You . . . take the others.'

'Done, but when?'

When was the question of paramount importance. He put his eye to the hole, blowpipe in one hand, fingertips of the other rubbing nervously against his thumb. The door to the Royal Suite opened and Vitari emerged from between the guards. She frowned up, then walked away down the corridor. There was no sign of Murcatto, no sign of Foscar, no further sign of anything. This was not part of the plan, of that Morveer was sure. He had still to kill the guards, of course, he had been paid to do so and always followed through on a contracted task. That was one thing among many that

separated him from the obscene likes of Nicomo Cosca. But when, when, when . . .

Morveer frowned. He was sure he could hear the vague sound of someone chewing. ‘Are you eating?’

‘Just a bun.’

‘Well stop it! We are at work, for pity’s sake, and I am trying to think! Is an iota of professionalism too much to ask?’

Time stretched out to the vague accompaniment of the incompetent musicians down in the courtyard, but with the exception of the guards rocking gently from side to side, there was no further sign of movement. Morveer slowly shook his head. In this case, it seemed, as in so many, one moment was much like another. He breathed in deep, lifted the pipe to his lips, taking aim on the furthest of his allotted pair—

The door to Ario’s chamber banged open. The two women emerged, one still adjusting her skirts. Morveer held his breath, cheeks puffed out. They pulled the door shut then made off down the corridor. One of the guards said something to the other, and he laughed. There was the most discreet of hisses as Morveer discharged his pipe, and the laughter was cut short.

‘Ah!’ The nearest guard pressed one hand to his scalp.

‘What?’

‘Something . . . I don’t know, stung me.’

‘Stung you? What would’ve—’ It was the other guard’s turn to rub at his head. ‘Bloody hell!’

The first had found the needle in his hair, and now held it up to the light. ‘A needle.’ He fumbled for his sword with a clumsy hand, lurched back against the wall and slid down onto his backside. ‘I feel all . . .’

The second guard took an unsteady stride into the corridor, reached up at nothing, then pitched over on his face, arm outstretched. Morveer allowed himself the slightest nod of satisfaction, then crept over to Day, crouching over two of the holes with her blowpipe in her hand.

‘Success?’ he asked.

‘Of course.’ She held the bun in the other, and now took a bite from it. Through the hole Morveer saw the two guards beside Ario’s suite slumped motionless.

‘Fine work, my dear. But that, alas, is all the work with which we were trusted.’ He began to gather up their equipment.

‘Should we stay, see how it goes?’

‘I see no reason so to do. The best we can hope for is that men will die, and that I have witnessed before. Frequently. Take it from me. One death is much like another. You have the rope?’

‘Of course.’

‘Never too soon to secure the means of escape.’

‘Caution first, always.’

‘Precisely so.’

Day uncoiled the cord from her pack and made one end of it fast around a heavy joist. She lifted one foot and kicked the little window from its frame. Morveer heard the sound of it splashing down into the canal behind the building.

‘Most neatly done. What would I do without you?’

*

‘Die!’ And Greylock came charging across the circle with that great lump of wood high over his head. Shivers gasped along with the crowd, only just scrambled clear in time, felt the wind of it ripping at his face. He caught the big man in a clumsy hug and they tottered together round the outside of the circle.

‘What the fuck are you after?’ Shivers hissed in his ear.

‘Vengeance!’ Greylock dealt him a knee in the side then flung him off.

Shivers stumbled away, finding his balance, picking his brains for some slight he’d given the man. ‘Vengeance? For what, you mad bastard?’

‘For Uffrith!’ He slapped his great foot down, feinting, and Shivers hopped back, peering over the top of his shield.

‘Eh? No one got killed there!’

‘You sure?’

‘A couple o’ men down on the docks, but—’

‘My brother! No more’n fourteen years old!’

‘I had no part o’ that, you great turd! Black Dow did them killings!’

‘Black Dow ain’t before me now, and I swore to my mother I’d make someone pay. You’d a big enough part for me to knock it out o’ you, fucker!’ Shivers gave a girlish kind of squeak as he ducked back from

another great sweep, heard men cheering around him, as keen for blood as the watchers might be at a real duel.

Vengeance, then. A double-edged blade if ever there was one. You never could tell when that bastard was going to cut you. Shivers stood, blood creeping down the side of his face from a knock he took just before, and all he could think was how fucking unfair it was. He'd tried to do the right thing, just the way his brother had always told him he should. He'd tried to be a better man. Hadn't he? This was where good intentions put you. Right in the shit.

'But I just . . . I done my best!' he bellowed in Northern.

Greylock sent spit spinning through the mouth-hole of his mask. 'So did my brother!' He came on, club coming down in a blur. Shivers ducked round it, jerked his shield up hard and smashed the rim under the big man's jaw, sent him staggering back, spluttering blood.

Shivers still had his pride. That much he'd kept for himself. He was damned if he was going to be put in the mud by some great thick bastard who couldn't tell a good man from a bad. He felt the fury boiling up his throat, the way it used to back home in the North, when the battle was joined and he was in the thick of it.

'Vengeance, is it?' he screamed. 'I'll show you fucking vengeance!'

Cosca winced as Shivers caught a blow on his shield and staggered sideways. He snarled something extremely angry-sounding in Northern, lashed at the air with his sword and missed Greylock by no more than the thickness of a finger, almost chopping deep into the onlookers on the backswing and making them shuffle nervously away.

'Amazing stuff!' someone frothed. 'It looks almost real! I must hire them for my daughter's wedding . . .'

It was true, the Northmen were mounting a good show. Rather too good. They circled warily, eyes fixed on each other, one of them occasionally jabbing forwards with foot or weapon. The furious, concentrated caution of men who knew the slightest slip could mean death. Shivers had his hair matted to the side of his face with blood. Greylock had a long scratch through the leather on his chest and a cut under his chin where the shield-rim had cracked him.

The onlookers had stopped yelling obscenities, cooing and gasping instead, eyes locked hungrily on the fighters, caught between wanting to press forwards to see, and press back when the weapons were swung. They felt something on the air in the courtyard. Like the weight of the sky before a great storm. Genuine, murderous rage.

The band had more than got the trick of the battle music, the fiddle stabbing as Shivers slashed with the sword, drum booming whenever Greylock heaved his great club, adding significantly to the near-unbearable tension.

Quite clearly they were trying to kill each other, and Cosca had not the ghost of a notion how to stop them. He winced as the club crashed into Shivers' shield again and nearly knocked him off his feet. He glanced worriedly up towards the stained-glass windows high above the yard.

Something told him they were going to leave more than two corpses behind tonight.

The corpses of the two guards lay beside the door. One was sitting up, staring at the ceiling. The other lay on his face. They hardly looked dead. Just sleeping. Monza slapped her own face, tried to shake the husk out of her head. The door wobbled towards her and a hand in a black glove reached out and grabbed the knob. Damn it. She needed to do that. She stood there, swaying, waiting for the hand to let go.

'Oh.' It was her hand. She turned it and the door came suddenly open. She fell through, almost pitched on her face. The room swam around her, walls flowing, melting, streaming waterfalls. Flames crackled, sparkling crystal in a fireplace. One window was open and music floated in, men shouting from down below. She could see the sounds, happy smears curling in around the glass, reaching across the changing space between, tickling at her ears.

Prince Ario lay on the bed, stark naked, body white on the rumpled cover, legs and arms spread out wide. His head turned towards her, the spray of feathers on his mask making long shadows creep across the glowing wall behind.

'More?' he murmured, taking a lazy swallow from a wine bottle.

'I hope we haven't . . . tired you out . . . already.' Monza's own voice seemed to boom out of a faraway bucket as she padded towards the bed, a ship tossing on a choppy red sea of soft carpet.

‘I daresay I can rise to the occasion,’ said Ario, fumbling with his cock. ‘You seem to have the advantage of me, though.’ He waved a finger at her. ‘Too many clothes.’

‘Uh.’ She shrugged the fur from her shoulders and it slithered to the floor.

‘Gloves off.’ He swatted with his hand. ‘Don’t care for them.’

‘Nor me.’ She pulled them off, tickling at her forearms. Ario was staring at her right hand. She held it up in front of her eyes, blinked at it. There was a long, pink scar down her forearm, the hand a blotchy claw, palm squashed, fingers twisted, little one sticking out stubbornly straight.

‘Ah.’ She’d forgotten about that.

‘A crippled hand.’ Ario wriggled eagerly down the bed towards her, his cock and the feathers sprouting from his head waggling from side to side with the movements of his hips. ‘How terribly . . . exotic.’

‘Isn’t it?’ The memory of Gobba’s boot crunching down across it flashed through her mind and snatched her into the cold moment. She felt herself smile. ‘No need for this.’ She took hold of the feathers and plucked the mask from his head, tossed it away into the corner.

Ario grinned at her, pink marks around his eyes where the mask had sat. She felt the glow of the husk leaking from her mind as she stared into his face. She saw him stabbing her brother in the neck, heaving him off the terrace, complaining at being cut. And here he was, before her now. Orso’s heir.

‘How rude.’ He clambered up from the bed. ‘I must teach you a lesson.’

‘Or maybe I’ll teach you one.’

He came closer, so close that she could smell his sweat. ‘Bold, to bandy words with me. Very bold.’ He reached out and ran one finger up her arm. ‘Few women are as bold as that.’ Closer, and he slipped his other hand into the slit in her skirts, up her thigh, squeezing at her arse. ‘I almost feel as if I know you.’

Monza took hold of the corner of her mask with her ruined right hand as Ario drew her closer still. ‘Know me?’ She slid her other fist gently behind her back, found the grip of one of the knives. ‘Of course you know me.’

She pulled her mask away. Ario’s smile lingered for a moment longer as his eyes flickered over her face. Then they went staring wide.

‘Somebody—!’

‘A hundred scales on this next throw!’ Crescent Moon bellowed, holding the dice up high. The room grew quiet as people turned to watch.

‘A hundred scales.’ It meant nothing to Friendly. None of it was his money, and money only interested him as far as counting it went. Losses and gains were exactly the same.

Crescent Moon rattled the dice in his hand. ‘Come on, you shits!’ The man flung them recklessly across the table, bouncing and tumbling.

‘Five and six.’

‘Hah!’ Moon’s friends whooped, chuckled, slapped him on the back as though he had achieved something fine by throwing one number instead of another.

The one with the mask like a ship threw his arms in the air. ‘Have that!’

The one with the fox mask made an obscene gesture.

The candles seemed to have grown uncomfortably bright. Too bright to count. The room was very hot, close, crowded. Friendly’s shirt was sticking to him as he scooped up the dice and tossed them gently back. A few gasps round the table. ‘Five and six. House wins.’ People often forgot that any one score is just as likely as any other, even the same score. So it was not entirely a shock that Crescent Moon lost his sense of perspective.

‘You cheating bastard!’

Friendly frowned. In Safety he would have cut a man who spoke to him like that. He would have had to, so that others would have known not to try. He would have started cutting him and not stopped. But they were not in Safety now, they were outside. Control, he had been told. He made himself forget the warm handle of his cleaver, pressing into his side. Control. He only shrugged. ‘Five and six. The dice don’t lie.’

Crescent Moon grabbed hold of Friendly’s wrist as he began to sweep up the counters. He leaned forwards and poked him in the chest with a drunken finger. ‘I think your dice are loaded.’

Friendly felt his face go slack, the breath hardly moving in his throat, it had constricted so painfully tight. He could feel every drop of sweat tickling at his forehead, at his back, at his scalp. A calm, cold, utterly unbearable rage seared through every part of him. ‘You think my dice are what?’ he could barely whisper.

Poke, poke, poke. ‘Your dice are liars.’

‘My dice . . . are what?’ Friendly’s cleaver split the crescent mask in half and the skull underneath it wide open. His knife stabbed the man with the ship over his face through his gaping mouth and the point emerged from the back of his head. Friendly stabbed him again, and again, squelch, squelch, the grip of the blade turning slippery. A woman gave a long, shrill scream.

Friendly was vaguely aware that everyone in the hall was gaping at him, four times three times four of them, or more, or less. He flung the dice table over, sending glasses, counters, coins flying. The man with the fox mask was staring, eyes wide inside the eyeholes, spatters of dark brains across his pale cheek.

Friendly leaned forwards into his face. ‘Apologise!’ he roared at the very top of his lungs. ‘Apologise to my fucking dice!’

‘Somebody—!’

Ario’s cry turned to a breathy wheeze of an in-breath. He stared down, and she did too. Her knife had gone in the hollow where his thigh met his body, just beside his wilting cock, and was buried in him to the grip, blood running out all over her fist. For the shortest moment he gave a hideous, high-pitched shriek, then the point of Monza’s other knife punched in under his ear and slid out of the far side of his neck.

Ario stayed there, eyes bulging, one hand plucking weakly at her bare shoulder. The other crept trembling up and fumbled at the handle of the blade. Blood leaked out of him thick and black, oozing between his fingers, bubbling down his legs, running down his chest in dark, treacly streaks, leaving his pale skin all smeared and speckled with red. His mouth yawned, but his scream was nothing but a soft farting sound, breath squelching around the wet steel in his throat. He tottered back, his other arm fishing at the air, and Monza watched him, fascinated, his white face leaving a bright trace across her vision.

‘Three dead,’ she whispered. ‘Four left.’

His bloody thighs slapped against the windowsill and he fell, head smashing against the stained glass and knocking the window wide. He tumbled through and out into the night.

The club came over, a blow that could’ve smashed in Shivers’ skull like an egg. But it was tired, sloppy, left Greylock’s side open. Shivers ducked it,

already spinning, snarling as he whipped the heavy sword round. It cut into the big man's blue-painted forearm with a meaty thump, hacked it off clean, carried on through and chopped deep into the side of his stomach. Blood showered from the stump and into the faces of the onlookers. The club clattered to the cobbles, hand and wrist along with it. Someone gave a thin shriek. Someone else laughed.

'How'd they do that?'

Then Greylock started squealing like he'd caught his foot in a door. 'Fuck! It hurts! Ah! Ah! What's my . . . by the—'

He reached around with the one hand he had left, fumbling at the gash in his side, dark mush bulging out. He lurched forwards onto one knee, head tipping back, and started to scream. Until Shivers' sword hit his mask right in the forehead and made a clang that cut his roar off dead, left a huge dent between the eyeholes. The big man crashed over on his back, his boots flew up in the air, then thumped down.

And that was the end of the evening's entertainment.

The band spluttered out a last few wobbly notes, then the music died. Apart from some vague yelling leaking from the gaming hall, the yard was silent. Shivers stared down at Greylock's corpse, blood bubbling out from beneath the stoved-in mask. His fury had suddenly melted, leaving him only with a painful arm, a scalp prickling with cold sweat and a healthy sense of creeping horror.

'Why do things like this always happen to me?'

'Because you're a bad, bad man,' said Cosca, peering over his shoulder.

Shivers felt a shadow fall across his face. He was just looking up when a naked body crashed down headfirst into the circle from above, showering the already gaping crowd with blood.

That's Entertainment

All at once, things got confused. 'The king!' someone squealed, for no reason that made any sense. The blood-spattered space that had been the circle was suddenly full of stumbling bodies, running to nowhere. Everyone was bawling, wailing, shouting. Men's voices and women's, a noise fit to deafen the dead. Someone shoved at Shivers' shield and he shoved back on an instinct, sent them sprawling over Greylock's corpse.

'It's Ario!'

'Murder!' A guest started to draw his sword, and one of the band stepped calmly forwards and smashed his skull apart with a sharp blow of a mace.

More screams. Steel rang and grated. Shivers saw one of the Gurkish dancers slit a man's belly open with a curved knife, saw him fumble his sword as he vomited blood, stab the man behind him in the leg. There was a crash of tinkling glass and a flailing body came flying through one of the windows of the gambling hall. Panic and madness spread like fire in a dry field.

One of the jugglers was flinging knives, flying metal clattering about the yard, thudding into flesh and wood, just as deadly to friends as enemies. Someone grabbed hold of Shivers' sword arm and he elbowed them in the face, lifted his sword to hack at them and realised it was Morc, the pipe player, blood running from his nose. There was a loud whomp and a glare of orange through the heaving bodies. The screaming went up a notch, a mindless chorus.

'Fire!'

'Water!'

'Out of my way!'

'The juggler! Get the—'

'Help! Help!'

'Knights of the Body, to me! To me!'

'Where's the prince? Where's Ario?'

'Somebody help!'

'Back!' shouted Cosca.

‘Eh?’ Shivers called at him, not sure who was howling at who. A knife flickered past in the darkness, rattled away between the thrashing bodies.

‘Back!’ Cosca sidestepped a sword-thrust, whipped his cane around, a long, thin blade sliding free of it, ran a man through the neck with a swift jab. He slashed at someone else, missed and almost stabbed Shivers as he lurched past. One of Ario’s gentlemen, mask like a squares board, nearly caught Cosca with a sword. Gurpi loomed up behind and smashed his lute over the man’s head. The wooden body shattered, the axe blade inside split his shoulder right down to his chest and crushed his butchered wreckage into the cobbles.

Another surge of flame went up, people stumbled away, shoving madly, a ripple through the straining crowd. They suddenly parted and the Incredible Ronco came thrashing straight at Shivers, white fire wreathing him like some devil burst out of hell. Shivers tottered back, smashed him away with his shield. Ronco reeled into the wall, bounced off it and into another, showering globs of liquid fire, folk scrambling away, steel stabbing about at random. The flames spread up the dry ivy, first a crackle, then a roar, leaped to the wooden wall, bathing the heaving courtyard in wild, flickering light. A window shattered. The locked gates clattered as men clutched at ’em, screaming to be let out. Shivers beat the flames on his shield against the wall. Ronco was rolling on the ground, still burning, making a thin screech like a boiling kettle, the flames casting a crazy glare across the bobbing masks of guests and entertainers – twisted monsters’ faces, everywhere Shivers looked.

There was no time to make sense of any of it. All that mattered was who lived and who died, and he’d no mind to join the second lot. He backed off, keeping close to the wall, shoving men away with his scorched shield as they grabbed at him.

A couple of the guards in breastplates were forcing their way through the press. One of ’em chopped Barti or Kummel down with his sword, hard to say which, caught one of Ario’s gentlemen on the backswing and took part of his skull off. He staggered round, squealing, one hand clapped to his head, blood running out between his fingers, over his golden mask and down his face in black streaks. Barti or Kummel, whichever was left, stabbed a knife into the top of the swordsman’s head, right up to the hilt, then hooted as the point of a blade slid out of the front of his chest.

Another armoured guard shouldered his way towards Shivers, sword held high, shouting something, sounded like the Union tongue. Didn't much matter where he was from, he had a mind for killing, that was clear, and Shivers didn't plan on giving him the first blow. He snarled as he swung, full-blooded, but the guard lurched back out of the way and Shivers' sword chopped into something else with a meaty thwack. A woman's chest, just happened to be stumbling past. She fell against the wall, scream turning to a gurgle as she slid down through the ivy, mask half-torn off, one eye staring at him, blood bubbling from her nose, from her mouth, pouring down her white neck.

The courtyard was a place of madness, lit by spreading flames. A fragment of a night-time battlefield, but a battle with no sides, no purpose, no winners. Bodies were kicked around under the panicking crowd – living, dead, split and bloodied. Gurpi was flailing, all tangled up with the wreckage of his lute, not even able to swing his axe for the broken strings and bits of wood. While Shivers watched, one of the guards hacked him down, sent blood showering black in the firelight.

'The smoking hall!' hissed Cosca, chopping someone out of their way with his sword. Shivers thought it might've been one of the jugglers, there was no way of telling. He dived through the open doorway after the old mercenary, together they started to heave the door shut. A hand came through and got caught against the frame, clutching wildly. Shivers bashed at it with the pommel of his sword until it slithered back trembling through the gap. Cosca wrestled the door closed and the latch dropped, then he tore the key around and flung it jingling away across the boards.

'What now?'

The old mercenary stared at him, eyes wild. 'What makes you think I've got the fucking answers?'

The hall was long and low, scattered with cushions, split up by billowing curtains, lit by guttering lamps, smelling of sweet husk-smoke. The sounds of violence out in the yard were muffled. Someone snored. Someone else giggled. A man sat against the wall opposite, a beaked mask and a broad smile on his face, pipe dangling from his hand.

'What about the others?' hissed Shivers, squinting into the half-light.

'I think we've reached the point of every man for himself, don't you?' Cosca was busy trying to drag an old chest in front of the door, already

shuddering from blows outside. ‘Where’s Monza?’

‘They’ll get in by the gaming hall, no? Won’t they—’ Something crashed against a window and it burst inwards, spraying twinkling glass into the room. Shivers shuffled further into the murk, heart thumping hard as a hammer at the inside of his skull. ‘Cosca?’ Nought but smoke and darkness, flickering light through the windows, flickering lamps on tables. He got tangled with a curtain, tore it down, fabric ripping from the rail above. Smoke was scratching at his throat. Smoke from the husk in here, smoke from the fire out there, more and more. The air was hazy with it.

He could hear voices. Crashing and screaming on his left like a bull going mad in the burning building. ‘My dice! My dice! Bastards!’

‘Help!’

‘Somebody send for . . . somebody!’

‘Upstairs! The king! Upstairs!’

Someone was beating at a door with something heavy, he could hear the wood shuddering under the blows. A figure loomed at him. ‘Excuse me, could you—’ Shivers smashed him in the face with his shield and knocked him flying, stumbled past, a vague idea he was after the stairs. Monza was upstairs. Top floor. He heard the door burst open behind him, shifting light, brown smoke, writhing figures began to pour through into the smoking hall, blades shining in the gloom. One of ’em pointed at him. ‘There! There he is!’

Shivers snatched a lamp up in his shield hand and flung it, missed the man at the front and hit the wall. It burst apart, showering burning oil across a curtain. People scattered, one of them screaming, arm on fire. Shivers ran the other way, deeper into the building, half-falling as cushions and tables tripped him in the darkness. He felt a hand grab his ankle and hacked at it with his sword. He staggered through the choking shadows to a doorway, a faint chink of light down the edge, shouldered it open, sure he’d get stabbed between the shoulder blades any moment.

He started up a set of spiral steps two at a time, panting with effort, legs burning as he climbed up towards the rooms where guests were entertained. Or fucked, depending how you looked at it. A panelled corridor met the stairway and a man came barrelling out of it just as Shivers got there, almost ran straight into him. They ended up staring into each other’s masks. One of the bastards with the polished breastplates. He clutched at Shivers’

shoulder with his free hand, showing his teeth, tried to pull his sword back for a thrust but got his elbow caught on the wall behind.

Shivers butted him in the face on an instinct, felt the man's nose crunch under his forehead. No room for the sword. Shivers chopped him in the hip with the edge of his shield, gave him a knee in the fruits that made him whoop, then swung him round and bundled him down the stairs, watched him flop over and over around the corner, sword clattering away. He kept going, upwards, not stopping for breath, starting to cough.

He could hear more shouting behind him, crashing, screaming. 'The king! Protect the king!' He staggered on, one step at a time now, sword aching heavy in his hand, shield dangling from his limp arm. He wondered who was still alive. He wondered about the woman he'd killed in the courtyard, the hand he'd smashed in the doorway. He tottered into the hallway at the top of the stairs, wafting his shield in front of his face to try and clear the haze.

There were bodies here, black shapes sprawled under the wide windows. Maybe she was dead. Anyone could've been dead. Everyone. He heard coughing. Smoke rolled around near the ceiling, pouring into the corridor over the tops of the doors. He squinted into it. A woman, bent over, bare arms stretched out in front of her, black hair hanging.

Monza.

He ran towards her, trying to hold his breath, keep down low under the smoke. He caught her round the waist, she grabbed his neck, snarling. She had blood spotted across her face, soot around her nose and her mouth.

'Fire,' she croaked at him.

'Over here.' He turned back the way he came, and stopped still.

Down at the end of the corridor, two men with breastplates were getting to the top of the steps. One of them pointed at him.

'Shit.' He remembered the model. Cardotti's backs onto the Eighth Canal. He lifted one boot and kicked the window wide. A long way down below, beyond the blowing smoke, water shifted, busy with the reflections of fire.

'My own worst fucking enemy,' he forced through his gritted teeth.

'Ario's dead,' Monza drawled in his ear. Shivers dropped his sword, grabbed hold of her. 'What're you—' He threw her out of the window, heard her choking shriek as she started falling. He tore his shield from his

arm and flung it at the two men as they ran down the corridor towards him, climbed up on the window ledge and jumped.

Smoke washed and billowed around him. The rushing air tore at his hair, his stinging eyes, his open mouth. He hit the water feet first and it dragged him down. Bubbles rushed in the blackness. The cold gripped him, almost forced him to suck in a breath of water. He hardly knew which way was up, flailing about, struck his head on something.

A hand grabbed him under the jaw, pulled at it, his face burst into the night and he gasped in cold air and cold water. He was dragged along through the canal, choking on the smoke he'd breathed, on the water he'd breathed, on the stink of the rotten water he was breathing now. He thrashed and jerked, wheezing, gasping.

'Still, you bastard!'

A shadow fell across his face, his shoulder scraped on stone. He fished around and his hand closed on an old iron ring, enough to hold his head above the water while he coughed up a lungful of canal. Monza was pressed to him, treading water, arm around his back, holding him tight. Her quick, scared, desperate breathing and his own hissed out together, merged with the slapping of the water and echoed under the arch of a bridge.

Beyond its black curve he could see the back of Cardotti's House of Leisure, the fire shooting high into the sky above the buildings around it, flames crackling and roaring, showers of sparks fizzing and popping, ash and splinters flying, smoke pouring up in a black-brown cloud. Light flickered and danced on the water and across one half of Monza's pale face – red, orange, yellow, the colours of fire.

'Shit,' he hissed, shivering at the cold, at the aching lag-end of battle, at what he'd done back there in the madness. He felt tears burning at his eyes. Couldn't stop himself crying. He started to shake, to sob, only just managing to keep his grip on the ring. 'Shit . . . shit . . . shit . . .'

'Shhh.' Monza's hand clapped over his mouth. Footsteps snapped against the road above, shouted voices echoing back and forth. They shrank back together, pressing against the slimy stonework. 'Shhh.' Few hours ago he'd have given a lot to be pressed up against her like this. Somehow, right then, he didn't feel much in the way of romance, though.

'What happened?' she whispered.

Shivers couldn't even look at her. 'I've no fucking idea.'

What Happened

Nicomo Cosca, infamous soldier of fortune, skulked in the shadows and watched the warehouse. All seemed quiet, shutters dark in their rotting frames. No vengeful mob, no clamour of guards. His instincts told him simply to walk off into the night, and pay no further mind to Monzcarro Murcatto and her mad quest for vengeance. But he needed her money, and his instincts had never been worth a runny shit. He shrank back into the doorway as a woman in a mask ran down the lane, skirts held up, giggling. A man chased after her. 'Come back! Kiss me, you bitch!' Their footsteps clattered away.

Cosca strutted across the street as if he owned it, into the alley behind the warehouse, then plastered himself to the wall. He sidled up to the back door. He slid the sword from his cane with a faint ring of steel, blade coldly glittering in the night. The knob turned, the door crept open. He eased his way through into the darkness—

'Far enough.' Metal kissed his neck. Cosca opened his hand and let the sword clatter to the boards.

'I am undone.'

'Cosca, that you?' The blade came away. Vitari, pressed into the shadows behind the door.

'Shylo, you changed? I much preferred the clothes you had at Cardotti's. More . . . ladylike.'

'Huh.' She pushed past him and down the dark passageway. 'That underwear, such as it was, was torture.'

'I shall have to content myself with seeing it in my dreams.'

'What happened at Cardotti's?'

'What happened?' Cosca bent over stiffly and fished his sword up between two fingers. 'I believe the word "bloodbath" would fit the circumstances. Then it caught fire. I must confess . . . I made a quick exit.' He was, in truth, disgusted with himself for having fled and saved his own worthless skin. But the decided habits of a whole life, especially a wasted life, were hard to change. 'Why don't you tell me what happened?'

'The King of the Union happened.'

‘The what?’ Cosca remembered the man in white, with the mask like the rising sun. The man who had not looked very much like Foscar. ‘Aaaaaah. That would explain all the guards.’

‘What about your entertainers?’

‘Hugely expendable. None of them have shown their faces here?’

Vitari shook her head. ‘Not so far.’

‘Then, I would guess, they are largely, if not entirely, expended. So it always is with mercenaries. Easily hired, even more easily discharged and never missed once they are gone.’

Friendly sat in the darkened kitchen, hunched over the table, rolling his dice gently in the light from a single lamp. A heavy and extremely threatening cleaver gleamed on the wood beside it.

Cosca came close, pointing to the dice. ‘Three and four, eh?’

‘Three and four.’

‘Seven. A most ordinary score.’

‘Average.’

‘May I?’

Friendly looked sharply up at him. ‘Yes.’

Cosca gathered the dice and gently rolled them back. ‘Six. You win.’

‘That’s my problem.’

‘Really? Losing is mine. What happened? No trouble in the gaming hall?’

‘Some.’

There was a long streak of half-dried blood across the convict’s neck, dark in the lamplight. ‘You’ve got something . . . just here,’ said Cosca.

Friendly wiped it off, looked down at his red-brown fingertips with all the emotion of an empty sink. ‘Blood.’

‘Yes. A lot of blood, tonight.’ Now Cosca was back to something approaching safety, the giddy rush of danger was starting to recede, and all the old regrets crowded in behind it. His hands were shaking again. A drink, a drink, a drink. He wandered through the doorway into the warehouse.

‘Ah! The ringmaster for tonight’s circus of murder!’ Morveer leaned against the rail of the stairs, sneering down, Day not far behind, her dangling hands slowly peeling an orange.

‘Our poisoners! I’m sorry to see you made it out alive. What happened?’

Morveer’s lip curled still further. ‘Our allotted role was to remove the guards on the top floor of the building. That we accomplished with absolute

speed and secrecy. We were not asked to remain in the building thereafter. Indeed we were ordered not to. Our employer does not entirely trust us. She was concerned that there be no indiscriminate slaughter.'

Cosca shrugged. 'Slaughter, by its very definition, would not appear to discriminate.'

'Either way, your responsibility is over. I doubt anyone will object if you take this, now.'

Morveer flicked his wrist and something sparkled in the darkness. Cosca snatched it from the air on an instinct. A metal flask, liquid sloshing inside. Just like the one he used to carry. The one he sold . . . where was it now? That sweet union of cold metal and strong liquor lapped at his memory, brought the spit flooding into his dry mouth. A drink, a drink, a drink—

He was halfway through unscrewing the cap before he stopped himself. 'It would seem a sensible life lesson never to swallow gifts from poisoners.'

'The only poison in there is the same kind you have been swallowing for years. The same kind you will never stop swallowing.'

Cosca lifted the flask. 'Cheers.' He upended it and let the spirit inside spatter over the warehouse floor, then tossed it clattering away into a corner. He made sure he noted where it ended up, though, in case there was a trickle left inside. 'No sign of our employer?' he called to Morveer, 'Or her Northern puppy?'

'None. We should give some consideration to the possibility that there may never be any.'

'He's right.' Vitari was a black shape in the lamplit doorway to the kitchen. 'Chances are good they're dead. What do we do then?'

Day looked at her fingernails. 'I, for one, will weep a river.'

Morveer had other plans. 'We should have a scheme for dividing such money as Murcatto has here—'

'No,' said Cosca, for some reason intensely irritated at the thought. 'I say we wait.'

'This place is not safe. One of the entertainers could have been captured by the authorities, could even now be divulging its location.'

'Exciting, isn't it? I say we wait.'

'Wait if you please, but I—'

Cosca whipped his knife out in one smooth motion. The blade whirred shining through the darkness and thumped, vibrating gently, into the wood

no more than a foot or two from Morveer's face. 'A little gift of my own.'

The poisoner raised one eyebrow at it. 'I do not appreciate drunks throwing knives at me. What if your aim had been off?'

Cosca grinned. 'It was. We wait.'

'For a man of notoriously fickle loyalties, I find your attachment to a woman who once betrayed you . . . perplexing.'

'So do I. But I've always been an unpredictable bastard. Perhaps I'm changing my ways. Perhaps I've made a solemn vow to be sober, loyal and diligent in all my dealings from now on.'

Vitari snorted. 'That'll be the day.'

'And how long do we wait?' demanded Morveer.

'I suppose you'll know when I say you can leave.'

'And suppose . . . I choose . . . to leave before?'

'You're nothing like as clever as you think you are.' Cosca held his eye. 'But you're cleverer than that.'

'Everyone be calm,' snarled Vitari, in the most uncalming voice imaginable.

'I don't take orders from you, you pickled *remnant*!'

'Maybe I need to teach you how—'

The warehouse door banged open and two figures burst through. Cosca whipped his sword from his stick, Vitari's chain rattled, Day had produced a small flatbow from somewhere and levelled it at the doorway. But the new arrivals were not representatives of the authorities. They were none other than Shivers and Monza, both wet through, stained with dirt and soot and panting for breath as though they had been pursued through half the streets of Sipani. Perhaps they had.

Cosca grinned. 'You need only mention her name and up she springs! Master Morveer was just now discussing how we should divide your money if it turned out you were burned to a cinder in the shell of Cardotti's.'

'Sorry to disappoint you,' she croaked.

Morveer gave Cosca a deadly glare. 'I am by no means disappointed, I assure you. I have a vested interested in your survival to the tune of many thousands of scales. I was simply considering . . . a contingency.'

'Best to be prepared,' said Day, lowering the bow and sucking the juice from her orange.

'Caution first, always.'

Monza lurched across the warehouse floor, one bare foot dragging, jaw muscles clenched tight against evident pain. Her clothes, which had not left too much to the imagination in the first instance, were badly ripped. Cosca could see a long red scar up one thin thigh, more across her shoulder, down her forearm, pale and prickly with gooseflesh. Her right hand was a mottled, bony claw, pressed against her hip as though to keep it out of sight.

He felt an unexpected stab of dismay at the sight of those marks of violence. Like seeing a painting one had always admired wilfully defaced. A painting one had secretly hoped to own, perhaps? Was that it? He shrugged his coat off and held it out to her as she came past him. She ignored it.

'Do we gather you are less than satisfied with tonight's endeavours?' asked Morveer.

'We got Ario. It could've been worse. I need some dry clothes. We leave Sipani right away.' She limped up the steps, torn skirts dragging in the dust behind her, and shouldered past Morveer. Shivers swung the warehouse door shut and leaned against it, head back.

'That is one stone-hearted bitch,' muttered Vitari as she watched her go.

Cosca pursed his lips. 'I always said she had a devil in her. But of the two, her brother was the truly ruthless one.'

'Huh.' Vitari turned back into the kitchen. 'It was a compliment.'

*

Monza managed to shut the door and make it a few steps into her room before her insides clenched up as if she'd been punched in the guts. She retched so hard she could hardly breathe, a long string of bitter drool dangling from her lip and spattering against the boards.

She shivered with revulsion, started trying to twist her way out of the whore's clothes. Her flesh crept at the touch of them, her guts cramped at the rotten canal stink of them. Numb fingers wrestled with hooks and eyes, clawed at buttons and buckles. Gasping and grunting, she tore the damp rags off and flung them away.

She caught sight of herself in the mirror, in the light of the one lamp. Hunched like a beggar, shivering like a drunk, red scars standing out from

white skin, black hair hanging lank and loose. A drowned corpse, standing. Just about.

You're a dream. A vision. The very Goddess of War!

She was doubled over by another stab of sickness, stumbled to her chest and started dragging fresh clothes on with trembling hands. The shirt had been one of Benna's. For a moment it was almost like having his arms around her. As close as she could ever get, now.

She sat on the bed, her own arms clamped around herself, bare feet pressed together, rocking back and forth, willing the warmth to spread. Another rush of nausea dragged her up and had her spitting bile. Once it passed she shoved Benna's shirt down behind her belt, bent to drag her boots on, grimacing at the cold aches through her legs.

She delved her hands into the washbasin and threw cold water on her face, started to scrape away the traces of paint and powder, the smears of blood and soot, digging at her ears, at her hair, at her nose.

'Monza!' Cosca's voice outside the door. 'We have a distinguished visitor.'

She pulled the leather glove back over her twisted joke of a hand, winced as she worked her bent fingers into it. She took a long, shuddering breath, then slid the Calvez out from under her mattress and into the clasp on her belt. It made her feel better just having it there. She pulled the door open.

Carlot dan Eider stood in the middle of the warehouse floor, gold thread gleaming in her red coat, watching Monza as she came down the steps, trying not to limp, Cosca following after.

'What in hell happened? Cardotti's is still burning! The city's in uproar!'

'What happened?' barked Monza. 'Why don't you tell me what happened? His August fucking Majesty was where Foscar was supposed to be!'

The black scab on Eider's neck shifted as she swallowed. 'Foscar wouldn't go. He said he had a headache. So Ario took his brother-in-law along in his place.'

'And he happened to bring a dozen Knights of the Body with him,' said Cosca. 'The king's own bodyguards. As well as a far greater volume of guests than anyone anticipated. The results were not happy. For anyone.'

'Ario?' muttered Eider, face pale.

Monza stared into her eyes. 'Deader than fuck.'

‘The king?’ she almost whispered.

‘Alive. When I left him. But the building did tend to burn down after that. Maybe they got him out.’

Eider looked at the floor, rubbing at one temple with her gloved hand. ‘I’d hoped you might fail.’

‘No such luck.’

‘There will be consequences now. You do a thing like this, there are consequences. Some you see coming, and some you don’t.’ She held out one hand. ‘My antidote.’

‘There isn’t one.’

‘I kept my side of the bargain!’

‘There was no poison. Just a jab with a dry needle. You’re free.’

Eider barked despairing laughter at her. ‘Free? Orso won’t rest until he’s fed me to his dogs! Perhaps I can keep ahead of him, but I’ll never keep ahead of the Cripple. I let him down, and put his precious king in harm’s way. He won’t let that pass. He never lets anything pass. Are you happy now?’

‘You talk as if there was a choice. Orso and the rest die, or I do, and that’s all. Happy isn’t part of the sum.’ Monza shrugged as she turned away. ‘You’d better start running.’

‘I sent a letter.’

She stopped, then turned back. ‘Letter?’

‘Earlier today. To Grand Duke Orso. It was written in some passion, so I forget exactly what was said. The name Shylo Vitari was mentioned, though. And the name Nicomo Cosca.’

Cosca waved it away with one hand. ‘I’ve always had a lot of powerful enemies. I consider it a point of pride. Listing them makes excellent dinner conversation.’

Eider turned her sneer from the old mercenary back to Monza. ‘Those two names, and the name of Murcatto as well.’

Monza frowned. ‘Murcatto.’

‘How much of a fool do you take me for? I know who you are, and now Orso will know too. That you’re alive, and that you killed his son, and that you had help. A petty revenge, perhaps, but the best I could manage.’

‘Revenge?’ Monza nodded slowly. ‘Well. Everyone’s at it. It would’ve been better if you hadn’t done that.’ The Calvez rattled gently as she rested

her hand on its hilt.

'Why, will you kill me for it? Hah! I'm good as dead already!'

'Then why should I bother? You're not on my list. You can go.' Eider stared at her for a moment, mouth slightly open as though she was about to speak, then she snapped it shut and turned for the door. 'Aren't you going to wish me luck?'

'What?'

'The way I see it, your best hope now is that I kill Orso.'

Ario's one-time mistress paused in the doorway. 'Some fucking chance of that!' And she was gone.

IV

VISSERINE

> ‘War without fire is as worthless as sausages without mustard’
>
> *Henry V*

The Thousand Swords fought for Ospria against Muris. They fought for Muris against Sipani. They fought for Sipani against Muris, then for *Ospria again. Between contracts, they sacked Oprile on a whim. A* month later, judging they had perhaps not been thorough enough, they sacked it again, and left it in smouldering ruins. They fought for everyone against no one, and no one against everyone, and all the while they hardly did any fighting at all.

But robbery and plunder, arson and pillage, rape and extortion, yes. Nicomo Cosca liked to surround himself with the curious that he might seem strange and romantic. A nineteen-year-old swordswoman inseparable from her younger brother seemed to qualify, so he kept them close. At first he found them interesting. Then he found them useful. Then he found them indispensable.

He and Monza would spar together in the cold mornings – the flicker and scrape of steel, the hiss and smoke of snatched breath. He was stronger, and she quicker, and so they were well matched. They would taunt each other, and spit at each other, and laugh. Men from the company would gather to watch them, laugh to see their captain bested by a girl half his age, often as not. Everyone laughed, except Benna. He was no swordsman.

He had a trick for numbers, though, and he took charge of the company’s books, and then the buying of the stocks, and then the management and resale of the booty and the distribution of the proceeds. He made money for everyone, and had an easy manner, and soon was well loved.

Monza was a quick study. She learned what Stolicus wrote, and Verturio, and Bialoveld, and Farans. She learned all that Nicomo Cosca had to teach.

She learned tactics and strategy, manoeuvre and logistics, how to read the ground and how to read an enemy. She learned by watching, then she learned by doing. She learned all the arts and all the sciences that were of use to the soldier.

'You have a devil in you,' Cosca told her, when he was drunk, which was not rarely. She saved his life at Muris, then he saved hers. Everyone laughed, except Benna, again. He was no lifesaver.

Old Sazine died of an arrow, and the captains of the companies that made up the Thousand Swords voted Nicomo Cosca to the captain general's chair. Monza and Benna went with him. She carried Cosca's orders. Then she told him what his orders should be. Then she gave orders while he was passed out drunk and pretended they were his. Then she stopped pretending they were his, and no one minded because her orders were better than his would have been, even had he been sober.

As the months passed and turned to years, he was sober less and less. The only orders he gave were in the tavern. The only sparring he did was with a bottle. When the Thousand Swords had picked one part of the country clean and it came time to move on, Monza would search for him through the taverns, and the smoke-houses, and the brothels, and drag him back.

She hated to do it, and Benna hated to watch her do it, but Cosca had given them a home and they owed him, so she did it still. As they wended their way to camp in the dusk, him stumbling under the weight of drink, and her stumbling under the weight of him, he would whisper in her ear.

'Monza, Monza. What would I do without you?'

Vengeance, Then

General Ganmark's highly polished cavalry boots click-clicked against the highly polished floor. The chamberlain's shoes squeak-squeaked along behind. The echoes of both snap-snapped from the glittering walls and around the great, hollow space, their hurry setting lazy dust motes swirling through bars of light. Shenkt's own soft work boots, scuffed and supple from long use, made no sound whatsoever.

'Upon entering the presence of his Excellency,' the chamberlain's words frothed busily out, 'you advance towards him, without undue speed, looking neither right nor left, your eyes tilted down towards the ground and at no point meeting those of his Excellency. You stop at the white line upon the carpet. Not before the line and under no circumstances beyond it but precisely at the line. You then kneel—'

'I do not kneel,' said Shenkt.

The chamberlain's head rotated towards him like an affronted owl's. 'Only the heads of state of foreign powers are excepted! Everyone must—'

'I do not kneel.'

The chamberlain gasped with outrage, but Ganmark snapped over him. 'For pity's sake! Duke Orso's son and heir has been murdered! His Excellency does not give a damn whether a man kneels if he can bring him vengeance. Kneel or not, as it suits you.' Two white-liveried guardsmen lifted their crossed halberds to let them pass, and Ganmark shoved the double doors wide open.

The hall beyond was dauntingly cavernous, opulent, grand. Fit for the throne room of the most powerful man in Styria. But Shenkt had stood in greater rooms, before greater men, and had no awe left in him. A thin red carpet stretched away down the mosaic floor, a white line at its lonely end. A high dais rose beyond it, a dozen men in full armour standing guard in front. Upon the dais was a golden chair. Within the chair was Grand Duke Orso of Talins. He was dressed all in black, but his frown was blacker yet.

A strange and sinister selection of people, three score or more, of all races, sizes and shapes, knelt before Orso and his retinue in a wide arc. They carried no weapons now, but Shenkt guessed they usually carried

many. He knew some few of them by sight. Killers. Assassins. Hunters of men. Persons in his profession, if the whitewasher could be said to be in the same profession as the master painter.

He advanced towards the dais, without undue speed, looking neither right nor left. He passed through the half-circle of assorted murderers and stopped precisely at the line. He watched General Ganmark stride past the guards and up the steps to the throne, lean to whisper in Orso's ear while the chamberlain took up a disapproving pose at his other elbow.

The grand duke stared at Shenkt for a long moment and Shenkt stared back, the hall cloaked all the while in that oppressive silence that only great spaces can produce. 'So this is he. Why is he not kneeling?'

'He does not kneel, apparently,' said Ganmark.

'Everyone else kneels. What makes you special?'

'Nothing,' said Shenkt.

'But you do not kneel.'

'I used to. Long ago. No more.'

Orso's eyes narrowed. 'And what if a man tried to make you?'

'Some have tried.'

'And?'

'And I do not kneel.'

'Stand, then. My son is dead.'

'You have my sorrow.'

'You do not sound sorrowful.'

'He was not my son.'

The chamberlain nearly choked on his tongue, but Orso's sunken eyes did not deviate. 'You like to speak the truth, I see. Blunt counsel is a valuable thing to powerful men. You come to me with the highest recommendations.'

Shenkt said nothing.

'That business in Keln. I understand that was your work. All of that, your work alone. It is said that the things that were left could hardly be called corpses.'

Shenkt said nothing.

'You do not confirm it.'

Shenkt stared into Duke Orso's face, and said nothing.

'You do not deny it, though.'

More nothing.

‘I like a tight-lipped man. A man who says little to his friends will say less than nothing to his enemies.’

Silence.

‘My son is murdered. Thrown from the window of a brothel like rubbish. Many of his friends and associates, my citizens, were also killed. My son-in-law, his Majesty the King of the Union, no less, only just escaped the burning building with his life. Sotorius, the half-corpse Chancellor of Sipani who was their host, wrings his hands and tells me he can do nothing. I am betrayed. I am bereaved. I am . . . embarrassed. Me!’ he screamed suddenly, making the chamber ring, and every person in it flinch.

Every person except Shenkt. ‘Vengeance, then.’

‘Vengeance!’ Orso smashed the arm of his chair with his fist. ‘Swift and terrible.’

‘Swift I cannot promise. Terrible – yes.’

‘Then let it be slow, and grinding, and merciless.’

‘It may be necessary to cause some harm to your subjects and their property.’

‘Whatever it takes. Bring me their heads. Every man, woman or child involved in this, to the slightest degree. Whatever is necessary. Bring me their heads.’

‘Their heads, then.’

‘What will be your advance?’

‘Nothing.’

‘Not even—’

‘If I complete the job, you will pay me one hundred thousand scales for the head of the ringleader, and twenty thousand for each assistant to a maximum of one quarter of a million. That is my price.’

‘A very high one!’ squeaked the chamberlain. ‘What will you do with so much money?’

‘I will count it and laugh, while considering how a rich man need not answer the questions of idiots. You will find no employer, anywhere, unsatisfied with my work.’ Shenkt moved his eyes slowly to the half-circle of scum at his back. ‘You can pay less to lesser men, if you please.’

‘I will,’ said Orso. ‘If one of them should find the killers first.’

‘I would accept no other arrangement, your Excellency.’

‘Good,’ growled the duke. ‘Go, then. All of you, go! Bring . . . me . . . revenge!’

‘You are dismissed!’ screeched the chamberlain. There was a rustling, rattling, clattering as the assassins rose to leave the great chamber. Shenkt turned and walked back down the carpet towards the great doors, without undue speed, looking neither right nor left.

One of the killers blocked his path, a dark-skinned man of average height but wide as a door, lean slabs of muscle showing through the gap in his brightly coloured shirt. His thick lip curled. ‘You are Shenkt? I expected more.’

‘Pray to whatever god you believe in that you never see more.’

‘I do not pray.’

Shenkt leaned close, and whispered in his ear. ‘I advise you to start.’

Although a large room by most standards, General Ganmark’s study felt cluttered. An oversized bust of Juvens frowned balefully from above the fireplace, his stony bald spot reflected in a magnificent mirror of coloured Visserine glass. Two monumental vases loomed either side of the desk almost to shoulder height. The walls were crowded with canvases in gilded frames, two of them positively vast. Fine paintings. Far too fine to be squeezed.

‘A most impressive collection,’ said Shenkt.

‘That one is by Coliere. It would have burned in the mansion in which I found it. And these two are Nasurins, that by Orhus.’ Ganmark pointed them out with precise jabs of his forefinger. ‘His early period, but still. Those vases were made as tribute to the first Emperor of Gurkhul, many hundreds of years ago, and somehow found their way to a rich man’s house outside Caprile.’

‘And from there to here.’

‘I try to rescue what I can,’ said Ganmark. ‘Perhaps when the Years of Blood end, Styria will still have some few treasures worth keeping.’

‘Or you will.’

‘Better I have them than the flames. The campaign season begins, and I will be away to Visserine in the morning, to take the city under siege. Skirmishes, sacks and burnings. March and counter-march. Famine and pestilence, naturally. Maim and murder, of course. All with the awful

randomness of a stroke from the heavens. Collective punishment. Of everyone, for nothing. War, Shenkt, war. And to think I once dreamed of being an honourable man. Of doing good.'

'We all dream of that.'

The general raised one eyebrow. 'Even you?'

'Even me.' Shenkt slid out his knife. A Gurkish butcher's sickle, small but sharp as fury.

'I wish you joy of it, then. The best I can do is strive to keep the waste to the merely . . . epic.'

'These are wasteful times.' Shenkt took the little lump of wood from his pocket, dog's head already roughly carved into the front.

'Aren't they all? Wine? It is from Cantain's own cellar.'

'No.'

Shenkt worked carefully with his knife while the general filled his own glass, woodchips scattering across the floor between his boots, the hindquarters of the dog slowly taking shape. Hardly a work of art like those around him, but it would serve. There was something calming in the regular movements of the curved blade, in the gentle fluttering down of the shavings.

Ganmark leaned against the mantel, drew out the poker and gave the fire a few unnecessary jabs. 'You have heard of Monzcarro Murcatto?'

'The captain general of the Thousand Swords. A most successful soldier. I heard she was dead.'

'Can you keep a secret, Shenkt?'

'I keep many hundreds.'

'Of course you do. Of course.' He took a long breath. 'Duke Orso ordered her death. Hers and her brother's. Her victories had made her popular in Talins. Too popular. His Excellency feared she might usurp his throne, as mercenaries can do. You are not surprised?'

'I have seen every kind of death, and every kind of motive.'

'Of course you have.' Ganmark frowned at the fire. 'This was not a good death.'

'None of them are.'

'Still. This was not a good one. Two months ago Duke Orso's bodyguard vanished. No great surprise, he was a foolish man, took little care over his

safety, was prone to vice and bad company and had made many enemies. I thought nothing of it.'

'And?'

'A month later, the duke's banker was poisoned in Westport, along with half his staff. This was a different matter. He took a very great deal of care over his safety. To poison him was a task of the greatest difficulty, carried out with a formidable professionalism and an exceptional lack of mercy. But he dabbled widely in the politics of Styria, and the politics of Styria is a fatal game with few merciful players.'

'True.'

'Valint and Balk themselves suspected a long enmity with Gurkish rivals might be the motive.'

'Valint and Balk.'

'You are familiar with the institution?'

Shenkt paused. 'I believe they employed me once. Go on.'

'But now Prince Ario, murdered.' The general pushed one fingertip under his ear. 'Stabbed in the very spot in which he stabbed Benna Murcatto, then thrown down from a high window?'

'You think Monzcarro Murcatto is still alive?'

'A week after his son's death, Duke Orso received a letter. From one Carlot dan Eider, Prince Ario's mistress. We had long suspected she was here to spy for the Union, but Orso tolerated the affair.'

'Surprising.'

Ganmark shrugged. 'The Union is our confirmed ally. We helped them win the latest round of their endless wars against the Gurkish. We both enjoy the backing of the Banking House of Valint and Balk. Not to mention the fact that the King of the Union is Orso's son-in-law. Naturally we send each other spies, by way of neighbourly good manners. If one must entertain a spy, she might as well be a charming one, and Eider was, undeniably, charming. She was with Prince Ario in Sipani. After his death she disappeared. Then the letter.'

'And it said?'

'That she was compelled through poison to assist Prince Ario's murderers. That they included among their number a mercenary named Nicomo Cosca and a torturer named Shylo Vitari, and were led by none other than Murcatto herself. Very much alive.'

‘You believe it?’

‘Eider had no reason to lie to us. No letter will save her from his Excellency’s wrath if she is found, and she must know it. Murcatto was alive when she went over the balcony, that much I am sure of. I have not seen her dead.’

‘She is seeking revenge.’

Ganmark gave a joyless chuckle. ‘These are the Years of Blood. Everyone is seeking revenge. The Serpent of Talins, though? The Butcher of Caprile? Who loved nothing in the world but her brother? If she lives, she is on fire with it. There are few more single-minded enemies a man could find.’

‘Then I should find this woman Vitari, this man Cosca and this serpent Murcatto.’

‘No one must learn she might still live. If it was known in Talins that Orso was the one who planned her death . . . there could be unrest. Revolt, even. She was much loved among the people. A talisman. A mascot. One of their own, risen through merit. As the wars drag on and the taxes mount, his Excellency is . . . less well liked than he could be. I can trust you to keep silent?’

Shenkt kept silent.

‘Good. There are associates of Murcatto’s still in Talins. Perhaps one of them knows where she is.’ The general looked up, the orange glow of the fire splashed across one side of his tired face. ‘But what am I saying? It is your business to find people. To find people, and to . . .’ He stabbed again at the glowing coals and sent up a shower of dancing sparks. ‘I need not tell you your business, need I?’

Shenkt put away his half-finished carving, and his knife, and turned for the door. ‘No.’

Downwards

They came upon Visserine as the sun was dropping down behind the trees and the land was turning black. You could see the towers even from miles distant. Dozens of ’em. Scores. Sticking up tall and slim as lady’s fingers into the cloudy blue-grey sky, pricks of light scattered where lamps burned in high windows.

‘Lot o’ towers,’ Shivers muttered to himself.

‘There always was a fashion for them in Visserine.’ Cosca grinned sideways at him. ‘Some date all the way back to the New Empire, centuries old. The greatest families compete to build the tallest ones. It is a point of pride. I remember when I was a boy, one fell before it was finished, not three streets from where I lived. A dozen poor dwellings were destroyed in the collapse. It’s always the poor who are crushed under rich men’s ambitions. And yet they rarely complain, because . . . well . . .’

‘They dream of having towers o’ their own?’

Cosca chuckled. ‘Why, yes, I suppose they do. They don’t see that the higher you climb, the further you have to fall.’

‘Men rarely see that ’til the ground’s rushing at ’em.’

‘All too true. And I fear many of the rich men of Visserine will be tumbling soon . . .’

Friendly lit a torch, Vitari too, and Day a third, set at the front of the cart to light the way. Torches were lit all round them, ’til the road was a trickle of tiny lights in the darkness, winding through the dark country towards the sea. Would’ve made a pretty picture, at another time, but not now. War was coming, and no one was in a pretty mood.

The closer they came to the city, the more choked the road got with people, and the more rubbish was scattered either side of it. Half of ’em seemed desperate to get into Visserine and find some walls to hide behind, the other half to get out and find some open country to run through. It was a bastard of a choice for farmers, when war was on the way. Stick to your land and get a dose of fire and robbery for certain, with rape or murder more’n likely. Make for a town on the chance they’ll find room for you, risk being robbed by your protectors, or caught up in the sack if the place falls. Or run for the hills to hide, maybe get caught, maybe starve, maybe just die of an icy night.

War killed some soldiers, sure, but it left the rest with money, and songs to sing, and a fire to sit around. It killed a lot more farmers, and left the rest with nought but ashes.

Just to lift the mood rain started flitting down through the darkness, spitting and hissing as it fell on the flickering torches, white streaks through the circles of light around 'em. The road turned to sticky mud. Shivers felt the wet tickle his scalp, but his thoughts were far off. Same place they'd tended to stray to these last few weeks. Back to Cardotti's, and the dark work he'd done there.

His brother had always told him it was about the lowest thing a man could do, kill a woman. Respect for womenfolk, and children, sticking to the old ways and your word, that was what set men apart from animals, and Carls from killers. He hadn't meant to do it, but when you swing steel in a crowd you can't duck the blame for the results. The good man he'd come here to be should've been gnawing his nails to the bloody quick over what he'd done. But all he could get in his head when he thought of his blade chopping a bloody chunk out of her ribs, the hollow sound it made, her staring face as she slid dying down the wall, was relief he'd got away with it.

Killing a woman by mistake in a brothel was murder, evil as it got, but killing a man on purpose in a battle was all kinds of noble? A thing to take pride in, sing songs of? Time was, gathered round a fire up in the cold North, that had seemed simple and obvious. But Shivers couldn't see the difference so sharp as he'd used to. And it wasn't like he'd got himself confused. He'd suddenly got it clear. You set to killing folk, there's no right place to stop that means a thing.

'You look as if you've dark thoughts in mind, my friend,' said Cosca.

'Don't seem the time for jokes.'

The mercenary chuckled. 'My old mentor Sazine once told me you should laugh every moment you live, for you'll find it decidedly difficult afterwards.'

'That so? And what became of him?'

'Died of a rotten shoulder.'

'Poor punchline.'

'Well, if life's a joke,' said Cosca, 'it's a black one.'

'Best not to laugh, then, in case the joke's on you.'

‘Or trim your sense of humour to match.’

‘You’d need a twisted sense of humour to make laughs o’ this.’

Cosca scratched at his neck as he looked towards the walls of Visserine, rising up black out of the thickening rain. ‘I must confess, for now I’m failing to see the funny side.’

You could tell from the lights there was an ugly press at the gate, and it got no prettier the closer they came. Folk were coming out from time to time – old men, young men, women carrying children, gear packed up on mules or on their backs, cartwheels creaking round through the sticky mud. Folk were coming out, easing nervous through the angry crowd, but there weren’t many being let the other way. You could feel the fear, heavy on the air, and the thicker they all crowded the worse it got.

Shivers swung down from his horse, stretched his legs and made sure he loosened his sword in its sheath.

‘Alright.’ Under her hood, Monza’s hair was stuck black to the side of her scowling face. ‘I’ll get us in.’

‘You are absolutely convinced that we should enter?’ demanded Morveer.

She gave him a long look. ‘Orso’s army can’t be more than two days behind us. That means Ganmark. Faithful Carpi too, maybe, with the Thousand Swords. Wherever they are is where we need to be, and that’s all.’

‘You are my employer, of course. But I feel duty-bound to point out that there is such a thing as being too determined. Surely we can devise a less perilous alternative to trapping ourselves in a city that will soon be surrounded by hostile forces.’

‘We’ll do no good waiting out here.’

‘No good will be done if we are all killed. A plan too brittle to bend with circumstance is worse than no—’ She turned before he’d finished and made off towards the archway, shoving her way between the bodies. ‘Women,’ Morveer hissed through gritted teeth.

‘What about them?’ growled Vitari.

‘Present company entirely excepted, they are prone to think with heart rather than head.’

‘For what she’s paying she can think with her arse for all I care.’

‘Dying rich is still dying.’

‘Better’n dying poor,’ said Shivers.

Not long after, a half-dozen guards came shoving through the crowd, herding folk away with their spears, clearing a muddy path to the gate. An officer came frowning with 'em, Monza just behind his shoulder. No doubt she'd sown a few coins, and this was the harvest.

'You six, with the cart there.' The officer pointed a gloved finger at Shivers and the rest. 'You're coming in. You six and no one else.'

There were some angry mutters from the rest stood about the gate. Somebody gave the cart a kick as it started moving. 'Shit on this! It ain't right! I paid my taxes to Salier all my life, and I get left out?' Someone snatched at Shivers' arm as he tried to lead his horse after. A farmer, from what he could tell in the torchlight and the spitting rain, even more desperate than most. 'Why should these bastards be let through? I've got my family to—'

Shivers smashed his fist into the farmer's face. He caught him by his coat as he fell and dragged him up, followed the first punch with another, knocked him sprawling on his back in the ditch by the road. Blood bubbled down his face, black in the dusk as he tried to push himself up. You start some trouble, it's best to start it and finish it all at once. A bit of sharp violence can save you a lot worse down the line. That's the way Black Dow would've handled it. So Shivers stepped forwards quick, planted his boot on the man's chest and shoved him back into the mud.

'Best stay where y'are.' A few others stood behind, dark outlines of men, a woman with two children around her legs. One lad looking straight at him, bent over like he was thinking of doing something about it all. The farmer's son, maybe. 'I do this shit for a living, boy. You feel a pressing need to lie down?'

The lad shook his head. Shivers took hold of his horse's bridle again, clicked his tongue and made for the archway. Not too fast. Good and ready in case anyone was fool enough to test him. But they were already back to shouting before he'd got a stride or two, calling out how they were special, why they should be let in while the rest were left to the wolves. A man getting his front teeth knocked out was nothing to cry about in all this. Those that hadn't seen far worse guessed they'd be seeing it soon enough, and all their care was to make sure they weren't on the sharp end of it. He followed the others, blowing on his skinned knuckles, under the archway and into the darkness of the long tunnel.

Shivers tried to remember what the Dogman had told him, a hundred years ago it seemed now, back in Adua. Something about blood making more blood, and it not being too late to be better'n that. Not too late to be a good man. Rudd Threetrees had been a good man, none better. He'd stuck to the old ways all his life, never took the easy path, if he thought it was the wrong one. Shivers was proud to say he'd fought beside the man, called him chief, but in the end, what had Threetrees' honour got him? A few misty-eyed mentions around the fire. That, and a hard life, and a place in the mud at the end of it. Black Dow had been as cold a bastard as Shivers ever knew. A man who never faced an enemy if he could take him in the back, burned villages without a second thought, broke his own oaths and spat on the results. A man as merciful as the plague, and with a conscience the size of a louse's cock. Now he sat in Skarling's chair with half the North at his feet and the other half feared to say his name.

They came out from the tunnel and into the city. Water spattered from broken gutters and onto worn cobbles. A wet procession of men, women, mules, carts, waiting to get out, watching them as they tramped the other way. Shivers tipped his head back, eyes narrowed against the rain flitting down into his face as they went under a great tower, soaring up into the black night. Must've been three times the height of the tallest thing in Carleon, and it weren't even the biggest one around.

He glanced sideways at Monza, the way he'd got so good at doing. She had her usual frown, eyes fixed right ahead, light from passing torches shifting across the hard bones in her face. She set her mind to a thing, and did whatever it took. Shit on conscience and consequences both. Vengeance first, questions later.

He moved his tongue around in his mouth and spat. The more he saw, the more he saw she was right. Mercy and cowardice were the same. No one was giving prizes for good behaviour. Not here, not in the North, not anywhere. You want a thing, you have to take it, and the greatest man is the one that snatches most. Maybe it would've been nice if life was another way.

But it was how it was.

Monza was stiff and aching, just like always. She was angry and tired, just like always. She needed a smoke, worse than ever. And just to sprinkle

some spice on the evening, she was getting wet, cold and saddle-sore besides.

She remembered Visserine as a beautiful place, full of twinkling glass and graceful buildings, fine food, laughter and freedom. She'd been in a rare good mood when she last visited, true, in a warm summer rather than a chill spring, with no one but Benna looking to her for leadership and no four men she had to kill.

But even so, the place was a long way from the bright pleasure garden of her memory.

Where there was a lamp burning the shutters were closed tight, light just leaking out around the edges, catching the little glass figures in their niches above the doors and making them twinkle. Household spirits, a tradition from long ago, before the time of the New Empire even, put there to bring prosperity and drive off evil. Monza wondered what good those chunks of glass would be when Orso's army broke through into the city. Not much. The streets were thick with fear, the sense of threat so heavy it seemed to stick to Monza's clammy skin and make the hairs on her neck prickle.

Not that Visserine wasn't crawling with people. Some were running, making for docks or gates. Men and women with packs, everything they could save on their backs, children in tow, elders shuffling behind. Wagons rattled along stacked with sacks and boxes, with mattresses and chests of drawers, with all manner of useless junk that would no doubt end up abandoned, lining one road or another out of Visserine. A waste of time and effort, trying to save anything but your lives at a time like this.

You chose to run, you'd best run fast.

But there were plenty who'd chosen to run into the city for refuge, and found to their great dismay it was a dead end. They lined the streets in places. They filled the doorways, huddled under blankets against the rain. They crammed the shadowy arcades of an empty market in their dozens, cowering as a column of soldiers tramped past, armour beaded up with moisture, gleaming by torchlight. Sounds came echoing through the murk. Crashes of breaking glass or tearing wood. Angry shouts, or fearful. Once or twice an outright scream.

Monza guessed a few of the city's own people were making an early start on the sacking. Settling a score or two, or snatching a few things they'd always envied while the eyes of the powerful were fixed on their own

survival. This was one of those rare moments when a man could get something for free, and there'd be more and more taking advantage of it as Orso's army gathered outside the city. The stuff of civilisation, already starting to dissolve.

Monza felt eyes following her and the rest of the merry band as they rode slowly through the streets. Fearful eyes, suspicious eyes, and the other kind – trying to judge if they were soft enough or rich enough to be worth robbing. She kept the reins in her right hand, for all it hurt her to tug at them, so her left could rest on her thigh, close to the hilt of her sword. The only law in Visserine now was at the edge of a blade. And the enemy hadn't even arrived yet.

I have seen hell, Stolicus wrote, and it is a great city under siege.

Up ahead the road passed under a marble arch, a long rivulet of water spattering from its high keystone. A mural was painted on the wall above. Grand Duke Salier sat enthroned at the top, optimistically depicted as pleasantly plump rather than massively obese. He held one hand up in blessing, a heavenly light radiating from his fatherly smile. Beneath him an assortment of Visserine's citizens, from the lowest to the highest, humbly enjoyed the benefits of his good governance. Bread, wine, wealth. Under them, around the top of the archway, the words charity, justice, courage were printed in gold letters high as a man. Someone with an appetite for truth had managed to climb up there and part daub over them in streaky red, greed, torture, cowardice.

'The arrogance of that fat fucker Salier.' Vitari grinned sideways at her, orange hair black-brown with rain. 'Still, I reckon he's made his last boast, don't you?'

Monza only grunted. All she could think about as she looked into Vitari's sharp-boned face was how far she could trust her. They might be in the middle of a war, but the greatest threats were still more than likely from within her own little company of outcasts. Vitari? Here for the money – ever a risky motivation since there's always some bastard with deeper pockets. Cosca? How can you trust a notoriously treacherous drunk you once betrayed yourself? Friendly? Who knew how the hell that man's mind worked?

But they were all tight as family beside Morveer. She stole a glance over her shoulder, caught him frowning at her from the seat of his cart. The man

was poison, and the moment he could profit by it he'd murder her easily as crushing a tick. He was already suspicious of the choice to come into Visserine, but the last thing she wanted was to share her reasoning. That Orso would have Eider's letter by now. Would have offered a king's ransom of Valint and Balk's money for her death and got half the killers in the Circle of the World scouring Styria hoping to put her head in a bag. Along with the heads of anyone who'd helped her, of course.

The chances were high they'd be safer in the middle of a battle than outside it.

Shivers was the only one she could even halfway trust. He rode hunched over, big and silent beside her. His babble had been quite the irritation in Westport, but now it had dried up, strange to say, it had left a gap. He'd saved her life, in foggy Sipani. Monza's life wasn't all it had been, but a man saving it still raised him a damn sight higher in her estimation.

'You're quiet, all of a sudden.'

She could hardly see his face in the darkness, just the hard set of it, shadows in his eye sockets, in the hollows under his cheeks. 'Don't reckon I've much to say.'

'Never stopped you before.'

'Well. I'm starting to see all kinds o' things different.'

'That so?'

'You might think it comes easy to me, but it's an effort, trying to stay hopeful. An effort that don't ever seem to pay off.'

'I thought being a better man was its own reward.'

'I guess it ain't reward enough for all the work. In case you hadn't noticed, we're in the middle of a war.'

'Believe me, I know what a war looks like. I've been living in one most of my life.'

'Well, what are the odds o' that? Me too. From what I've seen, and I've seen plenty, a war ain't really the place for bettering yourself. I'm thinking I might try it your way, from now on.'

'Pick out a god and praise him! Welcome to the real world!' She wasn't sure she didn't feel a twinge of disappointment though, for all her grinning. Monza might have given up on being a decent person long ago, but somehow she liked the idea that she could have pointed one out. She pulled

on her reins and eased her horse up, the cart clattering to a halt behind her. ‘We’re here.’

The place she and Benna had bought in Visserine was an old one, built before the city had good walls, and rich men each took their own care to guard what was theirs. A stone tower-house on five storeys, hall and stables to one side, with slit windows on the ground floor and battlements on the high roof. It stood big and black against the dark sky, a very different beast from the low brick-and-timber houses that crowded in close around it. She lifted the key to the studded door, then frowned. It was open a crack, light gathering on the rough stone down its edge. She put her finger to her lips and pointed towards it.

Shivers raised one big boot and kicked it shuddering open, wood clattering on the other side as something was barged out of the way. Monza darted in, left hand on the hilt of her sword. The kitchen was empty of furniture and full of people. Grubby and tired-looking, every one of them staring at her, shocked and fearful, in the light of one flickering candle. The nearest, a stocky man with one arm in a sling, stumbled up from an empty barrel and caught hold of a length of wood.

‘Get back!’ he screamed at her. A man in a dirty farmer’s smock took a stride towards her, waving a hatchet.

Shivers stepped around Monza’s shoulder, ducking under the lintel and straightening up, big shadow shifting across the wall behind him, his heavy sword drawn and gleaming down by his leg. ‘You get back.’

The farmer did as he was told, scared eyes fixed on that length of bright metal. ‘Who the hell are you?’

‘Me?’ snapped Monza. ‘This is my house, bastard.’

‘Eleven of them,’ said Friendly, slipping through the doorway on the other side.

As well as the two men there were two old women and a man even older, bent right over, gnarled hands dangling. There was a woman about Monza’s age, a baby in her arms and two little girls sat near her, staring with big eyes, like enough to be twins. A girl of maybe sixteen stood by the empty fireplace. She had a rough-forged knife out that she’d been gutting a fish with, her other arm across a boy, might’ve been ten or so, pushing him behind her shoulder.

Just a girl, looking out for her little brother.

‘Put your sword away,’ Monza said.

‘Eh?’

‘No one’s getting killed tonight.’

Shivers raised one heavy brow at her. ‘Now who’s the optimist?’

‘Lucky for you I bought a big house.’ The one with his arm in a sling looked like the head of the family, so she fixed her eye on him. ‘There’s room for all of us.’

He let his club drop. ‘We’re farmers from up the valley, just looking for somewhere safe. Place was like this when we found it, we didn’t steal nothing. We’ll be no trouble—’

‘You’d better not be. This all of you?’

‘My name’s Furli. That’s my wife—’

‘I don’t need your names. You’ll stay down here, and you’ll stay out of our way. We’ll be upstairs, in the tower. You don’t come up there, you understand? That way no one gets hurt.’

He nodded, fear starting to mix with relief. ‘I understand.’

‘Friendly, get the horses stabled, and that cart off the street.’ Those farmers’ hungry faces – helpless, weak, needy – made Monza feel sick. She kicked a broken chair out of the way then started up the stairs, winding into the darkness, her legs stiff from a day in the saddle. Morveer caught up with her on the fourth landing, Cosca and Vitari just behind him, Day at the back, a trunk in her arms. Morveer had brought a lamp with him, light pooling on the underside of his unhappy face.

‘Those peasants are a decided threat to us,’ he murmured. ‘A problem easily solved, however. It will hardly be necessary to utilise the King of Poisons. A charitable contribution of a loaf of bread, dusted with Leopard Flower of course, and they would cease to—’

‘No.’

He blinked. ‘If your intention is to leave them at liberty down there, I must most strongly protest at—’

‘Protest away. Let’s see if I care a shit. You and Day can take that room.’ As he turned to peer into the darkness, Monza snatched the lamp out of his hand. ‘Cosca, you’re on the second floor with Friendly. Vitari, seems like you get to sleep alone next door.’

‘Sleeping alone.’ She kicked some fallen plaster away across the boards. ‘Story of my life.’

‘I will to my cart, then, and bring my equipment into the Butcher of Caprile’s hostel for displaced peasantry.’ Morveer was shaking his head with disgust as he turned for the stairs.

‘Do that,’ snapped Monza at his back. She loitered for a moment, until she’d heard his boots scrape down a few flights and out of earshot. Until, apart from Cosca’s voice burbling away endlessly to Friendly downstairs, it was quiet on the landing. Then she followed Day into her room and gently pushed the door closed. ‘We need to talk.’

The girl had opened her trunk and was just getting a chunk of bread out of it. ‘What about?’

‘The same thing we talked about in Westport. Your employer.’

‘Picking at your nerves, is he?’

‘Don’t tell me he isn’t picking at yours.’

‘Every day for three years.’

‘Not an easy man to work for, I reckon.’ Monza took a step into the room, holding the girl’s eye. ‘Sooner or later a pupil has to step out from her master’s shadow, if she’s ever going to become the master herself.’

‘That why you betrayed Cosca?’

That gave Monza a moment’s pause. ‘More or less. Sometimes you have to take a risk. Grasp the nettle. But then you’ve got much better reasons even than I had.’ Said offhand, as though it was obvious.

Day’s turn to pause. ‘What reasons?’

Monza pretended to be surprised. ‘Well . . . because sooner or later Morveer will betray me, and go over to Orso.’ She wasn’t sure of it, of course, but it was high time she guarded herself against the possibility.

‘That so?’ Day wasn’t smiling any longer.

‘He doesn’t like the way I do things.’

‘Who says I like the way you do things?’

‘You don’t see it?’ Day only narrowed her eyes, food, for once, forgotten in her hand. ‘If he goes to Orso, he’ll need someone to blame. For Ario. A scapegoat.’

Now she got the idea. ‘No,’ she snapped. ‘He needs me.’

‘How long have you been with him? Three years, did you say? Managed before, didn’t he? How many assistants do you think he’s had? See a lot of them around, do you?’

Day opened her mouth, blinked, then thoughtfully shut it.

‘Maybe he’ll stick, and we’ll stay a happy family and part friends. Most poisoners are good sorts, when you get to know them.’ Monza leaned down close to whisper. ‘But when he tells you he’s going over to Orso, don’t say I didn’t warn you.’

She left Day frowning at her chunk of bread, slipped quietly through the door and brushed it shut with her fingertips. She peered down the stairwell, but there was no sign of Morveer, only the handrail spiralling down into the shadows. She nodded to herself. The seed was planted now, she’d have to see what sprouted from it. She pushed her tired legs up the narrow steps to the top of the tower, through the creaking door and into the high chamber under the roof, faint sound of rain drumming above.

The room where she and Benna had spent a happy month together, in the midst of some dark years. Away from the wars. Laughing, talking, watching the world from the wide windows. Pretending at how life might have been if they’d never taken up warfare, and somehow made it rich some other way. She found she was smiling, despite herself. The little glass figure still gleamed in its niche above the door. Their household spirit. She remembered Benna grinning over his shoulder as he pushed it up there with his fingertips.

So it can watch over you while you sleep, the way you’ve always watched over me.

Her smile leaked away, and she walked to the window and dragged open one of the flaking shutters. Rain had thrown a grey veil across the dark city, pelting down now, spattering against the sill. A stroke of distant lightning picked out the tangle of wet roofs below for an instant, the grey outlines of other towers looming from the murk. A few moments later the thunder crackled sullen and muffled across the city.

‘Where do I sleep?’ Shivers stood in the doorway, arm up on the frame and some blankets over one shoulder.

‘You?’ She glanced up to the little glass statue above his head, then back to Shivers’ face. Maybe she’d had high standards, long ago, but back then she’d had Benna, and both her hands, and an army behind her. She had nothing behind her now but six well-paid misfits, a good sword and a lot of money. A general should keep her distance from her troops, maybe, and a wanted woman from everyone, but Monza wasn’t a general any more. Benna was dead, and she needed something. You can weep over your

misfortunes, or you can pick yourself up and make the best of things, shit though they may be. She elbowed the shutter closed, sank down wincing on the bed and set the lamp on the floor.

'You're in here, with me.'

His brows went up. 'I am?'

'That's right, optimist. Your lucky night.' She leaned back on her elbows, old bed-frame creaking, and stuck one foot up at him. 'Now shut the door and help me get my fucking boots off.'

Rats in a Sack

Cosca squinted as he stepped out onto the roof of the tower. Even the sunlight seemed set on tormenting him, but he supposed he richly deserved it. Visserine was spread out around him: jumbles of brick-and-timber houses, villas of cream-coloured stone, the green tops of leafing trees where the parks and broad avenues were laid out. Everywhere windows glinted, statues of coloured glass on the rooflines of the grandest buildings catching the morning sun and shining like jewels. Other towers were widely scattered, dozens of them, some far taller than the one he stood on, each casting its own long shadow across the sprawl.

Southwards the grey-blue sea, the smoke of industry still rising from the city's famous glass-working district on its island just offshore, the gliding specks of seabirds circling above it. To the east the Visser was a dark snake glimpsed through the buildings, four bridges linking the two halves of the city. Grand Duke Salier's palace squatted jealously on an island in its midst. A place where Cosca had spent many enjoyable evenings, an honoured guest of the great connoisseur himself. When he had still been loved, feared and admired. So long ago it seemed another man's life.

Monza stood motionless at the parapet, framed by the blue sky. The blade of her sword and her sinewy left arm made a line, perfectly straight, from shoulder to point. The steel shone bright, the ruby on her middle finger glittered bloody, her skin gleamed with sweat. Her vest stuck to her with it. She let the sword drop as he came closer, as he lifted the wine jug and took a long, cool swallow.

'I wondered how long it would take you.'

'Only water in it, more's the pity. Did you not witness my solemn oath never to touch wine again?'

She snorted. 'That I've heard before, with small results.'

'I am in the slow and agonising process of mending my ways.'

'I've heard that too, with even smaller ones.'

Cosca sighed. 'Whatever must a man do to be taken seriously?'

'Keep his word once in his life?'

'My fragile heart, so often broken in the past! Can it take such a buffeting?' He wedged one boot up on the battlements beside her. 'I was born in Visserine, you know, no more than a few streets away. A happy

childhood but a wild youth, full of ugly incidents. Including the one that obliged me to flee the city to seek my fortune as a paid soldier.'

'Your whole life has been full of ugly incidents.'

'True enough.' He had few pleasant memories, in fact. And most of those, Cosca realised as he peered sideways at Monza, had involved her. Most of the best moments of his life, and the very worst of all. He took a sharp breath and shielded his eyes with a hand, looking westwards, past the grey line of the city walls and out into the patchwork of fields beyond. 'No sign of our friends from Talins yet?'

'Soon. General Ganmark isn't a man to turn up late to an engagement.' She paused for a moment, frowning, as always. 'When are you going to say you told me?'

'Told you what?'

'About Orso.'

'You know what I told you.'

'Never trust your own employer.' A lesson he had learned at great cost from Duchess Sefeline of Ospria. 'And now I'm the one paying your wages.'

Cosca made an effort at a grin, though it hurt his sore lips to do it. 'But we are fittingly suspicious in all our dealings with each other.'

'Of course. I wouldn't trust you to carry my shit to the stream.'

'A shame. Your shit smells sweet as roses, I am sure.' He leaned back against the parapet and blinked into the sun. 'Do you remember how we used to spar, in the mornings? Before you got too good.'

'Before you got too drunk.'

'Well, I could hardly spar afterwards, could I? There is a limit to how much a man should be willing to embarrass himself before breakfast. Is that a Calvez you have there?'

She lifted the sword, sun's gleam gliding along its edge. 'I had it made for Benna.'

'For Benna? What the hell would he do with a Calvez? Use it as a spit and cook apples on it?'

'He didn't even do that much, as it goes.'

'I used to have one, you know. Damn good sword. Lost it in a card game. Drink?' He held out the jug.

She reached for it. 'I could—'

‘Hah!’ He flung the water in her face and she yelped, stumbling back, drops flying. He ripped his sword from its sheath and as the jug shattered against the roof he was already swinging. She managed to parry the first cut, ducked desperately under the second, slipped, sprawled, rolled away as Cosca’s blade squealed down the roofing lead where she had been a moment before. She came up in a crouch, sword at the ready.

‘You’re getting soft, Murcatto.’ He chuckled as he paced out into the centre of the roof. ‘You’d never have fallen for the old water in the face ten years ago.’

‘I didn’t fall for it just now, idiot.’ She wiped her brow slowly with her gloved hand, water dripping from the ends of her wet hair, never taking her eyes from his. ‘You got anything more than water in the face, or is that as far as your swordsmanship reaches these days?’

Not much further, if he was honest. ‘Why don’t we find out?’

She sprang forwards and their blades feathered together, metal ringing and scraping. She had a long scar on her bare right shoulder, another curving round her forearm and into her black glove.

He waved his sword at it. ‘Fighting left-handed, eh? Hope you’re not taking pity on an old man.’

‘Pity? You know me better than that.’ He flicked away a jab, but another came so quickly behind it he only just got out of the way, the blade punching a ragged hole in his shirt before it whipped back out.

He raised his brows. ‘Good thing I lost some weight during my last binge.’

‘You could lose more, if you’re asking me.’ She circled him, the point of her tongue showing between her teeth.

‘Trying to get the sun behind you?’

‘You never should’ve taught me all those dirty tricks. Care to use your left, even things up a little?’

‘Give up an advantage? You know me better than that!’ He feinted right then went the other way and left her lunging at nothing. She was quick, but not near as quick as she had been with her right hand. He trod on her boot as she passed, made her stumble, the point of his sword left a neat scratch across the scar on her shoulder, and made a cross of it.

She peered down at the little wound, a bead of blood forming at its corner. ‘You old bastard.’

‘A little something to remember me by.’ And he twirled his sword around and slashed ostentatiously at the air. She lunged at him again and their swords rang together, cut, cut, jab and parry. All a touch clumsy, like sewing with gloves on. The time was they had given exhibitions, but it seemed time had done nothing for either of them. ‘One question . . .’ he murmured, keeping his eyes on hers. ‘Why did you betray me?’

‘I got tired of your fucking jokes.’

‘I deserved to be betrayed, of course. Every mercenary ends up stabbed in the front or the back. But by you?’ He jabbed at her, followed it with a cut that made her shuffle back, wincing. ‘After all I taught you? All I gave you? Safety, and money, and a place to belong? I treated you like my own daughter!’

‘Like your mother, maybe. You’ve left out getting so drunk you’d shit in your clothes. I owed you, but there’s a limit.’ She circled him, looking for an opening, no more than the thickness of a finger between the points of their swords. ‘I might’ve followed you to hell, but I wasn’t taking my brother there with me.’

‘Why not? He’d have been right at home.’

‘Fuck yourself!’ She tricked him with a feint, switched angle and forced him to hop away with all the grace of a dying frog. He had forgotten how much work swordplay required. His lungs were burning already, shoulder, forearm, wrist, hand, all aching with a vengeance. ‘If it hadn’t been me it would’ve been one of the other captains. Sesaria! Victus! Andiche!’ She pushed home each hated name with a sharp cut, jarring the sword in his hand. ‘They were all falling over themselves to be rid of you at Afieri!’

‘Can we not mention that damn place!’ He parried her next effort and switched smartly to the attack with something close to his old vigour, driving her back towards the corner of the roof. He needed to bring this to a close before he died of exhaustion. He lunged again and caught her sword on his. He drove her off balance against the parapet, bent her back over the battlements, guards scraping together until their faces were no more than a few inches apart, the long drop to the street looming into view behind her head. He could feel her quick breath on his cheek. For the briefest moment he almost kissed her, and he almost pushed her off the roof. Perhaps it was only because he could not decide which to do that he did neither one.

‘You were better with your right hand,’ he hissed.

‘You were better ten years ago.’ She slid from under his sword and her gloved little finger came from nowhere and poked him in the eye.

‘Eeeee!’ he squealed, free hand clapped to his face. Her knee thudded almost silently into his fruits and sent a lance of pain through his belly as far as his neck. ‘Ooooooof . . .’ He tottered, blade clattering from his clutching fingers, bent over, unable to breathe. ‘A little something to remember me by.’ And the glittering point of Monza’s sword left him a burning scratch across his cheek.

‘Gah!’ He sank down slowly to the roofing lead. Back on his knees. There really is no place like home . . .

Through the savage pain he heard slow clapping coming from the stairway. ‘Vitari,’ he croaked, squinting over at her as she ambled out into the sunlight. ‘Why is it . . . you always find me . . . at my lowest moments?’

‘Because I enjoy them so.’

‘You bitches don’t know your luck . . . that you’ll never feel the pain . . . of a blow to the fruits.’

‘Try childbirth.’

‘A charming invitation . . . if I were a little less bruised in the relevant areas, I would definitely take you up on it.’

But, as so often, his wit was wasted. Vitari’s attention was already fixed far beyond the battlements, and Monza’s too. Cosca dragged himself up, bow-legged. A long column of horsemen had crested a rise to the west of the city, framed between two nearby towers, a cloud of dust rising from the hooves of their horses and leaving a brown smear across the sky.

‘They’re here,’ said Vitari. From somewhere behind them a bell began to ring, soon joined by others.

‘And there,’ said Monza. A second column had appeared. And a pillar of smoke, drifting up beyond a hill to the north.

Cosca stood as the sun slowly rose into the blue sky, no doubt administering a healthy dose of sunburn to his spreading bald patch, and watched Duke Orso’s army steadily deploy in the fields outside the city. Regiment after regiment smoothly found their positions, well out of bowshot from the walls. A large detachment forded the river to the north and completed the encirclement. The horse screened the foot as they formed neat lines, then fell back behind them, no doubt to set about the business of ravaging anything carelessly left unravaged last season.

Tents began to appear, and carts too as the supplies came up, stippling the muddy land behind the lines. The tiny defenders at the walls could do nothing but watch as the Talinese dug in around them, as orderly as the workings of a gigantic clock. Not Cosca's style, of course, even when sober. More engineering than artistry, but one had to admire the discipline.

He spread his arms wide. 'Welcome, one and all, to the siege of Visserine!'

The others had all gathered on the roof to watch Ganmark's grip on the city tighten. Monza stood with her left hand on her hip, gloved right slack on the pommel of her sword, black hair stirring around her scowl. Shivers was on Cosca's other side, staring balefully out from under his brows. Friendly sat near the door to the stairs, rolling his dice between his crossed legs. Day and Vitari muttered to each other further along the parapet. Morveer looked even more sour than usual, if that was possible.

'Can no one's sense of humour withstand so small a thing as a siege? Cheer up, my comrades!' Cosca gave Shivers a hearty clap on his broad back. 'It isn't every day you get to see so large an army handled so well! We should all congratulate Monza's friend General Ganmark on his exceptional patience and discipline. Perhaps we should pen him a letter.'

'My dear General Ganmark.' Monza worked her mouth, curled her tongue and blew spit over the battlements. 'Yours ever, Monzcarro Murcatto.'

'A simple missive,' observed Morveer, 'but no doubt he will treasure it.'

'Lot o' soldiers down there,' Shivers grunted.

Friendly's voice drifted gently over. 'Thirteen thousand four hundred, or thereabouts.'

'Mostly Talinese troops.' Cosca waved at them with the eyeglass. 'Some regiments from Orso's older allies – flags of Etrisani on the right wing, there, near the water, and some others of Cesale in the centre. All regulars, though. No sign of our old comrades-in-arms, the Thousand Swords. Shame. It would be fine to renew some old friendships, wouldn't it, Monza? Sesaria, Victus, Andiche. Faithful Carpi too, of course.' Renew old friendships . . . and be revenged on old friends.

'The mercenaries will be away to the east.' Monza jerked her head across the river. 'Holding off Duke Rogont and his Osprians.'

'Great fun for all involved, no doubt. But we, at least, are here.' Cosca gestured towards the crawling soldiers outside the city. 'General Ganmark,

one presumes, is there. The plan, to bring us all together in a happy reunion? We presume you have a plan?'

'Ganmark is a cultured man. He has a taste for art.'

'And?' demanded Morveer.

'No one has more art than Grand Duke Salier.'

'His collection is impressive.' Cosca had admired it on several occasions, or at any rate pretended to, while admiring his wine.

'The finest in Styria, they say.' Monza strode to the opposite parapet, looking towards Salier's palace on its island in the river. 'When the city falls, Ganmark will make straight for the palace, eager to rescue all those priceless works from the chaos.'

'To steal them for himself,' threw in Vitari.

Monza's jaw was set even harder than usual. 'Orso will want to be done with this siege quickly. Leave as much time as possible to put an end to Rogont. Finish the League of Eight for good and claim his crown before winter comes. That means breaches, and assaults, and bodies in the streets.'

'Marvellous!' Cosca clapped his hands. 'Streets may boast noble trees, and stately buildings, but they never feel complete without a dusting of corpses, do they?'

'We take armour, uniforms, weapons from the dead. When the city falls, which will be soon, we disguise ourselves as Talinese. We find our way into the palace, and while Ganmark is going about the rescue of Salier's collection and his guard is down . . .'

'Kill the bastard?' offered Shivers.

There was a pause. 'I believe I perceive the most minute of flaws in the scheme.' Morveer's whining words were like nails driven into the back of Cosca's skull. 'Grand Duke Salier's palace will be among the best-guarded locations in Styria at the present moment, and we are not in it. Nor likely to receive an invitation.'

'On the contrary, I have one already.' Cosca was gratified to find them all staring at him. 'Salier and I were quite close some years ago, when he employed me to settle his boundary issues with Puranti. We used to dine together once a week and he assured me I was welcome whenever I found myself in the city.'

The poisoner's face was a caricature of contempt. 'Would this, by any chance, have been before you became a wine-ravaged sot?'

Cosca waved one careless hand while filing that slight carefully away with the rest. ‘During my long and most enjoyable transformation into one. Like a caterpillar turning into a beautiful butterfly. In any case, the invitation still stands.’

Vitari narrowed her eyes at him. ‘How the hell do you plan to make use of it?’

‘I imagine I will address the guards at the palace gate, and say something along the lines of – “I am Nicomo Cosca, famed soldier of fortune, and I am here for dinner.”

There was an uncomfortable silence, quite as if he had contributed a giant turd rather than a winning idea.

‘Forgive me,’ murmured Monza, ‘but I doubt your name opens doors the way it used to.’

‘Latrine doors, maybe.’ Morveer gave a sneering shake of his head. Day chuckled softly into the wind. Even Shivers had a dubious curl to his lip.

‘Vitari and Morveer, then,’ snapped Monza. ‘That’s your job. Watch the palace. Find us a way in.’ The two of them gave each other an unenthusiastic frown. ‘Cosca, you know something about uniforms.’

He sighed. ‘Few men more. Every employer wants to give you one of their own. I had one from the Aldermen of Westport cut from cloth of gold, about as comfortable as a lead pipe up the—’

‘Something less eye-catching might be better suited to our purpose.’

Cosca drew himself up and snapped out a vibrating salute. ‘General Murcatto, I will do my straining utmost to obey your orders!’

‘Don’t strain. Man of your age, you might rupture something. Take Friendly with you, once the assaults begin.’ The convict shrugged, and went back to his dice.

‘We will most nobly strip the dead to their naked arses!’ Cosca turned towards the stairs, but was brought up short by the sight in the bay. ‘Ah! Duke Orso’s fleet has joined the fun.’ He could just see ships moving on the horizon, white sails marked with the black cross of Talins.

‘More guests for Duke Salier,’ said Vitari.

‘He always was a conscientious host, but I’m not sure even he can be prepared for so many visitors at once. The city is entirely cut off.’ And Cosca grinned into the wind.

‘A prison,’ said Friendly, and almost with a smile of his own.

‘We are helpless as rats in a sack!’ snapped Morveer. ‘You speak quite as if that were a good thing.’

‘Five times I have been under siege, and always quite relished the experience. It has a wonderful way of limiting the options. Of freeing the mind.’ Cosca took a long breath in through his nose and blew it happily out. ‘When life is a cell, there is nothing more liberating than captivity.’

The Forlorn Hope

Fire. Visserine by night had become a place of flame and shadow. An endless maze of broken walls, fallen roofs, jutting rafters. A nightmare of disembodied cries, ghostly shapes flitting through the darkness. Buildings loomed, gutted shells, the eyeless gaps of window and doorway screaming open, fire spurting out, licking through, tickling at the darkness. Charred beams stabbed at the flames and they stabbed back. Showers of white sparks climbed into the black skies, and a black snow of ash fell softly the other way. The city had new towers now, crooked towers of smoke, glowing with the light of the fires that gave them birth, smudging out the stars.

'How many did we get the last time?' Cosca's eyes gleamed yellow from the flames across the square. 'Three was it?'

'Three,' croaked Friendly. They were safe in the chest in his room: the armour of two Talinese soldiers, one with the square hole left by a flatbow bolt, and the uniform of a slight young lieutenant he had found crushed under a fallen chimney. Bad luck for him, but then Friendly supposed it was his side throwing the fire everywhere.

They had catapults beyond the walls, five on the west side of the river, and three on the east. They had catapults on the twenty-two white-sailed ships in the harbour. The first night, Friendly had stayed up until dawn watching them. They had thrown one hundred and eighteen burning missiles over the walls, scattering fires about the city. Fires shifted, and burned out, and split, and merged one with another, and so they could not be counted. The numbers had deserted Friendly, and left him alone and afraid. It had taken but six short days, three nights times two, for peaceful Visserine to turn to this.

The only part of the city untouched was the island on which Duke Salier's palace stood. There were paintings there, Murcatto said, and other pretty things that Ganmark, the leader of Orso's army, the man they were here to kill, wished to save. He would burn countless houses, and countless people in them, and order murder night and day, but these dead things of paint had to be protected. Friendly thought this was a man who should be put in Safety, so that the world outside could be a safer place. But instead he was

obeyed, and admired, and the world burned. It seemed all turned around, all wrong. But then Friendly could not tell right from wrong, the judges had told him so.

'You ready?'

'Yes,' lied Friendly.

Cosca flashed a crazy grin. 'Then to the breach, dear friend, once more!' And he trotted off down the street, one hand on the hilt of his sword, the other clasping his hat to his head. Friendly swallowed, then followed, lips moving silently as he counted the steps he took. He had to count something other than the ways he could die.

It only grew worse the closer they got to the city's western edge. The fires rose up in terrible magnificence, creaking and roaring, towering devils, gnawing at the night. They burned Friendly's eyes and made them weep. Or perhaps he wept anyway, to see the waste of it. If you wanted a thing, why burn it? And if you did not want it, why fight to take it from someone else? Men died in Safety. They died there all the time. But there was no waste like this. There was not enough there to risk destroying what there was. Each thing was valued.

'Bloody Gurkish fire!' Cosca cursed as they gave another roaring blaze a wide berth. 'Ten years ago no one had dreamed of using that stuff as a weapon. Then they made Dagoska an ash-heap with it, knocked holes in the walls of the Agriont with it. Now no sooner does a siege begin than everyone's clamouring to blow things up. We liked to torch a building or two in my day, just to get things moving, but nothing like this. War used to be about making money. Some degree of modest misery was a regrettable side effect. Now it's just about destroying things, and the more thoroughly the better. Science, my friend, science. Supposed to make life easier, I thought.'

Lines of sooty soldiers tramped by, armour gleaming orange with reflected flames. Lines of sooty civilians passed buckets of water from hand to hand, desperate faces half-lit by the glow of unquenchable fires. Angry ghosts, black shapes in the sweltering night. Behind them, a great mural on a shattered wall. Duke Salier in full armour, sternly pointing the way to victory. He had been holding a flag, Friendly thought, but the top part of the building had collapsed, and his raised arm along with it. Dancing flames made it look as if his painted face was twitching, as if his painted mouth

was moving, as if the painted soldiers around him were charging onwards to the breach.

When Friendly was young, there had been an old man in the twelfth cell on his corridor who had told tales of long ago. Tales of the time before the Old Time, when this world and the world below were one, and devils roamed the earth. The inmates had laughed at that old man, and Friendly had laughed at him too, since it was wise in Safety to do just as others did and never to stand out. But he had gone back when no one else was near, to ask how many years, exactly, it had been since the gates were sealed and Euz shut the devils out of the world. The old man had not known the number. Now it seemed the world below had broken through the gates between again, flooding out into Visserine, chaos spreading with it.

They hurried past a tower in flames, fire flickering in its windows, pluming up from its broken roof like a giant's torch. Friendly sweated, coughed, sweated more. His mouth was endlessly dry, his throat endlessly rough, his fingertips chalky with soot. He saw the toothed outline of the city's walls at the end of a street strangled with rubble.

'We're getting close! Stay with me!'

'I . . . I . . .' Friendly's voice croaked to nothing on the smoky air. He could hear a noise, now, as they sidled down a narrow alley, red light flickering at its end. A clattering and clashing, a surging tide of furious voices. A noise like the great riot had made in Safety, before the six most feared convicts, Friendly among them, had agreed to put a stop to the madness. Who would stop the madness here? There was a boom that made the earth shudder, and a ruddy glare lit the night sky.

Cosca slipped up to the trunk of a scorched tree, keeping low, and crouched against it. The noise grew louder as Friendly crept after, terribly loud, but his heart pounding in his ears almost drowned it out.

The breach was no more than a hundred strides off, a ragged black patch of night torn from the city wall and clogged with heaving Talinese troops. They crawled like ants over the nightmare of fallen masonry and broken timbers that formed a ragged ramp down into a burned-out square at the city's edge. There might have been an orderly battle when the first assault came, but now it had dissolved into a shapeless, furious mêlée, defenders crowding in from barricades thrown up before the gutted buildings,

attackers fumbling their way on, on through the breach, adding their mindless weight to the fight, their breathless corpses to the carnage.

Axe and sword blades flashed and glinted, pikes and spears waved and tangled, a torn flag or two hung limp over the press. Arrows and bolts flitted up and down, from the Talinese crowding outside the walls, from defenders at their barricades, from a crumbling tower beside the breach. While Friendly watched, a great chunk of masonry was sent spinning down from the top of the wall and into the boiling mass below, tearing a yawning hole through them. Hundreds of men, struggling and dying by the hellish glare of burning torches, of burning missiles, of burning houses. Friendly could hardly believe it was real. It all looked false, fake, a model staged for a lurid painting.

'The breach at Visserine,' he whispered to himself, framing the scene with his hands and imagining it hanging on some rich man's wall.

When two men set out to kill each other, there is a pattern to it. A few men, for that matter. A dozen, even. With a situation like that, Friendly had always been entirely comfortable. There is a form to be followed, and by being faster, stronger, sharper, you can come out alive. But this was otherwise. The mindless press. Who could know when you would be pushed, by the simple pressure of those behind, onto a pike? The awful randomness. How could you predict an arrow, or a bolt, or a falling rock from above? How could you see death coming, and how could you avoid it? It was one colossal game of chance with your life as the stake. And like the games of chance at Cardotti's House of Leisure, in the long run, the players could only lose.

'Looks like a hot one!' Cosca screamed in his ear.

'Hot?'

'I've been in hotter! The breach at Muris looked like a slaughter yard when we were done!'

Friendly could hardly bring himself to speak, his head was spinning so much. 'You've been . . . in that?'

Cosca waved a dismissive hand. 'A few times. But unless you're mad you soon tire of it. Looks like fun, maybe, but it's no place for a gentleman.'

'How do they know who's on whose side?' hissed Friendly.

Cosca's grin gleamed in his soot-smeared face. 'Guesswork, mostly. You just try to stay pointed in the right direction and hope for the . . . ah.' A

fragment had broken from the general mêlée and was flowing forwards, bristling with weapons. Friendly could not even tell whether they were the besiegers or the besieged, they hardly seemed like men at all. He turned to see a wall of spears advancing down the street from the opposite direction, shifting light gleaming on dull metal, across stony faces. Not individual men, but a machine for killing.

'This way!' Friendly felt a hand grab his arm, shove him through a broken doorway in a tottering piece of wall. He stumbled and slipped, pitched over on his side. He half-ran, half-slid down a great heap of rubble, through a cloud of choking ash, and lay on his belly beside Cosca, staring up towards the combat in the street above. Men crashed together, killed and died, a formless soup of rage. Over their screams, their bellows of anger, the clash and squeal of metal, Friendly could hear something else. He stared sideways. Cosca was bent over on his knees, shaking with ill-suppressed mirth.

'Are you laughing?'

The old mercenary wiped his eyes with a sooty finger. 'What's the alternative?'

They were in a kind of darkened valley, choked with rubble. A street? A drained canal? A sewer? Ragged people picked through the rubbish. Not far away a dead man lay face down. A woman crouched over the corpse with a knife out, in the midst of cutting the fingers from one limp hand for his rings.

'Away from that body!' Cosca lurched up, drawing his sword.

'This is ours!' A scrawny man with tangled hair and a club in his hand.

'No.' Cosca brandished the blade. 'This is ours.' He took a step forwards and the scavenger stumbled back, falling through a scorched bush. The woman finally got through the bone with her knife, pulled the ring off and stuffed it in her pocket, flung the finger at Cosca along with a volley of abuse, then scuttled off into the darkness.

The old mercenary peered after them, weighing his sword in his hand. 'He's Talinese. His gear, then!'

Friendly crept numbly over and began to unbuckle the dead man's armour. He pulled the backplate away and slid it into his sack.

'Swiftly, my friend, before those sewer rats return.'

Friendly had no mind to delay, but his hands were shaking. He was not sure why. They did not normally shake. He pulled the soldier's greaves off, and his breastplate, rattling into the sack with the rest. Four sets, this would be. Three plus one. Three more and they would have one each. Then perhaps they could kill Ganmark, and be done, and he could go back to Talins, and sit in Sajaam's place, counting the coins in the card game. What happy times those seemed now. He reached out and snapped off the flatbow bolt in the man's neck.

'Help me.' Hardly more than a whisper. Friendly wondered if he had imagined it. Then he saw the soldier's eyes were wide open. His lips moved again. 'Help me.'

'How?' whispered Friendly. He undid the hooks and eyes on the man's padded jacket and, as gently as he could, stripped it from him, dragging the sleeve carefully over the oozing stumps of his severed fingers. He stuffed his clothes into the sack, then gently rolled him back over onto his face, just as he had found him.

'Good!' Cosca pointed towards a burned-out tower leaning precariously over a collapsed roof. 'That way, maybe?'

'Why that way?'

'Why not that way?'

Friendly could not move. His knees were trembling. 'I don't want to go.'

'Understandable, but we should stay together.' The old mercenary turned and Friendly caught his arm, words starting to burble out of his mouth.

'I'm losing count! I can't . . . I can't think. What number are we up to, now? What . . . what . . . have I gone mad?'

'You? No, my friend.' Cosca was smiling as he clapped his hand down on Friendly's shoulder. 'You are entirely sane. This. All this!' He swept his hat off and waved it wildly around. 'This is insanity!'

Mercy and Cowardice

Shivers stood at the window, one half open and the other closed, the frame around him like the frame around a painting, watching Visserine burn. There was an orange edge to his black outline from the fires out towards the city walls – down the side of his stubbly face, one heavy shoulder, one long arm, the twist of muscle at his waist and the hollow in the side of his bare arse.

If Benna had been there he'd have warned her she was taking some long chances, lately. Well, first he'd have asked who the big naked Northman was, then he'd have warned her. Putting herself in the middle of a siege, death so close she could feel it tickling at her neck. Letting her guard down even this much with a man she was meant to be paying, walking the soft line with those farmers downstairs. She was taking risks, and she felt that tingling mix of fear and excitement that a gambler can't do without. Benna wouldn't have liked it. But then she'd never listened to his warnings when he was alive. If the odds stand long against you, you have to take long chances, and Monza had always had a knack for picking the right ones.

Up until they killed Benna and threw her down the mountain, at least.

Shivers' voice came out of the darkness. 'How'd you come by this place, anyway?'

'My brother bought it. Long time ago.' She remembered him standing at the window, squinting into the sun, turning to her and smiling. She felt a grin tug at the corner of her own mouth, just for a moment.

Shivers didn't turn, now, and he didn't smile either. 'You were close, eh? You and your brother.'

'We were close.'

'Me and my brother were close. Everyone that knew him felt close to him. He had that trick. He got killed, by a man called the Bloody-Nine. He got killed when he'd been promised mercy, and his head nailed to a standard.'

Monza didn't much care for this story. On the one hand it was boring her, on the other it was making her think of Benna's slack face as they tipped him over the parapet. 'Who'd have thought we had so much in common? Did you take revenge?'

‘I dreamed of it. My fondest wish, for years. I had the chance, more’n once. Vengeance on the Bloody-Nine. Something a lot of men would kill for.’

‘And?’

She saw the muscles working on the side of Shivers’ head. ‘The first time I saved his life. The second I let him go, and chose to be a better man.’

‘And you’ve been wandering round like a tinker with his cart ever since, pedalling mercy to anyone who’ll take? Thanks for the offer, but I’m not buying.’

‘Not sure I’m selling any more. I been acting the good man all this time, talking up the righteous path, hoping to convince myself I done the right thing walking away. Breaking the circle. But I didn’t, and that’s a fact. Mercy and cowardice are the same, just like you told me, and the circle keeps turning, whatever you try. Taking vengeance . . . it might not answer no questions. It sure won’t make the world a fairer place or the sun shine warmer. But it’s better’n not taking it. It’s a damn stretch better.’

‘I thought you were all set on being Styria’s last good man.’

‘I’ve tried to do the right thing when I could, but you don’t get a name in the North without doing some dark work, and I done my share. I fought beside Black Dow, and Crummock-i-Phail, and the Bloody-Nine his self, for that matter.’ He gave a snort. ‘You think you got cold hearts down here? You should taste the winters where I come from.’ There was something in the set of his face she hadn’t seen before, and hadn’t expected to. ‘I’d like to be a good man, that’s true. But you need it the other way, then I know how.’

There was silence for a moment, while they looked at each other. Him leaning against the window frame, her sprawled on the bed with one hand behind her head.

‘If you really are such a snow-hearted bastard, why did you come back for me? In Cardotti’s?’

‘You still owe me money.’

She wasn’t sure if he was joking. ‘I feel warm all over.’

‘That and you’re about the best friend I’ve got in this mad fucking country.’

‘And I don’t even like you.’

‘I’m still hoping you’ll warm to me.’

‘You know what? I might just be getting there.’

She could see his grin in the light from beyond the window. ‘Letting me in your bed. Letting Furli and the rest stay in your house. If I didn’t know better I’d be thinking I’d pedalled you some mercy after all.’

She stretched out. ‘Maybe beneath this harsh yet beautiful shell I’m really still a soft-hearted farmer’s daughter, only wanting to do good. You think of that?’

‘Can’t say I did.’

‘Anyway, what’s my choice? Put them out on the street, they might start talking. Safer here, where they owe us something.’

‘They’re safest of all in the mud.’

‘Why don’t you go downstairs and put all our minds at rest, then, killer? Shouldn’t be a problem for the hero that used to carry Black Now’s luggage.’

‘Dow.’

‘Whoever. Best put some trousers on first, though, eh?’

‘I’m not saying we should’ve killed ’em or nothing, I’m just pointing out the fact. Mercy and cowardice are the same, I heard.’

‘I’ll do what needs doing, don’t worry. I always have. But I’m not Morveer. I’m not murdering eleven farmers just for my convenience.’

‘Nice to hear, I guess. All those little people dying in the bank didn’t seem to bother you none, long as one of ’em was Mauthis.’

She frowned. ‘That wasn’t the plan.’

‘Nor the folk at Cardotti’s.’

‘Cardotti’s didn’t go quite the way I had in mind either, in case you didn’t notice.’

‘I noticed pretty good. The Butcher of Caprile, they call you, no? What happened there?’

‘What needed doing.’ She remembered riding up in the dusk, the stab of worry as she saw the smoke over the city. ‘Doing it and liking it are different things.’

‘Same results, no?’

‘What the hell would you know about it? I don’t remember you being there.’ She shook the memory off and slid from the bed. The careless warmth of the last smoke was wearing through and she felt strangely awkward in her own scarred skin, crossing the room with his eyes on her, stark naked but for the glove still on her right hand. The city, and its towers,

and its fires spread out beyond the window, blurred through the bubbly glass panes in the closed half. ‘I didn’t bring you up here to remind me of my mistakes. I’ve made enough of the bastards.’

‘Who hasn’t? Why did you bring me up here?’

‘Because I’ve an awful weakness for big men with tiny minds, what do you think?’

‘Oh, I try not to think much, makes my tiny mind hurt. But I’m starting to get the feeling you might not be quite so hard as you make out.’

‘Who is?’ She reached out and touched the scar on his chest. Fingertip trailing through hair, over rough, puckered skin.

‘We’ve all got our wounds, I guess.’ He slid his hand down the long scar on her hip bone, and her stomach clenched up tight. That gambler’s mix of fear and excitement still, with a trace of disgust mixed in.

‘Some worse than others.’ The words sour in her mouth.

‘Just marks.’ His thumb slid across the scars on her ribs, one by one. ‘They don’t bother me any.’

She pulled the glove off her crooked right hand and stuck it in his face. ‘No?’

‘No.’ His big hands closed gently around her ruined one, warm and tight. She stiffened up at first, almost dragged it away, breath catching with ugly shock, as if she’d caught him caressing a corpse. Then his thumbs started to rub at her twisted palm, at the aching ball of her thumb, at her crooked fingers, all the way to the tips. Surprisingly tender. Surprisingly pleasant. She let her eyes close and her mouth open, stretched her fingers out as wide as they’d go, and breathed.

She felt him closer, the warmth of him, his breath on her face. Not much chance to wash lately and he had a smell – sweat and leather and a hint of bad meat. Sharp, but not entirely unpleasant. She knew she had a smell herself. His face brushed hers, rough cheek, hard jaw, nudging against her nose, nuzzling at her neck. She was half-smiling, skin tingling in the draught from the window, carrying that familiar tickle of burning buildings to her nose.

One of his hands still held hers, out to the side now, the other slid up her flank, over the knobble of her hip bone, slid under her breast, thumb rubbing back and forth over her nipple, slightly pleasant, slightly clumsy. Her free hand brushed against his cock, already good and hard, up, and

down, damp skin sticky on her palm. She lifted one foot, heel scraping loose plaster from the wall, wedged it on the windowsill so her legs were spread wide. His fingers slid back and forth between them with a soft squelch, squelch.

Her right hand was round under his jaw, twisted fingers pulling at his ear, turning his head sideways, thumb dragging his mouth open so she could push her tongue into it. It tasted of the cheap wine they'd been drinking, but hers probably did too, and who cared a shit anyway?

She drew him close, pressing up against him, skin sliding against skin. Not thinking about her dead brother, not thinking about her crippled hand, not thinking about the war outside, or needing a smoke, or the men she had to kill. Just his fingers and her fingers, his cock and her cunt. Not much, maybe, but something, and she needed something.

'Get on and fuck me,' she hissed in his ear.

'Right,' he croaked at her, hooked her under one knee, lifted her to the bed and dumped her on her back, frame creaking. She wriggled away, making room, and he knelt down between her open knees, working his way forwards, fierce grin on his face as he looked down at her. Same grin she had, keen to get on with it. She felt the end of his cock sliding around between her thighs, one side, then the other. 'Where the fuck . . .'

'Bloody Northmen, couldn't find your arse with a chair.'

'My arse ain't the hole I'm looking for.'

'Here.' She dragged some spit off her tongue with her fingers, propped herself up on one elbow, reached down and took hold of him, working his cock around until she found the spot.

'Ah.'

'Ah,' she grunted back. 'That's it.'

'Aye.' He moved his hips in circles, easing deeper with each one. 'That . . . is . . . it.' He ran his hands up her thighs, fingers into the short hair, started rubbing at her with his thumb.

'Gently!' She slapped his hand away and slid her own down in its place, middle finger working slowly round and round. 'You're not trying to crack a nut, fool.'

'Your nut, your business, I reckon.' His cock slid out as he worked his way forwards, onto his arms above her, but she slid it back in easy enough. They started finding a rhythm, patient but building, bit by bit.

She kept her eyes open, looking in his face, and she could see the gleam of his in the darkness looking back. Both of them with teeth bared, breathing hard. He opened his mouth to meet hers, then moved his head away as she craned up to kiss him, always just out of reach until she had to slump back flat with a gasp that sent a warm shiver through her.

She slid her right hand onto his backside, squeezing at one buttock as it tensed and relaxed, tensed and relaxed. Faster now, damp skin slap-slapping, and she pushed her twisted hand round further, down into the crack of his arse. She strained her head up off the bed again, biting at his lips, at his teeth, and he nipped at her, grunting in his throat and her grunting back. He came down onto one elbow, his other hand sliding up over her ribs, squeezing hard at one breast then the other, almost painful.

Creak, creak, creak, and her feet were off the bed and in the air, his hand tangled in her hair, fingers rubbing at the coins under her skin, dragging her head back, her face up against his, and she sucked his tongue out of his mouth and into hers, bit at it, licked at it. Deep, slobbery, hungry, snarling kisses. Hardly kisses at all. She pushed her finger into his arsehole, up to the first knuckle.

'What the fuck?' He broke clear of her as if she'd slapped him in the face, stopped moving, still and tense above her. She jerked her right hand back, left still busy between her legs.

'Alright,' she hissed. 'Doesn't make you less of a man, you know. Your arse, your business. I'll keep clear of it in—'

'Not that. D'you hear something?'

Monza couldn't hear anything but her own fast breath and the faint sound of her fingers still sliding wetly up and down. She pushed her hips back up against him. 'Come on. There's nothing but—'

The door crashed open, wood flying from the splintered lock. Shivers scrambled from the bed, tangled with the blanket. Monza was dazzled by lamplight, caught a glimpse of bright metal, armour, a shout and a sword swung.

There was a metallic thud, Shivers gave a squawk and went down hard on the boards. Monza felt spots of blood patter on her cheek. She had the hilt of the Calvez in her hand. Right hand, stupidly, by force of habit, blade a few inches drawn.

‘No you don’t.’ A woman coming through the ruins of the door, loaded flatbow levelled, hair scraped back from a soft-looking round face. A man turned from standing over Shivers and towards Monza, sword in hand. She could scarcely see more of him than the outline of his armour, his helmet. Another soldier stomped through the door, lantern in one fist and an axe in the other, curved blade gleaming. Monza let her twisted fingers open and the Calvez clattered down beside the bed half-drawn.

‘That’s better,’ said the woman.

Shivers gave a groan, tried to push himself up, eyes narrowed against the light, blood trickling down his face from a cut in his hair. Must have been clubbed with the flat. The one with the axe stepped forwards and swung a boot into his ribs, thud, thud, made him grunt, curled up naked against the wall. A fourth soldier walked in, some dark cloth over one arm.

‘Captain Langrier.’

‘What did you find?’ asked the woman, handing him the flatbow.

‘This, and some others.’

‘Looks like a Talinese uniform.’ She held the jacket up so Monza could see it. ‘Got anything to say about this?’

The jolt of cold shock was fading, and an even frostier fear was pressing in fast behind it. These were Salier’s soldiers. She’d been so fixed on killing Ganmark, so fixed on Orso’s army, she hadn’t spared a thought for the other side. They’d got her attention now, alright. She felt a sudden need for another smoke, so bad she was nearly sick. ‘It’s not what you think,’ she managed to croak out, acutely aware she was stark naked and smelled sharply of fucking.

‘How do you know what I think?’

Another soldier with a big drooping moustache appeared in the doorway. ‘A load of bottles and suchlike in one of the rooms. Didn’t fancy touching ’em. Looked like poison to me.’

‘Poison, you say, Sergeant Pello?’ Langrier stretched her head to one side and rubbed at her neck. ‘Well, that is damn suspicious.’

‘I can explain it.’ Monza’s mouth was dry. She knew she couldn’t. Not in any way these bastards would believe.

‘You’ll get your chance. Back at the palace, though. Bind ’em up.’

Shivers grimaced as the axeman dragged his wrists behind his back and snapped manacles shut on them, hauled him to his feet. One of the others

grabbed Monza's arm, twisted it roughly behind her as he jammed the cuffs on.

'Ah! Mind my hand!' One of them dragged her off the bed, shoved her stumbling towards the door and she nearly slipped, getting her balance back without much dignity. There wasn't much dignity to be had in all of this. Benna's little glass statue watched from its niche. So much for household spirits. 'Can we get some clothes at least?'

'I don't see why.' They hauled her out onto the landing, into the light of another lantern. 'Wait there.' Langrier squatted down, frowning at the zigzag scars on Monza's hip and along her thigh, neat pink dots of the pulled stitches almost faded. She prodded at them with one thumb as though she was checking a joint of meat in a butcher's for rot. 'You ever seen marks like that before, Pello?'

'No.'

She looked up at Monza. 'How did you get these?'

'I was shaving my cunt and the razor slipped.'

The woman spluttered with laughter. 'I like that. That's funny.'

Pello was laughing too. 'That is funny.'

'Good thing you've got a sense of humour.' Langrier stood up, brushing dust from her knees. 'You'll need that later.' She thumped Monza on the side of the head with an open hand and sent her tumbling down the stairs. She fell on her shoulder with a jarring impact, the steps battered her back, skinned her knees, her legs went flying over. She squealed and grunted as the wood drove the air out of her, then the wall cracked her in the nose and knocked her sprawling, one leg buckled against the plaster. She lifted her head, groggy as a drunkard, the stairway still reeling. Her mouth tasted of blood. She spat it out. It filled up again.

'Fuh,' she grunted.

'No more jokes? We've got a few more flights if you're still feeling witty.'

She wasn't. She let herself be dragged up, grunting as pain ground at her battered shoulder-joint.

'What's this?' She felt the ring pulled roughly off her middle finger, saw Langrier smiling as she held her hand up to the light, ruby glinting.

'Looks good on you,' said Pello. Monza kept her silence. If the worst she lost out of this was Benna's ring, she'd count herself lucky indeed.

There were more soldiers on the floors below, rooting through the tower, dragging gear from the chests and boxes. Glass crunched and tinkled as they upended one of Morveer's cases onto the floor. Day was sitting on a bed nearby, yellow hair hanging over her face, hands bound behind her. Monza met her eye for a moment, and they stared at each other, but there wasn't much pity to spare. At least she'd been lucky enough to have her shift on when they came.

They shoved Monza down into the kitchen and she leaned against the wall, breathing fast, stark naked but past caring. Furli was down there, and his brother too. Langrier walked over to them and pulled a purse from her back pocket.

'Looks like you were right. Spies.' She counted coins out into the farmer's waiting palm. 'Five scales for each of them. Duke Salier thanks you for your diligence, citizen. You say there were more?'

'Four others.'

'We'll keep a watch on the tower and pick them up later. You'd better find somewhere else for your family.'

Monza watched Furli take the money, licking at the blood running out of her nose and thinking this was where charity got you. Sold for five scales. Benna would probably have been upset by the size of the bounty, but she had far bigger worries. The farmer gave her a last look as they dragged her stumbling out through the door. There was no guilt in his eyes. Maybe he felt he'd done the best thing for his family, in the midst of a war. Maybe he was proud that he'd had the courage to do it. Maybe he was right to be.

Seemed it was as true now as it had been when Verturio wrote the words. Mercy and cowardice are the same.

The Odd Couple

It was Morveer's considered opinion that he was spending entirely too much of his time in lofts, of late. It did not help in the slightest that this one was exposed to the elements. Large sections of the roof of the ruined house were missing, and the wind blew chill into his face. It reminded him most unpleasingly of that crisp spring night, long ago, when two of the prettiest and most popular girls had lured him onto the roof of the orphanage then locked him up there in his nightshirt. He was found in the morning, grey-lipped and shivering, close to having frozen to death. How they had all laughed.

The company was far from warming him. Shylo Vitari crouched in the darkness, her head a spiky outline with the night sky behind, one eye shut, her eyeglass to the other. Behind them in the city, fires burned. War might be good for a poisoner's business, but Morveer had always preferred to keep it at arm's length. Considerably beyond, in fact. A city under siege was no place for a civilised man. He missed his orchard. He missed his good goose-down mattress. He attempted to shift the collars of his coat even higher around his ears, and transferred his attention once again to the palace of Grand Duke Salier, brooding on its long island in the midst of the fast-flowing Visser.

'Why ever a man of my talents should be called upon to survey a scene of this nature is entirely beyond me. I am no general.'

'Oh no. You're a murderer on a much smaller scale.'

Morveer frowned sideways. 'As are you.'

'Surely, but I'm not the one complaining.'

'I resent being dropped into the centre of a war.'

'It's Styria. It's spring. Of course there's a war. Let's just come up with a plan and get back out of the night.'

'Huh. Back to Murcatto's charitable institution for the housing of displaced agricultural workers, do you mean? The stench of self-righteous hypocrisy in that place causes my bile to rise.'

Vitari blew into her cupped hands. 'Better than out here.'

'Is it? Downstairs, the farmer's brats wail into the night. Upstairs, our employer's profoundly unsubtle erotic adventures with our barbarian

companion keep the floorboards groaning at all hours. I ask you, is there anything more unsettling than the sound of other . . . people . . . fucking?'

Vitari grinned. 'You've got a point there. They'll have that floor in before they're done.'

'They'll have my skull in before that. I ask you, is an iota of professionalism too much to ask for?'

'Long as she's paying, who cares?'

'I care if her carelessness leads to my untimely demise, but I suppose we must make do.'

'Less whining and more work, then, maybe? A way in.'

'A way in, because the noble leaders of Styrian cities are trusting folk, always willing to welcome uninvited guests into their places of residence . . .'

Morveer moved his eyeglass carefully across the front of the sprawling building, rising up sheer from the frothing waters of the river. For the home of a renowned aesthete, it was an edifice of minimal architectural merit. A confusion of ill-matched styles awkwardly mashed together into a jumble of roofs, turrets, cupolas, domes and dormers, its single tower thrusting up into the heavens. The gatehouse was comprehensively fortified, complete with arrow loops, bartizans, machicolations and gilded portcullis facing the bridge into the city. A detachment of fifteen soldiers were gathered there in full armour.

'The gate is far too well guarded, the front elevation far too visible to climb, either to roof or window.'

'Agreed. The only spot we'd have a chance of getting in without being seen is the north wall.'

Morveer swung his eyeglass towards the narrow northern face of the building, a sheer expanse of mossy grey stone pierced by darkened stained-glass windows and with a begargoyled parapet above. Had the palace been a ship sailing upriver, that would have been its prow, and fast-flowing water foamed with particular energy around its sloping base. 'Unobserved, perhaps, but also the most difficult to reach.'

'Scared?' Morveer lowered his eyeglass with some irritation to see Vitari grinning at him.

'Let us say rather that I am dubious as to our chances of success. Though I confess I feel some warmth at the prospect of your plunging from a rope

into the frothing river, I am far from attracted by the prospect of following you.'

'Why not just say you're scared?'

Morveer refused to rise to such ham-fisted taunting. It had not worked in the orphanage; it would most certainly not work now. 'We would require a boat, of course.'

'Shouldn't be too hard to find something upriver.'

He pursed his lips as he weighed the benefits. 'The plan would have the added advantage of providing a means of egress, an aspect of the venture by which Murcatto seems decidedly untroubled. Once Ganmark has been put paid to, we might hope to reach the roof, still disguised, and back down the rope to the boat. Then we could simply float out to sea and—'

'Look at that.' Vitari pointed at a group moving briskly along the street below, and Morveer trained his eyeglass upon them. Perhaps a dozen armoured soldiers marched on either side of two stumbling figures, entirely naked, hands bound behind them. A woman and a large man.

'Looks like they've caught some spies,' said Vitari. 'Bad luck for them.'

One of the soldiers jabbed the man with the butt of his spear and knocked him over in the road, bare rump sticking into the air. Morveer chuckled. 'Oh yes, indeed, even among Styrian prisons, the dungeons beneath Salier's palace enjoy a black reputation.' He frowned through the eyeglass. 'Wait, though. The woman looks like—'

'Murcatto. It's fucking them!'

'Can nothing run smoothly?' Morveer felt a mounting sense of horror he had in no way expected. Stumbling along at the back in her nightshirt, hands bound behind her, was Day. 'Curse it all! They have my assistant!'

'Piss on your assistant. They have our employer! That means they have my pay!'

Morveer could do nothing but grind his teeth as the prisoners were herded across the bridge and into the palace, the heavy gates tightly sealed behind them. 'Damn it! The tower-house is no longer safe! We cannot return there!'

'An hour ago you couldn't stand the thought of going back to that den of hypocrisy and erotic adventure.'

'But my equipment is there!'

'I doubt it.' Vitari nodded her spiky head towards the palace. 'It'll be with all the boxes they carried in there.'

Morveer slapped petulantly at the bare rafter by his head, winced as he took a splinter in his forefinger and was forced to suck it. ‘Damn and shitting *blast*!’

‘Calm, Morveer, calm.’

‘I am calm!’ The sensible thing to do was undeniably to find a boat, to float silently up to Duke Salier’s palace, then past it and out to sea, writing off his losses, return to the orchard and train another assistant, leaving Murcatto and her imbecile Northman to reap the consequences of their stupidity. Caution first, always, but . . .

‘I cannot leave my assistant behind in there,’ he barked. ‘I simply *cannot*!’

‘Why?’

‘Well, because . . .’ He was not sure why. ‘I flatly refuse to go through the trouble of instructing another!’

Vitari’s irritating grin had grown wider. ‘Fine. You need your girl and I need my money. You want to cry about it or work on a way in? I still say boat down the river to the north wall, then rope and grapple to the roof.’

Morveer squinted unhopefully towards the sheer stonework. ‘You can truthfully secure a grapple up there?’

‘I could get a grapple through a fly’s arse. It’s you getting the boat into position that worries me.’

He was not about to be outdone. ‘I challenge you to find a more accomplished oarsman! I could hold a boat steady in a deluge twice as fierce, but it will not be needful. I can drive a hook into that stonework and anchor the boat against those rocks all night.’

‘Good for you.’

‘Good. Excellent.’ His heart was beating with considerable urgency at the argument. He might not have liked the woman, but her competence was in no doubt. Given the circumstances he could not have selected a more suitable companion. A most handsome woman, too, in her own way, and no doubt every bit as firm a disciplinarian as the sternest nurse at the orphanage had been . . .

Her eyes narrowed. ‘I hope you’re not going to make the same suggestion you made last time we worked together.’

Morveer bristled. ‘There will be no repetition of that whatsoever, I can assure you!’

‘Good. Because I’d still rather fuck a hedgehog.’

‘You made your preferences quite clear on that occasion!’ he answered shrilly, then moved with all despatch to shift the topic. ‘There is no purpose in delay. Let us find a vessel appropriate to our needs.’ He took one last look down as he slithered back into the attic, and paused. ‘Who’s this now?’ A single figure was striding boldly towards the palace gates. Morveer felt his heart sink even lower. There was no mistaking the flamboyant gait. ‘Cosca. What ever is that horrible old drunkard about?’

‘Who knows what goes through that scabby head?’

The mercenary strode towards the guards quite as if it was his palace rather than Duke Salier’s, waving one arm. Morveer could just hear his voice in between the sighing of the wind, but had not the slightest notion of the words. ‘What are they saying?’

‘You can’t read lips?’ Vitari muttered.

‘No.’

‘Nice to find there’s one subject you’re not the world’s greatest expert on. The guards are challenging him.’

‘Of course!’ That much was clear from the halberds lowered at Cosca’s chest. The old mercenary swept off his hat and bowed low.

‘He is replying . . . my name is Nicomo Cosca . . . famed soldier of fortune . . . and I am here . . .’ She lowered the eyeglass, frowning.

‘Yes?’

Vitari’s eyes slid towards him. ‘And I am here for dinner.’

Darkness

Utter dark. Monza opened her eyes wide, squinted and stared, and saw nothing but fizzing, tingling blackness. She wouldn't have been able to see her hand before her face. But she couldn't move her hand there anyway, or anywhere else.

They'd chained her to the ceiling by her wrists, to the floor by her ankles. If she hung limp, her feet just brushed the clammy stones. If she stretched up on tiptoe, she could ease the throbbing ache through her arms, through her ribs, through her sides, a merciful fraction. Soon her calves would start to burn, though, worse and worse until she had to ease back down, teeth gritted, and swing by her skinned wrists. It was agonising, humiliating, terrifying, but the worst of it was, she knew – this was as good as things were going to get.

She wasn't sure where Day was. Probably she'd blinked those big eyes, shed a single fat tear and said she knew nothing, and they'd believed her. She had the sort of face that people believed. Monza never had that sort of face. But then she probably didn't deserve one. Shivers was struggling somewhere in the inky black, metal clinking as he twisted at his chains, cursing in Northern, then Styrian. 'Fucking Styria. Fucking Vossula. Shit. Shit.'

'Stop!' she hissed at him. 'Might as well . . . I don't know . . . keep your strength.'

'Strength going to help us, you reckon?'

She swallowed. 'Couldn't hurt.' Couldn't help. Nothing could.

'By the dead, but I need to piss.'

'Piss, then,' she snapped into the darkness. 'What's the difference?

A grunt. The sound of liquid spattering against stone. She might've joined him if her bladder hadn't been knotted up tight with fear. She pushed up on her toes again, legs aching, wrists, arms, sides burning with every breath.

'You got a plan?' Shivers' words sank away and died on the buried air.

'What fucking plan do you think I'd have? They think we're spies in their city, working for the enemy. They're sure of it! They're going to try and get us to talk, and when we don't have anything to say they want to hear,

they're going to fucking kill us!' An animal growl, more rattles. 'You think they didn't plan for you struggling?'

'What d'you want me to do?' His voice was strangled, shrill, as if he was on the verge of sobbing. 'Hang here and wait for them to start cutting us?'

'I . . .' She felt the unfamiliar thickness of tears at the back of her own throat. She didn't have the shadow of an idea of a way clear of this. Helpless. How could you get more helpless than chained up naked, deep underground, in the pitch darkness? 'I don't know,' she whispered. 'I don't know.'

There was the clatter of a lock turning and Monza jerked her head up, skin suddenly prickling. A door creaked open and light stabbed at her eyes. A figure came down stone steps, boots scraping, a torch flickering in his hand. Another came behind him.

'Let's see what we're doing, shall we?' A woman's voice. Langrier, the one who'd caught them in the first place. The one who'd knocked Monza down the stairs and taken her ring. The other one was Pello, with the moustache. They were both dressed like butchers, stained leather aprons and heavy gloves. Pello went around the room, lighting torches. They didn't need torches, they could've had lamps. But torches are that bit more sinister. As if, at that moment, Monza needed scaring. Light crept out across rough stone walls, slick with moisture, splattered with green moss. There were a couple of tables about, heavy cast-iron implements on them. Unsubtle-looking implements.

She'd felt better when it was dark.

Langrier bent over a brazier and got it lit, blowing patiently on the coals, orange glow flaring across her soft face with each breath.

Pello wrinkled his nose. 'Which one of you pissed?'

'Him,' said Langrier. 'But what's the difference?' Monza watched her slide a few lengths of iron into the furnace, and felt her throat close up tight. She looked sideways at Shivers, and he looked back at her, and said nothing. There was nothing to say. 'More than likely they'll both be pissing soon enough.'

'Alright for you, you don't have to mop it up.'

'I've mopped up worse.' She looked at Monza, and her eyes were bored. No hate in them. Not much of anything. 'Give them some water, Pello.'

The man offered a jug. She would've liked to spit in his face, scream obscenities, but she was thirsty, and it was no time for pride. So she opened her mouth and he stuck the spout in it, and she drank, and coughed, and drank, and water trickled down her neck and dripped to the cold flags between her bare feet.

Langrier watched her get her breath back. 'You see, we're just people, but I have to be honest, that's probably the last kindness you'll be getting out of us if you're not helpful.'

'It's a war, boy.' Pello offered the jug to Shivers. 'A war, and you're on the other side. We don't have the time to be gentle.'

'Just give us something,' said Langrier. 'Just a little something I can give to my colonel, then we can leave you be, for now, and we'll all be a lot happier.'

Monza looked her right in the eye, unwavering, and did her best to make her believe. 'We're not with Orso. The opposite. We're here—'

'You had his uniforms, didn't you?'

'Only so we could drop in with them if they broke into the city. We're here to kill Ganmark.'

'Orso's Union general?' Pello raised his brows at Langrier and she shrugged back.

'It's either what she said, or they're spies, working with the Talinese. Here to assassinate the duke, maybe. Now which of those seems the more likely?'

Pello sighed. 'We've been in this game a long time, and the obvious answer, nine times out of ten, is the right one.'

'Nine times out of ten.' Langrier spread her hands in apology. 'So you might have to do better than that.'

'I can't do any fucking better,' Monza hissed through gritted teeth, 'that's all I—'

Langrier's gloved fist thudded suddenly into her ribs. 'The truth!' Her other fist into Monza's other side. 'The truth!' A punch in the stomach. 'The truth! The truth! The truth!' She sprayed spit in Monza's face as she screamed it, knocking her back and forth, the sharp thumps and Monza's wheezing grunts echoing dully from the damp walls of the place.

She couldn't do any of the things her body desperately needed to do – bring her arms down, or fold up, or fall over, or breathe even. She was

helpless as a carcass on a hook. When Langrier got tired of pounding the guts out of her she shuddered silently for a moment, eyes bulging, every muscle cramped up bursting tight, creaking back and forth by her wrists. Then she coughed watery puke into her armpit, heaved half a desperate, moaning breath in and drooled out some more. She dropped limp as a wet sheet on a drying line, hair tangled across her face, heard that she was whimpering like a beaten dog with every shallow breath but couldn't stop it and didn't care.

She heard Langrier's boots scraping over to Shivers. 'So she's a fucking idiot, that's proven. Let's give you a chance, big man. I'll start with something simple. What's your name?'

'Caul Shivers,' voice high and tight with fear.

'Shivers.' Pello chuckled.

'Northerners. Who dreams up all these funny names? What about her?'

'Murcatto, she calls herself. Monzcarro Murcatto.' Monza slowly shook her head. Not because she blamed him for saying her name. Just because she knew the truth couldn't help.

'What do you know? The Butcher of Caprile herself in my little cell! Murcatto's dead, idiot, months ago, and I'm getting bored. You'd think none of us would ever die, the way you're wasting our time.'

'You reckon they're very stupid,' asked Pello, 'or very brave?'

'What's the difference?'

'You want to hold him?'

'You mind doing it?' Langrier winced as she worked one elbow around. 'Damn shoulder's aching today. Wet weather always gets it going.'

'You and your bloody shoulder.' Metal rattled as Pello let a stride of chain out through the pulley above and Shivers' hands dropped down around his head. Any relief he felt was short lived, though. Pello came up behind and kicked him in the back of his legs, sent him lurching onto his knees, arms stretched out again, kept him there by planting one boot on the back of his calves.

'Look!' It was cold but Shivers' face was all beaded up with sweat. 'We're not with Orso! I don't know nothing about his army. I just . . . I just don't know!'

'It's the truth,' Monza croaked, but so quiet no one could hear her. Even that started her coughing, each heave stabbing through her battered ribs.

Pello slid one arm around Shivers' head, elbow under his jaw, his other hand firm behind, tilting his face back.

'No!' squawked Shivers, the one bulging eye Monza could see rolling towards her. 'It was her! Murcatto! She hired me! To kill seven men! Vengeance, for her brother! And . . . and—'

'You've got him?' asked Langrier.

'I've got him.'

Shivers' voice rose higher. 'It was her! She wants to kill Duke Orso!' He was trembling now, teeth chattering together. 'We did Gobba, and a banker! A banker . . . called Mauthis! Poisoned him, and then . . . and then . . . Prince Ario, in Sipani! At Cardotti's! And now—'

Langrier stuck a battered wooden dowel between his jaws, putting a quick end to his wasted confession. 'Wouldn't want you to chew your tongue off. Still need you to tell me something worth hearing.'

'I've got money!' croaked Monza, her voice starting to come back.

'What?'

'I've got money! Gold! Boxes full of it! Not with me, but . . . Hermon's gold! Just—'

Langrier chuckled. 'You'd be amazed how everyone remembers buried treasure at a time like this. Doesn't often work out.'

Pello grinned. 'If I had just a tenth of what I've been promised in this room I'd be a rich man. I'm not, in case you're wondering.'

'But if you did have boxes full of gold, where the hell would I spend it now? You came a few weeks too late to bribe us. The Talinese are all around the city. Money's no use here.' Langrier rubbed at her shoulder, winced, worked her arm in a circle, then dragged an iron from the brazier. It squealed out with the sound of metal on metal, sent up a drifting shower of orange sparks and a sick twist of fear through Monza's churning guts.

'It's true,' she whispered. 'It's true.' But all the strength had gone out of her.

''Course it is.' And Langrier stepped forwards and pressed the yellow-hot metal into Shivers' face. It made a sound like a slice of bacon dropped into a pan, but louder, and with his mindless, blubbering screech on top of it, of course. His back arched, his body thrashed and trembled like a fish on a line, but Pello kept his grip on him, grim-faced.

Greasy steam shot up, a little gout of flame that Langrier blew out with a practised puff of air through pursed lips, grinding the iron one way then the other, into his eye. While she did it, she had the same look she might have had wiping a table. A tedious, distasteful chore that had fallen to her and unfortunately had to be done.

The sizzling grew quieter. Shivers' scream had become a moaning hiss, the last air in his lungs being dragged out of him, spit spraying from his stretched-back lips, frothing from the wood between his bared teeth. Langrier stepped away. The iron had cooled to dark orange, smeared down one side with smoking black ash. She tossed it clattering back into the coals with some distaste.

Pello let go and Shivers' head dropped forwards, breath bubbling in his throat. Monza didn't know if he was awake or not, aware or not. She prayed not. The room smelled of charred meat. She couldn't look at his face. Couldn't look. Had to look. A glimpse of a great blackened stripe across his cheek and through his eye, raw-meat-red around it, bubbled and blistered, shining oily with fat cooked from his face. She jerked her eyes back to the floor, wide open, the air crawling in her throat, all her skin as clammy-cold as a corpse dragged from a river.

'There we go. Aren't we all better off for that, now? All so you could keep your secrets for a few minutes longer? What you won't tell us, we'll just get out of that little yellow-haired bitch later.' She waved a hand in front of her face. 'Damn, that stinks. Drop her down, Pello.'

The chains rattled and she went down. Couldn't stand, even. Too scared, too hurting. Her knees grazed the stone. Shivers' breath crackled. Langrier rubbed at her shoulder. Pello clicked his tongue softly as he made the chains fast. Monza felt the sole of his boot dig into the backs of her calves.

'Please,' she whispered, whole body shivering, teeth rattling. Monzcarro Murcatto, the dreaded Butcher of Caprile, the fearsome Serpent of Talins, that monster who'd washed herself in the Years of Blood, all that was a distant memory. 'Please.'

'You think we enjoy doing this? You think we wouldn't rather get on with people? I'm well liked mostly, aren't I, Pello?'

'Mostly.'

'For pity's sake, give me something I can use. Just tell me . . .' Langrier closed her eyes and rubbed at them with the back of her wrist. 'Just tell me

who you get your orders from, at least. Let's just start with that.'

'Alright, alright!' Monza's eyes were stinging. 'I'll talk!' She could feel tears running down her face. 'I'm talking!' She wasn't sure what she was saying. 'Ganmark! Orso! Talins!' Gibberish. Nothing. Anything. 'I . . . I work for Ganmark!' Anything to keep the irons in the brazier for a few more moments. 'I take my orders from him!'

'From him directly?' Langrier frowned over at Pello, and he took a break from picking at the dry skin on one palm to frown back. 'Of course you do, and his Excellency Grand Duke Salier is constantly down here checking how we're getting along. Do you think I'm a fucking idiot?' She cuffed Monza across the face, one way and back the other, turned her mouth bloody and set her skin burning, made the room jerk and sway. 'You're making this up as you go along!'

Monza tried to shake the mud out of her head. 'Wha' d'you wan' me to tell you?' Words all mangled in her swollen mouth.

'Something that fucking helps me!'

Monza's bloody lip moved up and down, but nothing came out except a string of red drool. Lies were useless. The truth was useless. Pello's arm snaked around her head from behind, tight as a noose, dragged her face back towards the ceiling.

'No!' she squawked. 'No! N—' The piece of wood was wedged into her mouth, wet with Shivers' spit.

Langrier loomed into Monza's blurry vision, shaking one arm out. 'My damn shoulder! I swear I'm in more pain than anyone, but no one has mercy on me, do they?' She dragged a fresh iron clear of the coals, held it up, yellow-white, casting a faint glow across her face, making the beads of sweat on her forehead glisten. 'Is there anything more boring than other people's pain?'

She raised the iron, Monza's weeping eye jammed wide open and fixed on its white tip as it loomed towards her, fizzing ever so softly. The breath wheezed and shuddered in her throat. She could almost feel the heat from it on her cheek, almost feel the pain already. Langrier leaned forwards.

'Stop.' Out of the corner of her eye, she saw a blurry figure in the doorway. She blinked, eyelids fluttering. A great fat man, standing at the top of the steps in a white dressing gown.

‘Your Excellency!’ Langrier shoved the iron back into the brazier as though it was her it was burning. The grip round Monza’s neck was suddenly released, Pello’s boot came off the back of her calves.

Grand Duke Salier’s eyes shifted slowly in his great expanse of pale face, from Monza, to Shivers, and back to Monza. ‘Are these they?’

‘Indeed they are.’ Nicomo Cosca peered over the duke’s shoulder and down into the room. Monza couldn’t remember ever in her life being so glad to see someone. The old mercenary winced. ‘Too late for the Northman’s eye.’

‘Early enough for his life, at least. But whatever have you done to her skin, Captain Langrier?’

‘The scars she had already, your Excellency.’

‘Truly? Quite the collection.’ Salier slowly shook his head. ‘A most regrettable case of mistaken identity. For the time being, these two people are my honoured guests. Some clothes for them, and do what you can for his wound.’

‘Of course.’ She snatched the dowel out of Monza’s mouth and bowed her head. ‘I deeply regret my mistake, your Excellency.’

‘Quite understandable. This is war. People get burned.’ The duke gave a long sigh. ‘General Murcatto, I hope you will accept a bed in my palace, and join us for breakfast in the morning?’

The chains rattled free and her limp hands fell down into her lap. She thought she managed to gasp out a ‘yes’ before she started sobbing so hard she couldn’t speak, tears running free down her face.

Terror, and pain, and immeasurable relief.

The Connoisseur

Anyone would have supposed it was an ordinary morning of peace and plenty in Duke Salier's expansive dining chamber, a room in which his Excellency no doubt spent much of his time. Four musicians struck up sweet music in a far-distant corner, all smiling radiantly, as though serenading the doomed in a palace surrounded by enemies was all they had ever wished for. The long table was stacked high with delicacies: fish and shellfish, breads and pastries, fruits and cheeses, sweets, meats and sweetmeats, all arranged as neatly on their gilded plates as medals on a general's chest. Too much food for twenty, and there were but three to dine, and two of those not hungry.

Monza did not look well. Both of her lips were split, her face was ashen in the centre, swollen and bruised shiny pink on both sides, the white of one eye red with bloodshot patches, fingers trembling. Cosca felt raw to look at her, but he supposed it might have been worse. Small help to their Northern friend. He could have sworn he could hear the groans through the walls all night long.

He reached out with his fork, ready to spear a sausage, well-cooked meat striped black from the grill. An image of Shivers' well-cooked, black-striped face drifted through his mind, and he cleared his throat and caught himself instead a hard-boiled egg. It was only when it was halfway to his plate that he noticed its similarity to an eyeball. He shook it hastily off his fork and into its dish with a rumbling of nausea, and contented himself with tea, silently pretending it was heavily laced with brandy.

Duke Salier was busy reminiscing on past glories, as men are prone to do when their glories are far behind them. One of Cosca's own favourite pastimes, and, if it was even a fraction as boring when he did it, he resolved to give it up. '. . . Ah, but the banquets I have held in this very room! The great men and women who have enjoyed my hospitality at this table! Rogont, Cantain, Sotorius, Orso himself, for that matter. I never trusted that weasel-faced liar, even back then.'

'The courtly dance of Styrian power,' said Cosca. 'Partners never stay together long.'

'Such is politics.' The roll of fat around Salier's jaw shifted softly as he shrugged. 'Ebb and flow. Yesterday's hero, tomorrow's villain. Yesterday's

victory . . .' He frowned at his empty plate. 'I fear the two of you will be my last guests of note and, if you will forgive me, you both have seen more notable days. Still! One takes the guests one has, and makes the merry best of it!' Cosca gave a weary grin. Monza did not stretch herself even that far. 'No mood for levity? Anyone would think my city was on fire by your long faces! We will do no more good at the breakfast table, anyway. I swear I've eaten twice what the two of you have combined.' Cosca reflected that the duke undoubtedly weighed more than twice what the two of them did combined. Salier reached for a glass of white liquid and raised it to his lips.

'Whatever are you drinking?'

'Goat's milk. Somewhat sour, but wondrous for the digestion. Come, friends – and enemies, of course, for there is nothing more valuable to a powerful man than a good enemy – take a turn with me.' He struggled from his chair with much grunting, tossed his glass away and led them briskly across the tiled floor, one plump hand waving in time to the music. 'How is your companion, the Northman?'

'Still in very great pain,' murmured Monza, looking in some herself.

'Yes . . . well . . . a terrible business. Such is war, such is war. Captain Langrier tells me there were seven of you. The blonde woman with the child's face is with us, and your man, the quiet one who brought the Talinese uniforms and has apparently been counting every item in my larder since the crack of dawn this morning. One does not need his uncanny facility with numbers to note that two of your band are still . . . at large.'

'Our poisoner and our torturer,' said Cosca. 'A shame, it's so hard to find good ones.'

'Fine company you keep.'

'Hard jobs mean hard company. They'll be out of Visserine by now, I daresay.' They would be halfway to being out of Styria by now, if they had any sense, and Cosca was far from blaming them.

'Abandoned, eh?' Salier gave a grunt. 'I know the feeling. My allies have abandoned me, my soldiers, my people. I am distraught. My sole remaining comfort is my paintings.' One fat finger pointed to a deep archway, heavy doors standing open and bright sunlight spilling through.

Cosca's trained eye noted a deep groove in the stonework, metal points gleaming in a wide slot in the ceiling. A portcullis, unless he was much mistaken. 'Your collection is well protected.'

‘Naturally. It is the most valuable in Styria, long years in the making. My great-grandfather began it.’ Salier ushered them into a long hallway, a strip of gold-embroidered carpet beckoning them down the centre, many-coloured marble gleaming in the light from huge windows. Vast and brooding oils crowded the opposite wall in long procession, gilt frames glittering.

‘This hall is given over to the Midderland masters, of course,’ Salier observed. There was a snarling portrait of bald Zoller, a series of Kings of the Union – Harod, Arnault, Casimir, and more. One might have thought they all shat molten gold, they looked so smug. Salier paused a moment before a monumental canvas of the death of Juvens. A tiny, bleeding figure lost in an immensity of forest, lightning flaring across a lowering sky. ‘Such brushwork. Such colouring, eh, Cosca?’

‘Astounding.’ Though one daub looked much like another to his eye.

‘The happy days I have spent in profound contemplation of these works. Seeking the hidden meanings in the minds of the masters.’ Cosca raised his brows at Monza. More time in profound contemplation of the campaign map and less on dead painters and perhaps Styria would not have found itself in the current fix.

‘Sculptures from the Old Empire,’ murmured the duke as they passed through a wide doorway and into a second airy gallery, lined on both sides with ancient statues. ‘You would not believe the cost of shipping them from Calcis.’ Heroes, emperors, gods. Their missing noses, missing arms, scarred and pitted bodies gave them a look of wounded surprise. The forgotten winners of ten centuries ago, reduced to confused amputees. Where am I? And for pity’s sake, where are my arms?

‘I have been wondering what to do,’ said Salier suddenly, ‘and would value your opinion, General Murcatto. You are renowned across Styria and beyond for your ruthlessness, single-mindedness and commitment. Decisiveness has never been my greatest talent. I am too prone to think on what is lost by a certain course of action. To look with longing at all those doors that will be closed, rather than the possibilities presented by the one that I must open.’

‘A weakness in a soldier,’ said Monza.

‘I know it. I am a weak man, perhaps, and a poor soldier. I have relied on good intentions, fair words and righteous causes, and it seems I and my

people now will pay for it.' Or for that and his avarice, betrayals and endless warmongering, at least. Salier examined a sculpture of a muscular boat-man. Death poling souls to hell, perhaps. 'I could flee the city, by small boat in the hours of darkness. Down the river and away, to throw myself upon the mercy of my ally Grand Duke Rogont.'

'A brief sanctuary,' grunted Monza. 'Rogont will be next.'

'True. And a man of my considerable dimensions, fleeing? Terribly undignified. Perhaps I could surrender myself to your good friend General Ganmark?'

'You know what would follow.'

Salier's soft face turned suddenly hard. 'Perhaps Ganmark is not so utterly bereft of mercy as some of Orso's other dogs have been?' Then he seemed to sink back down, face settling into the roll of fat under his chin. 'But I daresay you are right.' He peered significantly sideways at a statue that had lost its head some time during the last few centuries. 'My fat head on a spike would be the best that I could hope for. Just like good Duke Cantain and his sons, eh, General Murcatto?'

She looked evenly back at him. 'Just like Cantain and his sons.' Heads on spikes, Cosca reflected, were still as fashionable as ever.

Around a corner and into another hall, still longer than the first, walls crowded with canvases. Salier clapped his hands. 'Here hang the Styrians! Greatest of our countrymen! Long after we are dead and forgotten, their legacy will endure.' He paused before a scene of a bustling marketplace. 'Perhaps I could bargain with Orso? Curry favour by delivering to him a mortal enemy? The woman who murdered his eldest son and heir, perhaps?'

Monza did not flinch. She never had been the flinching kind. 'The best of luck.'

'Bah. Luck has deserted Visserine. Orso would never negotiate, even if I could give him back his son alive, and you have put well and truly paid to that possibility. We are left with suicide.' He gestured at a huge, dark-framed effort, a half-naked soldier offering his sword to his defeated general. Presumably so they could make the last sacrifice that honour demanded. That was where honour got a man. 'To plunge the mighty blade into my bared breast, as did the fallen heroes of yesteryear!'

The next canvas featured a smirking wine merchant leaning on a barrel and holding a glass up to the light. Oh, a drink, a drink, a drink. 'Or poison?

Deadly powders in the wine? Scorpion in the bedsheets? Asp down one's undergarments?' Salier grinned round at them. 'No? Hang myself? I understand men often spend, when they are hanged.' And he flapped his hands away from his groin in demonstration, as though they had been in any doubt as to his meaning. 'Sounds like more fun than poison, anyway.' The duke sighed and stared glumly at a painting of a woman surprised while bathing. 'Let us not pretend I have the courage for such exploits. Suicide, that is, not spending. That I still manage once a day, in spite of my size. Do you still manage it, Cosca?'

'Like a fucking fountain,' he drawled, not to be outdone in vulgarity.

'But what to do?' mused Salier. 'What to—'

Monza stepped in front of him. 'Help me kill Ganmark.' Cosca felt his brows go up. Even beaten, bruised and with the enemy at the gates, she could not wait to draw the knives again. Ruthlessness, single-mindedness and commitment indeed.

'And why ever would I wish to do that?'

'Because he'll be coming for your collection.' She had always had a knack for tickling people where they were most ticklish. Cosca had seen her do it often. To him, among others. 'Coming to box up all your paintings, and your sculptures, and your jars, and ship them back to Fontezarmo to adorn Orso's latrines.' A nice touch, his latrines. 'Ganmark is a connoisseur, like yourself.'

'That Union cocksucker is nothing like me!' Anger suddenly flared red across the back of Salier's neck. 'A common thief and braggart, a degenerate man-fucker, tramping blood across the sweet soil of Styria as though its mud were not fit for his boots! He can have my life, but he'll never have my paintings! I will see to it!'

'I can see to it,' hissed Monza, stepping closer to the duke. 'He'll come here, when the city falls. He'll rush here, keen to secure your collection. We can be waiting, dressed as his soldiers. When he enters,' she snapped her fingers, 'we drop your portcullis, and we have him! You have him! Help me.'

But the moment had passed. Salier's veneer of heavy-lidded carelessness had descended again. 'These are my two favourites, I do believe,' gesturing, all nonchalance, towards two matching canvases. 'Parteo Gavra's studies of

the woman. They were intended always as a pair. His mother, and his favourite whore.'

'Mothers and whores,' sneered Monza. 'A curse on fucking artists. We were talking of Ganmark. Help me!'

Salier blew out a tired sigh. 'Ah, Monzcarro, Monzcarro. If only you had sought my help five seasons ago, before Sweet Pines. Before Caprile. Even last spring, before you spiked Cantain's head above his gate. Even then, the good we could have done, the blows we could have struck together for freedom. Even—'

'Forgive me if I'm blunt, your Excellency, but I spent the night being beaten like a sack of meat.' Monza's voice cracked slightly on the last word. 'You ask for my opinion. You've lost because you're too weak, too soft and too slow, not because you're too good. You fought alongside Orso happily enough when you shared the same goals, and smiled happily enough at his methods, as long as they brought you more land. Your men spread fire, rape and murder when it suited you. No love of freedom then. The only open hand the farmers of Puranti had from you back in those days was the one that crushed them flat. Play the martyr if you must, Salier, but not with me. I feel sick enough already.'

Cosca felt himself wincing. There was such a thing as too much truth, especially in the ears of powerful men.

The duke's eyes narrowed. 'Blunt, you say? If you spoke to Orso in such a manner it is small wonder he threw you down a mountain. I almost wish I had a long drop handy. Tell me, since candour seems the fashion, what did you do to anger Orso so? I thought he loved you like a daughter? Far more than his own children, not that any of those three ever were so very lovable – fox, shrew and mouse.'

Her bruised cheek twitched. 'I became too popular with his people.'

'Yes. And?'

'He was afraid I might steal his throne.'

'Indeed? And I suppose your eyes were never turned upon it?'

'Only to keep him in it.'

'Truly?' Salier grinned sideways at Cosca. 'It would hardly have been the first chair your loyal claws tore from under its owner, would it?'

'I did nothing!' she barked. 'Except win his battles, make him the greatest man in Styria. Nothing!'

The Duke of Visserine sighed. ‘I have a fat body, Monzcarro, not a fat head, but have it your way. You are all innocence. Doubtless you handed out cakes at Caprile as well, rather than slaughter. Keep your secrets if you please. Much good may they do you now.’

Cosca narrowed his eyes against the sudden glare as they stepped out of an open doorway, through an echoing arcade and into the pristine garden at the centre of Salier’s gallery. Water trickled in pools at its corners. A pleasant breeze made the new flowers nod, stirred the leaves of the topiary, plucked specks of blossom from Suljuk cherry trees, no doubt torn from their native soil and brought across the sea for the amusement of the Duke of Visserine.

A magnificent sculpture towered over them in the midst of a cobbled space, twice life-size or more, carved from perfectly white, almost translucent marble. A naked man, lean as a dancer and muscular as a wrestler, one arm extended and with a bronze sword, turned dark and streaked with green, thrust forwards in the fist. As if directing a mighty army to storm the dining room. He had a helmet pushed back on the top of his head, a frown of stern command on his perfect features.

‘The Warrior,’ murmured Cosca, as the shadow of the great blade fell across his eyes, the glare of sunlight blazing along its edge.

‘Yes, by Bonatine, greatest of all Styrian sculptors, and this perhaps his greatest work, carved at the height of the New Empire. It originally stood on the steps of the Senate House in Borletta. My father took it as an indemnity after the Summer War.’

‘He fought a war?’ Monza’s split lip curled. ‘For this?’

‘Only a small one. But it was worth it. Beautiful, is it not?’

‘Beautiful,’ Cosca lied. To the starving man, bread is beautiful. To the homeless man, a roof is beautiful. To the drunkard, wine is beautiful. Only those who want for nothing else need find beauty in a lump of rock.

‘Stolicus was the inspiration, I understand, ordering the famous charge at the Battle of Darmium.’

Monza raised an eyebrow. ‘Leading a charge, eh? You’d have thought he’d have put some trousers on for work like that.’

‘It’s called artistic licence,’ snapped Salier. ‘It’s a fantasy, one can do as one pleases.’

Cosca frowned. ‘Really? I always felt a man makes more points worth making if he steers always close to the truth . . .’

Hurried boot heels cut him off and a nervous-looking officer rushed across the garden, face touched with sweat, a long smear of black mud down the left side of his jacket. He came to one knee on the cobbles, head bowed.

‘Your Excellency.’

Salier did not even look at him. ‘Speak, if you must.’

‘There has been another assault.’

‘So close to breakfast time?’ The duke winced as he placed a hand on his belly. ‘A typical Union man, this Ganmark, he has no more regard for mealtimes than you did, Murcatto. With what result?’

‘The Talinese have forced a second breach, towards the harbour. We drove them back, but with heavy losses. We are greatly outnumbered—’

‘Of course you are. Order your men to hold their positions as long as possible.’

The colonel licked his lips. ‘And then . . . ?’

‘That will be all.’ Salier did not take his eyes from the great statue.

‘Your Excellency.’ The man retreated towards the door. And no doubt to a heroic, pointless death at one breach or another. The most heroic deaths of all were the pointless ones, Cosca had always found.

‘Visserine will soon fall.’ Salier clicked his tongue as he stared up at the great image of Stolicus. ‘How profoundly . . . depressing. Had I only been more like this.’

‘Thinner waisted?’ murmured Cosca.

‘I meant warlike, but while we are wishing, why not a thin waist too? I thank you for your . . . almost uncomfortably honest counsel, General Murcatto. I may have a few days yet to make my decision.’ To delay the inevitable at the cost of hundreds of lives. ‘In the meantime, I hope the two of you will remain with us. The two of you, and your three friends.’

‘Your guests,’ asked Monza, ‘or your prisoners?’

‘You have seen how my prisoners are treated. Which would be your choice?’

Cosca took a deep breath, and scratched slowly at his neck. A choice that more or less made itself.

Vile Jelly

Shivers' face was near healed. Faint pink stripe left across his forehead, through his brow, across his cheek. More'n likely it would fade altogether in a few days more. His eye still ached a bit, but he'd kept his looks alright. Monza lay in the bed, sheet round her waist, skinny back turned towards him. He stood a moment, grinning, watching her ribs shift gently as she breathed, patches of shadow between them shrinking and growing. Then he padded from the mirror across to the open window, looking out. Beyond it the city was burning, fires lighting up the night. Strange thing though, he wasn't sure which city, or why he was there. Mind was moving slowly. He winced, rubbing at his cheek.

'Hurts,' he grunted. 'By the dead it hurts.'

'Oh, that hurts?' He whipped round, stumbling back against the wall. Fenris the Feared loomed over him, bald head brushing the ceiling, half his body tattooed with tiny letters, the rest all cased in black metal, face writhing like boiling porridge.

'You're . . . you're fucking dead!'

The giant laughed. 'I'll say I'm fucking dead.' He had a sword stuck right through his body, the hilt above one hip, point of the blade sticking out under his other arm. He jerked one massive thumb at the blood dripping from the pommel and scattering across the carpet. 'I mean, this really hurts. Did you cut your hair? I liked you better before.'

Bethod pointed to his smashed-in head, a twisted mess of blood, brains, hair, bone. 'Shuth uth, the pair o' youth.' He couldn't speak right because his mouth was all squashed in on itself. 'Thith ith whath hurts lookth like!' He gave the Feared a pointless shove. 'Why couldn't you win, you thtupid half-devil bathtard?'

'I'm dreaming,' Shivers said to himself, trying to think his way through it, but his face was throbbing, throbbing. 'I must be dreaming.'

Someone was singing. 'I . . . am made . . . of death!' Hammer banging on a nail. 'I am the Great Leveller!' Bang, bang, bang, each time sending a jolt of pain through Shivers' face. 'I am the storm in the High Places!' The Bloody-Nine hummed to himself as he cut the corpse of Shivers' brother

into bits, stripped to the waist, body a mass of scars and twisted muscle all daubed-up with blood. ‘So you’re the good man, eh?’ He waved his knife at Shivers, grinning. ‘You need to fucking toughen up, boy. You should’ve killed me. Now help me get his arms off, optimist.’

‘The dead know I don’t like this bastard any, but he’s got a point.’ Shivers’ brother’s head peered down at him from its place nailed to Bethod’s standard. ‘You need to toughen up. Mercy and cowardice are the same. You reckon you could get this nail out?’

‘You’re a fucking embarrassment!’ His father, slack face streaked with tears, waving his jug around. ‘Why couldn’t you be the one dead, and your brother lived? You useless little fuck! You useless, gutless, disappointing speck o’ shit!’

‘This is rubbish,’ snarled Shivers through gritted teeth, sitting down on his crossed legs by the fire. His whole head was pulsing. ‘This is just . . . just rubbish!’

‘What’s rubbish?’ gurgled Tul Duru, blood leaking from his cut throat as he spoke.

‘All this. Faces from the past, saying meaningful stuff. Bit fucking obvious, ain’t it? Couldn’t you do better’n this shit?’

‘Uh,’ said Grim.

Black Dow looked a bit put out. ‘Don’t blame us, boy. Your dream, no? You cut your hair?’

Dogman shrugged. ‘If you was cleverer, maybe you’d have cleverer dreams.’

He felt himself grabbed from behind, face twisted round. The Bloody-Nine was there beside him, hair plastered to his head with blood, scarred face all dashed with black. ‘If you was cleverer, maybe you wouldn’t have got your eye burned out.’ And he ground his thumb into Shivers’ eye, harder and harder. Shivers thrashed, and twisted, and screamed, but there was no way free. It was already done.

He woke up screaming, ’course. He always did now. You could hardly call it a scream any more, his voice was worn down to a grinding stub, gravel in his raw throat.

It was dark. Pain tore at his face like a wolf at a carcass. He thrashed free of the blankets, reeled to nowhere. Like the iron was still pressed against

him, burning. He crashed into a wall, fell on his knees. Bent over, hands squeezing the sides of his skull like they might stop his head from cracking open. Rocking, every muscle flexed to bursting. He groaned and moaned, whimpered and snarled, spat and blubbered, drooled and gibbered, mad from it, mindless with it. Touch it, press it. He held his quivering fingers to the bandages.

'Shhhh.' He felt a hand. Monza, pawing at his face, pushing back his hair.

Pain split his head where his eye used to be like an axe splitting a log, split his mind too, broke it open, thoughts all spilling out in a mad splatter. 'By the dead . . . make it stop . . . shit, shit.' He grabbed her hand and she winced, gasped. He didn't care. 'Kill me! Kill me. Just make it stop.' He wasn't even sure what tongue he was talking. 'Kill me. By the . . .' He was sobbing, tears stinging the eye he still had. She tore her hand away and he was rocking again, rocking, pain ripping through his face like a saw through a tree-stump. He'd tried to be a good man, hadn't he?

'I tried, I fucking tried. Make it stop . . . please, please, please, please—'

'Here.' He snatched hold of the pipe and sucked at it, greedy as a drunkard at the bottle. He hardly even marked the smoke biting, just heaved in air until his lungs were full, and all the while she held him, arms tight around him, rocking him back and forward. The darkness was full of colours, now. Covered with glittering smears. The pain was a step away, 'stead of pressed burning against him. His breathing had softened to a whimper, aching body all washed out.

She helped him up, dragging him to his feet, pipe clattering from his limp hand. The open window swayed, a painting of another world. Hell maybe, red and yellow spots of fire leaving long brushstrokes through the dark. The bed came up and swallowed him, sucked him down. His face throbbed still, pulsed a dull ache. He remembered, remembered why.

'The dead . . .' he whispered, tears running down his other cheek. 'My eye. They burned my eye out.'

'Shhhh,' she whispered, gently stroking the good side of his face. 'Quiet now, Caul. Quiet.'

The darkness was reaching for him, wrapping him up. Before it took him he twisted his fingers clumsily in her hair and dragged her face towards his, close enough almost to kiss his bandages.

'Should've been you,' he whispered at her. 'Should've been you.'

Other People's Scores

'That's his place,' said the one with the sore on his cheek. 'Sajaam's place.' A stained door in a stained wall, pasted with fluttering old bills decrying the League of Eight as villains, usurpers and common criminals. A pair of caricature faces stared from each one, a bloated Duke Salier and a sneering Duke Rogont. A pair of common criminals stood at the doorway, scarcely less caricatures themselves. One dark-skinned, the other with a heavy tattoo down one arm, both sweeping the street with identical scowls.

'Thank you, children. Eat, now.' Shenkt pressed a scale into each grubby hand, twelve pairs of eyes wide in smudged faces to have so much money. Once a few days had passed, let alone a few years, he knew it would have done them little good. They were the beggars, thieves, whores, early dead of tomorrow. But Shenkt had done much harm in his life, and so he tried, wherever possible, to be kind. It put nothing right, he knew that. But perhaps a coin could tip the scales of life by that vital degree, and one among them would be spared. It would be a good thing, to spare even one.

He hummed quietly to himself as he crossed the street, the two men at the door frowning at him all the way. 'I am here to speak to Sajaam.'

'You armed?'

'Always.' He and the dark-skinned guard stared at each other for a moment. 'My ready wit could strike at any moment.'

Neither one of them smiled, but Shenkt had not expected them to, and did not care into the bargain. 'What've you got to say to Sajaam?'

' "Are you Sajaam?" That shall be my opening gambit.'

'You mocking us, little man?' The guard put one hand on the mace hanging at his belt, no doubt thinking himself fearsome.

'I would not dare. I am here to enjoy myself, and have money to spend, nothing more.'

'Maybe you came to the right place after all. With me.'

He led Shenkt through a hot, dim room, heavy with oily smoke and shadows. Lit blue, green, orange, red by lamps of coloured glass. Husk-smokers sprawled around it, pale faces twisted with smiles, or hanging

slack and empty. Shenkt found that he was humming again, and stopped himself.

A greasy curtain pushed aside into a large back room that smelled of unwashed bodies, smoke and vomit, rotten food and rotten living. A man covered in tattoos sat cross-legged upon a sweat-stained cushion, an axe leaning against the wall beside him. Another man sat on the other side of the room, digging at an ugly piece of meat with a knife, a loaded flatbow beside his plate. Above his head an old clock hung, workings dangling from its underside like the intestines from a gutted corpse, pendulum swinging, tick, tick, tick.

Upon a long table in the centre of the room were the chattels of a card game. Coins and counters, bottles and glasses, pipes and candles. Men sat about it, six of them in all. A fat man at Shenkt's right hand, a scrawny one at the left, stuttering out a joke to his neighbour.

'. . . he fuh, fuh, fucked her!'

Harsh laughter, harsh faces, cheap lives of cheap smoke, cheap drink, cheap violence. Shenkt's guide walked around to the head of the table, leaned down to speak to a broad-shouldered man, black-skinned, white-haired, with the smile of comfortable ownership on his lined face. He toyed with a golden coin, flipping it glinting across the tops of his knuckles.

'You are Sajaam?' asked Shenkt.

He nodded, entirely at his ease. 'Do I know you?'

'No.'

'A stranger, then? We do not entertain many strangers here, do we, my friends?' A couple of them grinned half-heartedly. 'Most of my customers are well known to us. What can Sajaam do for you, stranger?'

'Where is Monzcarro Murcatto?'

Like a man plunging through thin ice, the room was sucked into sudden, awful silence. That heavy quiet before the heavens split. That pregnant stillness, bulging with the inevitable.

'The Snake of Talins is dead,' murmured Sajaam, eyes narrowing.

Shenkt felt the slow movement of the men around him. Their smiles creeping off, their feet creeping to the balance for killing, their hands creeping to their weapons. 'She is alive and you know where. I want only to talk to her.'

‘Who the shuh, shit does this bastard thuh, think he is?’ asked the scrawny card player, and some of the others laughed. Tight, fake laughs, to hide their tension.

‘Only tell me where she is. Please. Then no one’s conscience need grow any heavier today.’ Shenkt did not mind pleading. He had given up his vanity long ago. He looked each man in the eyes, gave each a chance to give him what he needed. He gave everyone a chance, where he could. He wished more of them took it.

But they only smiled at him, and at each other, and Sajaam smiled widest of all. ‘I carry my conscience lightly enough.’

Shenkt’s old master might have said the same. ‘Some of us do. It is a gift.’

‘I tell you what, we’ll toss for it.’ Sajaam held his coin up to the light, gold flashing. ‘Heads, we kill you. Tails, I tell you where Murcatto is . . .’ His smile was all bright teeth in his dark face. ‘Then we kill you.’ There was the slightest ring of metal as he flicked his coin up.

Shenkt sucked in breath through his nose, slow, slow.

The gold crawled into the air, turning, turning.

The clock beat deep and slow as the oars of a great ship.

Boom . . . boom . . . boom . . .

Shenkt’s fist sank into the great gut of the fat man on his right, almost to the elbow. Nothing left to scream with, he gave the gentlest fragment of a sigh, eyes popping. An instant later the edge of Shenkt’s open hand caved his astonished face in and ripped his head half-off, bone crumpling like paper. Blood sprayed across the table, black spots frozen, the expressions of the men around it only now starting to shift from rage to shock.

Shenkt snatched the nearest of them from his chair and flung him into the ceiling. His cry was barely begun as he crashed into a pair of beams, wood bursting, splinters spinning, mangled body falling back down in a languid shower of dust and broken plaster. Long before he hit the floor, Shenkt had seized the next player’s head and rammed his face through the table, through the floor beneath it. Cards, and broken glasses, chunks of planking, fragments of wood and flesh made a swelling cloud. Shenkt ripped the half-drawn hatchet from his fist as he went down, sent it whirling across the room and into the chest of the tattooed man, halfway up from his cushion and the first note of a war cry throbbing from his lips. It hit him haft first, so

hard it scarcely mattered, spun him round and round like a child's top, ripped wide open, blood gouting from his body in all directions.

The flatbow twanged, deep and distorted, string twisting as it pushed the bolt towards him, swimming slowly through the dust-filled air as if through treacle, shaft flexing lightly back and forth. Shenkt snatched it from its path and drove it clean through a man's skull, his face folding into itself, meat bursting from torn skin. Shenkt caught him under the jaw and sent his corpse hurtling across the room with a flick of his wrist. He crashed into the archer, the two bodies mashed together, flailing bonelessly into the wall, through the wall, out into the alley on the other side, leaving a ragged hole in the shattered planks behind them.

The guard from the door had his mace raised, mouth open, air rushing in as he made ready to roar. Shenkt leaped the ruins of the table and slapped him backhanded across the chest, burst his ribcage and sent him reeling, twisting up like a corkscrew, mace flying from his lifeless hand. Shenkt stepped forwards and snatched Sajaam's coin from the air as it spun back down, metal slapping into his palm.

He breathed out, and time flowed again.

The last couple of corpses tumbled across the floor. Plaster dropped, settled. The tattooed man's left boot rattled against the boards, leg quivering as he died. One of the others was groaning, but not for much longer. The last spots of blood rained softly from the air around them, misting across the broken glass, the broken wood, the broken bodies. One of the cushions had burst, the feathers still fluttering down in a white cloud.

Shenkt's fist trembled before Sajaam's slack face. Steam hissed from it, then molten gold, trickling from between his fingers, running down his forearm in shining streaks. He opened his hand and showed it, palm forwards, daubed with black blood, smeared with glowing metal.

'Neither heads nor tails.'

'Fuh . . . fuh . . . fuh . . .' The stuttering man still sat at his place, where the table had been, cards clutched in his rigid hand, every part of him spattered, spotted, sprayed with blood.

'You,' said Shenkt. 'Stuttering man. You may live.'

'Fuh . . . fuh . . .'

'You alone are spared. Out, before I reconsider.'

The mumbling beggar dropped his cards, fled whimpering for the door and tumbled through it. Shenkt watched him go. A good thing, even to spare one.

As he turned back, Sajaam was swinging his chair over his head. It burst apart across Shenkt's shoulder, broken pieces bouncing from the floor and clattering away. A futile gesture, Shenkt scarcely even felt it. The edge of his hand chopped into the man's big arm, snapped it like a dead twig, spun him around and sent him rolling over and over across the floor.

Shenkt walked after him, his scuffed work boots making not the slightest sound as they found the gaps between the debris. Sajaam coughed, shook his head, started to worm away on his back, gurgling through gritted teeth, hand dragging behind him the wrong way up. The heels of his embroidered Gurkish slippers kicked at the floor, leaving stuttering trails though the detritus of blood, dust, feathers and splinters that had settled across the whole room like leaves across a forest floor in autumn.

'A man sleeps through most of his life, even when awake. You get so little time, yet still you spend it utterly oblivious. Angry, frustrated, fixated on meaningless nothings. That drawer does not close flush with the front of my desk. What cards does my opponent hold, and how much money can I win from him? I wish I were taller. What will I have for dinner, for I am not fond of parsnips?' Shenkt rolled a mangled corpse out of his way with the toe of one boot. 'It takes a moment like this to jerk us to our senses, to draw our eyes from the mud to the heavens, to root our attention in the present. Now you realise how precious is each moment. That is my gift to you.'

Sajaam reached the back wall and propped himself up against it, worked himself slowly to standing, broken arm hanging limp.

'I despise violence. It is the last tool of feeble minds.' Shenkt stopped a stride away. 'So let us have no more foolishness. Where is Monzcarro Murcatto?'

To give the man his due for courage, he made for the knife at his belt.

Shenkt's pointed finger sank into the hollow where chest met shoulder, just beneath his collarbone. It punched through shirt, skin, flesh, and as the rest of his fist smacked hard against Sajaam's chest and drove him back against the wall, his fingernail was already scraping against the inside surface of his shoulder blade, buried in his flesh right to the knuckles. Sajaam screamed, knife clattering from his dangling fingers.

‘No more foolishness, I said. Where is Murcatto?’

‘In Visserine the last I heard!’ His voice was hoarse with pain. ‘In Visserine!’

‘At the siege?’ Sajaam nodded, bloody teeth clenched tight together. If Visserine had not fallen already, it would have by the time Shenkt got there. But he never left a job half-done. He would assume she was still alive, and carry on the chase. ‘Who does she have with her?’

‘Some Northman beggar, called himself Shivers! A man of mine named Friendly! A convict! A convict from Safety!’

‘Yes?’ Shenkt twisted his finger in the man’s flesh, blood trickling from the wound and down his hand, around the streaks of gold dried to his forearm, dripping from his elbow, tap, tap, tap.

‘Ah! Ah! I put her in touch with a poisoner called Morveer! In Westport, and in Sipani with a woman called Vitari!’ Shenkt frowned. ‘A woman who can get things done!’

‘Murcatto, Shivers, Friendly, Morveer . . . Vitari.’

A desperate nod, spit flying from Sajaam’s gritted teeth with every heaving, agonised breath.

‘And where are these brave companions bound next?’

‘I’m not sure! Gah! She said seven men! The seven men who killed her brother! Ah! Puranti, maybe! Keep ahead of Orso’s army! If she gets Ganmark, maybe she’ll try for Faithful next, for Faithful Carpi!’

‘Maybe she will.’ Shenkt jerked his finger free with a faint sucking sound and Sajaam collapsed, sliding down until his rump hit the floor, his shivering, sweat-beaded face twisted with pain.

‘Please,’ he grunted. ‘I can help you. I can help you find her.’

Shenkt squatted down in front of him, blood-smeared hands dangling on the knees of his blood-smeared trousers. ‘But you have helped. You can leave the rest to me.’

‘I have money! I have money.’

Shenkt said nothing.

‘I was planning on turning her in to Orso, sooner or later, once the price was high enough.’

More nothing.

‘That doesn’t make any difference, does it?’

Silence.

‘I told that bitch she’d be the death of me.’

‘You were right. I hope that is a comfort.’

‘Not much of one. I should have killed her then.’

‘But you saw money to be made. Have you anything to say?’

Sajaam stared at him. ‘What would I say?’

‘Some people want to say things, at the end. Do you?’

‘What are you?’ he whispered.

‘I have been many things. A student. A messenger. A thief. A soldier in old wars. A servant of great powers. An actor in great events. Now?’ Shenkt puffed out an unhappy breath as he gazed around at the mangled corpses hunched, sprawled, huddled across the room. ‘Now, it seems, I am a man who settles other people’s scores.’

The Fencing Master

Monza's hands were shaking again, but that was no surprise. The danger, the fear, not knowing if she was going to live out the next moment. Her brother murdered, herself broken, everything she'd worked for gone. The pain, the withering need for husk, trusting no one, day after day, week after week. Then there was all the death she'd been the cause of, in Westport, in Sipani, gathering on her shoulders like a great weight of lead.

The last few months had been enough to make anyone's hands shake. But maybe it was just watching Shivers have his eye burned out and thinking she'd be next.

She looked nervously towards the door between her room and his. He'd be awake soon. Screaming again, which was bad enough, or silent, which was worse. Kneeling there, looking at her with his one eye. That accusing look. She knew she should have been grateful, should have cared for him the way she used to for her brother. But a growing part of her just wanted to kick him and not stop. Maybe when Benna died everything warm, or decent, or human in her had been left rotting on the mountainside with his corpse.

She pulled her glove off and stared at the thing inside. At the thin pink scars where the shattered bones had been put back together. The deep red line where Gobba's wire had cut into her. She curled the fingers into a fist, or something close, except the little one, still pointing off like a signpost to nowhere. It didn't hurt as badly as it used to, but more than enough to bring a grimace to her face, and the pain cut through the fear, crushed the doubts.

'Revenge,' she whispered. Kill Ganmark, that was all that mattered now. His soft, sad face, his weak, watery eyes. Calmly stabbing Benna through the stomach. Rolling his corpse off the terrace. That's that. She squeezed her fist tighter, bared her teeth at it.

'Revenge.' For Benna and for herself. She was the Butcher of Caprile, merciless, fearless. She was the Snake of Talins, deadly as the viper and no more regretful. Kill Ganmark, and then . . .

'Whoever's next.' And her hand was steady.

Running footsteps slapped hard along the hallway outside and away. She heard someone shout in the distance, couldn't make out the words, but couldn't miss the edge of fear in the voice. She crossed to the window and pulled it open. Her room, or her cell, was high up on the north face of the palace. A stone bridge spanned the Visser upstream, tiny dots moving fast across it. Even from this distance she could tell people running for their lives.

A good general gets to know the smell of panic, and suddenly it was reeking. Orso's men must have finally carried the walls. The sack of Visserine had begun. Ganmark would be on his way to the palace, even now, to take possession of Duke Salier's renowned collection.

The door creaked open and Monza spun about. Captain Langrier stood in the doorway in a Talinese uniform, a bulging sack in one hand. She had a sword at one hip and a long dagger at the other. Monza had nothing of the kind, and she found herself acutely aware of the fact. She stood, hands by her sides, trying to look as if every muscle wasn't ready to fight. And die, more than likely.

Langrier moved slowly into the room. 'So you really are Murcatto, eh?'

'I'm Murcatto.'

'Sweet Pines? Musselia? The High Bank? You won all those battles?'

'That's right.'

'You ordered all those folk killed at Caprile?'

'What the fuck do you want?'

'Duke Salier says he's decided to do it your way.' Langrier dumped the sack on the floor and it sagged open. Metal gleamed inside. The Talinese armour Friendly had stolen out near the breach. 'Best put this on. Don't know how long we'll have before your friend Ganmark gets here.'

Alive, then. For now. Monza dragged a lieutenant's jacket from the sack and pulled it on over her shirt, started to button it up. Langrier watched her for a minute, then started talking.

'I just wanted to say . . . while there's a chance. Well. That I always admired you, I guess.'

Monza stared at her. 'What?'

'A woman. A soldier. Getting where you've been. Doing what you've done. You might've stood on the other side from us, but you always were something of a hero to—'

‘You think I care a shit?’ Monza didn’t know which sickened her more – being called a hero or who was saying it.

‘Can’t blame me for not believing you. Woman with your reputation, thought you’d be harder in a fix like that—’

‘You ever watched someone have their eye burned out of their head and thought you’d be next?’

Langrier worked her mouth. ‘Can’t say I’ve sat on that side of the issue.’

‘You should try it, see how fucking hard you end up.’ Monza pulled some stolen boots on, not so bad a fit.

‘Here.’ Langrier was holding Benna’s ring out to her, big stone gleaming the colour of blood. ‘Doesn’t suit me anyway.’

Monza snatched it from her hand, twisted it onto her finger. ‘What? Give me back what you stole in the first place and think that makes us even?’

‘Look, I’m sorry about your man’s eye and the rest, but it isn’t about you, understand? Someone’s a threat to my city, I have to find out how. I don’t like it, it’s just what has to be done. Don’t pretend you haven’t done worse. I don’t expect we’ll ever share any jokes. But for now, while we’ve got this task to be about, we’ll need to put it behind us.’

Monza kept her silence as she dressed. It was true enough. She’d done worse, alright. Watched it done, anyway. Let it be done, which was no better. She buckled on the breastplate, must’ve come from some lean young officer and fitted her well enough, pulled the last strap through. ‘I need something to kill Ganmark with.’

‘Once we get to the garden you can have a blade, not—’

Monza saw a hand close around the grip of Langrier’s dagger. She started to turn, surprised. ‘Wha—’ The point slid out of the front of her neck. Shivers’ face loomed up beside hers, white and wasted, bandages bound tight over one whole side of it, a pale stain through the cloth where his eye used to be. His left arm slid around Langrier’s chest from behind and drew her tight against him. Tight as a lover.

‘It ain’t about you, understand?’ He was almost kissing at her ear as blood began to run from the point of the knife and down her neck in a thick black line. ‘You take my eye, I’ve got to take your life.’ She opened her mouth, and her tongue flopped out, and blood started to trickle from the tip of it and down her chin. ‘I don’t like it.’ Her face turned purple, eyes rolling up. ‘Just what has to be done.’ Her legs kicked, her boot heels clattering against the

boards as he lifted her up in the air. ‘Sorry about your neck.’ The blade ripped sideways and opened her throat up wide, black blood showering out across the bedclothes, spraying up the wall in an arc of red spots.

Shivers let her drop and she crumpled, sprawling face down as if her bones had turned to mud, another gout of blood spurting sideways. Her boots moved, toes scraping. One set of nails scratched at the floor. Shivers took a long breath in through his nose, then he blew it out, and he looked up at Monza, and he smiled. A friendly little grin, as if they’d shared some private joke that Langrier just hadn’t got.

‘By the dead but I feel better for that. Ganmark’s in the city, did she say?’

‘Uh.’ Monza couldn’t speak. Her skin was flushed and burning.

‘Then I reckon we got work ahead of us.’ Shivers didn’t seem to notice the rapidly spreading slick of blood creep between his toes, around the sides of his big bare feet. He dragged the sack up and peered inside. ‘Armour in here, then? Guess I’d better get dressed, eh, Chief? Hate to arrive at a party in the wrong clothes.’

The garden at the centre of Salier’s gallery showed no signs of imminent doom. Water trickled, leaves rustled, a bee or two floated lazily from one flower to another. White blossom occasionally filtered down from the cherry trees and dusted the well-shaved lawns.

Cosca sat cross-legged and worked the edge of his sword with a whetstone, metal softly ringing. Morveer’s flask pressed into his thigh, but he felt no need for it. Death was at the doorstep, and so he was at peace. His blissful moment before the storm. He tipped his head back, eyes closed, sun warm on his face, and wondered why he could never feel this way unless the world was burning down around him.

Calming breezes washed through the shadowy colonnades, through doorways into hallways lined with paintings. Through one open window Friendly could be seen, in the armour of a Talinese guardsman, counting every soldier in Nasurin’s colossal painting of the Second Battle of Oprile. Cosca grinned. He tried always to be forgiving of other men’s foibles. He had enough of his own, after all.

Perhaps a half-dozen of Salier’s guards had remained, disguised as soldiers from Duke Orso’s army. Men loyal enough to die beside their master at the last. He snorted as he ran the whetstone once more down the

edge of his sword. Loyalty had always sat with honour, discipline and self-restraint on his list of incomprehensible virtues.

'Why so happy?' Day sat beside him on the grass, a flatbow across her knees, chewing at her lip. The uniform she wore must have come from some dead drummer-boy, it fit her well. Very well. Cosca wondered if it was wrong of him to find something peculiarly alluring about a pretty girl in a man's clothes. He wondered furthermore if she might be persuaded to give a comrade-in-arms . . . a little help sharpening his weapon before the fighting started? He cleared his throat. Of course not. But a man could dream.

'Perhaps something is wrong in my head.' He rubbed a blemish from the steel with his thumb. 'Getting out of bed.' Metal rang. 'A day of honest work.' Whetstone scraped. 'Peace. Normality. Sobriety.' He held the sword up to the light and watched the metal gleam. 'These are the things that terrify me. Danger, by contrast, has long been my only relief. Eat something. You'll need your strength.'

'I've no appetite,' she said glumly. 'I've never faced certain death before.'

'Oh, come, come, don't say such a thing.' He stood, brushed the blossom from the captain's insignia on the sleeves of his stolen uniform. 'If there is one thing I have learned in all my many last stands, it is that death is never certain, only . . . extremely likely.'

'Truly inspirational words.'

'I try. Indeed I do.' Cosca slapped his sword into its sheath, picked up Monza's Calvez and ambled away towards the statue of The Warrior. His Excellency Duke Salier stood in its muscular shadow, arrayed for a noble death in a spotless white uniform festooned with gold braid.

'How did it end like this?' he was musing. The very same question Cosca had so often asked himself, while sucking the last drop from one cheap bottle or another. Waking baffled in one unfamiliar doorway, or another. Carrying out one hateful, poorly paid act of violence. Or another. 'How did it end . . . like this?'

'You underestimated Orso's venomous ambition and Murcatto's ruthless competence. Don't feel too badly, though, we've all done it.'

Salier's eyes rolled sideways. 'The question was intended to be rhetorical. But you are right, of course. It seems I have been guilty of arrogance, and the penalty will be harsh. No less than everything. But who could have

expected a young woman would win one unlikely victory over us after another? How I laughed when you made her your second, Cosca. How we all laughed when Orso gave her command. We were already planning our triumphs, dividing his lands between us. Our chuckles are become sobs now, eh?'

'I find chuckles have a habit of doing so.'

'I suppose that makes her a very great soldier and me a very poor one. But then I never aspired to be a soldier, and would have been perfectly happy as merely a grand duke.'

'Now you are nothing, instead, and so am I. Such is life.'

'Time for one last performance, though.'

'For both of us.'

The duke grinned back. 'A pair of dying swans, eh, Cosca?'

'A brace of old turkeys, maybe. Why aren't you running, your Excellency?'

'I must confess I am wondering myself. Pride, I think. I have spent my life as the Grand Duke of Visserine, and insist on dying the same way. I refuse to be simply fat Master Salier, once of importance.'

'Pride, eh? Can't say I ever had much of the stuff.'

'Then why aren't you running, Cosca?'

'I suppose . . .' Why was he not running? Old Master Cosca, once of importance, who always kept his last thought for his own skin? Foolish love? Mad bravery? Old debts to pay? Or simply so that merciful death could spare him from further shame? 'But look!' He pointed to the gate. 'Only think of her and she appears.'

She wore a Talinese uniform, hair gathered up under a helmet, jaw set hard. Just like a serious young officer, clean-shaven this morning and keen to get stuck into the manly business of war. If Cosca had not known, he swore he would never have guessed. A tiny something in the way she walked, perhaps? In the set of her hips, the length of her neck? Again, the women in men's clothes. Did they have to torture him so?

'Monza!' he called. 'I was worried you might not make it!'

'And leave you to die gloriously alone?' Shivers came behind her wearing breastplate, greaves and helmet stolen from a big corpse out near the breach. Bandages stared accusingly from one blind eyehole. 'From what I can hear, they're at the palace gate already.'

‘So soon?’ Salier’s tongue darted over his plump lips. ‘Where is Captain Langrier?’

‘She ran. Seems glory didn’t appeal.’

‘Is there no loyalty left in Styria?’

‘I never noticed any before.’ Cosca tossed the Calvez over in its scabbard and Monza snatched it smartly from the air. ‘Unless you count each man for himself. Is there any plan, besides wait for Ganmark to come calling?’

‘Day!’ She pointed up to the narrower windows on the floor above. ‘I want you up there. Drop the portcullis once we’ve had a try at Ganmark. Or once he’s had a try at us.’

The girl looked greatly relieved to be put at least temporarily out of harm’s way, though Cosca feared it would be no more than temporary. ‘Once the trap’s sprung. Alright.’ She hurried off towards one of the doorways.

‘We wait here. When Ganmark arrives we tell him we’ve captured Grand Duke Salier. We bring your Excellency close, and then . . . you realise we may well all die today?’

The duke smiled weakly, jowls trembling. ‘I am not a fighter, General Murcatto, but nor am I a coward. If I am to die, I might as well spit from my grave.’

‘I couldn’t agree more,’ said Monza.

‘Oh, nor me,’ Cosca threw in. ‘Though a grave’s a grave, spit or no. You are quite sure he’ll come?’

‘He’ll come.’

‘And when he does?’

‘Kill,’ grunted Shivers. Someone had given him a shield and a heavy studded axe with a long pick on the reverse. Now he took a brutal-looking practice swipe with it.

Monza’s neck shifted as she swallowed. ‘I guess we just wait and see.’

‘Ah, wait and see.’ Cosca beamed. ‘My kind of plan.’

A crash came from somewhere in the palace, distant shouting, maybe even the faint clash and clatter of steel. Monza worked her left hand nervously around the hilt of the Calvez, hanging drawn beside her leg.

‘Did you hear that?’ Salier’s soft face was pale as butter beside her. His guards, scattered about the garden fingering their borrowed weapons,

looked hardly more enthusiastic. But that was the thing about facing death, as Benna had often pointed out. The closer it gets, the worse an idea it seems. Shivers didn't look like he had any doubts. Hot iron had burned them out of him, maybe. Cosca neither, his happy grin widening with each moment. Friendly sat cross-legged, rolling his dice across the cobbles.

He looked up at her, face blank as ever. 'Five and four.'

'That a good thing?'

He shrugged. 'It's nine.' Monza raised her brows. A strange group she'd gathered, surely, but when you have a half-mad plan you need men at least half-mad to see it through.

Sane ones might be tempted to look for a better idea.

Another crash, and a thin scream, closer this time. Ganmark's soldiers, working their way through the palace towards the garden at its centre. Friendly threw his dice once more, then gathered them up and stood, sword in hand. Monza tried to stay still, eyes fixed on the open doorway ahead, the hall lined with paintings beyond it, beyond that the archway that led into the rest of the palace. The only way in.

A helmeted head peered round the side of the arch. An armoured body followed. A Talinese sergeant, sword and shield raised and ready. Monza watched him creep carefully under the portcullis, across the marble tiles. He stepped cautiously out into the sunlight, frowning about at them.

'Sergeant,' said Cosca brightly.

'Captain.' The man straightened up, letting his sword point drop. More men followed him. Well-armed Talinese soldiers, watchful and bearded veterans tramping into the gallery with weapons at the ready. They looked surprised, at first, to see their own side already in the garden, but not unhappy. 'That him?' asked the sergeant, pointing to Salier.

'This is him,' said Cosca, grinning back.

'Well, well. Fat fucker, ain't he?'

'That he is.'

More soldiers were coming through the entrance now, and behind them a knot of staff officers in pristine uniforms, with fine swords but no armour. Striding at their head with an air of unchallengeable authority came a man with a soft face and sad, watery eyes.

Ganmark.

Monza might have felt some grim satisfaction that she'd predicted his actions so easily, but the swell of hatred at the sight of him crowded it away. He had a long sword at his left hip, a shorter one at his right. Long and short steels, in the Union style.

'Secure the gallery!' he called in his clipped accent as he marched out into the garden. 'Above all, ensure no harm comes to the paintings!'

'Yes, sir!' Boots clattered as men moved to follow his orders. Lots of men. Monza watched them, jaw set aching hard. Too many, maybe, but there was no use weeping about it now. Killing Ganmark was all that mattered.

'General!' Cosca snapped out a vibrating salute. 'We have Duke Salier.'

'So I see. Well done, Captain, you were quick off the mark, and shall be rewarded. Very quick.' He gave a mocking bow. 'Your Excellency, an honour. Grand Duke Orso sends his brotherly greetings.'

'Shit on his greetings,' barked Salier.

'And his regrets that he could not be here in person to witness your utter defeat.'

'If he was here, I'd shit on him too.'

'Doubtless. He was alone?'

Cosca nodded. 'Just waiting here, sir, looking at this.' And he jerked his head towards the great statue in the centre of the garden.

'Bonatine's Warrior.' Ganmark paced slowly towards it, smiling up at the looming marble image of Stolicus. 'Even more beautiful in person than by report. It shall look very well in the gardens of Fontezarmo.' He was no more than five paces away. Monza tried to keep her breath slow, but her heart was hammering. 'I must congratulate you on your wonderful collection, your Excellency.'

'I shit on your congratulations,' sneered Salier.

'You shit on a great many things, it seems. But then a person of your size no doubt produces a vast quantity of the stuff. Bring the fat man closer.'

Now was the moment. Monza gripped the Calvez tight, stepped forwards, gloved right hand on Salier's elbow, Cosca moving up on his other side. Ganmark's officers and guards were spreading out, staring at the statue, at the garden, at Salier, peering through the windows into the hallways. A couple still stuck close to their general, one with his sword drawn, but they didn't look worried. Didn't look ready. All comrades together.

Friendly stood, still as a statue, sword in hand. Shivers' shield hung loose, but she saw his knuckles white on the haft of his axe, saw his good eye flickering from one enemy to another, judging the threat. Ganmark's grin spread as they led Salier forwards.

'Well, well, your Excellency. I still remember the text of that rousing speech, the one you made when you formed the League of Eight. What was it you said? That you'd rather die than kneel to a dog like Orso? I'd very much like to see you kneel, now.' He grinned at Monza as she came closer, no more than a couple of strides between them. 'Lieutenant, could you—' His pale eyes narrowed for an instant, and he knew her. She sprang at him, barging his nearest guard out of the way, lunging for his heart.

She felt the familiar scrape of steel on steel. In that flash Ganmark had somehow managed to get his sword half-drawn, enough to send her thrust wide by a hair. He jerked his head to one side and the point of the Calvez left him a long cut across his cheek before he flicked it away, his sword ringing clear from its sheath.

Then it was chaos in the garden.

Monza's blade left a long scratch down Ganmark's face. The nearest officer gave Friendly a puzzled look. 'But—'

Friendly's sword hacked deep into his head. The blade stuck in his skull as he fell, and Friendly let it go. A clumsy weapon, he preferred to work closer. He slid out the cleaver, the knife from his belt, felt the comfort of the familiar grips in his fists, the overwhelming relief that things were now simple. Kill as many as possible while they were surprised. Even the odds. Eleven against twenty-six were not good ones.

He stabbed a red-haired officer in the stomach before he could draw his sword, shoved him back into a third and sent his arm wide, crowded in close and hacked the cleaver into his shoulder, heavy blade splitting cloth and flesh. He dodged a spear-thrust and the soldier who held it stumbled past. Friendly sank the knife into his armpit, and out, blade scraping against the edge of his breastplate.

There was a screeching, rattling sound as the portcullis dropped. Two soldiers were standing in the archway. The gate came down just behind one, sealing him into the gallery with everyone else. The other must have leaned back, trying to get out of the way. The plummeting spikes caught him in the

stomach and crushed him helpless into the floor, stoving in his breastplate, one leg folded underneath him, the other kicking wildly. He began to scream, but it hardly mattered. By then everyone was screaming.

The fight spread out across the garden, spilled into the four beautiful hallways surrounding it. Cosca dropped a guard with a slash across the backs of his thighs. Shivers had cut one man near in half when the fight began, and now was hemmed in by three more, backing towards the hall full of statues, swinging wildly, making a strange noise between a laugh and a roar.

The red-haired officer Friendly had stabbed limped away, groaning, through the doorway into the first hall, leaving a scattering of bloody spots across the polished floor. Friendly sprang after, rolled under a panicky sweep of his sword, came up and took the back of his head off with the cleaver. The soldier pinned under the portcullis gibbered, gurgled, tore pointlessly at the bars. The other one, only just now working out what was happening, pointed his halberd at Friendly. A confused-looking officer with a birthmark across one cheek turned from contemplation of one of the seventy-eight paintings in the hall and drew his sword.

Two of them. One and one. Friendly almost smiled. This he understood.

*

Monza slashed at Ganmark again but one of his soldiers got in her way, bundled into her with his shield. She slipped, rolled sideways and scrambled up, the fight thrashing around her.

She saw Salier give a bellow, whip out a narrow small-sword from behind his back and cut one astonished officer down with a slash across the face. He thrust at Ganmark, surprisingly agile for a man of his size, but nowhere near agile enough. The general sidestepped and calmly ran the Grand Duke of Visserine right through his big belly. Monza saw a bloody foot of metal slide out from the back of his white uniform. Just as it had slid out through the back of Benna's white shirt.

'Oof,' said Salier. Ganmark raised a boot and shoved him off, sent him stumbling back across the cobbles and into The Warrior's marble pedestal.

The duke slid down it, plump hands clutched to the wound, blood soaking through the soft white cloth.

'Kill them all!' bellowed Ganmark. 'But mind the pictures!'

Two soldiers came at Monza. She hopped sideways so they got in each other's way, slid round a careless overhead chop from one, lunged and ran him through the groin, just under his breastplate. He made a great shriek, falling to his knees, but before she could find her balance again the other was swinging at her. She only just parried, the force almost jarring the Calvez from her hand. He slammed her in the chest with his shield and the rim of her breastplate dug into her stomach and drove her breath out, left her helpless. He raised his sword again, squawked, lurched sideways. One knee buckled and he pitched on his face, sliding forwards. The flights of a flatbow bolt stuck from the nape of his neck. Monza saw Day leaning from a window above, bow in her hands.

Ganmark pointed up towards her. 'Kill the blonde woman!' She vanished inside, and the last of the Talinese soldiers hurried obediently after her.

Salier stared down at the blood leaking out over his plump hands, eyes slightly unfocused. 'Whoever would've thought . . . I'd die fighting?' And his head dropped back against the statue's pedestal.

'Is there no end to the surprises the world throws up?' Ganmark undid the top button of his jacket and pulled a handkerchief from inside it, dabbed at the bleeding cut on his face, then carefully wiped Salier's blood from the blade of his sword. 'It's true, then. You are still alive.'

Monza had her breath back now, and her brother's sword up. 'It's true, cocksucker.'

'I always did admire the subtlety of your rhetoric.' The one Monza had stabbed through the groin was groaning as he tried to drag himself towards the entrance. Ganmark stepped carefully over him on his way towards her, tucking the bloody handkerchief into a pocket and doing his top button up again with his free hand. The crash, scrape, cry of fighting leaked from the halls beyond the colonnades, but for now they were alone in the garden. Unless you counted all the corpses scattered around the entrance. 'Just the two of us, then? It's been a while since I drew steel in earnest, but I'll endeavour not to disappoint you.'

'Don't worry about that. Your death will be entirely satisfying.'

He gave his weak smile, and his damp eyes drifted down to her sword. ‘Fighting left-handed?’

‘Thought I’d give you some kind of chance.’

‘The least I can do is extend to you the same courtesy.’ He flicked his sword smartly from one palm into the other, switched his guard and pointed the blade towards her. ‘Shall we—’

Monza had never been one to wait for an invitation. She lunged at him but he was ready, sidestepped it, came back at her with a sharp pair of cuts, high and low. Their blades rang together, slid and scraped, darting back and forth, glittering in the strips of sunlight between the trees. Ganmark’s immaculately polished cavalry boots glided across the cobbles as nimbly as a dancer’s. He jabbed at her, lightning fast. She parried once, twice, then nearly got caught and only just twisted away. She had to stumble back a few quick steps, take a breath and set herself afresh.

It is a deplorable thing to run from the enemy, Farans wrote, but often better than the alternative.

She watched Ganmark as he paced forwards, gleaming point of his sword moving in gentle little circles. ‘You keep your guard too low, I am afraid. You are full of passion, but passion without discipline is no more than a child’s tantrum.’

‘Why don’t you shut your fucking mouth and fight?’

‘Oh, I can talk and cut pieces from you both at once.’ He came at her in earnest, pushing her from one side of the garden to the other, parrying desperately, jabbing weakly back when she could, but not often, and to no effect.

She’d heard it said he was one of the greatest swordsmen in the world, and it wasn’t hard to believe, even with his left hand. A good deal better than she’d been at her best, and her best was squashed under Gobba’s boot and scattered down the mountainside beneath Fontezarmo. Ganmark was quicker, stronger, sharper. Which meant her only chance was to be cleverer, trickier, dirtier. Angrier.

She screeched as she came at him, feinted left, jabbed right. He sprang back, and she pulled her helmet off and flung it in his face. He saw it just in time to duck, it bounced from the top of his head and made him grunt. She came in after it but he twisted sideways and she only nicked the gold braid on the shoulder of his uniform. She jabbed and he parried, well set again.

‘Tricky.’

‘Get your arse fucked.’

‘I think I might be in the mood, once I’ve killed you.’ He slashed at her, but instead of backing off she came in close, caught his sword, their hilts scraping. She tried to trip him but he stepped around her boot, just kept his balance. She kicked at him, caught his knee, his leg buckled for the briefest moment. She cut viciously, but Ganmark had already slid away and she only hacked a chunk from some topiary, little green leaves fluttering.

‘There are easier ways to trim hedges, if that’s your aim.’ Almost before she knew it he was on her with a series of cuts, driving her across the cobbles. She hopped over the bloody corpse of one of his guards, ducked behind the great legs of the statue, keeping it between them, trying to think out some way to come at him. She undid the buckles on one side of her breastplate, pulled it open and let it clatter down. It was no protection against a swordsman of his skill, and the weight of it was only tiring her.

‘No more tricks, Murcatto?’

‘I’ll think of something, bastard!’

‘Think fast, then.’ Ganmark’s sword darted between the statue’s legs and missed by a hair as she jerked out of its way. ‘You don’t get to win, you know, simply because you think yourself aggrieved. Because you believe yourself justified. It is the best swordsman who wins, not the angriest.’

He seemed about to slide around The Warrior’s huge right leg, but came instead the other way, jumping over Salier’s corpse slumped against the pedestal. She saw it coming, knocked his sword wide then hacked at his head with small elegance but large force. He ducked just in time. The blade of the Calvez clanged against Stolicus’ well-muscled calf and sent chips of marble flying. She only just kept a hold on the buzzing grip, left hand aching as she reeled away.

Ganmark frowned, gently touched the crack in the statue’s leg with his free hand. ‘Pure vandalism.’ He leaped at her, caught her sword and drove her back, once, then twice, her boots sliding from the cobbles and up onto the turf beside, fighting all the while to tease, or trick, or bludgeon out some opening she could use. But Ganmark saw everything well before it came, handled it with the simple efficiency of masterful skill. He was scarcely even breathing hard. The longer they fought the more he had her measure, and the slimmer dwindled her chances.

‘You should mind that backswing,’ he said. ‘Too high. It limits your options and leaves you open.’ She cut at him, and again, but he flicked them dismissively away. ‘And you are prone to tilt your steel to the right when extended.’ She jabbed and he caught the blade on his, metal sliding on metal, his sword whipping around hers. With an effortless twist of his wrist he tore the Calvez from her hand and sent it skittering across the cobbles. ‘See what I mean?’

She took a shocked step back, saw the gleam of light as Ganmark’s sword darted out. The blade slid neatly through the palm of her left hand, point passing between the bones and pricking her in the shoulder, bending her arm back and holding it pinned like meat and onions on a Gurkish skewer. The pain came an instant later, making her groan as Ganmark twisted the sword and drove her helplessly down onto her knees, bent backwards.

‘If that feels undeserved from me, you can tell yourself it’s a gift from the townsfolk of Caprile.’ He twisted his sword the other way and she felt the point grind into her shoulder, the steel scrape against the bones in her hand, blood running down her forearm and into her jacket.

‘Fuck you!’ she spat at him, since it was that or scream.

His mouth twitched into that sad smile. ‘A gracious offer, but your brother was more my type.’ His sword whipped out of her and she lurched onto all fours, chest heaving. She closed her eyes, waiting for the blade to slide between her shoulder blades and through her heart, just the way it had through Benna’s.

She wondered how much it would hurt, how long it would hurt for. A lot, most likely, but not for long.

She heard boot heels clicking away from her on cobbles, and slowly raised her head. Ganmark hooked his foot under the Calvez and flicked it up into his waiting hand. ‘One touch to me, I rather think.’ He tossed the sword arrow-like and it thumped into the turf beside her, wobbling gently back and forth. ‘What do you say? Shall we make it the best of three?’

The long hall that housed Duke Salier’s Styrian masterpieces was now further adorned by five corpses. The ultimate decoration for any palace, though the discerning dictator needs to replace them regularly if he is to avoid an odour. Especially in warm weather. Two of Salier’s disguised soldiers and one of Ganmark’s officers all sprawled bloodily in attitudes of

scant dignity, though one of the general's guards had managed to die in a position approaching comfort, curled around an occasional table with an ornamental vase on top.

Another guard was dragging himself towards the far door, leaving a greasy red trail across the polished floor as he went. The wound Cosca had given him was in his stomach, just under his breastplate, and it was tough to crawl and hold your guts in all at once.

That left two young staff officers, bright swords drawn and bright eyes full of righteous hate, and Cosca. Probably they would both have been nice enough people under happier circumstances. Probably their mothers loved them and probably they loved their mothers back. Certainly they did not deserve to die here in this gaudy temple to greed simply for choosing one self-serving side over another. But what choice for Cosca other than to do his very best to kill them? The lowest slug, weed, slime struggle always to stay alive. Why should Styria's most infamous mercenary hold himself to another standard?

The two officers moved apart, one heading for the tall windows, the other for the paintings, herding Cosca towards the end of the room and, more than likely, the end of his life. He was prickly with sweat under the Talinese uniform, the breath burning his lungs. Fighting to the death was undeniably a young man's game.

'Now, now, lads,' he muttered, weighing his sword. 'How about you face me one at a time? Have you no honour?'

'No honour?' sneered one. 'Us?'

'You disguised yourself in order to launch a cowardly attack upon our general by stealth!' hissed the other, face pinking with outrage.

'True. True.' Cosca let the point of his sword drop. 'And the shame of it stabs at me. I surrender.'

The one on the left was not taken in for a moment. The one on the right looked somewhat puzzled, though, lowered his sword for an instant. It was him that Cosca flung his knife at.

It twittered through the air and thudded into the young man's side, doubling him over. Cosca charged in behind it, aiming for the chest. Perhaps the boy leaned forwards, or perhaps Cosca's aim was wayward, but the blade caught the officer's neck and, in a spectacular justification of all the sharpening, took his head clean off. It spun away, spraying spots of

blood, bounced from one of the paintings with a hollow clonk and a flapping of canvas. The body keeled forwards, blood welling from the severed neck in long spurts and creeping out across the floor.

Even as Cosca yelped with surprised triumph, the other officer was on him, slashing away like a man beating a carpet. Cosca ducked, weaved, parried, jerked helplessly back from a savage cut, tripped over the headless corpse and went sprawling in the slick of blood around it.

The officer gave a shriek as he sprang to finish the work. Cosca's flailing hand clutched for the nearest thing, gripped it, flung it. The severed head. It caught the young man in the face and sent him stumbling. Cosca floundered to his blade and snatched it up, spun about, hand, sword, face, clothes all daubed with red. Strangely fitting, for a man who had lived the life he had.

The officer was already at him again with a flurry of furious cuts. Cosca gave ground as fast as he could without falling over, sword drooping, pretending at complete exhaustion and not having to pretend all that much. He collided with the table, nearly fell, his free hand fished behind him, found the rim of the ornamental jar. The officer came forwards, lifting his sword with a yelp of triumph. It turned to a gurgle of shock as the jar came flying at him. He managed to smash it away with the hilt of his sword, fragments of pottery bursting across one side of him, but that left his blade wide for a moment. Cosca made one last desperate lunge, felt a gentle resistance as his blade punched through the officer's cheek and out through the back of his head with textbook execution.

'Oh.' The officer wobbled slightly as Cosca whipped his sword back and capered sharply away. 'Is that . . .' His look was one of bleary-eyed surprise, like a man who had woken up drunk to find himself robbed and tied naked to a post. Cosca could not quite remember whether it was in Etrisani or Westport that had happened to him, those years all rather blended into one.

'Whasappenah?' The officer slashed with exaggerated slowness and Cosca stepped out of the way, let him spin round in a wide circle and sprawl over onto his side. He laboriously rolled, clambered up, blood running gently from the neat little slit beside his nose. The eye above it was flickering now, face on that side gone slack as old leather.

'Sluviduviduther,' he drooled.

'Your pardon?' asked Cosca.

‘Slurghhh!’ And he raised his quivering sword and charged. Directly sideways into the wall. He crashed into the painting of the girl surprised while bathing, tore a great gash through it with his flailing sword arm, brought the great canvas keeling down on top of him as he fell, one boot sticking out from underneath the gilded frame. He did not move again.

‘The lucky bastard,’ Cosca whispered. To die beneath a naked woman. It was the way he had always wanted to go.

The wound in Monza’s shoulder burned. The one through her left hand burned far worse. Her palm, her fingers, sticky with blood. She could barely make a fist, let alone grip a blade. No choice, then. She dragged the glove from her right hand with her teeth, reached out and took hold of the Calvez’ hilt with it, feeling the crooked bones shift as her twisted fingers closed around the grip, little one still painfully straight.

‘Ah. Right-handed?’ Ganmark flicked his sword spinning into the air, snatched it back with his own right hand as nimbly as a circus trickster. ‘I always did admire your determination, if not the goals on which you trained it. Revenge, now, eh?’

‘Revenge,’ she snarled.

‘Revenge. If you could even get it, what good would it do you? All this expenditure of effort, pain, treasure, blood, for what? Who is ever left better off for it?’ His sad eyes watched her slowly stand. ‘Not the avenged dead, certainly. They rot on, regardless. Not those who are avenged upon, of course. Corpses all. And what of the ones who take vengeance, what of them? Do they sleep easier, do you suppose, once they have heaped murder on murder? Sown the bloody seeds of a hundred other retributions?’ She circled around, trying to think of some trick to kill him with. ‘All those dead men at that bank in Westport, that was your righteous work, I suppose? And the carnage at Cardotti’s, a fair and proportionate reply?’

‘What had to be done!’

‘Ah, what had to be done. The favourite excuse of unexamined evil echoes down the ages and slobbers from your twisted mouth.’ He danced at her, their swords rang together, once, twice. He jabbed, she parried and jabbed back. Each contact sent a jolt of pain up her arm. She ground her teeth together, forced the scowl to stay on her face, but there was no disguising how much it hurt her, or how clumsy she was with it. If she’d

had small chances with her left, she had none at all with her right, and he knew it already.

'Why the Fates chose you for saving I will never guess, but you should have thanked it kindly and slunk away into obscurity. Let us not pretend you and your brother did not deserve precisely what you received.'

'Fuck yourself! I didn't deserve that!' But even as she said it, she had to wonder. 'My brother didn't!'

Ganmark snorted. 'No one is quicker to forgive a handsome man than I, but your brother was a vindictive coward. A charming, greedy, ruthless, spineless parasite. A man of the very lowest character imaginable. The only thing that lifted him from utter worthlessness, and utter inconsequence, was you.' He sprang at her with lethal speed and she reeled away, fell against a cherry tree with a grunt and stumbled back through the shower of white blossom. He could surely have spitted her but he stayed still as a statue, sword at the ready, smiling faintly as he watched her thrash her way clear.

'And let us face the facts, General Murcatto. You, for all your undeniable talents, have hardly been a paragon of virtue. Why, there must be a hundred thousand people with just reasons to fling your hated carcass from that terrace!'

'Not Orso. Not him!' She came low, jabbing sloppily at his hips, wincing as he flicked her sword aside and jarred the grip in her twisted palm.

'If that's a joke, it's not a funny one. Quibble with the judge, when the sentence is self-evidently more than righteous?' He placed his feet with all the watchful care of an artist applying paint to a canvas, steering her back onto the cobbles. 'How many deaths have you had a hand in? How much destruction? You are a bandit! A glorified profiteer! You are a maggot grown fat on the rotting corpse of Styria!' Three more blows, rapid as a sculptor's hammer on his chisel, snapping her sword this way and that in her aching grip. 'Did not deserve, you say to me, did not deserve? That excuse for a right hand is embarrassing enough. Pray do not shame yourself further.'

She made a tired, pained, clumsy lunge. He deflected it disdainfully, already stepping around her and letting her stumble past. She expected his sword in her back; instead she felt his boot thud into her arse and send her sprawling across the cobbles, Benna's sword bouncing from her numb fingers one more time. She lay there a moment, panting for breath, then

slowly rolled over, came up to her knees. There hardly seemed much point standing. She'd be back here soon enough, once he ran her through. Her right hand throbbed, trembled. The shoulder of her stolen uniform was dark with blood, the fingers of her left hand were dripping with it.

Ganmark flicked his wrist, whipped the head from a flower and into his waiting palm. He lifted it to his face and breathed in deep. 'A beautiful day, and a good place to die. We should have finished you up at Fontezarmo, along with your brother. But now will do.'

She couldn't think of much in the way of sharp last words, so she just tipped her head back and spat at him. It spattered against his neck, his collar, the pristine front of his uniform. Not much vengeance, maybe, but something. Ganmark peered down at it. 'A perfect lady to the end.'

His eyes flickered sideways and he jerked away as something flashed past him, twittered into a flower bed behind. A thrown knife. There was a snarl and Cosca was on him, barking like a mad dog as he harried the general back across the cobbles.

'Cosca!' Fumbling her sword up. 'Late, as ever.'

'I was somewhat occupied next door,' growled the old mercenary, pausing to catch his breath.

'Nicomo Cosca?' Ganmark frowned at him. 'I thought you were dead.'

'There have always been false reports of my death. Wishful thinking—'

'On the part of his many enemies.' Monza stood, shaking the weakness out of her limbs. 'You've got a mind to kill me, you should get it done instead of talking about it.'

Ganmark backed slowly away, sliding his short steel from its sheath with his left hand, pointing it towards her, the long towards Cosca, his eyes flitting back and forth between them. 'Oh, there's still time.'

Shivers weren't himself. Or maybe he finally was. The pain had turned him mad. Or the eye they'd left him wasn't working right. Or he was still all broken up from the husk he'd been sucking at the past few days. Whatever the reasons, he was in hell.

And he liked it.

The long hall pulsed, glowed, swam like a rippling pool. Sunlight burned through the windows, stabbing and flashing at him through a hundred hundred glittering squares of glass. The statues shone, smiled, sweated,

cheered him on. He might've had one eye less than before, but he saw things clearer. The pain had swept away all his doubts, his fears, his questions, his choices. All that shit had been dead weight on him. All that shit was weakness, and lies, and a waste of effort. He'd made himself think things were complicated when they were beautifully, awfully simple. His axe had all the answers he needed.

Its blade caught the sunlight and left a great white, fizzing smear, hacked into a man's arm sending black streaks flying. Cloth flapping. Flesh torn. Bone splintered. Metal bent and twisted. A spear squealed across Shivers' shield and he could taste the roar in his mouth, sweet as he swung the axe again. It crashed into a breastplate and left a huge dent, sent a body flailing into a pitted urn, burst it apart, writhing on the floor in a mass of shattered pottery.

The world was turned inside out, like the glistening innards of the officer he'd gutted a few moments before. He used to get tired when he fought. Now he got stronger. The rage boiled up in him, leaked out of him, set his skin on fire. With every blow he struck it got worse, better, muscles burning until he had to scream it out, laugh it out, weep, sing, thrash, dance, shriek.

He smashed a sword away with his shield, tore it from a hand, was on the soldier behind it, arms around him, kissing his face, licking at him. He roared as he ran, ran, legs pounding, rammed him into one of the statues, sent it over, crashing into another, and another beyond that, tipping, smashing on the floor, breaking apart into chunks in a cloud of dust.

The guard groaned, sprawling in the ruins, tried to roll over. Shivers' axe stoved the top of his helmet in deep with a hollow clonk, drove the metal rim right down over his eyes and squashed his nose flat, blood running out from underneath.

'Fucking die!' Shivers bashed in the side of the helmet and sent his head one way. 'Die!' Swung back and crumpled the other side, neck crunching like a sock full of gravel. 'Die! Die!' Bonk, bonk, like pots and pans clattering in the river after mealtime. A statue looked on, disapproving.

'Look at me?' Shivers smashed its head off with his axe. Then he was on top of someone, not knowing how he got there, ramming the edge of his shield into a face until it was nothing but a shapeless mess of red. He could hear someone whispering, whispering in his ear. Mad, hissing, croaking voice.

‘I am made of death. I am the Great Leveller. I am the storm in the High Places.’ The Bloody-Nine’s voice, but it came from his own throat. The hall was strewn with fallen men and fallen statues, scattered with bits of both. ‘You.’ Shivers pointed his bloody axe at the last of them, cringing at the far end of the dusty hallway. ‘I see you there, fucker. No one gets away.’ He realised he was talking in Northern. The man couldn’t understand a word he said. Hardly mattered, though.

He reckoned he got the gist.

Monza forced herself on down the arcade, wringing the last strength from her aching legs, snarling as she lunged, jabbed, cut clumsily, not letting up for a moment. Ganmark was on the retreat, dropping back through sunlight, then shadow, then sunlight again, frowning with furious concentration. His eyes flickered from side to side, parrying her blade and Cosca’s as it jabbed at him from between the pillars on her right, their hard breathing, their shuffling footsteps, the quick scraping of steel echoing from the vaulted ceiling.

She cut at him, then back the other way, ignoring the burning pain in her fist as she tore the short steel from his hand and sent it clattering into the shadows. Ganmark lurched away, only just turned one of Cosca’s thrusts wide with his long steel, left his unguarded side facing her. She grinned, was pulling her arm back to lunge when something crashed into the window on her left, sent splinters of glass flying into her face. She thought she heard Shivers’ voice, roaring in Northern from the other side. Ganmark slipped between two pillars as Cosca slashed at him and away across the lawn, backing off into the centre of the garden.

‘Could you get on and kill this bastard?’ wheezed Cosca.

‘Doing my best. You go left.’

‘Left it is.’ They moved apart, herding Ganmark towards the statue. He looked spent now, blowing hard, soft cheeks turned blotchy pink and shining with sweat. She smiled as she feinted at him, sensing victory, felt her smile slip as he suddenly sprang to meet her. She dodged his first thrust, slashed at his neck, but he caught it and pushed her away. He was a lot less spent than she’d thought, and she was a lot more. Her foot came down badly and she tottered sideways. Ganmark darted past and his sword left a burning cut across her thigh. She tried to turn, screeched as her leg

crumpled, fell and rolled, the Calvez tumbling from her limp fingers and bouncing away.

Cosca sprang past with a hoarse cry, swinging wildly. Ganmark dropped under his cut, lunged from the ground and ran him neatly through the stomach. Cosca's sword clanged hard into The Warrior's shin and flew from his hand, stone chips spinning. The general whipped his blade free and Cosca dropped to his knees, sagged sideways with a long groan.

'And that's that.' Ganmark turned towards her, Bonatine's greatest work looming up behind him. A few flakes of marble trickled from the statue's ankle, already cracked where Monza's sword had chopped into it. 'You've given me some exercise, I'll grant you that. You are a woman – or have been a woman – of remarkable determination.' Cosca dragged himself across the cobbles, leaving spotty smears of blood behind him. 'But in keeping your eyes always ahead, you blinded yourself to everything around you. To the nature of the great war you fight in. To the natures of the people closest to you.' Ganmark flicked out his handkerchief again, dabbed sweat from his forehead, carefully wiped blood from his steel. 'If Duke Orso and his state of Talins are no more than a sword in the hand of Valint and Balk, then you were never more than that sword's ruthless point.' He flicked the shining point of his own sword with his forefinger. 'Always stabbing, always killing, but never considering why.' There was a gentle creaking, and over his shoulder The Warrior's own great sword wobbled ever so slightly. 'Still. It hardly matters now. For you the fight is over.' Ganmark still wore his sad smile as he came to a stop a stride from her. 'Any pithy last words?'

'Behind you,' growled Monza through gritted teeth, as The Warrior rocked ever so gently forwards.

'You must take me for—' There was a loud bang. The statue's leg split in half and the whole vast weight of stone toppled inexorably forwards.

Ganmark was just beginning to turn as the point of Stolicus' giant sword pinned him between the shoulder blades, drove him onto his knees, burst out through his stomach and crashed into the cobbles, spraying blood and rock chips in Monza's stinging face. The statue's legs broke apart as they hit the ground, noble feet left on the pedestal, the rest cracking into muscular chunks and rolling around in a cloud of white marble dust. From the hips up, the proud image of the greatest soldier of history stayed in one

magnificent piece, staring sternly down at Orso's general, impaled on his monstrous sword beneath him.

Ganmark made a sucking sound like water draining from a broken bath, and coughed blood down the front of his uniform. His head fell forwards, steel clattering from his dangling hand.

There was a moment of stillness.

'Now that,' croaked Cosca, 'is what I call a happy accident.'

Four dead, three left. Monza saw someone creep out from one of the colonnades, grimaced as she shuffled to her sword and dragged it up for the third time, hardly sure which ruined hand to hold it in. It was Day, loaded flatbow levelled. Friendly trudged along behind her, knife and cleaver hanging from his fists.

'You got him?' asked the girl.

Monza looked at Ganmark's corpse, kneeling spitted on the great length of bronze. 'Stolicus did.'

Cosca had kicked his way as far as one of the cherry trees and sat with his back against the trunk. He looked just like a man relaxing on a summer's day. Apart from the bloody hand pressed to his stomach. She limped up to him, stuck the Calvez point-first into the turf and knelt down.

'Let me have a look.' She fumbled with the buttons on Cosca's jacket, but before she got the second one undone he reached up, gently took her bloody hand and her twisted one in his.

'I've been waiting years for you to tear my clothes off, but I think I'll have politely to decline. I'm finished.'

'You? Never.'

He squeezed her hands tighter. 'Right through the guts, Monza. It's over.' His eyes rolled towards the gate, and she could hear the faint clattering as soldiers on the other side struggled to lever the portcullis open. 'And you'll have other problems soon enough. Four of seven, though, girl.' He grinned. 'Never thought you'd make four of seven.'

'Four of seven,' muttered Friendly, behind her.

'I wish I could've made Orso one of them.'

'Well.' Cosca raised his brows. 'It's a noble calling, but I guess you can't kill everyone.'

Shivers was walking slowly over from one of the doorways. He barely even glanced at Ganmark's impaled corpse as he passed. 'None left?'

‘Not in here.’ Friendly nodded towards the gate. ‘Some out there, though.’

‘Reckon so.’ The Northman stopped not far away. His hanging axe, his dented shield, his pale face and the bandages across one half of it were all dashed and speckled dark red.

‘You alright?’ asked Monza

‘Don’t rightly know what I am.’

‘Are you hurt, I’m asking?’

He touched one hand to the bandages. ‘No worse’n before we started . . . reckon I must be beloved o’ the moon today, as the hillmen say.’ His eye rolled down to her bloody shoulder, her bloody hand. ‘You’re bleeding.’

‘My fencing lesson turned ugly.’

‘You need a bandage?’

She nodded towards the gateway, the noise of the Talinese soldiers on the other side getting louder with every moment. ‘We’ll be lucky if we get the time to bleed to death.’

‘What now, then?’

She opened her mouth, but nothing came out. There was no use fighting, even if she’d had the strength. The palace would be swarming with Orso’s soldiers. There was no use surrendering, even if she’d been the type. They’d be lucky if they made it back to Fontezarmo to be killed. Benna had always warned her she didn’t think far enough ahead, and it seemed he’d had a point—

‘I’ve an idea.’ Day’s face had broken out in an unexpected smile. Monza followed her pointing finger, up to the roofline above the garden, and squinted into the sun. A black figure crouched there against the bright sky.

‘A fine afternoon to you!’ She never thought she’d be glad to hear Castor Morveer’s scraping whine. ‘I was hoping to view the Duke of Visserine’s famous collection and I appear to have become entirely lost! I don’t suppose any of you kind gentlefolk know where I might find it? I hear he has Bonatine’s greatest work!’

Monza jerked her bloody thumb at the ruined statue. ‘Not all it’s cracked up to be!’

Vitari had appeared beside the poisoner now, was smoothly lowering a rope. ‘We’re rescued,’ grunted Friendly, in just the same tone as he might have said, ‘We’re dead.’

Monza hardly had the energy even to feel pleased. She hardly knew if she was pleased. ‘Day, Shivers, get up there.’

‘No doubt.’ Day tossed her bow away and ran for it. The Northman frowned at Monza for a moment, then followed.

Friendly was looking down at Cosca. ‘What about him?’ The old mercenary seemed to have dozed off for a moment, eyelids flickering.

‘We’ll have to pull him up. Get a hold.’

The convict slid one arm around his back and started to lift him. Cosca woke with a jolt, grimaced. ‘Dah! No, no, no, no, no.’ Friendly let him carefully back down and Cosca shook his scabby head, breathing ragged. ‘I’m not screaming my way up a rope just so I can die on a roof. Here’s as good a place as any, and this as good a time. I’ve been promising to do it for years. Might as well keep my word this once.’

She squatted down beside him. ‘I’d rather call you a liar one more time, and keep you watching my back.’

‘I only stayed there . . . because I like looking at your arse.’ He bared his teeth, winced, gave a long growl. The clanging at the gate was getting louder.

Friendly offered Cosca’s sword to him. ‘They’ll be coming. You want this?’

‘Why would I? It was messing with those things got me into this fix in the first place.’ He tried to shift, winced and sagged back, his skin already carrying that waxy sheen that corpses have.

Vitari and Morveer had bundled Shivers over the gutter and onto the roof. Monza jerked her head at Friendly. ‘Your turn.’

He crouched there for a moment, not moving, then looked to Cosca. ‘Do you want me to stay?’

The old mercenary took Friendly’s big hand and smiled as he gave it a squeeze. ‘I am touched beyond words to hear you make the offer. But no, my friend. This I had better handle alone. Give your dice a roll for me.’

‘I will.’ Friendly stood and strode off towards the rope without a backward glance. Monza watched him go. Her hands, her shoulder, her leg burned, her battered body ached. Her eyes slunk over the bodies scattered across the garden. Sweet victory. Sweet vengeance. Men turned into meat.

‘Do me one favour.’ Cosca had a sad smile, almost as if he guessed her thoughts.

‘You came back for me, didn’t you? I can stretch to one.’

‘Forgive me.’

She made a sound – half-snort, half-retch. ‘I thought I was the one betrayed you?’

‘What does it matter now? Treachery is commonplace. Forgiveness is rare. I’d rather go without any debts. Except all the money I owe in Ospria. And Adua. And Dagoska.’ He weakly waved one bloody hand. ‘Let’s say no debts to you, anyway, and leave it at that.’

‘That I can do. We’re even.’

‘Good. I lived like shit. Glad to see at least I got the dying right. Get on.’

Part of her wanted to stay with him, to be with him when Orso’s men broke through the gate, make sure there really were no debts. But not that big a part. She’d never been prone to sentiment. Orso had to die, and if she was killed here, who’d get it done? She pulled the Calvez from the ground, slid it back into its sheath and turned without another word. Words are poor tools at a time like that. She limped to the rope, tied it off under her hips the best she could, twisted it around her wrist.

‘Let’s go!’

From the roof Monza could see right across the city. The wide curve of the Visser and its graceful bridges. The many towers poking at the sky, dwarfed by pillars of smoke still rising from the scattered fires. Day had already got a pear from somebody and was biting happily into it, yellow curls blowing on the breeze, juice gleaming on her chin.

Morveer raised one eyebrow at the carnage down in the garden. ‘I am relieved to observe that, in my absence, you succeeded in keeping the slaughter under tight control.’

‘Some things never change,’ she snapped at him.

‘Cosca?’ asked Vitari.

‘Not coming.’

Morveer gave a sickening little grin. ‘He failed to save his own skin this time? So a drunkard can change after all.’

Rescue or not, Monza would have stabbed him at that moment if she’d had a good hand to do it with. From the way Vitari scowled at the poisoner, she was feeling much the same. She jerked her spiky head towards the river instead. ‘We should have the tearful reunion down in the boat. The city’s full of Orso’s troops. High time we were floating out to sea.’

Monza took one last look back. All was still down in the garden. Salier had slid from the fallen statue's pedestal and rolled onto his back, arms outstretched as if welcoming a dear old friend. Ganmark knelt in a wide slick of blood, impaled on The Warrior's great bronze blade, head dangling. Cosca's eyes were closed, hands resting in his lap, a slight smile still on his tipped-back face. Cherry blossom wafted down and settled across his stolen uniform.

'Cosca, Cosca,' she murmured. 'What will I do without you?'

V

PURANTI

> ‘For mercenaries are disunited, thirsty for power, undisciplined, and disloyal; they are brave among their friends and cowards before the enemy; they have no fear of God, they do not keep faith with their fellow men; they avoid defeat just as long as they avoid battle; in peacetime you are despoiled by them and in wartime by the enemy’
>
> *Niccolò Machiavelli*

F*or two years, half the Thousand Swords pretended to fight the other half.* Cosca, when he was sober enough to speak, boasted that never before in history had men made so much for doing so little. They sucked the coffers of Nicante and Affoia bone dry, then turned north when their hopes were dashed by the sudden outbreak of peace, seeking new wars to profit from, or ambitious employers to begin them.

No employer was more ambitious than Orso, the new Grand Duke of Talins, kicked to power after his elder brother was kicked by his favourite horse. He was all too eager to sign a Paper of Engagement with the well-known mercenary Monzcarro Murcatto. Especially since his enemies in Etrea had but lately hired the infamous Nicomo Cosca to lead their troops.

It proved difficult to bring the two to battle, however. Like two cowards circling before a brawl, they spent a whole season in ruinously expensive manoeuvrings, doing much harm to the farmers of the region but little to each other. They were finally urged together in ripe wheat-fields near the village of Afieri, where a battle seemed sure to follow. Or something that looked very like one.

But that evening Monza had an unexpected visitor to her tent. None other than Duke Orso himself.

‘Your Excellency, I had not expected—’

‘No need for pleasantries. I know what Nicomo Cosca has planned for tomorrow.’

Monza frowned. ‘I imagine he plans to fight, and so do I.’

‘He plans no such thing, and neither do you. The pair of you have been making fools of your employers for the past two years. I do not care to be made a fool of. I can see fake battles in the theatre at a fraction of the cost. That is why I will pay you twice to fight him in earnest.’

Monza had not been expecting this. ‘I . . .’

‘You have loyalty to him, I know. I respect that. Everyone must stick at something in their lives. But Cosca is the past, and I have decided that you are the future. Your brother agrees with me.’

Monza had certainly not been expecting that. She stared at Benna, and he grinned back. ‘It’s better like this. You deserve to lead.’

‘I can’t . . . the other captains will never—’

‘I spoke to them already,’ said Benna. ‘All except Faithful, and that old dog will follow along when he sees how the wind’s blowing. They’re sick of Cosca, and his drinking, and his foolishness. They want a long contract and a leader they can be proud of. They want you.’

The Duke of Talins was watching. She could not afford to seem reluctant. ‘Then I accept, of course. You had me at paid twice,’ she lied.

Orso smiled. ‘I have a feeling you and I will do well for one another, General Murcatto. I will look forward to news of your victory tomorrow.’ And he left.

When the tent flap dropped Monza cuffed her brother across the face and knocked him to the ground. ‘What have you done, Benna? What have you done?’

He looked sullenly up at her, one hand to his bloody mouth. ‘I thought you’d be pleased.’

‘No you fucking didn’t! You thought you’d be. I hope you are.’

But there was nothing she could do but forgive him, and make the best of it. He was her brother. The only one who really knew her. And Sesaria, Victus, Andiche and most of the other captains had agreed. They were tired of Nicomo Cosca. So there could be no turning back. The next day, as dawn slunk out of the east and they prepared for the coming battle, Monza ordered her men to charge in earnest. What else could she do?

By evening she was sitting in Cosca’s chair, with Benna grinning beside her and her newly enriched captains drinking to her first victory. Everyone laughed but her. She was thinking of Cosca, and all he had given her, what

she had owed him and how she had paid him back. She was in no mood to celebrate.

Besides, she was captain general of the Thousand Swords. She could not afford to laugh.

Sixes

The dice came up a pair of sixes. In the Union they call that score suns, like the sun on their flag. In Baol they call it twice won, because the house pays double on it. In Gurkhul they call it the Prophet or the Emperor, depending where a man's loyalty lies. In Thond it is the golden dozen. In the Thousand Isles, twelve winds. In Safety they call two sixes the jailer, because the jailer always wins. All across the Circle of the World men cheer for that score, but to Friendly it was no better than any other. It won him nothing. He turned his attention back to the great bridge of Puranti, and the men crossing it.

The faces of the statues on their tall columns might have worn to pitted blobs, the roadway might have cracked with age and the parapet crumbled, but the six arches still soared tall and graceful, scornful of the dizzy drop below. The great piers of rock from which they sprang, six times six strides high, still defied the battering waters. Six hundred years old and more, but the Imperial bridge was still the only way across the Pura's deep gorge at this time of year. The only way to Ospria by land.

The army of Grand Duke Rogont marched across it in good order, six men abreast. The regular tramp, tramp of their boots was like a mighty heartbeat, accompanied by the jingle and clatter of arms and harness, the occasional calls of officers, the steady murmur of the watching crowd, the rushing throb of the river far below. They had been marching across it all morning, now, by company, by battalion, by regiment. Moving forests of spear tips, gleaming metal and studded leather. Dusty, dirty, determined faces. Proud flags hanging limp on the still air. Their six-hundredth rank had passed not long before. Some four thousand men across already and at least as many more to follow. Six, by six, by six, they came.

'Good order. For a retreat.' Shivers' voice had withered to a throaty whisper in Visserine.

Vitari snorted. 'If there's one thing Rogont knows how to manage it's a retreat. He's had enough practice.'

'One must appreciate the irony,' observed Morveer, watching the soldiers pass with a look of faint scorn. 'Today's proud legions march over the last

vestiges of yesterday's fallen empire. So it always is with military splendour. Hubris made flesh.'

'How incredibly profound.' Murcatto curled her lip. 'Why, travelling with the great Morveer is both pleasure and education.'

'I am philosopher and poisoner all in one. I pray you not to worry, though, my fee covers both. Remunerate me for my bottomless insights, the poison comes free of charge.'

'Does our luck have no end?' she grated back.

'Does it even have a beginning?' murmured Vitari.

The group was down to six, and those more irritable than ever. Murcatto, hood drawn up, black hair hanging lank from inside, only her pointed nose and chin and hard mouth visible. Shivers, half his head still bandaged and the other half milk-pale, his one eye sunk in a dark ring. Vitari, sitting on the parapet with her legs stretched out and her shoulders propped against a broken column, freckled face tipped back towards the bright sun. Morveer, frowning down at the churning water, his apprentice leaning nearby. And Friendly, of course. Six. Cosca was dead. In spite of his name, Friendly rarely kept friends long.

'Talking of remuneration,' Morveer droned on, 'we should visit the nearest bank and have a note drawn up. I hate to have debts outstanding between myself and an employer. It leaves a sour taste on our otherwise honey-sweet relationship.'

'Sweet,' grunted Day, around a mouthful, though whether she was talking about her cake or the relationship, it was impossible to say.

'You owe me for my part in General Ganmark's demise, a peripheral yet vital one, since it prevented you from partaking in a demise of your own. I have also to replace the equipment so carelessly lost in Visserine. Need I once again point out that, had you allowed me to remove our problematic farmers as I desired, there would have been no—'

'Enough,' hissed Murcatto. 'I don't pay you to be reminded of my mistakes. '

'I imagine that service too is free of charge.' Vitari slid down from the parapet. Day swallowed the last of her cake and licked her fingers. They all made ready to move, except for Friendly. He stayed, looking down at the water.

'Time to move,' said Murcatto.

‘Yes. I am going back to Talins.’

‘You’re what?’

‘Sajaam was sending word to me here, but there is no letter.’

‘It’s a long way to Talins. There’s a war—’

‘This is Styria. There’s always a war.’

There was a pause while she looked at him, her eyes almost hidden in her hood. The others watched, none showing much feeling at his going. People rarely did, when he went, and nor did he. ‘You’re sure?’ she asked.

‘Yes.’ He had seen half of Styria – Westport, Sipani, Visserine and much of the country in between, and hated it all. He had felt shiftless and scared sitting in Sajaam’s smoke-house, dreaming of Safety. Now those long days, the smell of husk, the endless cards and posturing, the routine rounds of the slums collecting money, the occasional moments of predictable and well-structured violence, all seemed like some happy dream. There was nothing for him out here, where every day was under a different sky. Murcatto was chaos, and he wanted no more of her.

‘Take this then.’ She pulled a purse out from her coat.

‘I am not here for your money.’

‘Take it anyway. It’s a lot less than you deserve. Might make the journey easier.’ He let her press it into his hand.

‘Luck be at your back,’ said Shivers.

Friendly nodded. ‘The world is made of six, today.’

‘Six be at your back, then.’

‘It will be, whether I want it or not.’ Friendly swept up the dice with the side of his hand, wrapped them carefully in their cloth and tucked them down inside his jacket. Without a backward glance he slipped off through the crowds lining the bridge, against the endless current of soldiers, over the endless current of water. He left both behind, struck on into the smaller, meaner part of the city on the river’s western side. He would pass the time by counting the number of strides it took him to reach Talins. Since he said his goodbyes he had made already three hundred and sixty-six—

‘Master Friendly!’ He jerked round, frowning, hands itching ready to move to knife and cleaver. A figure leaned lazily in a doorway off the street, arms and boots crossed, face all in shadow. ‘Whatever are the odds of meeting you here?’ The voice sounded terribly familiar. ‘Well, you would

know the odds better than me, I'm sure, but a happy chance indeed, on that we can agree.'

'We can,' said Friendly, beginning to smile as he realised who it was.

'Why, I feel almost as if I threw a pair of sixes . . .'

The Eye-Maker

A bell tinkled as Shivers shoved the door open and stepped through into the shop, Monza at his shoulder. It was dim inside, light filtering through the window in a dusty shaft and falling across a marble counter, shadowy shelves down one wall. At the back, under a hanging lamp, was a big chair with a leather pad to rest your head on. Might've looked inviting, except for the straps to hold the sitter down. On a table beside it a neat row of instruments were laid out. Blades, needles, clamps, pliers. Surgeon's tools.

That room might've given him a cold tremble fit to match his name once, but no more. He'd had his eye burned out of his face, and lived to learn the lessons. The world hardly seemed to have any horrors left. Made him smile, to think how scared he'd always been before. Scared of everything and nothing. Smiling tugged at the great wound under his bandages and made his face burn, so he stopped.

The bell brought a man creeping through a side door, hands rubbing nervously together. Small and dark-skinned with a sorry face. Worried they were here to rob him, more'n likely, what with Orso's army not far distant. Everyone in Puranti seemed worried, scared they'd lose what they had. Apart from Shivers himself. He hadn't much to lose.

'Sir, madam, can I be of assistance?'

'You're Scopal?' asked Monza. 'The eye-maker?'

'I am Scopal,' he bent a nervous bow, 'scientist, surgeon, physician, specialising in all things relating to the vision.'

Shivers undid the knot at the back of his head. 'Good enough.' And he started unwinding the bandages. 'Fact is I've lost an eye.'

That perked the surgeon up. 'Oh, don't say lost, my friend!' He came forwards into the light from the window. 'Don't say lost until I have had a chance to view the damage. You would be amazed at what can be achieved! Science is leaping forwards every day!'

'Springy bastard, ain't it.'

Scopal gave an uncertain chuckle. 'Ah . . . most elastic. Why, I have returned a measure of sight to men who thought themselves blind for life. They called me a magician! Imagine that! They called me . . . a . . .'

Shivers peeled away the last bandages, the air cold against his tingling skin, and he stepped up closer, turning the left side of his face forwards. ‘Well? What do you reckon? Can science make that big a jump?’

The man gave a polite nod. ‘My apologies. But even in the area of replacement I have made great discoveries, never fear!’

Shivers took a half-step further, looming over the man. ‘Do I look feared to you?’

‘Not in the least, of course, I merely meant . . . well . . .’ Scopal cleared his throat and sidled to the shelves. ‘My current process for an ocular prosthesis is—’

‘The fuck?’

‘Fake eye,’ said Monza.

‘Oh, much, much more than that.’ Scopal slid out a wooden rack. Six metal balls sat on it, gleaming silver-bright. ‘A perfect sphere of the finest Midderland steel is inserted into the orbit where it will, one hopes, remain permanently.’ He brought down a round board, flipped it towards them with a showy twist. It was covered with eyes. Blue ones, green ones, brown ones. Each had the colour of a real eye, the gleam of a real eye, some of the whites even had a red vein or two in ’em. And still they looked about as much like a real eye as a boiled egg might’ve.

Scopal waved at his wares with high smugness. ‘A curved enamel such as these, painted with care to match perfectly your other eye, is then inserted between metal ball and eyelid. These are prone to wear, and must therefore be regularly changed, but, believe me, the results can be uncanny.’

The fake eyes stared, unblinking, at Shivers. ‘They look like dead men’s eyes.’

An uncomfortable pause. ‘When glued upon a board, of course, but properly fitted within a living face—’

‘Reckon it’s a good thing. Dead men tell no lies, eh? We’ll have no more lies.’ Shivers strode to the back of the shop, dropped down into the chair, stretched out and crossed his legs. ‘Get to it, then.’

‘At once?’

‘Why not?’

‘The steel will take an hour or two to fit. Preparing a set of enamels usually requires at least a fortnight—’ Monza tossed a stack of silver coins onto the counter and they jingled as they spilled across the stone. Scopal

humbly bowed his head. ‘I will fit the closest I have, and have the rest ready by tomorrow evening.’ He turned the lamp up so bright Shivers had to shield his good eye with one hand. ‘It will be necessary to make some incisions.’

‘Some whats, now?’

‘Cuts,’ said Monza.

‘ ’Course it will. Nothing in life worth doing that doesn’t need a blade, eh?’

Scopal shuffled the instruments around on the little table. ‘Followed by some stitches, the removal of the useless flesh—’

‘Dig out the dead wood? I’m all for it. Let’s have a fresh start.’

‘Might I suggest a pipe?’

‘Fuck, yes,’ he heard Monza whisper.

‘Suggest away,’ said Shivers. ‘I’m getting bored o’ pain the last few weeks.’

The eye-maker bowed his head, eased off to charge the pipe. ‘I remember you getting your hair cut,’ said Monza. ‘Nervous as a lamb at its first shearing.’

‘Heh. True.’

‘Now look at you, keen to be fitted for an eye.’

‘A wise man once told me you have to be realistic. Strange how fast we change, ain’t it, when we have to?’

She frowned back at him. ‘Don’t change too far. I’ve got to go.’

‘No stomach for the eye-making business?’

‘I’ve got to renew an acquaintance.’

‘Old friend?’

‘Old enemy.’

Shivers grinned. ‘Dearer yet. Watch you don’t get killed, eh?’ And he settled back in the chair, pulled the strap tight round his forehead. ‘We’ve still got work to do.’ He closed his good eye, the lamplight glowing pink through the lid.

Prince of Prudence

Grand Duke Rogont had made his headquarters in the Imperial Bath-Hall. The building was still one of the greatest in Puranti, casting half the square at the east end of the old bridge into shadow. But like the rest of the city, it had seen better centuries. Half its great pediment and two of the six mighty pillars that once held it up had collapsed lifetimes before, the stone pilfered for the mismatched walls of newer, meaner buildings. The stained masonry sprouted with grass, with dead ivy, with a couple of stubborn little trees, even. Probably baths had been a higher priority when it was built, before everyone in Styria started trying to kill each other. Happy times, when keeping the water hot enough had been anyone's biggest worry. The crumbling building might have whispered of the glories of a lost age, but made a sad comment on Styria's long decline.

If Monza had cared a shit.

But she had other things on her mind. She waited for a gap to appear between one tramping company of Rogont's retreating army and the next, then she forced her shoulders back and strode across the square. Up the cracked steps of the Bath-Hall, trying to walk with all her old swagger while her crooked hip bone clicked back and forth in its socket and sent stings right through her arse. She pushed her hood back, keeping her eyes fixed on the foremost of the guards, a grizzled-looking veteran wide as a door with a scar down one colourless cheek.

'I need to speak to Duke Rogont,' she said.

'Of course.'

'I'm Mon . . . what?' She'd been expecting to explain herself. Probably to be laughed at. Possibly to be strung up from one of the pillars. Certainly not to be invited in.

'You're General Murcatto.' The man had a twist to his grey mouth that came somewhere near a smile. 'And you're expected. I'll need the sword, though.' She frowned as she handed it over, liking the feel of this less than if they'd kicked her down the street.

There was a great pool in the marble hall beyond, surrounded by tall columns, murky water smelling strongly of rot. Her old enemy Grand Duke

Rogont was poring over a map on a folding table, in a sober grey uniform, lips thoughtfully pursed. A dozen officers clustered about him, enough gold braid between them to rig a carrack. A couple looked up as she made her way around the fetid pond towards them.

'It's her,' she heard one say, his lip well curled.

'Mur . . . cat . . . to,' another, as if the very name was poison. No doubt it was to them. She'd been making fools of these very men for the past few years and the more of a fool a man is, the less he cares to look like one. Still, the general with the smallest numbers should remain always on the offensive, Stolicus wrote. So she walked up unhurried, the thumb of her bandaged left hand hooked carelessly in her belt, as if this was her bath and she was the one with all the swords.

'If it isn't the Prince of Prudence, Duke Rogont. Well met, your Cautiousness. A proud-looking set of comrades you've got here, for men who've spent seven years retreating. Still, at least you're not retreating today.' She let it sink in for a moment. 'Oh, wait. You are.'

That forced a few chins to haughtily rise, a nostril or two to flare. But the dark eyes of Rogont himself shifted up from the map without any rush, a little tired, perhaps, but still irritatingly handsome and at ease. 'General Murcatto, what a pleasure! I wish we could have met after a great battle, preferably with you as a crestfallen prisoner, but my victories have been rather thin on the ground.'

'Rare as summer snows.'

'And you, so cloaked in glories. I feel quite naked under your victorious glare.' He peered towards the back of the hall. 'But wherever are your all-conquering Thousand Swords now?'

Monza sucked her teeth. 'Faithful Carpi's borrowed them from me.'

'Without asking? How . . . rude. I fear you are too much soldier and not enough politician. I fear I am the opposite. Words may hold more power than swords, as Juvens said, but I have discovered to my cost that there are times when there is no substitute for pointy metal.'

'These are the Years of Blood.'

'Indeed they are. We are all the prisoners of circumstance, and circumstances have left me once again with no other choice but bitter retreat. The noble Lirozio, Duke of Puranti and owner of this wonderful bath, was as staunch and warlike an ally as could be imagined when Duke

Orso's power was long leagues away on the other side of the great walls of Musselia. You should have heard him gnash his teeth, his sword never so eager to spring forth and spill hot blood.'

'Men love to talk about fighting.' Monza let her eyes wander over the sullen faces of Rogont's advisors. 'Some like to dress for it, too. Getting blood on the uniforms is a different matter.'

A couple of angry head-tosses from the peacocks, but Rogont only smiled. 'My own sad realisation. Now Musselia's great walls are breached, thanks to you, Borletta fallen, thanks to you, and Visserine burned too. The army of Talins, ably assisted by your erstwhile comrades, the Thousand Swords, are picking the country clean on Lirozio's very doorstep. The brave duke finds his enthusiasm for drum and bugle much curtailed. Powerful men are as inconstant as the shifting water. I should have picked weaker allies.'

'Bit late for that.'

The duke puffed out his cheeks. 'Too late, too late, shall be my epitaph. At Sweet Pines I arrived but two days tardy, and rash Salier had fought and lost without me. So Caprile was left helpless before your well-documented wrath.' That was a fool's version of the story, but Monza kept it to herself, for now. 'At Musselia I arrived with all my power, prepared to hold the great walls and block the Gap of Etris against you, and found you had stolen the city the day before, picked it clean already and now held the walls against me.' More injury to the truth, but Monza kept her peace. 'Then at the High Bank I found myself unavoidably detained by the late General Ganmark, while the also late Duke Salier, quite determined not to be fooled by you a second time, was fooled by you a second time and his army scattered like chaff on a stiff wind. So Borletta . . .' He stuck his tongue between his lips, jerked his thumb towards the floor and blew a loud farting sound. 'So brave Duke Cantain . . .' He drew one finger across his throat and blew another. 'Too late, too late. Tell me, General Murcatto, how come you are always first to the field?'

'I rise early, shit before daybreak, check I'm pointed in the right direction and let nothing stop me. That and I actually try to get there.'

'Your meaning?' demanded a young man at Rogont's elbow, his face even sourer than the rest.

'My meaning?' she parroted, goggling like an idiot, and then to the duke himself, 'Is that you could have reached Sweet Pines on time but chose to

dither, knowing proud, fat Salier would piss before his trousers were down and more than likely waste all his strength whether he won or not. He lost, and looked the fool, and you the wiser partner, just as you hoped.' It was Rogont's turn to stay carefully silent. 'Two seasons later you could have reached the Gap in time and held it against the world, but it suited you to delay, and let me teach the proud Musselians the lesson you wanted them to learn. Namely to be humble before your prudent Excellency.'

The whole chamber was very still as her voice grated on. 'When did you realise time was running out? That you'd delayed so much you'd let your allies wane too weak, let Orso wax too strong? No doubt you would have liked to make it to the High Bank for once on time, but Ganmark got in your way. As far as playing the good ally, by that time it was . . .' She leaned forwards and whispered it. 'Too late. All your policy was making sure you were the strongest partner when the League of Eight won, so you could be the first among them. A grand notion, and carefully managed. Except, of course, Orso has won, and the League of Eight . . .' She stuck her tongue between her lips and blew a long fart at the assembled flower of manhood. 'So much for too late, fuckers.'

The shrillest of the brood stepped towards her, fists clenched. 'I will not listen to one word more of this, you . . . you devil! My father died at Sweet Pines!'

It seemed everyone had their own wrongs to avenge, but Monza had too many wounds of her own to be much stung by other people's. 'Thank you,' she said.

'What?'

'Since your father was presumably among my enemies, and the aim of a battle is to kill them, I take his death as a compliment. I shouldn't have to explain that to a soldier.'

His face had turned a blotchy mixture of pink and white. 'If you were a man I'd kill you where you stand.'

'If you were a man, you mean. Still, since I took your father, it's only fair I give you something in trade.' She curled her tongue and blew spit in his face.

He came at her clumsily, and with his hands, just as she'd guessed he would. Any man who needs to be worked up to it that hard isn't likely to be too fearful when he finally gets there. She was ready, dodged around him,

grabbed the top and bottom rims of his gilded breastplate, used his own weight to swing him, caught his toe with one well-placed boot. She grabbed the hilt of his sword as he stumbled helplessly past, bent almost double, part running and part falling, and whipped it from his belt. He squawked as he splashed into the pool, sending up a fountain of shining spray, and she spun round, blade at the ready.

Rogont rolled his eyes. 'Oh, for pity's—' His men bundled past, all fumbling their swords out, cursing, nearly knocking the table over in their haste to get at her. 'Less steel, gentlemen, if you please, less steel!' The officer had surfaced now, or at least was fighting to, splashing and floundering, hauled down by the weight of his ornamental armour. Two of Rogont's other attendants hurried to drag him from the pool while the rest shuffled towards Monza, jostling at each other in their efforts to stab her first.

'Shouldn't you be the ones retreating?' she hissed as she backed away past the pillars.

The nearest jabbed at her. 'Die, you damned—'

'Enough!' roared Rogont. 'Enough! Enough!' His men scowled like naughty children called to account. 'No swordplay in the bath, for pity's sake! Will my shame never end?' He gave a long sigh, then waved an arm. 'Leave us, all of you!'

His foremost attendant's moustache bristled with horror. 'But, your Excellency, with this . . . foul creature?'

'Never fear, I will survive.' He arched one eyebrow at them. 'I can swim. Now out, before someone hurts themselves. Shoo! Go!'

Reluctantly they sheathed their swords and grumbled their way from the hall, the soaked man leaving a squelching trail of wet fury behind him. Monza grinned as she tossed his gilded sword into the pool, where it vanished with a splash. A small victory, maybe, but she had to enjoy the ones she got these days.

Rogont waited in silence until they were alone, then gave a heavy sigh. 'You told me she would come, Ishri.'

'It is well that I never tire of being right.' Monza started. A dark-skinned woman lay on her back on a high windowsill, a good stride or two above Rogont's head. Her legs were crossed, up against the wall, one arm and her head hanging off the back of the narrow ledge so that her face was almost

upside down. ‘For it happens often.’ She slid off backwards, flipped over at the last moment and dropped silently to all fours, nimble as a lizard.

Monza wasn’t sure how she’d missed her in the first place, but she didn’t like that she had. ‘What are you? An acrobat?’

‘Oh, nothing so romantic as an acrobat. I am the East Wind. You can think of me as but one of the many fingers on God’s right hand.’

‘You talk enough rubbish to be a priest.’

‘Oh, nothing so dry and dusty as a priest.’ Her eyes rolled to the ceiling. ‘I am a passionate believer, in my way, but only men may take the robe, thanks be to God.’

Monza frowned. ‘An agent of the Gurkish Emperor.’

‘Agent sounds so very . . . underhanded. Emperor, Prophet, Church, State. I would call myself a humble representative of Southern Powers.’

‘What’s Styria to them?’

‘A battlefield.’ And she smiled wide. ‘Gurkhul and the Union may be at peace, but . . .’

‘The fighting goes on.’

‘Always. Orso’s allies are our enemies, so his enemies are our allies. We find ourselves with common cause.’

‘The downfall of Grand Duke Orso of Talins,’ muttered Rogont. ‘Please God.’

Monza curled her lip at him. ‘Huh. Praying to God now, Rogont?’

‘To whoever will listen, and most fervently.’

The Gurkish woman stood, stretching up on tiptoe to the ends of her long fingers. ‘And you, Murcatto? Are you the answer to this poor man’s desperate prayers?’

‘Maybe.’

‘And he to yours, perhaps?’

‘I’ve been often disappointed by the powerful, but I can hope.’

‘You’d hardly be the first friend I’ve disappointed.’ Rogont nodded towards the map. ‘They call me the Count of Caution. The Duke of Delay. The Prince of Prudence. Yet you would make an ally of me?’

‘Look at me, Rogont, I’m almost as desperate as you are. “Great tempests,” Farans said, “wash up strange companions.”

‘A wise man. How can I help my strange companion, then? And, more importantly, how can she help me?’

‘I need to kill Faithful Carpi.’

‘Why would we care for treacherous Carpi’s death?’ Ishri sauntered forwards, head falling lazily onto one side, then further still. Too far to look at comfortably, let alone to do. ‘Are there not other captains among the Thousand Swords? Sesaria, Victus, Andiche?’ Her eyes were pitch black, as empty and dead as the eye-maker’s replacements. ‘Will not one of those infamous vultures fill your old chair, keen to pick at the corpse of Styria?’

Rogont pouted. ‘And so my weary dance continues, but with a fresh partner. I win only the most fleeting reprieve.’

‘Those three have no loyalty to Orso beyond their pockets. They were persuaded easily enough to betray Cosca for me, and me for Faithful, when the price was right. If the price is right, with Faithful gone I can bring them back to me, and from Orso’s service to yours.’

A slow silence. Ishri raised her fine black brows. Rogont tipped his head thoughtfully back. The two of them exchanged a lingering glance. ‘That would go a long way towards evening the odds.’

‘You are sure you can buy them?’ asked the Gurkish woman.

‘Yes,’ Monza lied smoothly. ‘I never gamble.’ An even bigger lie, so she delivered it with even greater confidence. There was no certainty where the Thousand Swords were concerned, and even less with the faithless bastards who commanded them. But there might be a chance, if she could kill Faithful. Get Rogont’s help with that, then they’d see.

‘How high would be the price?’

‘To turn against the winning side? Higher than I can afford, that’s sure.’ Even if she’d had the rest of Hermon’s gold to hand, and most of it was still buried thirty strides from her dead father’s ruined barn. ‘But you, the Duke of Ospria—’

Rogont gave a sorry chuckle. ‘Oh, the bottomless purse of Ospria. I am in hock up to my neck and beyond. I’d sell my arse if I thought I could get more than a few coppers for it. No, you will coax no gold from me, I fear.’

‘What about your Southern Powers?’ asked Monza. ‘I hear the mountains of Gurkhul are made of gold.’

Ishri wriggled back against one of the pillars. ‘Of mud, like everyone else’s. But there may be much gold in them, if one knows where to dig. How do you plan to put an end to Faithful?’

‘Lirozio will surrender to Orso’s army as soon as it arrives.’

‘Doubtless,’ said Rogont. ‘He is every bit as proficient at surrender as I am at retreat.’

‘The Thousand Swords will push on southwards towards Ospria, picking the country clean, and the Talinese will follow.’

‘I need no military genius to tell me this.’

‘I’ll find a place, somewhere between, and bring Carpi out. With two-score men I can get him killed. Small risk for either one of you.’

Rogont cleared his throat. ‘If you can bring that loyal old hound out of his kennel, then I can surely spare some men to put him down.’

Ishri watched Monza, just as Monza might have watched an ant. ‘And once he is at peace, if you can buy the Thousand Swords then I can furnish the money.’

If, if, if. But that was more than Monza had any right to hope for here. She could just as easily have left the meeting feet first. ‘Then it’s as good as done. To strange companions, eh?’

‘Indeed. God has truly blessed you.’ Ishri gave an extravagant yawn. ‘You came looking for one friend, and you leave with two.’

‘Lucky me,’ said Monza, far from sure she was leaving with any. She turned towards the gate, boot heels scraping against the worn marble, hoping she didn’t start shaking before she got there.

‘One more thing, Murcatto!’ She looked back to Rogont, standing alone now by his maps. Ishri had vanished as suddenly as she’d appeared. ‘Your position is weak, and so you are obliged to play at strength. I see that. You are what you are, bold beyond recklessness. I would not have it any other way. But I am what I am, also. Some more respect, in future, will make our marriage of mutual desperation run ever so much more smoothly.’

Monza gave an exaggerated curtsey. ‘Your Resplendence, I am not only weak, but abject with regret.’

Rogont slowly shook his head. ‘That officer of mine really should have drawn and run you through.’

‘Is that what you’d have done?’

‘Oh, pity, no.’ He looked back to his charts. ‘I’d have asked for more spit.’

Neither Rich nor Poor

Shenkt hummed to himself as he walked down the shabby corridor, his footfalls making not the slightest sound. The exact tune always somehow eluded him. A nagging fragment of something his sister sang when he was a child. He could see the sunlight still, through her hair, the window at her back, face in shadow. All long ago, now. All faded, like cheap paints in the sun. He had never been much of a singer himself. But he hummed, at least, and imagined his sister's voice singing along with him, and that was some comfort.

He put his knife away, and the carved bird too, almost finished now, though the beak was giving him some trouble and he did not wish to break it by rushing. Patience. As vital to the wood-carver as it is to the assassin. He stopped before the door. Soft, pale pine, full of knots, badly jointed, light shining through a split. He wished, sometimes, that his work took him to better places. He raised one boot, and burst the lock apart with a single kick.

Eight sets of hands leaped to weapons as the door splintered from its hinges. Eight hard faces snapped towards him, seven men and a woman. Shenkt recognised most of them. They had been among the kneeling half-circle in Orso's throne room. Killers, sent after Prince Ario's murderers. Comrades, of a kind, in the hunt. If the flies on a carcass can be said to be comrades to the lion that made the kill. He had not expected such as these to beat him to his quarry, but he was long past being surprised by the turns life took. His twisted like a snake in its death throes.

'Have I come at a bad time?' he asked.

'It's him.'

'The one who wouldn't kneel.'

'Shenkt.' This last from the man who had blocked his path in Orso's throne room. The one he had advised to pray. Shenkt hoped he had taken the advice, but did not think it likely. A couple of them relaxed when they recognised his face, pushed back their half-drawn blades, thinking him one of their number.

‘Well, well.’ A man with a pockmarked face and long, black hair seemed to be in charge. He reached out and gently pushed the woman’s bow towards the floor with one finger. ‘My name’s Malt. You’re just in time to help us bring them in.’

‘Them?’

‘The ones his Excellency Duke Orso’s paying us to find, who do you think? Over there, in the smoke-house yonder.’

‘All of them?’

‘The leader, anyway.’

‘How do you know you have the right man?’

‘Woman. Pello knows, don’t you, Pello?’

Pello was possessed of a ragged moustache and a look of sweaty desperation. ‘It’s Murcatto. The same one who led Orso’s army at Sweet Pines. She was in Visserine, not but a month ago. Took her prisoner. Questioned her myself. That’s where the Northman lost his eye.’ The Northman called Shivers, that Sajaam had spoken of. ‘In Salier’s palace. She killed Ganmark there, that general of Orso’s, few days afterward.’

‘The Snake of Talins herself,’ said Malt proudly, ‘and still alive. What do you think of that?’

‘I am all amaze.’ Shenkt walked slowly to the window and peered out across the street. A shabby-looking place for a famous general, but such was life. ‘She has men with her?’

‘Just this Northman. Nothing we can’t deal with. Lucky Nim and two of her boys are waiting in the alley at the back. When the big clock next chimes, we go in the front. They won’t be getting away.’

Shenkt looked slowly round at each suspicious face, and gave each man a chance. ‘You all are determined to do this? All of you?’

‘Of fucking course we are. You’ll find no faint hearts here, my friend.’ Malt looked at him through narrowed eyes. ‘You want to come in with us?’

‘With you?’ Shenkt took a long breath, then sighed. ‘Great tempests wash up strange companions.’

‘I’ll take that as a yes.’

‘We don’t need this fucker.’ The one Shenkt had told to pray, again, making a great show of a curved knife. A man of small patience, evidently. ‘I say we cut his throat, and one less share to pay.’

Malt gently pushed his knife down. ‘Come now, no need to be greedy. I’ve been on jobs like that before, everyone stuck on the money not the work, watching their backs every minute. Bad for your health and your business. We’ll do this civilised, or not at all. What do you say?’

‘I say civilised,’ said Shenkt. ‘For pity’s sake, let’s kill like honest men.’

‘Exactly so. With what Orso’s paying, there’ll be enough for everyone. Equal shares all round, and we can all be rich.’

‘Rich?’ Shenkt smiled sadly as he shook his head. ‘The dead are neither rich nor poor.’ The look of mild surprise was just forming on Malt’s face when Shenkt’s pointing finger split it neatly in half.

*

Shivers sat on the greasy bed, back pressed to the dirty wall, with Monza sprawled on top of him. Her head lay in his lap, breath hissing shallow, in and out. The pipe was still in her bandaged left hand, smoke twisting from the embers in a brown streak. He frowned at it creeping through the shafts of light, rippling, spreading, filling the room with sweet haze.

Husk was good stuff for pain. Too good, to Shivers’ mind. So good you always needed more. So good that after a while stubbing your toe seemed like excuse enough. Took your edge off, all that smoking, left you soft. Maybe Monza had more edge than she wanted, but he didn’t trust it. The smoke was tickling at his nose, making him feel sick and needy both together. His eye was itching under the bandages. Would’ve been easy to do it. Where was the harm . . . ?

He had a sudden panic, wriggling out from under her like he was buried alive. Monza gave an irritated burble then fell back, eyelids flickering, hair stuck across her clammy face. Shivers ripped back the bolt on the window and pulled the wonky shutters open, getting a nice view of the rotting alley behind the building and a face full of cold, piss-smelling air. At least that smell was honest.

There were two men down there by a back door, and a woman holding one hand up. A bell rang out, from a high clock tower in the next street. The woman nodded, the men pulled out a bright sword and a heavy mace. She opened the door and they hurried in.

‘Shit,’ hissed Shivers, hardly able to believe it. Three of ’em and, from the way they’d been waiting, most likely more coming in the front. Too late to run. But then Shivers was sick of running anyway. He had his pride, still, didn’t he? Running from the North and down here to fucking Styria was what landed him in this one-eyed mess in the first place.

He reached towards Monza, but stopped short. State she was in she’d be no use. So he let her be, slid out the heavy knife she’d given him the first day they met. The grip was firm in his hand and he squeezed it tight. They were better armed, maybe, but big weapons and small rooms don’t mix. Surprise was on his side, and that’s the best weapon a man can have. He pressed himself into the shadows behind the door, feeling his heart thumping, the breath burning in his throat. No fear, no doubt, just furious readiness.

He heard their soft steps on the stairs and had to stop himself laughing. A bit of a giggle crept out all the same, and he didn’t know why, ’cause there was nothing funny. A creak and a muttered curse. Not the sharpest assassins in the whole Circle of the World. He bit on his lip, trying to stop his ribs shaking. Monza stirred, stretched out smiling on the greasy blanket.

‘Benna . . .’ she murmured. The door was yanked open and the swordsman sprang in. Monza’s eyes came blearily open. ‘Whathe—’

The second man barged in like a fool, knocking his mate off balance, lifting his mace over his head, tip scraping a little shower of plaster from the low ceiling. It was almost like he was offering it up. Would’ve seemed rude to turn it down, so Shivers snatched it from his hand while he stabbed the first one in the back.

The blade slid in and out of him. Quick, quiet scrapes, up to the hilt. Shivers growled through his teeth, half-sniggering with the leftover shreds of laughter, arm pumping in and out. The stabbed man made a shocked little hoot each time, not sure what was happening yet, twisted round, jerking the knife out of Shivers’ hand.

The other one turned, eyes wide, too close to swing at. ‘Wha—’

Shivers thumped him in the nose with the butt of the mace and felt it pop, sent him reeling towards the empty fireplace. The stabbed man’s knees went, he caught his sword point on the wall above Monza and pitched on top of her. No need to worry about him. Shivers took a short stride, dropping onto his knees so the mace wouldn’t hit the ceiling, roaring as he

swung the big lump of metal. It hit its previous owner in the forehead with a meaty crunch, stove his skull in, spattered the ceiling with spots of blood.

He heard a scream behind, twisted round. The woman sprang through the door, a short blade in each hand. Monza's kicking leg tripped her as she struggled out from under the dying swordsman. Happy chance, the woman's scream switching from fury to shock as she blundered into Shivers' arms, fumbling one of her knives. He grabbed her other wrist as he went down under her, on top of the maceman's corpse, his head smacking against the side of the fireplace and leaving him blinded for a moment.

He kept his grip on her wrist, felt her nails tearing at his bandages. They growled stupidly at each other, her hair hanging down and tickling at him, tongue stuck between her teeth with the effort as she tried to push the blade into his neck with all her weight. Her breath smelled of lemons. He wrenched himself round and punched her under the jaw, snapped her head up, teeth sinking deep into her tongue.

Same moment the sword hacked clumsily into her arm, the point almost catching Shivers' shoulder, making him jerk back. Monza's white face behind her, eyes hardly focused. The woman howled, tried to drag herself free. Another fumbling sword blow caught the top of her head with the flat and knocked her sideways. Monza floundered into the wall, tripped over the bed, almost stabbing herself as the sword clattered from her hand. Shivers twisted the blade from the woman's limp grip and stabbed her under the jaw right to the hilt, blood spraying out across Monza's shirt and up the wall.

He kicked himself free of the tangle of limbs, scrabbling up the mace, pulling his knife from the dead swordsman's back and pushing it into his belt, stumbling for the door. The corridor outside was empty. He grabbed Monza's wrist and dragged her up. She was staring down at herself, soaked with the woman's blood.

'Wha . . . wha . . .'

He pulled her limp arm over his shoulder and hauled her through the door, bundled her down the stairs, her boots clattering against the treads. Out through the open back door into sunlight. She tottered a step and blew thin vomit down the wall. Groaned and heaved again. He pushed the haft of the mace up his sleeve, the bloody head in his fist, ready to let it drop if he needed to. He realised he was sniggering again as he did it. Couldn't see

why. Still nothing funny. Quite the opposite, far as he could tell. Still laughing, though.

Monza took a drunken step or two, bent almost double. ‘I got stop smoking,’ she muttered, spitting bile.

‘ ’Course. Just as soon as my eye grows back.’ He grabbed her elbow, pulled her after him towards the end of the alley, folk moving in the sunlit street. He paused at the corner, took a quick look both ways, then dragged her arm around his shoulder again, and away.

Aside from the three corpses, the room was empty. Shenkt padded to the window, stepping carefully around the slick of blood across the boards, and peered out. Of Murcatto and the one-eyed Northman there was no sign. But it was better they should escape than someone else should find them before he did. That he would not allow. When Shenkt took on a job, he always saw it through.

He squatted down, forearms resting on his knees, hands dangling. He had hardly made a worse mess of Malt and his seven friends than Murcatto and her Northman had of these three. The walls, the floor, the ceiling, the bed, all spattered and smeared with red. One man lay by the fireplace, his skull roundly pulped. The other was face down, the back of his shirt ripped with stab-wounds, soaked through with blood. The woman had a yawning gash in her neck.

Lucky Nim, he presumed. It seemed her luck had deserted her.

‘Just Nim, then.’

Something gleamed in the corner, by the wall. He stooped and picked it up, held it to the light. A golden ring with a large, blood-red ruby. Far too fine a ring for any of these scum to wear. Murcatto’s ring, even? Still warm from her finger? He slid it onto his own, then took hold of Nim’s ankle and dragged her corpse up onto the bed, humming to himself as he stripped it bare.

Her right leg had a patch of scaly rash across the thigh, so he took the left instead, cut it free, buttock and all, with three practised movements of his butcher’s sickle. He popped the bone from the hip joint with a sharp twist of his wrists, took the foot off with two jerks of the curved blade, wrapped her belt around the neatly butchered leg to hold it folded and slid it into his bag.

A rump steak, then, thick-cut and pan-fried. He always carried a special mix of Suljuk four-spice with him, crushed to his taste, and the oil native to the region around Puranti had a wonderful nutty flavour. Then salt, and crushed pepper. Good meat was all in the seasoning. Pink in the centre, but not bloody. Shenkt had never been able to understand people who liked their meat bloody, the notion disgusted him. Onions sizzling alongside. Perhaps then dice the shank and make stew, with roots and mushrooms, a broth from the bones, a dash of that old Muris vinegar to give it . . .

'Zing.'

He nodded to himself, carefully wiped the sickle clean, shouldered the bag, turned for the door and . . . stopped.

He had passed a baker's earlier, and thought what fine, crusty, new-baked loaves they had in the window. The smell of fresh bread. That glorious scent of honesty and simple goodness. He would very much have liked to be a baker, had he not been . . . what he was. Had he never been brought before his old master. Had he never followed the path laid out for him, and had he never rebelled against it. How well that bread would be, he now thought, sliced and thickly smeared with a coarse pate. Perhaps with a quince jelly, or some such, and a good glass of wine. He drew his knife again and went in through Lucky Nim's back for her liver.

After all, it was no use to her now.

Heroic Efforts, New Beginnings

The rain stopped, and the sun came out over the farmland, a faint rainbow stretching down from the grey heavens. Monza wondered if there was an elf-glade where it touched the ground, the way her father used to tell her. Or if there was just shit, like everywhere else. She leaned from her saddle and spat into the wheat.

Elf shit, maybe.

She pushed her wet hood back and scowled to the west, watching the showers roll off towards Puranti. If there was any justice they'd dump a deluge on Faithful Carpi and the Thousand Swords, their outriders probably no more than a day's ride behind. But there was no justice, and Monza knew it. The clouds pissed where they pleased.

The damp winter wheat was spattered with patches of red flowers, like smears of blood across the tawny country. It would be ready to harvest soon, except there'd be no one here to do the reaping. Rogont was doing what he was best at – pulling back, and the farmers were taking everything they could carry and pulling back with him towards Ospria. They knew the Thousand Swords were coming, and knew better than to be there when they did. There were no more infamous foragers in the world than the men Monza used to lead.

Forage, Farans wrote, is robbery so vast that it transcends mere crime, and enters the arena of politics.

She'd lost Benna's ring. She kept fussing at her middle finger with her thumb, endlessly disappointed to find it wasn't there. A pretty piece of rock hadn't changed the fact Benna was dead. But still it felt as if she'd lost some last little part of him she'd managed to cling on to. One of the last little parts of herself worth keeping.

She was lucky a ring was all she'd lost back in Puranti, though. She'd been careless, and it had nearly been the end of her. She had to stop smoking. Make a new beginning. Had to, and yet she was smoking more than ever. Each time she woke from sweet oblivion she told herself it would have to be the last, but a few hours later and she'd be sweating desperation from every pore. Waves of sick need, like an incoming tide, each one higher

than the last. Each one resisted took a heroic effort, and Monza was no hero, however the people of Talins might once have cheered for her. She'd thrown her pipe away, then in a sticky panic bought another. She wasn't sure how many times she'd hidden the dwindling lump of husk down at the bottom of one bag or another. But she'd found there's a problem with hiding a thing yourself.

You always know where it is.

'I do not care for this country.' Morveer stood from his swaying seat and peered out across the flat land. 'This is good country for an ambush.'

'That's why we're here,' Monza growled back. Hedgerows, the odd stand of trees, brown houses and barns alone or in groups away across the fields – plenty of hiding places. Scarcely a thing moved. Scarcely a sound but for the crows, the wind flapping the canvas on the cart, the wheels rattling, splattering through an occasional puddle.

'Are you sure it is prudent to put your faith in Rogont?'

'You don't win battles with prudence.'

'No, one plans murders with it. Rogont is notoriously untrustworthy even for a grand duke, and an old enemy of yours besides.'

'I can trust him as far as what's in his own interest.' The question was all the more irritating as it was one she'd been asking herself ever since they left Puranti. 'Small risk for him killing Faithful Carpi, but a hell of a pay-off if I can bring him the Thousand Swords.'

'But it would hardly be your first miscalculation. What if we are marooned out here in the path of an army? You are paying me to kill one man at a time, not fight a war single—'

'I paid you to kill one man in Westport, and you murdered fifty at a throw. I need no lessons from you in taking care.'

'Scarcely more than forty, and that was due to too much care to get your man, not too little! Was your butcher's bill any shorter at Cardotti's House of Leisure? Or in Duke Salier's palace? Or at Caprile, for that matter? Forgive me if I have scant faith in your ability to keep violence contained!'

'Enough!' she snarled at him. 'You're like a goat that won't stop bleating! Do the job I pay you for, and that's the end of it!'

Morveer pulled up the cart suddenly with a haul on the reins and Day squawked as she nearly fumbled her apple. 'Is this the thanks I get for your timely rescue in Visserine? After you so pointedly ignored my sage advice?'

Vitari, sprawling among the supplies on the back of the cart, stuck up one long arm. ‘That rescue was as much my doing as his. No one’s thanked me.’

Morveer ignored her. ‘Perhaps I should find a more grateful employer!’

‘Perhaps I should find a more obedient fucking poisoner!’

‘Perhaps . . . ! But wait.’ Morveer held up a finger, squeezing his eyes shut. ‘But wait.’ He puckered his lips and sucked in a deep breath, held it for a moment, then slowly blew it out. And again. Shivers rode up, raised his one eyebrow at Monza. One more breath, and Morveer’s eyes came open, and he gave a chuckle of sickening falseness. ‘Perhaps . . . I should most sincerely apologise.’

‘What?’

‘I realise I am . . . not always the easiest company.’ A sharp burst of laughter from Vitari and Morveer winced, but carried on. ‘If I seem always contrary it is because I want only the best for you and your venture. It has ever been a failing of mine to be too intransigent in my pursuit of excellence. There is no more important characteristic than pliability in a man who must, perforce, be your humble servant. Can I entreat you to make with me . . . a heroic effort? To put this unpleasantness behind us?’ He snapped the reins and moved the cart on, still smiling thinly over his shoulder. ‘I feel it! A new beginning!’

Monza caught Day’s eye as she passed, rocking gently on her seat. The blonde girl lifted her brows, stripped her apple to the last fragment of stalk and flicked it away into the field. Vitari was on the back of the cart, just pulling off her coat and sprawling out on the canvas in the sunlight. ‘Sun’s coming out. New beginning.’ She pointed across the country, one hand pressed to her chest. ‘And aaaaaaaw, a rainbow! You know, they say there’s an elf-glade where it touches the ground!’

Monza scowled after them. Seemed more likely they’d stumble on an elf-glade than that Morveer would make a new beginning. She trusted this sudden obedience even less than his endless carping.

‘Maybe he just wants to be loved,’ came Shivers’ whispery voice as they set off again.

‘If men can change like that.’ And Monza snapped her fingers in his face.

‘That’s the only way they do change, ain’t it?’ His one eye stayed on her. ‘If things change enough around ’em? Men are brittle, I reckon. They don’t bend into new shapes. They get broken into them. Crushed into them.’

Burned into them, maybe. ‘How’s your face?’ she muttered.

‘Itchy.’

‘Did it hurt, at the eye-maker’s?’

‘On a scale between stubbing your toe and having your eye burned out, it was down near the bottom.’

‘Most everything is.’

‘Falling down a mountain?’

‘Not that bad, as long as you lie still. It’s when you try to get up it starts to sting some.’ That got a grin from him, though he was grinning a lot less than he used to. Small surprise after what he’d been through, maybe. What she’d put him through. ‘I suppose . . . I should be thanking you for saving my life, again. It’s getting to be a habit.’

‘What you’re paying me for, ain’t it, Chief? Work well done is its own reward, my father always used to tell me. Fact is I’m good at it. As a fighter I’m a man you need to respect. As anything else I’m just a big shiftless fuck wasted a dozen years in the wars, with nothing to show for it but bloody dreams and one less eye than most. I’ve got my pride, still. Man’s got to be what he is, I reckon. Otherwise what is he? Just pretending, no? And who wants to spend all the time they’re given pretending to be what they ain’t?’

Good question. Luckily they crested a rise, and she was spared having to think of an answer. The remains of the Imperial road stretched away, an arrow-straight stripe of brown through the fields. Eight centuries old, and still the best road in Styria. A sad comment on the leadership since. There was a farm not far from it. A stone house of two storeys, windows shuttered, roof of red tiles turned mossy brown with age, a small stable-block beside. A waist-high wall of lichen-splattered drystone round a muddy yard, a couple of scrawny birds pecking at the dirt. Opposite the house a wooden barn, roof slumping in the middle. A weather vane in the shape of a winged snake flapped limply on its leaning turret.

‘That’s the place!’ she called out, and Vitari stuck her arm up to show she’d heard.

A stream wound past the buildings and off towards a mill-house a mile or two distant. The wind came up, shook the leaves on a hedgerow, made soft waves in the wheat, drove the ragged clouds across the sky, their shadows flowing over the land beneath.

It reminded Monza of the farm where she was born. She thought of Benna, a boy running through the crop, just the top of his head showing above the ripening grain, hearing his high laughter. Long ago, before their father died. Monza shook herself and scowled. Maudlin, self-indulgent, nostalgic shit. She'd hated that farm. The digging, the ploughing, the dirt under her nails. And all for what? There weren't many things you worked so hard at to make so little.

The only other one she could think of right off was revenge.

Since his earliest remembrances, Morveer seemed always to have had an uncanny aptitude for saying the wrong thing. When he meant to contribute, he would find he was complaining. When he intended to be solicitous, he would discover he was insulting. When he sought earnestly to provide support, he would be construed as undermining. He wanted only to be valued, respected, included, and yet somehow every attempt at good fellowship only made matters worse.

He was almost starting to believe, after thirty years of failed relationships – a mother who had left him, a wife who had left him, apprentices who had left, robbed or attempted to kill him, usually by poison but on one memorable occasion with an axe – that he simply was not very good with people. He should have been glad, at least, that the loathsome drunk Nicomo Cosca was dead, and indeed he had at first felt some relief. But the dark clouds had soon rolled back to re-establish the eternal baseline of mild depression. He found himself once more squabbling with his troublesome employer over every detail of their business.

Probably it would have been better if he had simply retired to the mountains and lived as a hermit, where he could injure nobody's feelings. But the thin air had never suited his delicate constitution. So he had resolved, once more, to make a heroic effort at camaraderie. To be more compliant, more graceful, more indulgent of the shortcomings of others. He had taken the first step, therefore, while the rest of the party were out surveying the land for signs of the Thousand Swords, by pretending at a headache and preparing a pleasant surprise, in the form of his mother's recipe for mushroom soup. Perhaps the only tangible thing which she had left her only son.

He nicked his finger while slicing, singed his elbow upon the hot stove, both of which events almost caused him to forsake his new beginning in a torrent of unproductive rage. But by the time he heard the horses returning to the farm, just as the sun was sinking and the shadows in the yard outside were stretching out, he had the table set, two stubs of candle casting a welcoming glow, two loaves of bread sliced and the pot of soup at the ready, exuding a wholesome fragrance.

'Excellent.' His rehabilitation was assured.

His new vein of optimism did not survive the arrival of the diners, however. When they entered, incidentally without removing their boots and therefore treading mud across his gleaming floor, they looked towards his lovingly cleaned kitchen, his carefully laid table, his laboriously prepared potage with all the enthusiasm of convicts being shown the executioner's block.

'What's this?' Murcatto's lips were pushed out and her brows drawn down in even deeper suspicion than usual.

Morveer did his best to float over it. 'This is an apology. Since our number-obsessed cook has returned to Talins, I thought I might occupy the vacuum and prepare dinner. My mother's recipe. Sit, sit, pray sit!' He hurried round dragging out chairs and, notwithstanding some uncomfortable sideways glances, they all found seats.

'Soup?' Morveer advanced on Shivers with pan and ladle at the ready.

'Not for me. You did, what do you call it . . .'

'Paralyse,' said Murcatto.

'Aye. You paralysed me that time.'

'You mistrust me?' he snapped.

'Almost by definition,' said Vitari, watching him from under her ginger brows. 'You're a poisoner.'

'After all we have been through together? You mistrust me, over a little paralysis?' He was making heroic efforts to repair the foundering ship of their professional relationship, and nobody appreciated it one whit. 'If my intention was to poison you, I would simply sprinkle Black Lavender on your pillow and lull you to a sleep that would never end. Or put Amerind thorns in your boots, Larync on the grip of your axe, Mustard Root in your water flask.' He leaned down towards the Northman, knuckles white around the ladle. 'There are a thousand thousand ways that I could kill you and you

would never suspect the merest shadow of a thing. I would not go to all the trouble of cooking you dinner!'

Shivers' one eye stared levelly back into his for what seemed a very long time. Then the Northman reached out, and for the briefest moment Morveer wondered if he was about to receive his first punch in the face for many years. But instead Shivers only folded his big hand round Morveer's with exaggerated care, tipping the pan so soup spilled out into his bowl. He picked up his spoon, dipped it in his soup, blew delicately on it and slurped up the contents. 'It's good. Mushroom, is it?'

'Er . . . yes, it is.'

'Nice.' Shivers held Morveer's eye a moment longer before letting go his hand.

'Thank you.' Morveer hefted the ladle. 'Now, does anyone not want soup?'

'Me!' The voice barked out of nowhere like boiling water squirted in Morveer's ear. He jerked away, the pan tumbling, hot soup flooding out across the table and straight into Vitari's lap. She leaped up with a screech, wet cutlery flying. Murcatto's chair went clattering over as she lurched out of it, fumbling for her sword. Day dropped a half-eaten slice of bread as she took a shocked step back towards the door. Morveer whipped around, dripping ladle clutched pointlessly in one fist—

A Gurkish woman stood smiling beside him, arms folded. Her skin was smooth as a child's, flawless as dark glass, eyes midnight black.

'Wait!' barked Murcatto, one hand up. 'Wait. She's a friend.'

'She's no friend of mine!' Morveer was still desperately trying to understand how she could have appeared from nothing in such a manner. There was no door near her, the window was tightly shuttered and barred, the floor and ceiling intact.

'You have no friends, poisoner,' she purred at him. Her long, brown coat hung open. Underneath, her body seemed to be swaddled entirely in white bandages.

'Who are you?' demanded Day. 'And where the hell did you come from?'

'They used to call me the East Wind.' The woman displayed two rows of utterly perfect white teeth as she turned one finger gracefully round and round. 'But now they call me Ishri. I come from the sun-bleached South.'

'She meant—' began Morveer.

‘Magic,’ murmured Shivers, the only member of the party who had remained in his seat. He calmly raised his spoon and slurped up another mouthful. ‘Pass the bread, eh?’

‘Damn your bread!’ he snarled back. ‘And your magic too! How did you get in here?’

‘One of them.’ Vitari had a table-knife in her fist, eyes narrowed to deadly slits as the remains of the soup dripped from the table and tapped steadily on the floor. ‘An Eater.’

The Gurkish woman pushed one fingertip through the spilled soup and curled her tongue around it. ‘We must all eat something, no?’

‘I don’t care to be on the menu.’

‘You need not worry. I am very picky about my food.’

‘I tangled with your kind before, in Dagoska.’ Morveer did not fully understand what was being said, a sensation which was among his least favourite, but Vitari seemed worried, and that made him worried. She was by no means a woman prone to high-blown fancies. ‘What deals have you been making, Murcatto?’

‘The ones that needed making. She works for Rogont.’

Ishri let her head fall to one side, so far that it was almost horizontal. ‘Or perhaps he works for me.’

‘I don’t care who’s the rider and who’s the donkey,’ snapped Murcatto, ‘as long as one or the other of you is sending men.’

‘He is sending them. Two score of his best.’

‘In time?’

‘Unless the Thousand Swords come early, and they will not. Their main body are camped six miles distant still. They were held up picking a village clean. Then they just had to burn the place. A destructive little crowd.’ Her gaze fell on Morveer. Those black eyes made him unnecessarily nervous. He did not like the fact that she was wrapped up in bandages. He found himself curious as to why—

‘They keep me cool,’ she said. He blinked, wondering whether he might have spoken the question out loud. ‘You did not.’ He felt himself turn cold to the roots of his hair. Just as he had when the nurses uncovered his secret materials at the orphanage, and guessed their purpose. He could not escape the irrational conclusion that this Gurkish devil somehow knew his private

thoughts. Knew the things he had done, that he had thought no one would ever know . . .

'I will be in the barn!' he screeched, voice far more shrill than he had intended. He dragged it down with difficulty. 'I must prepare, if we are to have visitors tomorrow. Come, Day!'

'I'll just finish this.' She had quickly grown accustomed to their visitor, and was busy buttering three slices of bread at once.

'Ah . . . yes . . . I see.' He stood twitching for a moment, but there was nothing he could achieve by staying but further embarrassment. He stalked towards the door.

'You need your coat?' asked Day.

'I will be more than warm enough!'

It was only when he was through the door of the farmhouse and into the darkness, the wind sighing chill across the wheat and straight through his shirt, that he realised he would not be warm enough by any stretch of the imagination. It was too late to return without looking entirely the fool, and that he steadfastly refused to do.

'Not me.' He cursed most bitterly as he picked his way across the darkened farmyard, wrapping his arms around himself and already beginning to shiver. He had allowed some Gurkish charlatan to unnerve him with simple parlour tricks. 'Bandaged bitch.' Well, they would all see. 'Oh yes.' He had got the better of the nurses at the orphanage, in the end, for all the whippings. 'We'll see who whips who now.' He peered over his shoulder to make sure he was unobserved. 'Magic!' he sneered. 'I'll show you a trick or—'

'Eeee!' His boot squelched, slid, and he went over on his back in a patch of mud. 'Bah! Damn it to your bastard arse!' So much for heroic efforts, and new beginnings too.

The Traitor

Shivers reckoned it was an hour or two short of dawn. The rain had slacked right off but water still drip-dripped from the new leaves, pattering in the dirt. The air was weighty with chill damp. A swollen stream gurgled near the track, smothering the muddy falls of his horse's hooves. He knew he was close, could see the faintest ruddy campfire glow at the edges of the slick tree-trunks.

Dark times are the best for dark business, Black Dow always used to say, and he should've known.

Shivers nudged his horse through the wet night, hoping some drunk sentry didn't get nervous and serve him up an arrow through the guts. One of those might hurt less than having your eye burned out, but it was nought to look forward to. Luckily, he saw the first guard before the guard saw him, pressed up against a tree, spear resting on his shoulder. He had an oilskin draped right over his head, couldn't have seen a thing, even if he'd been awake.

'Oy!' The man jerked round, dropped his spear in the muck. Shivers grinned as he watched him fumbling for it in the dark, arms crossed loose on his saddle-bow. 'You want to give me a challenge, or shall I just head on and leave you to it?'

'Who goes there?' he growled, tearing his spear up along with a clump of wet grass.

'My name's Caul Shivers, and Faithful Carpi's going to want to talk to me.'

The Thousand Swords' camp looked pretty much like camps always do. Men, canvas, metal and mud. Mud in particular. Tents scattered every which way. Horses tethered to trees, breath smoking in the darkness. Spears stacked up one against the other. Campfires, some burning, some down to fizzling embers, the air sharp with their smoke. A few men still awake, wrapped in blankets mostly, on guard or still drinking, frowning as they watched Shivers pass.

Reminded him of all the cold, wet nights he'd spent in camps across the North and back. Huddled around fires, hoping to the dead the rain didn't get

heavier. Roasting meat, spitted on dead men's spears. Curled up shivering in the snow under every blanket he could find. Sharpening blades for dark work on the morrow. He saw faces of men dead and gone back to the mud, that he'd shared drink and laughter with. His brother. His father. Tul Duru, that they'd called the Thunderhead. Rudd Threetrees, the Rock of Uffrith. Harding Grim, quieter than the night. Brought up a swell of unexpected pride, those memories. Then a swell of unexpected shame at the work he was about now. More feeling than he'd had since he lost his eye, or he'd expected to have again.

He sniffed, and his face stung underneath the bandages, and the soft moment slipped away and left him cold again. They stopped at a tent big as a house, lamplight leaking out into the night round the edges of its flap.

'Now you'd best behave yourself in here, you Northern bastard.' The guard jabbed at Shivers with his own axe. 'Or I'll—'

'Fuck yourself, idiot.' Shivers brushed him out of the way with one arm and pushed on through. Inside it smelled of stale wine, mouldy cloth, unwashed men. Ill-lit by flickering lamps, hung round the edges with slashed and tattered flags, trophies from old battlefields.

A chair of dark wood set with ivory, stained, scarred and polished with hard use, stood on a pair of crates up at the far end. The captain general's chair, he guessed. The one that had been Cosca's, then Monza's, and now was Faithful Carpi's. Didn't look much more than some battered rich man's dining chair. Surely didn't look like much to kill folk over, but then small reasons often serve for that.

There was a long table set up in the midst, men sat down each side. Captains of the Thousand Swords. Rough-looking men, scarred, stained and battered as the chair, and with quite a collection of weapons too, between 'em. But Shivers had smiled in harder company, and he smiled now. Strange thing was, he felt more at home with these lot than he had in months. He knew the rules here, he reckoned, better'n he did with Monza. Seemed as if they'd started out doing some planning, by the maps that were spread across the wood, but some time in the middle of the night the strategy had turned to dice. Now the maps were weighted down with scattered coins, with half-full bottles, with old cups, chipped glasses. One great chart was soaked red with spilled wine.

A big man stood at the head of the table – a faceful of scars, short hair grey and balding. He had a bushy moustache, the rest of his thick jaw covered in white stubble. Faithful Carpi himself, from what Monza had said. He was shaking the dice in one chunk of fist. ‘Come on, you shits, come on and give me nine!’ They came up one and three, to a few sighs and some laughter. ‘Damn it!’ He tossed some coins down the table to a tall, pock-faced bastard with a hook-nose and the ugly mix of long black hair and a big bald patch. ‘One of these days I’ll work your trick out, Andiche.’

‘No trick. I was born under a lucky star.’ Andiche scowled at Shivers, about as friendly a look as a fox spares for a chicken. ‘Who the hell’s this bandaged arsehole?’

The guard pushed in past Shivers, giving him a dirty look sideways. ‘General Carpi, sir, this Northman says he needs to speak to you.’

‘That a fact?’ Faithful spared Shivers a quick glance, then went back to stacking up his coins. ‘And why would I want to speak to the likes of him? Toss me the dice there, Victus, I ain’t done.’

‘That’s the problem with generals.’ Victus was bald as an egg and gaunt as famine, bunches of rings on his fingers and chains round his neck doing nothing to make him look prettier. ‘They never do know when they’re done.’ And he tossed the dice back down the table, couple of his fellows chuckling.

The guard swallowed. ‘He says he knows who killed Prince Ario!’

‘Oh, you do, do you? And who was that?’

‘Monzcarro Murcatto.’ Every hard face in the tent turned sharp towards Shivers. Faithful carefully set the dice down, eyes narrowed. ‘Looks like you know the name.’

‘Should we hire him for a jester or hang him for a liar?’ Victus grated out.

‘Murcatto’s dead,’ another.

‘That so? I wonder who it is I been fucking for the past month, then?’

‘If you’ve been fucking Murcatto I’d advise you to get back to it.’ Andiche grinned around him. ‘From what her brother told me, no one here can suck a cock as well as she could.’

A good few chuckles at that. Shivers wasn’t sure what he meant about her brother, but it didn’t matter none. He’d already undone the bandages, and now he dragged the lot off in one go, turned his face towards the lamplight. Such laughter as there was mostly sputtered out. He had the kind of face

now put a sharp end to mirth. ‘Here’s what she’s cost me so far. For a handful of silver? Shit on that, I ain’t half the fool she takes me for, and I’ve got my pride, still. I’m done with the bitch.’

Faithful Carpi was frowning at him. ‘Describe her.’

‘Tall, lean, black hair, blue eyes, frowns a lot. Sharp tongue on her.’

Victus waved one jewel-crusted hand at him. ‘Common knowledge!’

‘She’s got a broken right hand, and marks all over. From falling down a mountain, she says.’ Shivers pushed his finger into his stomach, keeping his eyes on Faithful. ‘Got a scar just here, and one matching in her back. Says a friend of hers gave it to her. Stabbed her through with her own dagger.’

Carpi’s face had turned grim as a gravedigger’s. ‘You know where she is?’

‘Hold up just a trice, there.’ Victus looked even less happy than his chief. ‘You saying Murcatto’s alive?’

‘I’d heard a rumour,’ said Faithful.

A huge black-skinned man with long ropes of iron-grey hair stood up sharp from the table. ‘I’d heard all kinds of rumours,’ voice slow and deep as the sea. ‘Rumours and facts are two different things. When were you planning to fucking tell us?’

‘When you fucking needed to know, Sesaria. Where is she?’

‘At a farm,’ said Shivers. ‘Maybe an hour’s hard ride distant.’

‘How many does she have with her?’

‘Just four. A whining poisoner and his apprentice, hardly more’n a girl. A red-haired woman name of Vitari and some brown bitch.’

‘Where exactly?’

Shivers grinned. ‘Well, that’s why I’m here, ain’t it? To sell you the where exactly.’

‘I don’t like the smell of this shit,’ snarled Victus. ‘If you’re asking me—’

‘I’m not,’ growled Faithful, without looking round. ‘What’s your price for it?’

‘A tenth part of what Duke Orso’s offering on the head o’ Prince Ario’s killer.’

‘Just a tenth?’

‘I reckon a tenth is plenty more’n I’ll get from her, but not enough to get me killed by you. I want no more’n I can carry away alive.’

‘Wise man,’ said Faithful. ‘Nothing we hate more than greed, is there, boys?’ A couple of chuckles, but most were still looking far from happy at their old general’s sudden return from the land of the dead. ‘Alright, then, a tenth part is fair. You’ve a deal.’ And Faithful stepped forwards and slapped his hand into Shivers’, looking him right in the face. ‘If we get Murcatto.’

‘You need her dead or alive?’

‘Sorry to say, I’d prefer dead myself.’

‘Good, so would I. Last thing I want is a running score with that crazy bitch. She don’t forget.’

Faithful nodded. ‘So it seems. I reckon we can do business, you and me. Swolle?’

‘General?’ A man with a heavy beard stepped up.

‘Get three-score horsemen ready to ride, and quick, those with the fastest —’

‘Might be best to keep it to fewer,’ said Shivers.

‘That so? And how would fewer men be better?’

‘The way she tells it, she’s got friends here still.’ Shivers let his eye wander round the hard faces in the tent. ‘The way she tells it, there’s plenty o’ men in this camp wouldn’t say no to having her back in charge. The way she tells it, they won victories to be proud of with her, and with you they skulk around and scout, while Orso’s men get all the prizes.’ Faithful’s eyes darted sideways, then back. Enough to let Shivers know he’d touched a wound. There’s no chief in the world so sure of himself he don’t worry some. No chief of men like these, leastways. ‘Best keep it to a few, and them ones you’re sure of. I’ve no problem stabbing Murcatto in the back, I reckon she’s got it coming. Getting stabbed by one o’ these is another matter.’

‘Five all told, and four of ’em women?’ Swolle grinned. ‘A dozen should do it.’

Faithful kept his eyes on Shivers. ‘Still. Make it three score, like I said, just in case there’s more at the party than we’re expecting. I’d be all embarrassed to arrive at a job short-handed.’

‘Sir.’ And Swolle shouldered his way out through the tent flap.

Shivers shrugged. ‘Have it your way.’

‘Why, that I will. You can depend on it.’ Faithful turned to his frowning captains. ‘Any of you old bastards want to come out on the hunt?’

Sesaria shook his big head, long hair swaying. ‘This is your mess, Faithful. You can swing the broom.’

‘I’ve foraged enough for one night.’ Andiche was already pushing out through the flap, a few others following in a muttering crowd, some looking suspicious, some looking careless, some looking drunk.

‘I too must take my leave, General Carpi.’ The speaker stood out among all these rough, scarred, dirty men, if only ’cause nothing much about him stood out. He had a curly head of hair, no weapon Shivers could see, no scar, no sneer, no fighter’s air of menace in the least. But Faithful still chuckled up to him like he was a man needed respect.

‘Master Sulfur!’ Folding his hand in both of his big paws and giving it a squeeze. ‘My thanks for stopping by. You’re always welcome here.’

‘Oh, I am loved wherever I go. Easy to remain on good terms with the man who brings the money.’

‘Tell Duke Orso, and your people at the bank, they’ve nothing to worry on here. It’ll all be taken care of, like we discussed. Just as soon as I’ve dealt with this little problem.’

‘Life does love to throw up problems, doesn’t it?’ Sulfur gave Shivers a splinter of a smile. He had odd-coloured eyes, one blue, one green. ‘Happy hunting, then.’ And he ambled out into the dawn.

Faithful was back in Shivers’ face right away. ‘An hour’s ride, you said?’

‘If you move quick for your age.’

‘Huh. How do you know she won’t have missed you by then, slipped away?’

‘She’s asleep. Husk sleep. She smokes more o’ that shit every day. Half her time drooling with it, the rest drooling for it. She won’t be waking any time soon.’

‘Best to waste no time, though. That woman can cause unpleasant surprises.’

‘That’s a fact. And she’s expecting help. Two-score men from Rogont, coming by tomorrow afternoon. They’re planning to shadow you, lay an ambush as you turn south.’

‘No better feeling than flipping a surprise around, eh?’ Faithful grinned. ‘And you’ll be riding at the front.’

‘For a tenth part o’ the take I’ll ride at the front side-saddle.’

‘Just in front will do. Right next to me and you can point out the ground. We honest men need to stick together.’

‘That we do,’ said Shivers. ‘No doubt.’

‘Alright.’ Faithful clapped his big hands and rubbed them together. ‘A piss, then I’m getting my armour on.’

King of Poisons

‘Ross?’came Day’s high voice. ‘You awake?’ Morveer exhaled a racking sigh. ‘Merciful slumber has indeed B released me from her soft bosom . . . and back into the frigid embrace of an uncaring world.’

‘What?’

He waved it bitterly away. ‘Never mind. My words fall like seeds . . . on stony ground.’

‘You said to wake you at dawn.’

‘Dawn? Oh, harsh mistress!’ He threw back his one thin blanket and struggled up from the prickling straw, truly a humble repose for a man of his matchless talents, stretched his aching back and clambered stiffly down the ladder to the floor of the barn. He was forced to concede that he had long been too advanced in years, not to mention too refined in tastes, for haylofts.

Day had assembled the apparatus during the hours of darkness and now, as the first anaemic flicker of dawn niggled at the narrow windows, the burners were alight. Reagents happily simmered, steam carelessly condensed, distillations merrily dripped into the collecting flasks. Morveer processed around the makeshift table, rapping his knuckles against the wood as he passed, making the glassware clink and tinkle. Everything appeared to be entirely in order. Day had learned her business from a master, after all, perhaps the greatest poisoner in all the wide Circle of the World, who would say nay? But even the sight of the good work well done could not coax Morveer from his maudlin mood.

He puffed out his cheeks and gave vent to a weary sigh. ‘No one understands me. I am doomed to be misunderstood.’

‘You’re a complex person,’ said Day.

‘Exactly! Exactly so! You see it!’ Perhaps she alone appreciated that beneath his stern and masterful exterior there were reservoirs of feeling deep as mountain lakes.

‘I’ve made tea.’ She held a battered metal mug out to him, steam curling from within. His stomach grumbled unpleasantly.

‘No. I am grateful for your kind attentions, of course, but no. My digestion is unsettled this morning, terribly unsettled.’

‘Our Gurkish visitor making you nervous?’

‘Absolutely and entirely not,’ he lied, suppressing a shiver at the very remembrance of those midnight eyes. ‘My dyspepsia is the result of my ongoing difference of opinion with our employer, the notorious Butcher of Caprile, the ever-contrary Murcatto! I simply cannot seem to find the correct approach with that woman! However cordially I behave, however spotless my intentions, she bears it ill !’

‘She’s somewhat prickly, true.’

‘In my opinion she passes beyond prickly and enters the arena of . . . sharp,’ he finished, lamely.

‘Well, the betrayal, the being thrown down the mountain, the dead brother and all—’

‘Explanations, not excuses! We all have suffered painful reverses! I declare, I am half-tempted to abandon her to her inevitable fate and seek out fresh employment.’ He snorted with laughter at a sudden thought. ‘With Duke Orso, perhaps!’

Day looked up sharply. ‘You’re joking.’

It had, in fact, been intended as a witticism, for Castor Morveer was not the man to abandon an employer once he had accepted a contract. Certain standards of behaviour had to be observed, in his business more than any other. But it amused him to explore the notion further, counting off the points one by one upon his outstretched digits. ‘A man who can undoubtedly afford my services. A man who undoubtedly requires my services. A man who has proved himself unencumbered by the slightest troublesome moral qualm.’

‘A man with a record of pushing his employees down mountains.’

Morveer dismissed it. ‘One should never be foolish enough to trust the sort of person who would hire a poisoner. In that he is no worse an employer than any other. Why, it is a profound wonder the thought did not occur sooner!’

‘But . . . we killed his son.’

‘Bah! Such difficulties are easily explained away when two men find they need each other.’ He airily waved one hand. ‘Some invention will suffice. Some wretched scapegoat can always be found to shoulder the blame.’

She nodded slowly, mouth set hard. ‘A scapegoat. Of course.’

‘A wretched one.’ One less mutilated Northman in the world would be no loss to posterity. Nor one less insane convict or abrasive torturer, for that matter. He was almost warming to the notion. ‘But I daresay for the time being we are stuck with Murcatto and her futile quest for revenge. Revenge. I swear, is there a more pointless, destructive, unsatisfying motive in all the world?’

‘I thought motives weren’t our business,’ observed Day, ‘only jobs and the pay.’

‘Correct, my dear, very correct, every motive is a pure one that necessitates our services. You see straight to the heart of the matter as always, as though the matter were entirely transparent. Whatever would I do without you?’ He came smiling around the apparatus. ‘How are our preparations proceeding?’

‘Oh, I know what to do.’

‘Good. Very good. Of course you do. You learned from a master.’

She bowed her head. ‘And I marked your lessons well.’

‘Most excellent well.’ He leaned down to flick at a condenser, watched the Larync essence dripping slowly down into the retort. ‘It is vital to be exhaustively prepared for any and every eventuality. Caution first, always, of—Ah!’ He frowned down at his forearm. A tiny speck of red swelled, became a dot of blood. ‘What . . .’ Day backed slowly away from him, an expression of the most peculiar intensity on her face. She held a mounted needle in her hand.

‘Someone to take the blame?’ she snarled at him. ‘Scapegoat, am I? Fuck yourself, bastard!’

‘Come on, come on, come on.’ Faithful was pissing again, stood by his horse, back to Shivers, shaking his knees around. ‘Come on, come on. Bloody years catching up on me, that’s what this is.’

‘That or your dark deeds,’ said Swolle.

‘I’ve done nothing black enough to deserve this shit, surely. You feel like you never had to go so bad in your life, then when you finally get your prick out, you end up stood here in the wind for an age of . . . ah . . . ah . . . there’s the fucker!’ He leaned backwards, showing off his big bald spot. A

brief spatter, then another. One more, he worked his shoulders around as he shook the drips off, and started lacing up again.

'That's it?' asked Swolle.

'What's your interest?' snapped the general. 'To bottle it? Years catching up on me is all it is.' He picked his way up the slope bent over, heavy red cloak held out of the mud in one hand, and squatted down next to Shivers. 'Right then. Right then. That's the place?'

'That's the place.' The farm sat at the end of an open paddock, in the midst of a sea of grey wheat, under the grey sky, clouds smudged with watery dawn. Faint light flickered at the narrow windows of the barn, but no more signs of life. Shivers rubbed his fingers slowly against his palms. He'd never done much treachery. Nothing so sharply cut as this, leastways, and it was making him nervy.

'Looks peaceful enough.' Faithful ran a slow hand over his white stubble. 'Swolle, you get a dozen men and take 'em round the side, out of sight, into that stand of trees down there, get on the flank. Then if they see us and make a run for it you can finish up.'

'Right y'are, General. Nice and simple, eh?'

'Nothing worse than too much plan. More there is to remember, more there is to make a shit of. Don't need to tell you not to make a shit of it, do I, Swolle?'

'Me? No, sir. Into the trees, then if I see anyone running, charge. Just like at the High Bank.'

'Except Murcatto's on the other side now, right?'

'Right. Fucking evil bitch.'

'Now, now,' said Faithful. 'Some respect. You were happy enough to clap for her when she brought you victories, you can clap for her now. Shame things have come to this, is all. Nothing else for it. Don't mean there can't be some respect.'

'Right. Sorry.' Swolle paused for a moment. 'Sure it wouldn't be better to try and creep down there on foot? I mean, we can't ride into that farmhouse, can we?'

Faithful gave him a long look. 'Did they pick a new captain general while I was away, and are you it?'

'Well, no, 'course not, just—'

‘Creeping up ain’t my style, Swolle. Knowing how often you wash, more than likely Murcatto’d fucking smell you before we got within a hundred strides, and be ready. No, we’ll ride down there and spare my knees the wear. We can always get down once we’ve given the place the check over. And if she’s got any surprises for us, well, I’d rather be in my saddle.’ He frowned sideways at Shivers. ‘You see a problem with that, boy?’

‘Not me.’ From what Shivers had seen he reckoned Faithful was one o’ those men make a good second and a poor chief. Lots of bones but no imagination. Looked like he’d got stuck to one way of doing things over the years and had to do it now whether it fit the job or not. But he weren’t about to say so. Strong leaders might like it when someone brings ’em a better idea, but weak ones never do. ‘You reckon I could get my axe back, though?’

Faithful grinned. ‘’Course you can. Just as soon as I see Murcatto’s dead body. Let’s go.’ He nearly tripped on his cloak as he turned for the horses, angrily dragged it up and tossed it over his shoulder. ‘Bloody thing. Knew I should’ve got a shorter one.’

Shivers took one last look at the farm before he followed, shaking his head. There’s nothing worse’n too much plan, that’s true. But too little comes in close behind.

Morveer blinked. ‘But . . .’ He took a slow step towards Day. His ankle wobbled and he slumped sideways against the table, knocking over a flask and making the fizzing contents spill across the wood. He clutched one hand to his throat, his skin flushing, burning. He knew already what she must have done, the realisation spreading out frigid through his veins. He knew already what the consequences would have to be. ‘The King . . .’ he rasped, ‘of Poisons?’

‘What else? Caution first, always.’

He grimaced, at the meagre pain of the tiny prick in his arm, and at the far deeper wound of bitter betrayal besides. He coughed, fell forwards onto his knees, one hand stretching, trembling upwards. ‘But—’

Day kicked his hand away with the toe of one shoe. ‘Doomed to be misunderstood?’ Her face was twisted with contempt. With hatred, even. The pleasing mask of obedience, of admiration, of innocence too, finally dropped. ‘What do you think there is to understand about you, you swollen-

headed parasite? You're thin as tissue paper!' There was the deepest cut of all – ingratitude, after all he had given her! His knowledge, his money, his . . . fatherly affection! 'The personality of a baby in the body of a murderer! Bully and coward in one. Castor Morveer, greatest poisoner in the world? Greatest bore in the world, maybe, you—'

He sprang forwards with consummate nimbleness, nicked her ankle with his scalpel as he passed, rolled under the table and came up on the other side, grinning at her through the complexity of apparatus, the flickering flames of the burners, the distorting shapes of twisted tubes, the glinting surfaces of glass and metal.

'Ha ha!' He shouted, entirely alert and not dying in the least. 'You, poison me? The great Castor Morveer, undone by his assistant? I think *not* !' She stared down at her bleeding ankle, and then up at him, eyes wide. 'There is no King of Poisons, fool!' he cackled. 'The method I showed you, that produces a liquid that smells, tastes and looks like water? It makes water! Entirely harmless! Unlike the concoction with which I just now pricked you, which was enough to kill a dozen horses!'

He slipped his hand inside his shirt, deft fingertips unerringly selecting the correct vial and sliding it out into the light. Clear fluid gleamed inside. 'The antidote.' She winced as she saw it, made to dive one way around the table then came the other, but her feet were clumsy and he evaded her with negligible effort. 'Most undignified, my dear! Chasing each other around our apparatus, in a barn, in the middle of rural Styria! Most terribly undignified!'

'Please,' she hissed at him. 'Please, I'll . . . I'll—'

'Don't embarrass us both! You have displayed your true nature now you . . . you ingrate *harpy* ! You are unmasked, you treacherous cuckoo!'

'I didn't want to take the blame is all! Murcatto said sooner or later you'd go over to Orso! That you'd want to use me as the scapegoat! Murcatto said —'

'Murcatto? You listen to Murcatto over me? That degenerate, husk-addled and notorious butcher of the bloody battlefield? Oh, commendable guiding light! Curse me for an imbecile to trust either one of you! It seems you were correct, at least, that I am like to a baby. All unspoiled innocence! All undeserved mercy!' He flicked the vial through the air at Day. 'Let it never again be said,' as he watched her fumbling through the straw for it, 'that I

am not,' as she clawed it up and ripped out the cork, 'as generous, merciful and forgiving as any poisoner,' as she sucked down the contents, 'within the entire Circle of the World.'

Day wiped her mouth and took a shuddering breath. 'We need . . . to talk.'

'We certainly do. But not for long.' She blinked, then a strange spasm passed over her face. Just as he had known it would. He wrinkled his nose as he tossed his scalpel clattering across the table. 'The blade carried no poison, but you have just consumed a vial of undiluted Leopard Flower.'

She flopped over, eyes rolling back, skin turning pink, began to jerk around in the straw, froth gurgling from her mouth.

Morveer stepped forwards, leaned down over her, baring his teeth, stabbing at his chest with a clawing finger. 'Kill me, would you? Poison me? Castor Morveer?' The heels of her shoes drummed out a rapid beat on the hard-packed earth, sending up puffs of straw-dust. 'I am the only King of Poisons, you . . . you child-faced fool !' Her thrashing became a locked-up trembling, back arched impossibly far. 'The simple insolence of you! The arrogance! The *insult* ! The, the, the . . .' He fumbled breathlessly for the right word, then realised she was dead. There was a long, slow silence as her corpse gradually relaxed.

'Shit!' he barked. 'Entirely shit!' The scant satisfaction of victory was already fast melting, like an unseasonable flurry of snow on a warm day, before the crushing disappointment, wounding betrayal and simple inconvenience of his new, assistant-less, employer-less situation. For Day's final words had left him in no doubt that Murcatto was to blame. That after all his thankless, selfless toil on her behalf she had plotted his death. Why had he not anticipated this development? How could he not have expected it, after all the painful reverses he had suffered in his life? He was simply too soft a personage for this harsh land, this unforgiving epoch. Too trusting and too comradely for his own good. He was prone to see the world in the rosy tones of his own benevolence, cursed always to expect the best from people.

'Thin as paper, am I? Shit! You . . . shit!' He kicked Day's corpse petulantly, his shoe thudding into her body over and over and making it shudder again. 'Swollen-headed?' he near shrieked it. 'Me? Why, I am humility . . . its . . . fucking . . . self !' He realised suddenly that it ill befit a man of his boundless sensitivity to kick a person already dead, especially

one he had cared for almost as a daughter. He felt a sudden bubbling-up of melodramatic regret.

'I'm sorry! So sorry.' He knelt beside her, gently pushed her hair back, touched her face with trembling fingers. That vision of innocence, never more to smile, never more to speak. 'I'm so sorry, but . . . but why? I will always remember you, but—Oh . . . urgh!' There was a sharp smell of urine. The corpse voiding itself, an inevitable side effect of a colossal dose of Leopard Flower that a man of his experience really should have seen coming. The pool had already spread out through the straw and soaked the knees of his trousers. He tottered up, wincing with disgust.

'Shit! Shit!' He snatched up a flask and flung it against the wall in a fury, fragments of glass scattering. 'Bully and coward in one?' He gave Day's body another petulant kick, bruised his toes and set off limping around the barn at a great pace.

'Murcatto!' That evil witch had incited his apprentice to treachery. The best and most loved apprentice he had trained since he was obliged to preemptively poison Aloveo Cray back in Ostenhorm. He knew he should have killed Murcatto in his orchard, but the scale, the importance and the apparent impossibility of the work she offered had appealed to his vanity. 'Curse my vanity! The one flaw in my character!'

But there could be no vengeance. 'No.' Nothing so base and uncivilised, for that was not Morveer's way. He was no savage, no animal like the Serpent of Talins and her ilk, but a refined and cultured gentleman of the highest ethical standards. He was considerably out of pocket, now, after all his hard and loyal work, so he would have to find a proper contract. A proper employer and an entirely orderly and clean-motived set of murders, resulting in 'a proper, honest profit.'

And who would pay him to murder the Butcher of Caprile and her barbaric cronies? The answer was not so very difficult to fathom.

He faced a window and practised his most sycophantic bow, the one with the full finger twirl at the end. 'Grand Duke Orso, an incom . . . parable honour.' He straightened, frowning. At the top of the long rise, silhouetted against the grey dawn, were several dozen riders.

'For honour, glory and, above all, a decent pay-off!' A scattering of laughter as Faithful drew his sword and held it up high. 'Let's go!' And the long line

of horsemen started moving, keeping loosely together as they thrashed through the wheat and out into the paddock, upping the pace to a trot.

Shivers went along with 'em. There wasn't much choice since Faithful was right at his side. Hanging back would've seemed poor manners. He would've liked his axe to hand, but hoping for a thing often brought on the opposite. Besides, as they picked up speed to a healthy canter, keeping both hands on the reins seemed like an idea with some weight to it.

Maybe a hundred strides out now, and all still looking peaceful. Shivers frowned at the farmhouse, at the low wall, at the barn, gathering himself, making ready. It all seemed like a bad plan, now. It had seemed a bad plan at the time, but having to do it made it seem a whole lot worse. The ground rushed past hard under his horse's hooves, the saddle jolted at his sore arse, the wind nipped at his narrowed eye, tickled at the raw scars on the other side of his face, bitter cold without the bandages. Faithful rode on his right, sitting up tall, cloak flapping behind him, sword still raised, shouting, 'Steady! Steady!' On his left the line shifted and buckled, eager faces of men and horses in a twisting row, spears jolting up and down at all angles. Shivers worked his boots free of the stirrups.

Then the shutters of the farmhouse flew open all together with an echoing bang. Shivers saw the Osprians at the windows, first light glinting on their steel caps as a long row of 'em came up from behind the wall together, flatbows levelled. Comes a time you just have to do a thing, shit on the consequences. The air whooped in his throat as he sucked in a great breath and held it, then threw himself sideways and tumbled from the saddle. Over the batter of hooves, the clatter of metal, the rushing of wind he heard Monza's sharp cry.

Then the dirt struck him, jarred his teeth together. He rolled, grunting, over and over, took a mouthful of mud. The world spun, all dark sky and flicking soil, flying horses, falling men. Hooves thudded around him, mud spattered in his eyes. He heard screams, fought his way up as far as his knees. A corpse dropped, flailing, crashed into Shivers and knocked him on his back again.

Morveer made it to the double doors of the barn and wrestled one wide enough to stick his head through, just in time to see the Osprian soldiers rise

from behind the farmyard wall and deliver a disciplined and deadly volley of flatbow fire.

Out in the grassy paddock men jerked and tumbled from their saddles, horses fell and threw their riders. Flesh plunged down, ploughed into the wet dirt, limbs flailing. Beasts and men roared and wailed in shock and fury, pain and fear. Perhaps a dozen riders dropped, but the rest broke into a full charge without the slightest hint of reluctance, weapons raised and gleaming, releasing war cries to match the death screams of their fallen comrades.

Morveer whimpered, shoved the door shut and pressed his back against it. Red-edged battle. Rage and randomness. Pointed metal moving at great speed. Blood spilled, brains dashed, soft bodies ripped open and their innards laid sickeningly bare. A most uncivilised way to carry on, and decidedly not his area of expertise. His own guts, thankfully still within his abdomen, shifted with a first stab of bestial terror and revulsion, then constricted with a more reasoned wash of fear. If Murcatto won, her lethal intentions towards him had already been clearly displayed. She had not balked for a moment at engineering the death of his innocent apprentice, after all. If the Thousand Swords won, well, he was an accomplice of Prince Ario's killer. In either case his life would undoubtedly be painfully forfeit.

'Damn it!'

Beyond the one doorway the farmyard was rapidly becoming a slaughteryard, but the windows were too narrow to squeeze through. Hide in the hayloft? No, no, what was he, five years old? Lay down beside poor Day and play dead? What? Lie down in urine? Never! He dashed to the back of the barn with all despatch, poked desperately at the planking for a way through. He found a loose board and began kicking at it.

'Break, you wooden bastard ! Break! Break! Break! ' The sounds of mortal combat were growing ever more intense in the yard behind him. Something crashed against the side of the barn and made him startle, dust filtering down from the rafters with the force of it. He turned back to the carpentry, whimpering now with fear and frustration, face prickling with sweat. One last kick and the wood tore free. Wan daylight slunk in through a narrow gap between two ragged-edged planks. He knelt, turning sideways on, forced his head through the crack, splinters digging at his scalp, gained a view of flat country, brown wheat, a stand of trees perhaps two hundred

strides distant. Safety. He worked one arm through into the free air, clutching vainly at the weathered outside of the barn. One shoulder, half his chest, and then he stuck fast.

It had been optimistic of him, to say the least, to imagine that he might have effortlessly slipped through that gap. Ten years ago he had been slender as a willow-swatch, could have glided through a space half the width with the grace of a dancer. Too many pastries in the interim had rendered such an operation impossible, however, and there appeared to be a growing prospect that they might have cost him his life. He wriggled, squirmed, sharp wood digging at his belly. Is this how they would find him? Is this the tale that they would snigger over in after years? Would that be his legacy? The great Castor Morveer, death without a face, most feared of all poisoners, finally brought to book, wedged in a crack in the back of a barn while fleeing?

'Damn pastries!' he screamed, and with one last effort tore himself through, teeth gritted as a rogue nail ripped his shirt half-off and left him a long and painful cut down his ribs. 'Damn it! Shit!' He dragged his aching legs through after him. Finally liberated from the clawing embrace of poor-quality joinery and riddled with splinters, he began to dash towards the proffered safety of the trees, waist-high wheat stalks tripping him, thrashing him, snatching at his legs.

He had progressed no further than five wobbly strides when he fell headlong, sprawling in the damp crop with a squeal. He struggled up, cursing. One of his shoes had been snatched off by the jealous wheat as he went down. 'Damn wheat!' He was just beginning to cast about for it when he became aware of a loud drumming sound. To his disbelieving horror, a dozen horsemen had burst from the trees towards which he had been fleeing, and were even now bearing down on him at full gallop, spears lowered.

He gave vent to a breathless squeak, spun, slipped on his bare foot, began to limp back to the crack that had so mauled him on their first acquaintance. He wedged one leg through, whimpered at a stab of agony as he accidently squashed his fruits against a plank. His back prickled as the hammering of hooves grew louder. The riders were no more than fifty strides from him, eyes of men and beasts starting, teeth of men and beasts bared, brightening morning sun catching warlike metal, chaff flying from threshing hooves. He

would never tear his bleeding body back through the narrow gap in time. Would he be thrashed, now? Poor, humble Castor Morveer, who only ever wanted to be—

The corner of the barn exploded in a gout of bright flame. It made no sound beyond the crack and twang of shattering wood. The air suddenly swarmed with spinning debris: a tumbling chunk of flaming beam, ripped planks, bent nails, a scouring cloud of splinters and sparks. A cone of wheat was flattened in one great rustling wave, sucking up a rippling swell of dust, stalk, grain, embers. Two not insignificant barrels were suddenly exposed, standing proud in the midst of the levelled crop, directly in the path of the charging horsemen. Flames leaped up from them, black char spreading spontaneously across their sides.

The right-hand barrel exploded with a blinding flash, the left almost immediately after. Two great fountains of soil were hurled into the sky. The lead horse, trapped between them, seemed to stop, frozen, twist, then burst apart along with its rider. Most of the rest were enveloped in the spreading clouds of dust and, presumably, reduced to flying mincemeat.

A wave of wind flattened Morveer against the side of the barn, tearing at his ripped shirt, his hair, his eyes. A moment later the thunderous double detonation reached his ears and made his teeth rattle. A couple of horses at either end of the line remained largely in one piece, flapping bonelessly as they were tossed through the air like an angry toddler's toys, one mount turned mostly inside out, crashing down to leave bloody scars through the crop near the trees from which they had first emerged.

Clods of earth rattled against the plank wall. Dust began to settle. Patches of damp wheat burned reluctantly around the edges of the blast, sending up smudges of acrid smoke. Charred splinters of wood, blackened chaff, smouldering fragments of men and beasts still rained from the sky. Ash wafted softly down on the breeze.

Morveer stood, still wedged in the side of the barn, struck to the heart with cold amazement. Gurkish fire, it seemed, or something darker, more . . . magical? A figure appeared around the smouldering corner of the barn just as he wrenched himself free and dived into the wheat, peering up between the stalks.

The Gurkish woman, Ishri. One arm and the hem of her brown coat were thoroughly on fire. She seemed suddenly to notice as the flames licked up

around her face, shrugged the burning garment off without rush and tossed it aside, standing bandaged from neck to toe, unburned and pristine as the body of some ancient desert queen embalmed and ready for burial. She took one long look towards the trees, then smiled and slowly shook her head.

She said something happily in Kantic. Morveer's mastery of the tongue was not supreme, but it sounded like, 'You still have it, Ishri.' She swept the wheat where Morveer was hiding with her black eyes, at which he ducked down with the greatest alacrity, then she turned and disappeared behind the shattered corner of the barn from whence she came. He heard her faintly chuckling to herself.

'You still have it.'

Morveer was left only with an overpowering – but in his opinion entirely justifiable – desire to flee, and never look back. So he wormed his way through the gore-spattered crops on his belly. Towards the trees, inch by painful inch, breath wheezing in his burning chest, terror pricking at his arse all the long way.

No Worse

Monza jerked the Calvez back and the man gave a wheezing grunt, face all squeezed up with shock, clutching at the little wound in his chest. He took a tottering step forwards, hauling up his short-sword as if it weighed as much as an anvil. She stepped out to the left and ran him through the side, just under his ribs, a foot of well-used blade sliding through his studded leather jerkin. He turned his head in her direction, face pink and trembling, veins bulging in his stretched-out neck. When she pulled the sword out, he dropped as if it had been the only thing holding him up. His eyes rolled towards her.

'Tell my . . .' he whispered.

'What?'

'Tell . . . her—' He strained up from the boards, dust caked across one side of his face, then coughed black vomit and stopped moving.

Monza placed him, all of a sudden. Baro, his name had been, or Paro, something with an 'o' on the end. Some cousin of old Swolle's. He'd been there at Musselia, after the siege, after they sacked the town. He'd laughed at one of Benna's jokes. She remembered because it hadn't seemed the time for jokes, after they'd murdered Hermon and stolen his gold. She hadn't felt much like laughing, she knew that.

'Varo?' she muttered, trying to think what that joke had been. She heard a board creak, saw movement just in time to drop down. Her head jolted, the floor hit her in the face. She got up, the room tipped over and she ploughed into the wall, put one elbow out of the window, almost fell right through it. Roaring outside, clatter and clash of combat.

Through a head full of lights she saw something come at her and she tumbled out of the way, heard it smash into plaster. Splinters in her face. She screamed, reeling off balance, slashed at a black shape with the Calvez, saw her hand was empty. Dropped it already. There was a face at the window.

'Benna?' And some blood trickled from her mouth.

No time for jokes. Something clattered into her back and drove her breath out. She saw a mace, dull metal gleaming. Saw a man's face, snarling. A

chain whipped around his neck and jerked him up. The room was settling, blood whooshing in her head, she tried to stand and only rolled onto her back.

Vitari had him round the throat and they lurched together about the dim room. He elbowed at her, other hand fiddling at the chain, but she dragged it tight, eyes ground to two furious little slits. Monza struggled up, made it to her feet, wobbled towards them. He fished at his belt for a knife but Monza got there first, pinned his free arm with her left hand, drew the blade with her right and started stabbing him with it.

'Uh, uh, uh.' Squelch, scrape, thud, honking and spitting in each other's faces, her stuttering moan, and his squealing grunts, and Vitari's low growl all mingling together into an echoing, animal mess. Pretty much the same sounds they would have made if they were fucking rather than killing each other. Scrape, thud, squelch. 'Uh, ah, uh.'

'Enough!' hissed Vitari. 'He's done!'

'Uh.' She let the knife clatter to the boards. Her arm was sticky wet inside her coat all the way to her elbow, gloved hand locked up into a burning claw. She turned to the door, narrowing her stinging eyes against the brightness, stepped clumsily over the corpse of an Osprian soldier and through the broken wood in the doorway.

A man with blood down his cheek clawed at her, near dragged her over as he fell, smearing gore across her coat. A mercenary was stabbed from behind as he tried to stagger up from the yard, went down thrashing on his face. Then the Osprian soldier who'd speared him got kicked in the head by a horse, his steel cap flying right off and him toppling sideways like a felled tree. Men and mounts strained all around – a deadly storm of thumping boots, hooves, clattering metal, swinging weapons and flying dirt.

And not ten strides from her, through the mass of writhing bodies, Faithful Carpi sat on his big warhorse, roaring like a madman. He hadn't much changed – the same broad, honest, scarred face. The bald pate, the thick white moustache and the white stubble round it. He'd got himself a shiny breastplate and a long red cloak better suited to a duke than a mercenary. He had a flatbow bolt sticking from his shoulder, right arm hanging useless, the other raised to point a heavy sword towards the house.

The strange thing was that she felt a rush of warmth when she first laid eyes on him. That happy pang you get when you see a friend's face in a

crowd. Faithful Carpi, who'd led five charges for her. Who'd fought for her in all weathers and never let her down. Faithful Carpi, who she would've trusted with her life. Who she had trusted with her life, so he could sell it cheap for Cosca's old chair. Sell her life, and sell her brother's too.

The warmth didn't last long. The dizziness faded with it, left her a dose of anger scalding her guts and a stinging pain down the side of her head where the coins held her skull together.

The mercenaries could be bitter fighters when they had no other choice, but they much preferred foraging to fighting and they'd been withered by that first volley, rattled by the shock of men where they hadn't expected them. They had spears ahead, enemies in the buildings, archers at the windows and on the flat stable roof, shooting down at their leisure. A rider shrieked as he was dragged from his saddle, spear tumbling from his hand and clattering at Monza's feet.

A couple of his comrades turned their horses to run. One made it back into the paddock. The other was poked wailing from his saddle with a sword, foot caught in one stirrup, dancing upside down while his horse thrashed about. Faithful Carpi was no coward, but you don't last thirty years as a mercenary without knowing when to make a dash for it. He wheeled his horse around, chopping an Osprian soldier down and laying his skull wide open in the mud. Then he was gone round the side of the farmhouse.

Monza clawed up the fallen spear in her gloved hand, snatched hold of the bridle of the riderless horse with the other and dragged herself into the saddle, her sudden bitter need to kill Carpi putting some trace of the old spring back into her lead-filled legs. She pulled the horse around to face the farmyard wall, gave it her heels and jumped it, an Osprian soldier flinging his flatbow down and diving out of her way with a cry. She thumped down on the other side, jolting in the saddle and near stabbing herself in the face, crashed out into the wheat, stalks thrashing at the legs of her stolen horse as it struggled up the long slope. She fumbled the spear across into her left hand, took the reins in her right, crouched down and drummed up a jagged canter with her heels. She saw Carpi stop at the top of the rise, a black outline against the bright eastern sky, then turn his horse and tear away.

She burst out from the wheat and across a field spotted with thorny bushes, downhill now, clods of mud flying from the soft ground as she dug her mount to a full gallop. Not far ahead of her Carpi jumped a hedgerow,

greenery thrashing at his horse's hooves. He landed badly, flailing in the saddle to keep his balance. Monza picked her spot better, cleared the hedge easily, gaining on him all the time. She kept her eyes ahead, always ahead. Not thinking of the speed, or the danger, or the pain in her hand. All that was in her mind was Faithful Carpi, and his horse, and the overpowering need to stick her spear into one or the other.

They thundered across an unplanted field, hooves hammering at the thick mud, towards a crease in the ground that looked like a stream. A whitewashed building gleamed beside it in the brightening morning sun, a mill-house from what Monza could tell with the world shaking, wobbling, rushing around her. She strained forwards over her horse's neck, gripping hard at the spear couched under her arm, wind rushing at her narrowed eyes. Willing herself closer to Faithful Carpi. Willing herself closer to vengeance. It looked as though his horse might have picked up a niggle when he spoiled that jump, she was making ground on him now, making ground fast.

There were just three lengths between them, then two, specks of mud from the hooves of Carpi's warhorse flicking in her face. She drew herself up in the saddle, pulling back the spear, sun twinkling on the tip for a moment. She caught a glimpse of Faithful's familiar face as he jerked his head round to look over his shoulder, one grey eyebrow thick with blood, streaks down his stubbly cheek from a cut on his forehead. She heard him growl, digging hard with his spurs, but his horse was a heavy beast, better suited to charging than fleeing. The bobbing head of her mount crept slowly closer and closer to the streaming tail of Carpi's, the ground a brown blur rushing by between the two.

She screamed as she rammed the spear point into the horse's rump. It jerked, twisted, head flailing, one eye rolling wild, foam on its bared teeth. Faithful jolted in the saddle, one boot torn from the stirrup. The warhorse carried on for a dizzy moment, then its wounded leg twisted underneath it and all at once it went down, pitching forwards, head folding under its hurtling weight, hooves flailing, mud flying. She heard Carpi squeal as she flashed past, heard the thumping behind her as his horse tumbled over and over across the muddy field.

She hauled on the reins with her right hand, pulled her horse up, snorting and tossing, legs shaky from the hard ride. She saw Carpi pushing himself

drunkenly from the ground, tangled with his long red cloak, all spattered and streaked with dirt. She was surprised to see him still alive, but not unhappy. Gobba, Mauthis, Ario, Ganmark, they'd had their part in what Orso had done to her, done to her brother, and they'd paid their price for it. But none of them had been her friends. Faithful had ridden beside her. Eaten with her. Drunk from her canteen. Smiled, and smiled, then stabbed her when it suited him, and stolen her place.

She had a mind to stretch this out.

He took a dizzy step, mouth hanging open, eyes wide in his bloody face. He saw her and she grinned, held the spear up high and gave a whoop. Like a hunter might do, seeing the fox in the open. He started limping desperately away towards the edge of the field, wounded arm cradled against his chest, the shaft of the flatbow bolt jutting broken from his shoulder.

The smile tugged hard at her face as she trotted up closer, close enough to hear his wheezing breath as he struggled pointlessly towards the stream. The sight of that treacherous bastard crawling for his life made her happier than she'd been in a long while. He hauled his sword from its scabbard with his left hand, floundering desperately forwards, using it as a crutch.

'Takes time,' she called to him, 'to learn to use the wrong hand! I should know! You don't have that much fucking time, Carpi!' He was close to the stream, but she'd be on him before he got there, and he knew it.

He turned, clumsily raising the blade. She jerked the reins and sent her mount sideways so he hacked nothing but air. She stood in the stirrups, stabbed down with the spear, caught him in the shoulder and tore the armour from it, ripped a gash in his cloak and knocked him to his knees, sword left stuck in the earth. He moaned through gritted teeth, blood trickling down his breastplate, struggling to get up again. She pulled one boot from the stirrup, brought her horse closer and kicked him in the face, snapped his head back and sent him rolling down the bank and into the stream.

She tossed the spear point-first into the soil, swung her leg over the saddle and slid down. She stood a moment, watching Carpi floundering, shaking the life back into her stiff legs. Then she snatched the spear up, took a long, slow breath and started picking her way down the bank to the water's edge.

Not far downstream the mill-house stood, waterwheel clattering as it slowly turned. The far bank had been walled up with rough stone, all bearded with moss. Carpi was fumbling at it, cursing, trying to drag himself up onto the far side. But weighed down with armour, his cloak heavy with water, a flatbow bolt in one shoulder and a spear wound in the other, he had less than no chance. So he waded doggedly along, up to his waist in the stream, while she shadowed him on the other bank, grinning, spear levelled.

'You keep on going, Carpi, I'll give you that. No one could call you a coward. Just an idiot. Stupid Carpi.' She forced out a laugh. 'I can't believe you fell for this shit. All those years taking my orders, you should've known me better. Thought I'd be sitting waiting, did you, weeping over my misfortunes?'

He edged back through the water, eyes fixed on the point of her spear, breathing hard. 'That fucking Northman lied to me.'

'Almost as if you can't trust anyone these days, eh? You should've stabbed me in the heart, Faithful, instead of the guts.'

'Heart?' he sneered. 'You don't have one!' He floundered through the water at her, sending up a shower of glittering spray, dagger in his fist. She thrust at him, felt the spear's shaft jolt in her aching right hand as the point took him in the hip, twisted him round and sent him over backwards. He struggled up again, snarling through his gritted teeth. 'I'm better'n you at least, you murdering scum!'

'If you're so much better than me, how come you're the one in the stream and I'm the one with the spear, fucker?' She moved the point in slow circles, shining with wet. 'You keep on coming, Carpi, I'll give you that. No one could call you a coward. Just a fucking liar. Traitor Carpi.'

'Me a traitor?' he dragged himself down the wall towards the slowly clattering waterwheel. 'Me? After all those years I stuck with you? I wanted to be loyal to Cosca! I was loyal to him. I'm Faithful!' He thumped his wet breastplate with his bloody hand. 'That's what I am. What I was. You stole that from me! You and your fucking brother!'

'I didn't throw Cosca down a mountain, bastard!'

'You think I wanted to do it? You think I wanted any of this?' There were tears in the old mercenary's eyes as he struggled away from her. 'I'm not made to lead! Ario comes to me, says Orso's decided you can't be trusted!

That you have to go! That you're the past and I'm the future, and the rest of the captains already agreed. So I took the easy way. What was my choice?'

Monza wasn't enjoying herself any more. She remembered Orso standing smiling in her tent. Cosca is the past, and I have decided that you are the future. Benna smiling beside him. It's better like this. You deserve to lead. She remembered taking the easy way. What had been her choice? 'You could've warned me, given me a chance to—'

'Like you warned Cosca? Like you warned me? Fuck yourself, Murcatto! You pointed out the path and I followed, that's all! You sow bloody seeds, you'll reap a bloody harvest, and you sowed seeds across Styria and back! You did this to yourself! You did this to—Gah!' He twisted backwards, fumbling weakly at his neck. That fine cloak of his had floated back and got all caught up in the gears of the waterwheel. Now the red cloth was winding tighter and tighter, dragging him hard against the slowly turning wood.

'Fucking . . .' He fumbled with his one half-good arm at the mossy slats, at the rusted bolts of the great wheel, but there was no stopping it. Monza watched, mouth half-open but no words to say, spear hanging slack from her hands as he was dragged down, down under the wheel. Down, down, into the black water. It surged and bubbled around his chest, then around his shoulders, then around his neck.

His bulging eyes rolled up towards her. 'I'm no worse'n you, Murcatto! Just did what I had to!' He was fighting to keep his mouth above the frothing water. 'I'm . . . no worse . . . than—'

His face disappeared.

Faithful Carpi, who'd led five charges for her. Who'd fought for her in all weathers and never let her down. Faithful Carpi, who she'd trusted with her life.

Monza floundered down into the stream, cold water closing around her legs. She caught hold of Faithful's clutching hand, felt his fingers grip hers. She pulled, teeth gritted, growling with the effort. She lifted the spear, rammed it into the gears hard as she could, felt the shaft jam there. She hooked her gloved hand under his armpit, up to her neck in surging water, fighting to drag him out, straining with every burning muscle. She felt him starting to come up, arm sliding out of the froth, elbow, then shoulder, she started fumbling at the buckle on his cloak with her gloved hand but she couldn't make the fingers work. Too cold, too numb, too broken. There was

a crack as the spear shaft splintered. The waterwheel started turning, slowly, slowly, metal squealing, cogs grating, and dragged Faithful back under.

The stream kept on flowing. His hand went limp, and that was that.

Five dead, two left.

She let it go, breathing hard. She watched as his pale fingers slipped under the water, then she waded out of the stream and limped up onto the bank, soaked to the skin. There was no strength left in her, legs aching deep in the bones, right hand throbbing all the way up her forearm and into her shoulder, the wound on the side of her head stinging, blood pounding hard as a club behind her eyes. It was all she could manage to get one foot in the stirrup and drag herself into the saddle.

She took a look back, felt her guts clench and double her over, spat a mouthful of scalding sick into the mud, then another. The wheel had pulled Faithful right under and now it was dragging him up on the other side, limbs dangling, head lolling, eyes wide open and his tongue hanging out, some waterweed tangled around his neck. Slowly, slowly, it hoisted him up into the air, like an executed traitor displayed as an example to the public.

She wiped her mouth on the back of her arm, scraped her tongue over her teeth and tried to spit the bitterness away while her sore head spun. Probably she should have cut him down from there, given him some last shred of dignity. He'd been her friend, hadn't he? No hero, maybe, but who was? A man who'd wanted to be loyal in a treacherous business, in a treacherous world. A man who'd wanted to be loyal and found it had gone out of fashion. Probably she should have dragged him up onto the bank at least, left him somewhere he could lie still. But instead she turned her horse back towards the farm.

Dignity wasn't much help to the living, it was none to the dead. She'd come here to kill Faithful, and he was killed.

No point weeping about it now.

Harvest Time

Shivers sat on the steps of the farmhouse, trimming some loose skin from the big mass of grazes on his forearm and watching some man weep over a corpse. Friend. Brother, even. He weren't trying to hide it, just sat slumped over, tears dripping off his chin. A moving sight, most likely, if you were that way inclined.

And Shivers always had been. His brother had called him pig-fat when he was a boy on account of his being that soft. He'd cried at his brother's grave and at his father's. When his friend Dobban got stabbed through with a spear and took two days going back to the mud. The night after the fight at Dunbrec, when they buried half his crew along with Threetrees. After the battle in the High Places, even, he'd gone off and found a spot on his own, let fall a full puddle of salt water. Though that might've been relief the fighting was done, rather than sorrow some lives were.

He knew he'd wept all those times, and he knew why, but he couldn't remember for the life of him how it had felt to do it. He wondered if there was anyone left in the world he'd cry for now, and he wasn't sure he liked the answer.

He took a swig of sour water from his flask, and watched a couple of Osprian soldiers picking over the bodies. One rolled a dead man over, some bloody guts slithering out of his split side, wrestled his boot off, saw it had a hole in the sole, tossed it away. He watched another pair, shirt-sleeves rolled up, one with a shovel over his shoulder, arguing the toss over where'd be easiest to start digging. He watched the flies, floating about in the soupy air, already gathering round the open mouths, the open eyes, the open wounds. He looked at ragged gashes and broken bone, cut-off limbs and spilled innards, blood in sticky streaks, drying spots and spatters, red-black pools across the stony yard, and felt no pleasure at a job well done, but no disgust either, no guilt and no sorrow. Just the stinging of his grazes, the uncomfortable stickiness of the heat, the tiredness in his bruised limbs and a niggling trace of hunger, since he'd missed breakfast.

There was a man screaming inside the farmhouse, where they were dealing with the wounded. Screaming, screaming, hoarse and blubbery. But

there was a bird tweeting happily from the eaves of the stable too, and Shivers found without too much effort he could concentrate on one and forget the other. He smiled and nodded along with the bird, leaned back against the door frame and stretched his leg out. Seemed a man could get used to anything, in time. And he was damned if he was going to let some screaming shift him off a good spot on the doorstep.

He heard hoofbeats, looked round. Monza, trotting slowly down the slope, a black figure with the bright-blue sky behind her. He watched her pull her lathered horse up in the farmyard, frowning at the bodies. Her clothes were sodden wet, as if she'd been dunked in a stream. Her hair was matted with blood on one side, her pale cheek streaked with it.

'Aye aye, Chief. Good to see you.' Should've been true but it felt like some kind of a lie, still. He felt not much of anything either way. 'Faithful dead, is he?'

'He's dead.' She slid stiffly down. 'Have any trouble getting him here?'

'Not much. He wanted to bring more friends than we'd planned for, but I couldn't bring myself to turn 'em down. You know how it is when folk hear about a party. They looked so eager, poor bastards. Have any trouble killing him?'

She shook her head. 'He drowned.'

'Oh aye? Thought you'd have stabbed him.' He picked her sword up and offered it to her.

'I stabbed him a bit.' She looked at the blade for a moment, then took it from his hand and sheathed it. 'Then I let him drown.'

Shivers shrugged. 'Up to you. Drowning'll do it, I reckon.'

'Drowning did it.'

'Five of seven, then.'

'Five of seven.' Though she didn't look like celebrating. Hardly any more than the man crying over his dead friend. It weren't much of a joyous occasion for anyone, even on the winning side. There's vengeance for you.

'Who's that screaming?'

'Someone. No one.' Shivers shrugged. 'Listen to the bird instead.'

'What?'

'Murcatto!' Vitari stood, arms folded, in the open doorway of the barn. 'You'll want to see this.'

It was cool and dim inside, sunlight coming in through a ragged hole in the corner, through the narrow windows, throwing bright stripes across the darkened straw. One fell over Day's corpse, yellow hair tangled across her face, body twisted awkwardly. No blood. No marks of violence at all.

'Poison,' muttered Monza.

Vitari nodded. 'Oh, the irony.'

A hellish-looking mess of copper rods, glass tubes and odd-shaped bottles was stood on the table beside the body, a couple of lamps with yellow-blue flames flickering underneath, stuff bubbling away inside, trickling, dripping. Shivers liked the look of the poisoner's equipment even less than the look of the poisoner's corpse. Bodies he was good and familiar with, science was all unknown.

'Fucking science,' he muttered. 'Even worse'n magic.'

'Where's Morveer?' asked Monza.

'No sign.' The three of them looked hard at each other for a moment.

'Not among the dead?'

Shivers slowly shook his head. 'It's a shame, but I didn't see him.'

Monza took a worried step back. 'Best not touch anything.'

'You think?' growled Vitari. 'What happened?'

'Difference of opinion between master and apprentice, by the look of things.'

'Serious difference,' muttered Shivers.

Vitari slowly shook her spiky head. 'That's it. I'm finished.'

'You're what?' asked Monza.

'I'm out. In this business you have to know when to quit. It's war now, and I try not to get involved with that. Too hard to pick the outcome.' She nodded towards the yard where, out in the sunshine, they were piling up the corpses. 'Visserine was a step too far for me, and this is a step further. That and I've no taste for being on the wrong side of Morveer. I could do without looking over my shoulder every day of my life.'

'You'll still be looking over your shoulder for Orso,' said Monza.

'Knew it when I took the job. Needed the money.' Vitari held out her open palm. 'Talking of which . . .'

Monza frowned at her hand, then her face. 'You've only come halfway. Halfway, half what we agreed.'

‘Seems fair. All the money and dead is no kind of payment. I’ll settle for half and live.’

‘I’d sooner keep you on. I can use you. And you won’t be safe as long as Orso’s alive—’

‘Then you’d best get on and kill the bastard, hadn’t you? But without me.’

‘Your choice.’ Monza reached inside her coat and pulled out a flat leather pouch, a little stained with water. She unfolded it twice and slid a paper from inside, damp at one corner, covered with fancy-looking script. ‘More than half what we agreed. Five thousand two hundred and twelve scales, in fact.’ Shivers frowned at it. He still couldn’t see how you could turn such a weight of silver into a scrap of paper.

‘Fucking banking,’ he murmured. ‘Even worse’n science.’

Vitari took the bill from Monza’s gloved hand, gave it a quick look over. ‘Valint and Balk?’ Her eyes went even narrower than usual, which was some achievement. ‘This paper better pay. If not, there’s no place in the Circle of the World you’ll be safe from—’

‘It’ll pay. If there’s one thing I don’t need it’s more enemies.’

‘Then let’s part friends.’ Vitari folded the paper and pushed it down into her shirt. ‘Maybe we’ll work together again some time.’

Monza stared right into her face, that way she had. ‘I’ll count the minutes.’

Vitari backed off for a few steps, then turned towards the sunlit square of the doorway.

‘I fell in a river!’ Shivers called after her.

‘What?’

‘When I was young. First time I went raiding. I got drunk, and I went for a piss, and I fell in the river. Current sucked my trousers off, dumped me half a mile downstream. Time I got back to camp I’d more or less turned blue with cold, shivering so bad I near shook my fingers off.’

‘And?’

‘That’s why they called me Shivers. You asked. Back in Sipani.’ And he grinned. Seemed like he could see the funny side of it, these days. Vitari stood there for a moment, a lean black outline, then slid out through the door. ‘Well, Chief, looks like it’s just you and me—’

‘And me!’ He snapped round, reaching for his axe. Beside him Monza crouched, sword already half-drawn, both straining into the darkness. Ishri’s

grinning face hung on one side, over the edge of the hayloft. ‘And a fine afternoon to my two heroes.’ She slid down the ladder face first, as smooth as if her bandaged body had no bones in it. Up onto her feet, looking impossibly thin without her coat, and she sauntered across the straw towards Day’s corpse. ‘One of your killers killed the other. There’s killers for you.’ She looked at Shivers, eyes black as coal, and he gripped his axe tight.

‘Fucking magic,’ he mumbled. ‘Even worse’n banking.’

She crept up, all white-toothed, hungry grin, touched one finger to the pick on the back of his axe and pushed it gently down towards the floor. ‘Do I take it you murdered your old friend Faithful Carpi to your satisfaction?’

Monza slapped her sword back into its sheath. ‘Faithful’s dead, if that’s the point of your fucking performance.’

‘You have a strange manner of celebration.’ She lifted her long arms to the ceiling. ‘Vengeance is yours! Praise be to God!’

‘Orso still lives.’

‘Ah, yes.’ Ishri opened her eyes very wide, so wide Shivers wondered if they might drop out. ‘When Orso dies you will smile.’

‘What do you care whether I smile?’

‘I, care? Not a particle. You Styrians have a habit of boasting, and boasting, and never following through. I am pleased to find one who can get the job done. Do the job, scowl by all means.’ She ran her fingers across the table-top then casually snuffed the flames of the burners out with the palm of her hand. ‘Speaking of which, you told our mutual friend Duke Rogont you could bring the Thousand Swords over to his side, as I recall?’

‘If the Emperor’s gold is forthcoming—’

‘In your shirt pocket.’

Monza frowned as she pulled something from her pocket and held it up to the light. A big red-gold coin, shining with that special warmth gold has that somehow makes you want to hold it. ‘Very nice, but it’ll take more than one.’

‘Oh, there’ll be more. The mountains of Gurkhul are made of gold, I hear.’ She peered at the charred edges of the hole in the corner of the barn, then happily clicked her tongue. ‘I still have it.’ And she twisted her body through the gap like a fox through a fence and was gone.

Shivers left it a moment, then leaned close to Monza. ‘Can’t put my finger on it, but there’s something odd about her.’

‘You’ve got this amazing sense for people, haven’t you?’ She turned without smiling and followed Vitari out of the barn.

Shivers stood there a moment longer, frowning down at Day’s body, working his face around, feeling the scars on the left side stretching, shifting, itching. Cosca dead, Day dead, Vitari gone, Friendly gone, Morveer fled and, by the look of things, turned against them. So much for the merry company. He should’ve been all nostalgic for the happy friends of long ago, the bands of brothers he’d been a part of. United in a common cause, even if it was no more’n staying alive. Dogman, and Harding Grim, and Tul Duru. Black Dow, even, all men with a code. All faded into the past, and left him alone. Down here in Styria, where no one had any code that meant a thing.

Even then, his right eye was about as close to crying as his left.

He scratched at the scar on his cheek. Ever so gently, just with his fingertips. He winced, scratched harder. And harder still. He stopped himself, hissing through his teeth. Now it itched worse than ever, and hurt into the bargain. He’d yet to work out a way to scratch that itch that didn’t make matters worse.

There’s vengeance for you.

The Old New Captain General

Monza had seen wounds past counting, in all their wondrous variety. The making of them had been her profession. She'd witnessed bodies ruined in every conceivable manner. Men crushed, slashed, stabbed, burned, hanged, skinned, gutted, gored. But Caul Shivers' scar might well have been the worst she'd ever seen on the face of a living man.

It started as a pink mark near the corner of his mouth, became a ragged groove thick as a finger below his cheekbone, then widened, a stream of mottled, melted flesh flowing towards his eye. Streaks and spots of angry red spread out from it across his cheek, down the side of his nose. There was a thin mark to match slanting across his forehead and taking off half his eyebrow. Then there was the eye itself. It was bigger than the other. Lashes gone, lids shrivelled, the lower one drooping. When he blinked with his right eye, the left only twitched, and stayed open. He'd sneezed a while back, and it had puckered up like a swallowing throat, the dead enamelled pupil still staring at her through the pink hole. She'd had to will herself not to spew, and yet she was gripped with a horrified fascination, constantly looking to see if it would happen again, and it hardly helped that she knew he couldn't see her looking.

She should have felt guilt. She'd been the cause of it, hadn't she? She should have felt sympathy. She'd scars of her own, after all, and ugly enough. But disgust was as close as she could get. She wished she'd started off riding on the other side of him, but it was too late now. She wished he'd never taken the bandages off, but she could hardly tell him to put them back on. She told herself it might heal, might get better, and maybe it would.

But not much, and she knew it.

He turned suddenly, and she realised why he'd been staring at his saddle. His right eye was on her. His left, in the midst of all that scar, still looked straight downwards. The enamel must have slipped, and now his mismatched eyes gave him a look of skewed confusion.

'What?'

'Your, er . . .' She pointed at her face. 'It's slipped . . . a bit.'

‘Again? Fucking thing.’ He put his thumb in his eye and slid it back up. ‘Better?’ Now the false one was fixed straight ahead while the real one glared at her. It was almost worse than it had been.

‘Much,’ she said, doing her best to smile.

Shivers spat something in Northern. ‘Uncanny results, did he say? If I happen back through Puranti I’ll give that eye-making bastard a visit . . .’

The mercenaries’ first picket came into view around a curve in the track – a scattering of shady-looking men in mismatched armour. She knew the one in charge by sight. She’d made it her business to know every veteran in the Thousand Swords, and what he was good for. Secco was this one’s name, a tough old wolf who’d served as a corporal for six years or more.

He pointed his spear at her as they brought their horses to a walk, his fellows around him, flatbows, swords, axes at the ready. ‘Who goes—’

She pushed her hood back. ‘Who do you think, Secco?’

The words froze on his lips and he stood, spear limp, as she rode past. On into the camp, men going about their morning rituals, eating their breakfasts, getting ready to march. A few looked up as she and Shivers passed on the track, or at any rate the widest stretch of mud between the tents. A few of them started staring. Then a few more, watching, following at a distance, gathering along the way.

‘It’s her.’

‘Murcatto.’

‘She’s alive?’

She rode through them the way she used to, shoulders back, chin up, sneer locked on her mouth, not even bothering to look. As if they were nothing to her. As if she was a better kind of animal than they were. And all the while she prayed silently they didn’t work out what they’d never worked out yet, but what she was always afraid to the pit of her stomach they would.

That she didn’t know what the hell she was doing, and a knife would kill her just as dead as anyone else.

But none of them spoke to her, let alone tried to stop her. Mercenaries are cowards, on the whole, even more so than most people. Men who’ll kill because it’s the easiest way they’ve found to make a living. Mercenaries have no loyalty in them, on the whole, by definition. Not much to their leaders, even less to their employers.

That was what she was counting on.

The captain general's tent was pitched on a rise in a big clearing, red pennant hanging limp from its tallest pole, well above the jumble of badly pitched canvas around it. Monza kicked her horse up, making a couple of men scurry out of her way, trying not to let the nerves that were boiling up her throat show. It was a long enough gamble as it was. Show one grain of fear and she'd be done.

She swung down from her horse, tossed the reins carelessly round a sapling trunk. She had to sidestep a goat someone had tethered there, then strode up towards the flap. Nocau, the Gurkish outcast who'd guarded the tent during the daylight since way back in Sazine's time, stood staring, his big scimitar not even drawn.

'You can shut your mouth now, Nocau.' She leaned in close and pushed his slack jaw shut with her gloved finger so his teeth snapped together. 'Wouldn't want a bird nesting in there, eh?' And she pushed through the flap.

The same table, even if the charts on it were of a different stretch of ground. The same flags hanging about the canvas, some of them that she'd added, won at Sweet Pines and the High Bank, at Musselia and Caprile. And the same chair, of course, that Sazine had supposedly stolen from the Duke of Cesale's dining table the day he formed the Thousand Swords. It stood empty on a pair of crates, waiting for the arse of the new captain general. For her arse, if the Fates were kind.

Though she had to admit they weren't usually.

The three most senior captains left in the great brigade stood close to the improvised dais, muttering to each other. Sesaria, Victus, Andiche. The three Benna had persuaded to make her captain general. The three who'd persuaded Faithful Carpi to take her place. The three she needed to persuade to give it back to her. They looked up, and they saw her, and they straightened.

'Well, well,' rumbled Sesaria.

'Well, well, well,' muttered Andiche. 'If it isn't the Serpent of Talins.'

'The Butcher of Caprile herself,' whined Victus. 'Where's Faithful?'

She looked him right in the eye. 'Not coming. You boys need a new captain general.'

The three of them swapped glances, and Andiche sucked noisily at his yellowed teeth. A habit Monza had always found faintly disgusting. One of

many disgusting things about the lank-haired rat of a man. ‘As it happens, we’d reached the same conclusion on our own.’

‘Faithful was a good fellow,’ rumbled Sesaria.

‘Too good for the job,’ said Victus.

‘A decent captain general needs to be an evil shit at best.’

Monza showed her teeth. ‘Any one of you three is more than evil enough, I reckon. There aren’t three bigger shits in Styria.’ It was no kind of joke. She should’ve murdered these three rather than Faithful. ‘Too big a set of shits to work for each other, though.’

‘True enough,’ said Victus sourly.

Sesaria tipped his head back and stared at her down his flat nose. ‘We need someone new.’

‘Or someone old,’ said Monza.

Andiche grinned at his two fellows. ‘As it happens, we’d reached the same conclusion on our own,’ he said again.

‘Good for you.’ This was going more smoothly even than she’d hoped. Eight years she’d led the Thousand Swords, and she knew how to handle the likes of these three. Greed, nice and simple. ‘I’m not the type to let a little bad blood get in the way of a lot of good money, and I damn well know that none of you are.’ She held Ishri’s coin up to the light, a Gurkish double-headed coin, Emperor on one side, Prophet on the other. She flicked it to Andiche. ‘There’ll be plenty more like that, to go over to Rogont.’

Sesaria stared at her from under his thick grey brows. ‘Fight for Rogont, against Orso?’

‘Fight all the way back across Styria?’ The chains round Victus’ neck rattled as he tossed his head. ‘The same ground we’ve fought over the past eight years?’

Andiche looked up from the coin to her, and puffed out his acne-scarred cheeks. ‘Sounds like an awful lot of fighting.’

‘You’ve won against longer odds, with me in charge.’

‘Oh, that’s a fact.’ Sesaria gestured at the tattered flags. ‘We’ve won all kinds of glory with you in the chair, all kinds of pride.’

‘But try paying a whore with that.’ Victus was grinning, and that weasel never grinned. Something was wrong about their smiles, something mocking in them.

‘Look.’ Andiche rested one lazy hand on the arm of the captain general’s chair and dusted the seat off with the other. ‘We don’t doubt for a moment that when it comes to a fight, you’re the best damn general a man could ask for.’

‘Then what’s the problem?’

Victus’ face twisted into a snarl. ‘We don’t want to fight! We want to make . . . fucking . . . money!’

‘Who ever brought you more money than me?’

‘Ahem,’ came a voice right in her ear. Monza jerked round, and froze, hand halfway to the hilt of her sword. Standing just behind her, with a faintly embarrassed smile, was Nicomo Cosca.

He’d shaved off his moustache, and all his hair besides, left only a black and grey stubble over his knobbly skull, his sharp jaw. The rash had faded to a faint pink splash up the side of his neck. His eyes were less sunken, his face no longer trembling or beaded with sweat. But the smile was the same. The faint little smile and the playful gleam in his dark eyes. The same he used to have, when she first met him.

‘A delight to see you both well.’

‘Uh,’ grunted Shivers. Monza found she’d made a kind of strangled cough, but no words came with it.

‘I am in resplendent health, your concern for my welfare is most touching.’ Cosca strolled past, slapping a puzzled-looking Shivers on the back, more captains of the Thousand Swords pushing their way through the flap after him and spreading out around the edges of the tent. Men whose names, faces, qualities, or lack of them, she knew well. A thick-set man with a stoop, a worn coat and almost no neck came at the rear. He raised his heavy brows at her as he passed.

‘Friendly?’ she hissed. ‘I thought you were going back to Talins!’

He shrugged, as if it was nothing. ‘Didn’t make it all the way.’

‘So I fucking see!’

Cosca stepped up onto the packing cases and turned to the assembly with a self-satisfied flourish. He’d acquired a grand black breastplate with golden scrollwork from somewhere, a sword with a gilded hilt, fine black boots with shining buckles. He settled himself into the captain general’s chair with as much pomp as an Emperor into his throne, Friendly standing watchful beside the cases, arms crossed. As Cosca’s arse touched the wood

the tent broke into polite applause, every captain tapping their fingers against their palms as daintily as fine ladies attending the theatre. Just as they had for Monza, when she stole the chair. If she hadn't felt suddenly so sick she might almost have laughed.

Cosca waved away the applause while obviously encouraging it. 'No, no, really, entirely undeserved. But it's good to be back.'

'How the hell—'

'Did I survive? The wound, it appears, was not quite so fatal as we all supposed. The Talinese took me, on account of my uniform, for one of their own, and bore me directly to an excellent surgeon, who was able to staunch the bleeding. I was two weeks abed, then slipped out of a window. I made contact in Puranti with my old friend Andiche, who I had gathered might be desirous of a change in command. He was, and so were all his noble fellows.' He gestured to the captains scattered about the tent, then to himself. 'And here I am.'

Monza snapped her mouth shut. There was no planning for this. Nicomo Cosca, the very definition of an unpredictable development. Still, a plan too brittle to bend with circumstances is worse than no plan at all. 'My congratulations, then, General Cosca,' she managed to grate. 'But my offer still stands. Gurkish gold in return for your services to Duke Rogont—'

'Ah.' Cosca winced, sucking air through his teeth. 'Tiny little problem there, unfortunately. I already signed a new engagement with Grand Duke Orso. Or with his heir, to be precise, Prince Foscar. A promising young man. We'll be moving against Ospria just as Faithful Carpi planned, prior to his untimely demise.' He poked at the air with his forefinger. 'Putting paid to the League of Eight! Taking the fight to the Duke of Delay! There's plenty to sack in Ospria. It was a good plan.' Agreeing mutters from the captains. 'Why work out another?'

'But you hate Orso!'

'Oh, I despise him utterly, that's well known, but I've nothing against his money. It's the exact same colour as everybody else's. You should know. He paid you enough of it.'

'You old cunt,' she said.

'You really shouldn't talk to me that way.' Cosca stuck his lips out at her. 'I am a mature forty-eight. Besides, I gave my life for you!'

'You didn't fucking die!' she snarled.

‘Well. Rumours of my death are often exaggerated. Wishful thinking, on the part of my many enemies.’

‘I’m beginning to know how they feel.’

‘Oh, come, come, whatever were you thinking? A noble death? Me? Very much not my style. I mean to go with my boots off, a bottle in my hand and a woman on my cock.’ His eyebrows went up. ‘It’s not that job you’ve come for, is it?’

Monza ground her teeth. ‘If it’s a question of money—’

‘Orso has the full support of the Banking House of Valint and Balk, and you’ll find no deeper pockets anywhere. He’s paying well, and better than well. But it’s not about the money, actually. I signed a contract. I gave my solemn word.’

She stared at him. ‘When have you ever cared a shit about your word?’

‘I’m a changed man.’ Cosca pulled a flask from a back pocket, unscrewed it and took a long swig, never taking his amused eyes from her face. ‘And I must admit I owe it all to you. I’ve put the past behind me. Found my principles.’ He grinned at his captains, and they grinned back. ‘Bit mossy, but they should polish up alright. You forged a good relationship with Orso. Loyalty. Honesty. Stability. Hate to toss all your hard work down the latrine. Besides, there’s the soldier’s first rule to consider, isn’t there, boys?’

Victus and Andiche spoke in unison, just the way they’d used to, before she took the chair. ‘Never fight for the losing side!’

Cosca’s grin grew wider. ‘Orso holds the cards. Find a good hand of your own, my ears are always open. But we’ll stick with Orso for now.’

‘Whatever you say, General,’ said Andiche.

‘Whatever you say,’ echoed Victus. ‘Good to have you back.’

Sesaria leaned down, muttering something in Cosca’s ear. The new captain general recoiled as though stung. ‘Give them over to Duke Orso? Absolutely not! Today is a happy day! A joyous occasion for one and all! There’ll be no killing here, not today.’ He wafted a hand at her as though he was shooing a cat out of the kitchen. ‘You can go. Better not come back tomorrow, though. We might not be so joyous, then.’

Monza took a step towards him, a curse half-out of her mouth. There was a rattling of metal as the assorted captains began to draw their weapons. Friendly blocked her path, arms coming uncrossed, hands dropping to his

sides, expressionless face turned towards her. She stopped still. ‘I need to kill Orso!’

‘And if you manage it, your brother will live again, yes?’ Cosca cocked his head to one side. ‘You’ll get your hand back? No?’

She was cold all over, skin prickling. ‘He deserves what’s coming!’

‘Ah, but most of us do. All of us will get it regardless. How many others will you suck into your little vortex of slaughter in the meantime?’

‘For Benna—’

‘No. For you. I know you, don’t forget. I’ve stood where you stand now, beaten, betrayed, disgraced, and come out the other side. As long as you have men to kill you are still Monzcarro Murcatto, the great and fearsome! Without that, what are you?’ Cosca’s lip curled. ‘A lonely cripple with a bloody past.’

The words were strangled in her throat. ‘Please, Cosca, you have to—’

‘I don’t have to do a thing. We’re even, remember? More than even, say I. Out of my sight, snake, before I pack you off back to Duke Orso in a jar. You need a job, Northman?’

Shivers’ good eye crept across to Monza, and for a moment she was sure he’d say yes. Then he slowly shook his head. ‘I’ll stick with the chief I’ve got.’

‘Loyalty, eh?’ Cosca snorted. ‘Be careful with that nonsense, it can get you killed!’ A scattering of laughter. ‘The Thousand Swords is no place for loyalty, eh, boys? We’ll have none of that childishness here!’ More laughter, a score or more hard grins all aimed at Monza.

She felt dizzy. The tent seemed too bright and too dark at once. Her nose caught a waft of something – sweaty bodies, or strong drink, or stinking cooking, or a latrine pit too close to the headquarters, and her stomach turned over, set her mouth to watering. A smoke, oh please, a smoke. She turned on her heel, somewhat unsteadily, shoved her way between a couple of chuckling men and through the flap, out of the tent and into the bright morning.

Outside it was far worse. Sunlight stabbed at her. Faces, dozens of them, blurred together into a mass of eyes, all fixed on her. A jury of scum. She tried to look ahead, always ahead, but she couldn’t stop her lids from flickering. She tried to walk in the old way, head back, but her knees were trembling so hard she was sure they must be able to hear them slapping

against the insides of her trousers. It was as if she'd been putting off the fear, the weakness, the pain. Putting it off, storing it up, and now it was breaking on her in one great wave, sweeping her under, helpless. Her skin was icy with cold sweat. Her hand was aching all the way to her neck. They saw what she really was. Saw she'd lost. A lonely cripple with a bloody past, just like Cosca said. Her guts shifted and she gagged, an acid tickle at the back of her throat. The world lurched.

Hate only keeps you standing so long.

'Can't,' she whispered. 'Can't.' She didn't care what happened, as long as she could stop. Her leg buckled and she started to fall, felt Shivers grab hold of her arm and drag her up.

'Walk,' he hissed in her ear.

'Can't—'

His fist dug hard into her armpit, and the pain stopped the world spinning for a moment. 'Fucking walk, or we're finished.'

Enough strength, with Shivers' help, to make it to the horses. Enough to put a boot in a stirrup. Enough, with an aching groan, to get herself into the saddle, pull her horse around and get it facing the right way. As they rode from the camp she could hardly see. The great captain general, Duke Orso's would-be nemesis, sagging in her saddle like dead meat.

You make yourself too hard, you make yourself brittle too. Crack once, crack all to pieces.

VI

OSPRIA

‘I like a look of agony, because I know it’s true’

Emily Dickinson

I*t seemed a little gold could spare a lot of blood.*

Musselia could not be captured without an indefinite siege, this was well known. It had once been a great fortress of the New Empire, and its inhabitants placed great pride in their ancient walls. Too much pride in walls, perhaps, and not enough gold in the pockets of their defenders. It was for a sum almost disappointing that Benna arranged for a small side gate to be left unlocked.

Even before Faithful and his men had taken possession of the defences, and long before the rest of the Thousand Swords spilled out into the city to begin the sack, Benna was leading Monza through the darkened streets. Him leading her was unusual enough in itself.

‘Why did you want to be at the front?’

‘You’ll see.’

‘Where are we going?’

‘To get our money back. Plus interest.’

Monza frowned as she hurried after him. Her brother’s surprises tended always to have a sting in them. Through a narrow archway in a narrow street. A cobbled courtyard inside, lit by two flickering torches. A Kantic man in simple travelling clothes stood beside a canvas-covered cart, horse hitched and ready. Monza did not know him, but he knew Benna, coming forwards, hands out, his smile gleaming in the darkness.

‘Benna, Benna. It is good to see you!’ They embraced like old comrades.

‘And you, my friend. This is my sister, Monzcarro.’

The man bowed to her. ‘The famous and fearsome. An honour.’

‘Somenu Hermon,’ said Benna, smiling wide. ‘Greatest merchant of Musselia.’

‘No more than a humble trader, like any other. There are only a few last . . . things . . . to move. My wife and children have already left.’

‘Good. That makes this much easier.’

Monza frowned at her brother. ‘What’s going—’

Benna snatched her dagger from her belt and stabbed Hermon overhand in his face. It happened so fast that the merchant was still smiling as he fell. Monza drew her sword on an instinct, staring into the shadows around the courtyard, out into the street, but all was quiet.

‘What the hell have you done?’ she snarled at him. He was up on the cart, ripping back the canvas, a mad, eager look on his face. He fumbled open the lid of a box underneath, delved inside and let coins slowly drop with the jingling rattle of falling money.

Gold.

She hopped up beside him. More gold than she had ever seen at once. With a sickly widening of her eyes she realised there were more boxes. She pushed the canvas back with trembling hands. Many more.

‘We’re rich!’ squeaked Benna. ‘We’re rich!’

‘We were already rich.’ She was looking down at her knife stuck through Hermon’s eye, blood black in the lamplight. ‘Did you have to kill him?’

He stared at her as if she had gone mad. ‘Rob him and leave him alive? He would have told people we had the money. This way we’re safe.’

‘Safe? This much gold is the opposite of safe, Benna!’

He frowned, as though he was hurt by her. ‘I thought you’d be pleased. You of all people, who slaved in the dirt for nothing.’ As though he was disappointed in her. ‘This is for us. For us, do you understand?’ As though he was disgusted with her. ‘Mercy and cowardice are the same, Monza! I thought you knew that.’

What could she do? Unstab Hermon’s face?

It seemed a little gold could cost a lot of blood.

His Plan of Attack

The southernmost range of the Urval Mountains, the spine of Styria, all shadowy swales and dramatic peaks bathed in golden evening light, marched boldly southwards, ending at the great rock into which Ospria itself was carved. Between the city and the hill on which the headquarters of the Thousand Swords had been pitched, the deep and verdant valley was patched with wild flowers in a hundred colours. The Sulva wound through its bottom and away towards the distant sea, touched by the setting sun and turned the orange of molten iron.

Birds twittered in the olive trees of an ancient grove, grasshoppers chirped in the waving long grass, the wind kissed at Cosca's face and made the feather on his hat, held gently in one hand, heroically thrash and flutter. Vineyards were planted on the slopes to the north of the city, green rows of vines on the dusty hillsides that drew Cosca's eye and made his mouth water with an almost painful longing. The best vintages in the Circle of the World were trampled out on that very ground . . .

'Sweet mercy, a drink,' he mouthed.

'Beautiful,' breathed Prince Foscar.

'You never before looked upon fair Ospria, your Highness?'

'I had heard stories, but . . .'

'Breathtaking, isn't she?' The city was built upon four huge shelves cut into the cream-coloured rock of the steep hillside, each one surrounded by its own smooth wall, crammed with lofty buildings, stuffed with a tangle of roofs, domes, turrets. The ancient Imperial aqueduct curved gracefully down from the mountains to meet its outermost rampart, fifty arches or more, the tallest of them twenty times the height of a man. The citadel clung impossibly to the highest crag, four great towers picked out against the darkening azure sky. The lamps were being lit in the windows as the sun sank, the outline of the city dusted with pinprick points of light. 'There can be no other place quite like this one.'

A pause. 'It seems almost a shame to spoil it with fire and sword,' observed Foscar.

'Almost, your Highness. But this is war, and those are the tools available.'

Cosca had heard that Count Foscar, now Prince Foscar following his brother's mishap in a famous Sipanese brothel, was a boyish, callow,

weaknerved youth, and was therefore pleasantly impressed by what he had seen thus far. The lad was fresh-faced, true, but every man begins young, and he seemed thoughtful rather than weak, sober rather than bloodless, polite rather than limp. A young man very much like Cosca himself had been at that age. Only the absolute reverse in every particular, of course.

'They appear to be most powerful fortifications . . .' murmured the prince, scanning the towering walls of the city with his eyeglass.

'Oh, indeed. Ospria was the furthest outpost of the New Empire, built as a bastion to hold back the restless Baolish hordes. Parts of the walls have been standing firm against the savage for more than five hundred years.'

'Then will Duke Rogont not simply retreat behind them? He does seem prone to avoid battle whenever possible . . .'

'He'll give battle, your Highness,' said Andiche.

'He must,' rumbled Sesaria, 'or we'll just camp in his pretty valley and starve him out.'

'We outnumber him three to one or more,' whined Victus.

Cosca could not but agree. 'Walls are only useful if one expects help, and no help is coming to the League of Eight now. He must fight. He will fight. He is desperate.' If there was one thing he understood, it was desperation.

'I must confess I have some . . . concerns.' Foscar nervously cleared his throat. 'I understood that you always hated my father with a passion.'

'Passion. Hah.' Cosca dismissed it with a wave. 'As a young man I let my passion lead me by the nose, but I have learned numerous harsh lessons in favour of a cool head. I and your father have had our disagreements but I am, above all else, a mercenary. To let my personal feelings reduce the weight of my purse would be an act of criminal unprofessionalism.'

'Hear, hear.' Victus wore an unsightly leer. Even more so than usual.

'Why, my own three closest captains,' and Cosca took them in with a theatrical sweep of his hat, 'betrayed me utterly and put Murcatto in my chair. They fucked me to their balls, as they say in Sipani. To their balls, your Highness. If I had a taste for vengeance, it would be on these three heaps of human shit.' Then Cosca chuckled, and they chuckled, and the vaguely uncomfortable atmosphere was swiftly dispelled. 'But we can all be useful to each other, and so I have forgiven them everything, and your father too. Vengeance brings no man a brighter tomorrow, and when placed on the scales of life, does not outweigh a single . . . scale. You need not

worry on that score, Prince Foscar, I am all business. Bought and paid for, and entirely your man.'

'You are generosity itself, General Cosca.'

'I am avarice itself, which is not quite the same, but will do in a pinch. Now, perhaps, for dinner. Would any of you gentlemen care for a drink? We came by a crate of a very fine vintage in a manor house upstream only yesterday, and—'

'It might be best if we were to discuss our strategy before the levity begins.' Colonel Rigrat's shrill voice was as a file applied directly to Cosca's sensitive back teeth. He was a sharp-faced, sharp-voiced, sharply self-satisfied man in his late thirties and a well-pressed uniform, previously General Ganmark's second in command and now Foscar's. Presumably the military brains behind the Talinese operation, such as they were. 'Now, while everyone still has their wits close to hand.'

'Believe me, young man,' though he was neither young, nor yet a man as far as Cosca was concerned, 'my wits and I are not easily parted. You have a plan in mind?'

'I do!' Rigrat produced his baton with a flourish. Friendly loomed out from under the nearest olive tree, hands moving to his weapons. Cosca sent him melting back into the shadows with the faintest smile and shake of his head. No one else even noticed.

Cosca had been a soldier all his life, of a kind, and had yet to understand what the purpose of a baton truly was. You could not kill a man with one, or even look like you might. You could not hammer in a tent peg, cook a good side of meat or even pawn it for anything worthwhile. Perhaps they were intended for scratching those hard-to-reach places in the small of the back? Or stimulating the anus? Or perhaps simply for marking a man out as a fool? For that purpose, he reflected as Rigrat pointed self-importantly towards the river with his baton, they served admirably.

'There are two fords across the Sulva! Upper . . . and lower! The lower is much the wider and more reliable crossing.' The colonel indicated the point where the dirty stripe of the Imperial road met the river, glimmering water flaring out in the gently sloping bottom of the valley. 'But the upper, perhaps a mile upstream, should also be usable at this time of year.'

'Two fords, you say?' It was a fact well known there were two damn fords. Cosca himself had crossed in glory by one when he came into Ospria

to be toasted by Grand Duchess Sefeline and her subjects, and fled by another just after the bitch had tried to poison him. Cosca slid his battered flask from his jacket pocket. The one that Morveer had flung at him back in Sipani. He unscrewed the cap.

Rigrat gave him a sharp glance. 'I thought we agreed that we would drink once we had discussed strategy.'

'You agreed. I just stood here.' Cosca closed his eyes, took a deep breath, tilted up the flask and took a long swallow, then another, felt the coolness fill his mouth, wash at his dry throat. A drink, a drink, a drink. He gave a happy sigh. 'Nothing like a drink of an evening.'

'May I continue?' hissed Rigrat, riddled with impatience.

'Of course, my boy, take your time.'

'The day after tomorrow, at dawn, you will lead the Thousand Swords across the lower ford—'

'Lead? From the front, do you mean?'

'Where else would a commander lead from?'

Cosca exchanged a baffled glance with Andiche. 'Anywhere else. Have you ever been at the front of a battle? The chances of being killed there really are very high.'

'Extremely high,' said Victus.

Rigrat ground his teeth. 'Lead from what position pleases you, but the Thousand Swords will cross the lower ford, supported by our allies from Etrisani and Cesale. Duke Rogont will have no choice but to engage you with all his power, hoping to crush your forces while you are still crossing the river. Once he is committed, our Talinese regulars will break from hiding and cross the upper ford. We will take the enemy in the flank, and—' He snapped his baton into his waiting palm with a smart crack.

'You'll hit them with a stick?'

Rigrat was not amused. Cosca had to wonder whether he ever had been. 'With steel, sir, with steel! We will rout them utterly and put them to flight, and thus put an end to the troublesome League of Eight!'

There was a long pause. Cosca frowned at Andiche, and Andiche frowned back. Sesaria and Victus shook their heads at one another. Rigrat tapped his baton impatiently against his leg. Prince Foscar cleared his throat once more, nervously pushed his chin forwards. 'Your opinion, General Cosca?'

‘Hmm.’ Cosca gloomily shook his head, eyeing the sparkling river with the weightiest of frowns. ‘Hmm. Hmm. Hmmmm.’

‘Hmmm.’ Victus tapped his pursed lips with one finger.

‘Humph.’ Andiche puffed out his cheeks.

‘Hrrrrrm.’ Sesaria’s unconvinced voice throbbed at a deeper pitch.

Cosca removed his hat, scratched his head and placed it back with a flick at the feather. ‘Hmmmmmmmmmmmm—’

‘Are we to take it that you disapprove?’asked Foscar.

‘I somehow let slip my misgivings? Then I cannot in good conscience suppress them. I am not convinced that the Thousand Swords are well suited to the task you have assigned.’

‘Not convinced,’ said Andiche.

‘Not well suited,’ said Victus.

Sesaria was a silent mountain of reluctance.

‘Have you not been well paid for your services?’ demanded Rigrat.

Cosca chuckled. ‘Of course, and the Thousand Swords will fight, you may depend on that!’

‘They will fight, every man!’ asserted Andiche.

‘Like devils!’ added Victus.

‘But it is how they are to be made to fight best that concerns me as their captain general. They have lost two leaders in a brief space.’ He hung his head as if he regretted the fact, and had in no way benefited hugely himself.

‘Murcatto, then Faithful.’ Sesaria sighed as if he had not been one of the prime agents in the changes of command.

‘They have been relegated to support duties.’

‘Scouting,’ lamented Andiche.

‘Clearing the flanks,’ growled Victus.

‘Their morale is at a terribly low ebb. They have been paid, but money is never the best motivation for a man to risk his life.’ Especially a mercenary, it needed hardly to be said. ‘To throw them into a pitched mêlée against a stubborn and desperate enemy, toe to toe . . . I’m not saying they might break, but . . . well . . .’ Cosca winced, scratching slowly at his neck. ‘They might break.’

‘I hope this is not an example of your notorious reluctance to fight,’ sneered Rigrat.

‘Reluctance . . . to fight? Ask anyone, I am a tiger!’ Victus snorted snot down his chin but Cosca ignored him. ‘This is a question of picking the right tool for the task. One does not employ a rapier to cut down a stubborn tree. One employs an axe. Unless one is a complete arse.’ The young colonel opened his mouth to retort but Cosca spoke smoothly over him. ‘The plan is sound, in outline. As one military man to another I congratulate you upon it unreservedly.’ Rigrat paused, unbalanced, not sure if he was being taken for a fool or not, though he most obviously was.

‘But it would be wiser counsel for your regular Talinese troops – tried and tested recently in Visserine, then Puranti, committed to their cause, used to victory and with the very firmest of morale – to cross the lower ford and engage the Osprians, supported by your allies of Etrisani and Cesale, and so forth.’ He waved his flask towards the river, a far more useful implement to his mind than a baton, since a baton makes no man drunk. ‘The Thousand Swords would be far better deployed concealed upon the high ground. Waiting to seize the moment! To drive across the upper ford, with dash and vigour, and take the enemy in the rear!’

‘Best place to take an enemy,’ muttered Andiche. Victus sniggered.

Cosca finished with a flourish of his flask. ‘Thus, your earthy courage and our fiery passion are used where they are best suited. Songs will be sung, glory will be seized, history will be made, Orso will be king . . .’ He gave Foscar a gentle bow. ‘And yourself, your Highness, in due course.’

Foscar frowned towards the fords. ‘Yes. Yes, I see. The thing is, though —’

‘Then we are agreed!’ Cosca flung an arm around his shoulders and guided him back towards the tent. ‘Was it Stolicus who said great men march often in the same direction? I believe it was! Let us march now towards dinner, my friends!’ He pointed one finger back towards the darkening mountains, where Ospria glimmered in the sunset. ‘I swear, I am so hungry I could eat a city!’ Warm laughter accompanied him back into the tent.

Politics

Shivers sat there frowning, and drank. Duke Rogont's great dining hall was the grandest room he'd ever got drunk in by quite a stretch. When Vossula told him Styria was packed with wonders it was this type of thing, rather than the rotting docks of Talins, that Shivers had in mind. It must've had four times the floor of Bethod's great hall in Carleon and a ceiling three times as high or more. The walls were pale marble with stripes of blue-black stone through it, all fretted with veins of glitter, all carved with leaves and vines, all grown up and crept over with ivy so the real plants and the sculpted tangled together in the dancing shadows. Warm evening breezes washed in through open windows wide as castle gates, made the orange flames of a thousand hanging lamps flicker and sway, striking a precious gleam from everything.

A place of majesty and magic, built by gods for the use of giants.

Shame the folk gathered there fell a long way short of either. Women in gaudy finery, brushed, jewelled and painted to look younger, or thinner, or richer than they were. Men in bright-coloured jackets who wore lace at their collars and little gilded daggers at their belts. They looked at him first with mild disdain on their powdered faces, like he was made of rotting meat. Then, once he'd turned the left side of his face forwards, with a sick horror that gave him three parts grim satisfaction and one part sick horror of his own.

Always at every feast there's some stupid, ugly, mean bastard got a big score to settle with no one in particular, drinks way too much and makes the night a worry for everyone. Seemed tonight it was him, and he was taking to the part with a will. He hawked up phlegm and spat it noisily across the gleaming floor.

A man at the next table in a yellow coat with long tails to it looked round, the smallest sneer on his puffed-up lips. Shivers leaned towards him, grinding the point of his knife into the polished table-top. 'Something to say to me, piss-coat?' The man paled and turned back to his friends without a word. 'Bunch o' bastard cowards,' Shivers growled into his quickly

emptying wine-cup, good and loud enough to be heard three tables away. ‘Not a single bone in the whole fucking crowd!’

He thought about what the Dogman might’ve made of this crew of tittering dandies. Or Rudd Threetrees. Or Black Dow. He gave a grim snort to think of it, but his laughter choked off short. If there was a joke, it was on him. Here he was, in the midst of ’em, after all, leaning on their charity without a friend to his name. Or so it seemed.

He scowled towards the high table, up on a raised dais at the head of the room. Rogont sat in the midst of his most favoured guests, grinning around as though he was a star shining from the night sky. Monza sat beside him. Hard to tell from where Shivers was, specially with everything smeared up with anger and too much wine, but he thought he saw her laughing. Enjoying herself, no doubt, without her one-eyed errand boy to drag her down.

He was a fine-looking bastard, the Prince of Prudence. Had both his eyes, anyway. Shivers would’ve liked to break his smooth, smug face open. With a hammer, like Monza had broken Gobba’s head. Or just with his fists. Crush it in his hands. Pound it to red splinters. He gripped his knife trembling tight, spinning out a whole mad story of how he’d go about it. Picking over all the bloody details, shifting them about until they made him look as big a man as possible, Rogont wailing for mercy and pissing himself, twisting it into crazy shapes where Monza wanted him more’n ever at the end of it. And all the while he watched the two of ’em through one twitching, narrowed eye.

He goaded himself with the notion they were laughing at him, but he knew that was foolishness. He didn’t matter enough to laugh at, and that made him stew hotter than ever. He was still clinging to his pride, after all, like a drowning man to a twig way too small to keep him afloat. He was a maimed embarrassment, after he’d saved her life how many times? Risked his life how many times? And after all the bloody steps he’d climbed to get to the top of this bastard mountain too. Might’ve hoped for something better’n scorn at the end of it.

He jerked his knife from the split wood. The knife Monza had given him the first day they met. Back when he had both his eyes and a lot less blood on his hands. Back when he had it in mind to leave killing behind him, and be a good man. He could hardly remember what that had felt like.

Monza sat there frowning, and drank.

She hadn't much taste for food lately, had less for ceremony, and none at all for tonguing arses, so Rogont's banquet of the doomed came close to a nightmare. Benna had been the one for feasting, form and flattery. He would have loved this – pointing, laughing, slapping backs with the worst of them. If he'd found a moment clear of soaking up the flattery of people who despised him, he would have leaned over, and touched her arm with a soothing hand, and whispered in her ear to grin and take it. Baring her teeth in a rictus snarl was about as close as she could come.

She had a bastard of a headache, pulsing away down the side where the coins were screwed, and the genteel rattle of cutlery might as well have been nails hammered into her face. Her guts seemed to have been cramping up ever since she left Faithful drowned on the millwheel. It was the best she could do not to turn to Rogont and spew, and spew, and spew all over his gold-embroidered white coat.

He leaned towards her with polite concern. 'Why so glum, General Murcatto?'

'Glum?' She swallowed the rising acid enough to speak. 'Orso's army are on their way.'

Rogont turned his wine glass slowly round and round by the stem. 'So I hear. Ably assisted by your old mentor Nicomo Cosca. The scouts of the Thousand Swords have already reached Menzes Hill, overlooking the fords.'

'No more delays, then.'

'It would appear not. My designs on glory will soon be ground into the dust. As such designs often are.'

'You sure the night before your own destruction is the best time to celebrate?'

'The day after might be too late.'

'Huh.' True enough. 'Perhaps you'll get a miracle.'

'I've never been a great believer in divine intervention.'

'No? What are they here for, then?' Monza jerked her head towards a knot of Gurkish just below the high table, dressed in the white robes and skullcaps of the priesthood.

The duke peered down at them. ‘Oh, their help goes well beyond the spiritual. They are emissaries of the Prophet Khalul. Duke Orso has his allies in the Union, the backing of their banks. I must find friends of my own. And even the Emperor of Gurkhul kneels before the Prophet.’

‘Everyone kneels to someone, eh? I guess Emperor and Prophet can console each other after their priests bring news of your head on a spike.’

‘They’ll soon get over it. Styria is a sideshow to them. I daresay they’re already preparing the next battlefield.’

‘I hear the war never ends.’ She drained her glass and slung it rattling back across the wood. Maybe they pressed the best wine in the world in Ospria, but it tasted of vomit to her. Everything did. Her life was made of sick. Sick and frequent, painful, watery shits. Raw-gummed, saw-tongued, rough-toothed, sore-arsed. A horse-faced servant in a powdered wig flowed around her shoulder and let fall a long stream of wine into the empty glass, as though flourishing the bottle as far above her as possible would make it taste better. He retreated with consummate ease. Retreat was the speciality down in Ospria, after all. She reached for the glass again. The most recent smoke had stopped her hand shaking, but nothing more.

So she prayed for mindless, shameful, stupefying drunkenness to swarm over and blot out the misery.

She let her eyes crawl over Ospria’s richest and most useless citizens. If you really looked for it, the banquet had an edge of shrill hysteria. Drinking too much. Talking too fast. Laughing too loud. Nothing like a dash of imminent annihilation to lower the inhibitions. The one consolation of Rogont’s coming rout was that a good number of these fools would lose everything along with him.

‘You sure I should be up here?’ she grunted.

‘Someone has to be.’ Rogont glanced sideways at the girlish Countess Cotarda of Affoia without great enthusiasm. ‘The noble League of Eight, it seems, has become a League of Two.’ He leaned close. ‘And to be entirely honest I’m wondering if it’s not too late for me to get out of it. The sad fact is I’m running short of notable guests.’

‘So I’m an exhibit to stiffen your wilting prestige, am I?’

‘Exactly so. A perfectly charming one, though. And those stories about my wilting are all scurrilous rumours, I assure you.’ Monza couldn’t find the strength even to be irritated, let alone amused, and settled for a weary

snort. ‘You should eat something.’ He gestured at her untouched plate with his fork. ‘You look thin.’

‘I’m sick.’ That and her right hand hurt so badly she could scarcely hold the knife. ‘I’m always sick.’

‘Really? Something you ate?’ Rogont forked meat into his mouth with all the relish of a man likely to live out the week. ‘Or something you did?’

‘Maybe it’s just the company.’

‘I wouldn’t be at all surprised. My Aunt Sefeline was always revolted by me. She was a woman much prone to nausea. You remind me of her in a way. Sharp mind, great talents, will of iron, but a weaker stomach than might have been expected.’

‘Sorry to disappoint you.’ The dead knew she disappointed herself enough.

‘Me? Oh, quite the reverse, I assure you. We are none of us made from flint, eh?’

If only. Monza gagged down more wine and scowled at the glass. A year ago, she’d had nothing but contempt for Rogont. She remembered laughing with Benna and Faithful over what a coward he was, what a treacherous ally. Now Benna was dead, she’d murdered Faithful and she’d run to Rogont for shelter like a wayward child to her rich uncle. An uncle who couldn’t even protect himself, in this case. But he was far better company than the alternative. Her eyes were dragged reluctantly towards the bottom of the long table on the right, where Shivers sat alone.

The hard fact was he sickened her. It was an effort just to stand beside him, let alone touch him. It was far more than the simple ugliness of his maimed face. She’d seen enough that was ugly, and done enough too, to have no trouble at least pretending to be comfortable around it. It was the silences, when before she couldn’t shut him up. They were full of debts she couldn’t pay. She’d see that skewed, dead ruin of an eye and remember him whispering at her, It should’ve been you. And she’d know it should have been. When he did talk he said nothing about doing the right thing any more, nothing about being a better man. Maybe it should have pleased her to have won that argument. She’d tried hard enough. But all she could think was that she’d taken a halfway decent man and somehow made a halfway evil one. She wasn’t only rotten herself, she rotted everything she touched.

Shivers sickened her, and the fact she was disgusted when she knew she should have been grateful only sickened her even more.

'I'm wasting time,' she hissed, more at her glass than anyone else.

Rogont sighed. 'We all are. Just passing the ugly moments until our ignominious deaths in the least horrible manner we can find.'

'I should be gone.' She tried to make a fist of her gloved hand, but the pain only made her weaker now. 'Find a way . . . find a way to kill Orso.' But she was so tired she could hardly find the strength to say it.

'Revenge? Truly?'

'Revenge.'

'I would be crushed if you were to leave.'

She could hardly be bothered to take care what she said. 'Why the hell would you want me?'

'I, want you?' Rogont's smile slipped for a moment. 'I can delay no longer, Monzcarro. Soon, perhaps tomorrow, there will be a great battle. One that will decide the fate of Styria. What could be more valuable than the advice of one of Styria's greatest soldiers?'

'I'll see if I can find you one,' she muttered.

'And you have many friends.'

'Me?' She couldn't think of a single one alive.

'The people of Talins love you still.' He raised his eyebrows at the gathering, some of them still glowering at her with scant friendliness. 'Less popular here, of course, but that only serves to prove the point. One man's villain is another's hero, after all.'

'They think I'm dead in Talins, and don't care into the bargain.' She hardly cared herself.

'On the contrary, agents of mine are in the process of making the citizens well aware of your triumphant survival. Bills posted at every crossroads dispute Duke Orso's story, charge him with your attempted murder and proclaim your imminent return. The people care deeply, believe me, with that bottomless passion common folk sometimes have for great figures they have never met, and never will. If nothing else, it turns them further against Orso, and gives him difficulties at home.'

'Politics, eh?' She drained her glass. 'Small gestures, when war is knocking at your gates.'

‘We all make the gestures we can. But in war and politics both you are still an asset to be courted.’ His smile was back now, and broader than ever. ‘Besides, what extra reason should a man require to keep cunning and beautiful women close at hand?’

She scowled sideways. ‘Fuck yourself.’

‘When I must.’ He looked straight back at her. ‘But I’d much rather have help.’

‘You look almost as bitter as I feel.’

‘Eh?’ Shivers prised his scowl from the happy couple. ‘Ah.’ There was a woman talking to him. ‘Oh.’ She was very good to look at, so much that she seemed to have a glow about her. Then he saw everything had a glow. He was drunk as shit.

She seemed different from the rest, though. Necklace of red stones round her long neck, white dress that hung loose, like the ones he’d seen black women wearing in Westport, but she was very pale. There was something easy in the way she stood, no stiff manners to her. Something open in her smile. For a moment, it almost had him smiling with her. First time in a while.

‘Is there space here?’ She spoke Styrian with a Union accent. An outsider, like him.

‘You want to sit . . . with me?’

‘Why not, do you carry the plague?’

‘With my luck I wouldn’t be surprised.’ He turned the left side of his face towards her. ‘This seems to keep most folk well clear o’ me by itself, though.’

Her eyes moved over it, then back, and her smile didn’t flicker. ‘We all have our scars. Some of us on the outside, some of us—’

‘The ones on the inside don’t take quite such a toll on the looks, though, eh?’

‘I’ve found that looks are overrated.’

Shivers looked her slowly up and down, and enjoyed it. ‘Easy for you to say, you’ve plenty to spare.’

‘Manners.’ She puffed out her cheeks as she looked round the hall. ‘I’d despaired of finding any among this crowd. I swear, you must be the only honest man here.’

‘Don’t count on it.’ Though he was grinning wide enough. There was never a bad time for flattery from a fine-looking woman, after all. He had his pride. She held out one hand to him and he blinked at it. ‘I kiss it, do I?’

‘If you like. It won’t dissolve.’

It was soft and smooth. Nothing like Monza’s hand – scarred, tanned, calloused as any Named Man’s. Even less like her other one, twisted as a nettle root under that glove. Shivers pressed his lips to the woman’s knuckles, caught a giddy whiff of scent. Like flowers, and something else that made the breath sharpen in his throat.

‘I’m, er . . . Caul Shivers.’

‘I know.’

‘You do?’

‘We’ve met before, though briefly. Carlot dan Eider is my name.’

‘Eider?’ Took him a moment to place it. A half-glimpsed face in the mist. The woman in the red coat, in Sipani. Prince Ario’s lover. ‘You’re the one that Monza—’

‘Beat, blackmailed, destroyed and left for dead? That would be me.’ She frowned up towards the high table. ‘Monza, is it? Not only first-name terms, but an affectionate shortening. The two of you must be very close.’

‘Close enough.’ Nowhere near as close as they had been, though, in Visserine. Before they took his eye.

‘And yet she sits up there, with the great Duke Rogont, and you sit down here, with the beggars and the embarrassments.’

Like she knew his own thoughts. His fury flickered up again and he tried to steer the talk away from it. ‘What brings you here?’

‘After the carnage in Sipani I had no other choices. Duke Orso is doubtless offering a pretty price for my head. I’ve spent the last three months expecting every person I passed to stab me, poison me, throttle me, or worse.’

‘Huh. I know that feeling.’

‘Then you have my sympathy.’

‘The dead know I could do with some.’

‘You can have all mine, for what that’s worth. You’re just as much a piece in this sordid little game as I am, no? And you’ve lost even more than I. Your eye. Your face.’

She didn't seem to move, but she seemed to keep getting closer. Shivers hunched his shoulders. 'I reckon.'

'Duke Rogont is an old acquaintance. A somewhat unreliable man, though undoubtedly a handsome one.'

'I reckon,' he managed to grate out.

'I was forced to throw myself upon his mercy. A hard landing, but some succour, for a while. Though it seems he has found a new diversion now.'

'Monza?' The fact he'd been thinking it himself all night didn't help any. 'She ain't like that.'

Carlot dan Eider gave a disbelieving snort. 'Really? Not a treacherous, murdering liar who'll use anyone and anything to get her way? She betrayed Nicomo Cosca, no, and stole his chair? Why do you think Duke Orso tried to kill her? Because it was his chair she was planning to steal next.' The drink had made him half-stupid, he couldn't think of a thing to say to it. 'Why not use Rogont to get her way? Or is she in love with someone else?'

'No,' he growled. 'Well . . . how would I know—Fucking no! You've got it twisted!'

She touched one hand to her pale chest. 'I have it twisted? There's a reason why they call her the Snake of Talins! A snake loves nothing but itself!'

'You'd say anything. She used you in Sipani. You hate her!'

'I'd shed no tears over her corpse, that's true. The man who put a blade in her could have my gratitude and more besides. But that doesn't make me a liar.' She was halfway to whispering in his ear. 'Monzcarro Murcatto, the Butcher of Caprile? They murdered children there.' He could almost feel her breath on him, his skin tingling with having her so near, anger and lust all mangled hot together. 'Murdered! In the streets! She wasn't even faithful to her brother, from what I hear—'

'Eh?' Shivers wished he'd drunk less, the hall was getting some spin to it.

'You didn't know?'

'Know what?' An odd mix of curiosity, and fear, and disgust creeping up on him.

Eider laid one hand on his arm, close enough that he caught another waft of scent – sweet, dizzying, sickening. 'She and her brother were lovers.' She purred the last word, dragging it out long.

‘What?’ His scarred cheek was burning like he’d been slapped.

‘Lovers. They used to sleep together, like husband and wife. They used to fuck each other. It’s no kind of secret. Ask anyone. Ask her.’

Shivers found he could hardly breathe. He should’ve known it. Few things made sense now had tripped him at the time. He had known it, maybe. But still he felt tricked. Betrayed. Laughed at. Like a fish tickled from a stream and left choking. After all he’d done for her, after all he’d lost. The rage boiled up in him so hot he could hardly keep hold of himself.

‘Shut your fucking mouth!’ He flung Eider’s hand off. ‘You think I don’t see you goading me?’ He was up from his bench somehow, standing over her, hall tipping around him, blurred lights and faces swaying. ‘You take me for a fool, woman? D’you set me at nothing?’

Instead of cringing back she came forwards, pressing against him almost, eyes seeming big as dinner plates. ‘Me? You’ve made no sacrifices for me! Am I the one who’s cut you off? Am I the one who sets you at nothing?’

Shivers’ face was on fire. The blood was battering at his skull, so hard it felt like it might pop his eye right out. Except it was burned out already. He gave a strangled sort of a yelp, throat closed up with fury. He staggered back, since it was that or throttle her, lurched straight into a servant, knocking his silver tray from his hands, glasses falling, bottle shattering, wine spraying.

‘Sir, I most humbly—’

Shivers’ left fist thudded into his ribs and twisted him sideways, right crunched into the man’s face before he could fall. He bounced off the wall and sprawled in the wreckage of his bottles. There was blood on Shivers’ fist. Blood, and a white splinter between his fingers. A piece of tooth. What he wanted, more’n anything, was to kneel over this bastard, take his head in his hands and smash it against the beautiful carvings on the wall until his brains came out. He almost did it.

But instead he made himself turn. Made himself turn and stumble away.

Time crawled.

Monza lay on her side, back to Shivers, at the very edge of the bed. Keeping as much space between them as she possibly could without rolling onto the floor. The first traces of dawn were creeping from between the curtains now, turning the room dirty grey. The wine was wearing through

and leaving her more nauseous, weary, hopeless than ever. Like a wave washing up on a dirty beach that you hope will wash it clean, but only sucks back out and leaves a mass of dead fish behind it.

She tried to think what Benna would have said. What he'd have done, to make her feel better. But she couldn't remember what his voice had sounded like any more. He was leaking away, and taking the best of her with him. She thought of him a boy, long ago, small and sickly and helpless. Needing her to take care of him. She thought of him a man, laughing, riding up the mountain to Fontezarmo. Still needing her to take care of him. She knew what colour his eyes had been. She knew there had been creases at their corners, from smiling often. But she couldn't see his smile.

Instead the faces that came to her in all their bloodied detail were the five men she'd killed. Gobba, fumbling at Friendly's garrotte with his great bloated, ruined hands. Mauthis, flapping around on his back like a puppet, gurgling pink foam. Ario, hand to his neck as black blood spurted from him. Ganmark, grinning up at her, stuck through the back with Stolicus' outsize sword. Faithful, drowned and dripping, dangling from his waterwheel, no worse than her.

The faces of the five men she'd killed, and of the two she hadn't. Eager little Foscar, barely even a man himself. And Orso, of course. Grand Duke Orso, who'd loved her like a daughter.

Monza, Monza, what would I do without you . . .

She tore the blankets back and swung her sweaty legs from the bed, dragged her trousers on, shivering though it was too hot, head pounding with worn-out wine.

'What you doing?' came Shivers' croaky voice.

'Need a smoke.' Her fingers were trembling so badly she could hardly turn the lamp up.

'Maybe you should be smoking less, think of that?'

'Thought of it.' She fumbled with the lump of husk, wincing as she moved her ruined fingers. 'Decided against.'

'It's the middle of the night.'

'Go to sleep, then.'

'Shitty fucking habit.' He was sitting up on the side of the bed, broad back to her, head turned so he was frowning out of the corner of his one good eye.

‘You’re right. Maybe I should take up knocking servants’ teeth out instead.’ She picked up her knife and started hacking husk into the bowl of the pipe, scattering dust. ‘Rogont wasn’t much impressed, I can tell you that.’

‘Wasn’t long ago you weren’t much impressed with him, as I recall. Seems your feelings about folk change with the wind, though, don’t it?’

Her head was splitting. She’d no wish to talk to him, let alone argue. But it’s at times like those people bite each other hardest. ‘What’s eating at you?’ she snapped, knowing full well already and not wanting to hear about it either.

‘What d’you think?’

‘You know what, I’ve my own problems.’

‘You leaving me, is what!’

She’d have jumped at the chance. ‘Leaving you?’

‘Tonight! Down with the shit while you sat up there lording it with the Duke of Delay!’

‘You think I was in charge of the fucking seating?’ she sneered at him. ‘He put me there to make him look good, is all.’

There was a pause. He turned his head away from her, shoulders hunching. ‘Well. I guess looking good ain’t something I can help with these days.’

She twitched – awkward, annoyed. ‘Rogont can help me. That’s all. Foscar’s out there, with Orso’s army. Foscar’s out there . . .’ And he had to die, whatever the costs.

‘Vengeance, eh?’

‘They killed my brother. I shouldn’t have to explain it to you. You know how I feel.’

‘No. I don’t.’

She frowned. ‘What about your brother? Thought you said the Bloody-Nine killed him? I thought—’

‘I hated my fucking brother. Folk called him Skarling reborn, but the man was a bastard. He’d show me how to climb trees, and fish, nick me under the chin and laugh when our father was there. When he was gone, he used to kick me ’til I couldn’t breathe. He said I’d killed our mother. All I did was be born.’ His voice was hollow, no anger left in it. ‘When I heard he was dead, I wanted to laugh, but I cried instead because everyone else was.

I swore vengeance on his killer and all the rest 'cause, well, there's a form to be followed, ain't there? Wouldn't want to fall short. But when I heard the Bloody-Nine nailed my bastard of a brother's head up, I didn't know whether I hated the man for doing it, or hated that he'd robbed me o' the chance, or wanted to kiss him for the favour like you'd kiss . . . a brother, I guess . . .'

For a moment she was about to get up, go to him, put her hand on his shoulder. Then his one eye moved towards her, cold and narrow. 'But you'd know all about that, I reckon. Kissing your brother.'

The blood pounded suddenly behind her eyes, worse than ever. 'What my brother was to me is my fucking business!' She realised she was stabbing at him with the knife, tossed it away across the table. 'I'm not in the habit of explaining myself. I don't plan to start with the men I hire!'

'That's what I am to you, is it?'

'What else would you be?'

'After what I've done for you? After what I've lost?'

She flinched, hands trembling worse than ever. 'Well paid, aren't you?'

'Paid?' He leaned towards her, pointing at his face. 'How much is my eye worth, you evil cunt?'

She gave a strangled growl, jerked up from the chair, snatched up the lamp, turned her back on him and made for the door to the balcony.

'Where you going?' His voice had turned suddenly wheedling, as if he knew he'd stepped too far.

'Clear of your self-pity, bastard, before I'm sick!' She ripped the door open and stepped out into the cold air.

'Monza—' He was sitting slumped on the bed, the saddest sort of look on his face. On the half of it that still worked, anyway. Broken. Hopeless. Desperate. Fake eye pointing off sideways. He looked as if he was about to weep, to fall down, to beg to be forgiven.

She slammed the door shut. It suited her to have an excuse. She preferred the passing guilt of turning her back on him to the endless guilt of facing him. Much, much preferred it.

The view from the balcony might well have been among the most breathtaking in the world. Ospria dropped away below, a madman's maze of streaky copper roofs, each one of the four tiers of the city surrounded by its own battlemented walls and towers. Tall buildings of old, pale stone

crowded tight behind them, narrow-windowed and striped with black marble, pressed in alongside steeply climbing streets, crooked alleys of a thousand steps, deep and dark as the canyons of mountain streams. A few early lights shone from scattered windows, flickering dots of sentries' torches moved on the walls. Beyond them the valley of the Sulva was sunk in the shadows of the mountains, only the faintest glimmer of the river in its bottom. At the summit of the highest hill on the other side, against the dark velvet of the sky, perhaps the pinpricks of the campfires of the Thousand Swords.

Not a place for anyone with a fear of heights.

But Monza had other things on her mind. All that mattered was to make nothing matter, and as fast as she could. She crabbed down into the deepest corner, hunched jealously over her lamp and her pipe like a freezing man over a last tongue of fire. She gripped the mouthpiece in her teeth, lifted the rattling hood with trembling hands, leaned forwards—

A sudden gust came up, swirled into the corner, whipped her greasy hair in her eyes. The flame fluttered and went out. She stayed there, frozen, staring at the dead lamp in achy confusion, then sweaty disbelief. Her face went slack with horror as the implications fumbled their way into her thumping head.

No flame. No smoke. No way back.

She sprang up, took a step towards the parapet and flung the lamp out across the city with all her strength. She tilted her head back, taking a great breath, grabbed the parapet, rocked forwards and screamed her lungs out. Screamed her hatred at the lamp as it tumbled down, at the wind that had blown it out, at the city spread out below her, at the valley beyond it, at the world and everyone in it.

In the distance, the angry sun was beginning to creep up behind the mountains, staining the sky around their darkened slopes with blood.

No More Delays

Cosca stood before the mirror, making the final adjustments to his fine lace collar, turning his five rings so the jewels faced precisely outwards, adjusting each bristle of his beard to his satisfaction. It had taken him an hour and a half, by Friendly's calculation, to make ready. Twelve passes of the razor against the sharpening strap. Thirty-one movements to trim away the stubble. One tiny nick left under his jaw. Thirteen tugs of the tweezers to purge the nose hairs. Forty-five buttons done up. Four pairs of hooks and eyes. Eighteen straps to tighten and buckles to fasten.

'And all is ready. Master Friendly, I wish you to take the post of first sergeant of the brigade.'

'I know nothing about war.' Nothing except that it was madness, and threw him out of all compass.

'You need know nothing. The role would be to keep close to me, to keep silent but sinister, to support and follow my lead where necessary and most of all to watch my back and yours. The world is full of treachery, my friend! The odd bloody task too, and on occasion to count out sums of money paid and received, to take inventory of the numbers of men, weapons and sundries at our disposal . . .'

That was, to the letter, what Friendly had done for Sajaam, in Safety then outside it. 'I can do that.'

'Better than any man alive, I never doubt! Could you begin by fastening this buckle for me? Bloody armourers. I swear they only put it there to vex me.' He jerked his thumb at the side strap on his gilded breastplate, stood tall and held his breath, sucking in his gut as Friendly tugged it closed. 'Thank you, my friend, you are a rock! An anchor! An axle of calm about which I madly spin. Whatever would I do without you?'

Friendly did not understand the question. 'The same things.'

'No, no. Not the same. Though we are not long acquainted, I feel there is . . . an understanding between us. A bond. We are much alike, you and I.'

Friendly sometimes felt he feared every word he had to speak, every new person and every new place. Only by counting everything and anything could he claw by his fingernails from morning to night. Cosca, by sharp

contrast, drifted effortlessly through life like blossom on the wind. The way that he could talk, smile, laugh, make others do the same seemed like magic as surely as when Friendly had seen the Gurkish woman Ishri form from nowhere. ‘We are nothing alike.’

‘You see my point exactly! We are entire opposites, like earth and air, yet we are both . . . missing something . . . that others take for granted. Some part of that machinery that makes a man fit into society. But we each miss different cogs on the wheel. Enough that we may make, perhaps, between the two of us, one half-decent human.’

‘One whole from two halves.’

‘An extraordinary whole, even! I have never been a reliable man – no, no, don’t try to deny it.’ Friendly had not. ‘But you, my friend, are constant, clear-sighted, single-minded. You are . . . honest enough . . . to make me more honest.’

‘I’ve spent most of my life in prison.’

‘Where you did more to spread honesty among Styria’s most dangerous convicts than all the magistrates in the land, I do not doubt!’ Cosca slapped Friendly on his shoulder. ‘Honest men are so very rare, they are often mistaken for criminals, for rebels, for madmen. What were your crimes, anyway, but to be different?’

‘Robbery the first time, and I served seven years. When they caught me again there were eighty-four counts, with fourteen murders.’

Cosca cocked an eyebrow. ‘But were you truly guilty?’

‘Yes.’

He frowned for a moment, then waved it away. ‘Nobody’s perfect. Let’s leave the past behind us.’ He gave his feather a final flick, jammed his hat onto his head at its accustomed rakish angle. ‘How do I look?’

Black pointed knee-boots set with huge golden spurs in the likeness of bull’s heads. Breastplate of black steel with golden adornments. Black velvet sleeves slashed with yellow silk, cuffs of Sipanese lace hanging at the wrists. A sword with flamboyant gilded basketwork and matching dagger, slung ridiculously low. An enormous hat, its yellow feather threatening to brush the ceiling. ‘Like a pimp who lost his mind in a military tailor’s.’

Cosca broke out in a radiant grin. ‘Precisely the look I was aiming at! So to business, Sergeant Friendly!’ He strode forwards, flung the tent flap wide

and stepped through into the bright sunlight.

Friendly stuck close behind. It was his job, now.

The applause began the moment he stepped up onto the big barrel. He had ordered every officer of the Thousand Swords to attend his address, and here they were indeed; clapping, whooping, cheering and whistling to the best of their ability. Captains to the fore, lieutenants crowding further back, ensigns clustering at the rear. In most bodies of fighting men these would have been the best and brightest, the youngest and highest born, the bravest and most idealistic. This being a brigade of mercenaries, they were the polar opposite. The longest serving, the most steeped in vice, the slyest back-stabbers, most practised grave-robbers and fastest runners, the men with fewest illusions and most betrayals under their belts. Cosca's very own constituency, in other words.

Sesaria, Victus and Andiche lined up beside the barrel, all three clapping gently, the biggest, blackest crooks of the lot. Unless you counted Cosca himself, of course. Friendly stood not far behind, arms tightly folded, eyes darting over the crowd. Cosca wondered if he was counting them, and decided it was a virtual certainty.

'No, no! No, no! You do me too much honour, boys! You shame me with your fond attentions!' And he waved the adulation down, fading into an expectant silence. A mass of scarred, pocked, sunburned and diseased faces turned towards him, waiting. As hungry as a gang of bandits. They were one.

'Brave heroes of the Thousand Swords!' His voice rang out into the balmy morning. 'Well, let us say brave men of the Thousand Swords, at least. Let us say men, anyway!' Scattered laughter, a whoop of approval. 'My boys, you all know my stamp! Some of you have fought beside me . . . or at any rate in front.' More laughter. 'The rest of you know my . . . spotless reputation.' And more yet. 'You all know that I, above all, am one of you. A soldier, yes! A fighter, of course! But one who would much prefer to sheathe his weapon.' And he gave a gentle cough as he adjusted his groin. 'Than draw his blade!' And he slapped the hilt of his sword to widespread merriment.

'Let it never be said that we are not masters and journeymen of the glorious profession of arms! As much so as any lapdog at some noble's

boots! Men strong of sinew!' And he slapped Sesaria's great arm. 'Men sharp of wits!' And he pointed at Andiche's greasy head. 'Men hungry for glory!' He jerked his thumb towards Victus. 'Let it never be said we will not brave risks for our rewards! But let the risks be kept as lean as possible, and the rewards most hearty!' Another swell of approval.

'Your employer, the young Prince Foscar, was keen that you carry the lower ford and meet the enemy head on in pitched battle . . .' Nervous silence. 'But I declined! Though you are paid to fight, I told him, you are far keener on the pay than the fighting!' A rousing cheer. 'We'll wet our boots higher up, therefore, and with considerably lighter opposition! And whatever occurs today, however things may seem, you may always depend upon it that I have your . . . best interests closest to my own heart!' And he rubbed his fingers against his thumb to an even louder cheer.

'I will not insult you by calling for courage, for steadfastness, for loyalty and honour! All these things I already know you possess in the highest degree!' Widespread laughter. 'So to your units, officers of the Thousand Swords, and await my order! May Mistress Luck be always at your side and mine! She is drawn, after all, to those who least deserve her! May darkness find us victorious! Uninjured! And above all – rich!'

There was a rousing cheer. Shields and weapons, mailed and plated arms, gauntleted fists shaken in the air.

'Cosca!'

'Nicomo Cosca!'

'The captain general!'

He hopped smiling down from his barrel as the officers began to disperse, Sesaria and Victus going with them to make their regiments – or their gangs of opportunists, criminals and thugs – ready for action. Cosca strolled away towards the brow of the hill, the beautiful valley opening out before him, shreds of misty cloud clinging to the hollows in its sides. Ospria looked proudly down on all from her mountain, fairer than ever by daylight, all cream-coloured stone banded with blue-black stripes of masonry, roofs of copper turned pale green by the years or, on a few buildings recently repaired, shining brilliantly in the morning glare.

'Nice speech,' said Andiche. 'If your taste runs to speeches.'

'Most kind. Mine does.'

'You've still got the trick of it.'

‘Ah, my friend, you have seen captain generals come and go. You well know there is a happy time, after a man is elevated to command, in which he can say and do no wrong in the eyes of his men. Like a husband in the eyes of his new wife, just following the marriage. Alas, it cannot last. Sazine, myself, Murcatto, ill-fated Faithful Carpi, our tides all flowed out with varying speed and left each one of us betrayed or dead. And so shall mine again. I will have to work harder for my applause in future.’

Andiche split a toothy grin. ‘You could always appeal to the cause.’

‘Hah!’ Cosca lowered himself into the captain general’s chair, set out in the dappled shade of a spreading olive tree with a fine view of the glittering fords. ‘My curse on fucking causes! Nothing but big excuses. I never saw men act with such ignorance, violence and self-serving malice as when energised by a just cause.’ He squinted at the rising sun, brilliant in the bright blue sky. ‘As we will no doubt witness, in the coming hours . . .’

Rogont drew his sword with a faint ring of steel.

‘Free men of Ospria! Free men of the League of Eight! Great hearts!’

Monza turned her head and spat. Speeches. Better to move fast and hit hard than waste time talking about it. If she’d found herself with time for a speech before a battle she would have reckoned she’d missed her moment, pulled back and looked for another. It took a man with a bloated sense of himself to think his words might make all the difference.

So it was no surprise that Rogont had his all well worked out.

‘Long have you followed me! Long have you waited for the day you would prove your mettle! My thanks for your patience! My thanks for your courage! My thanks for your faith!’ He stood in his stirrups and raised his sword high above his head. ‘Today we fight!’

He cut a pretty picture, there was no denying that. Tall, strong and handsome, dark curls stirred by the breeze. His armour was studded with glittering gems, steel polished so bright it was almost painful to look at. But his men had made an effort too. Heavy infantry in the centre, well armoured under a forest of polearms or clutching broadswords in their gauntleted fists, shields and blue surcoats all stitched with the white tower of Ospria. Light infantry on the wings, all standing to stiff attention in studded leather, pikes kept carefully vertical. Archers too, steel-capped flatbowmen, hooded longbowmen. A detachment of Affoians on the far right slightly spoiled the

pristine organisation, weapons mismatched and their ranks a little skewed, but still a good stretch neater than any men Monza had ever led.

And that was before she turned to the cavalry lined up behind her, a gleaming row in the shadow of the outermost wall of Ospria. Every man noble of birth and spirit, horses in burnished bardings, helmets with sculpted crests, lances striped, polished and ready to be steeped in glory. Like something out of a badly written storybook.

She snorted some snot from the back of her nose, and spat again. In her experience, and she had plenty, clean men were the keenest to get into battle and the keenest to get clear of it.

Rogont was busy cranking up his rhetoric to new heights. 'We stand now upon a battlefield! Here, in after years, men will say heroes fought! Here, men will say the fate of Styria was decided! Here, my friends, here, on our own soil! In sight of our own homes! Before the ancient walls of proud Ospria!' Enthusiastic cheering from the companies drawn up closest to him. She doubted the rest could hear a word of it. She doubted most could even see him. For those that could, she doubted the sight of a shiny speck in the distance would do much for their morale.

'Your fate is in your own hands!' Their fate had been in Rogont's hands, and he'd frittered it away. Now it was in Cosca's and Foscar's, and it was likely to be a bloody one.

'Now for freedom!' Or at best a better-looking brand of tyranny.

'Now for glory!' A glorious place in the mud at the bottom of the river.

Rogont jerked on the reins with his free hand and made his chestnut charger rear, lashing at the air with its front hooves. The effect was only slightly spoiled by a few heavy clods of shit that happened to fall from its rear end at the same moment. It sped off past the massed ranks of infantry, each company cheering Rogont as he passed, lifting their spears in unison and giving a roar. It might have been an impressive sight. But Monza had seen it all before, with grim results. A good speech wasn't much compensation for being outnumbered three to one.

The Duke of Delay trotted up towards her and the rest of his staff, the same gathering of heavily decorated and lightly experienced men she'd made fools of in the baths at Puranti, arrayed for battle now rather than the parade ground. Safe to say they hadn't warmed to her. Safe to say she didn't care.

‘Nice speech,’ she said. ‘If your taste runs to speeches.’

‘Most kind.’ Rogont turned his horse and drew it up beside her. ‘Mine does.’

‘I’d never have guessed. Nice armour too.’

‘A gift from the young Countess Cotarda.’ A knot of ladies had gathered to observe at the top of the slope in the shade of the city walls. They sat side-saddle in bright dresses and twinkling jewels, as if they were expecting to attend a wedding rather than a slaughter. Cotarda herself, milk-pale in flowing yellow silks, gave a shy wave and Rogont returned it without much vigour. ‘I think her uncle has it in mind that we might marry. If I live out the day, of course.’

‘Young love. My heart is all aglow.’

‘Damp down your sentimental soul, she’s not at all my type. I like a woman with a little . . . bite. Still, it is a fine armour. An impartial observer might mistake me for some kind of hero.’

‘Huh. “Desperation bakes heroes from the most rotten flour,” Farans wrote.’

Rogont blew out a heavy sigh. ‘We are running short of time for this particular loaf to rise.’

‘I thought that talk about you having trouble rising was all scurrilous rumours . . .’ There was something familiar about one of the ladies in Countess Cotarda’s party, more simply dressed than the others, long-necked and elegant. She turned her head and then her horse, began to ride down the grassy slope towards them. Monza felt a cold twinge of recognition. ‘What the hell is she doing here?’

‘Carlot dan Eider? You know her?’

‘I know her.’ If punching someone in the face in Sipani counted.

‘An old . . . friend.’ He said the word in a way that implied more than that. ‘She came to me in peril of her life, begging for protection. Under what circumstances could I possibly refuse?’

‘If she’d been ugly?’

Rogont shrugged with a faint rattling of steel. ‘I freely admit it, I’m every bit as shallow as the next man.’

‘Far shallower, your Excellency.’ Eider nudged her horse up close to them, and gracefully inclined her head. ‘And who is this? The Butcher of

Caprile! I thought you were but a thief, blackmailer, murderer of innocents and keen practiser of incest! Now it seems you are a soldier too.'

'Carlot dan Eider, such a surprise! I thought this was a battle but now it smells more like a brothel. Which is it?'

Eider raised one eyebrow at the massed regiments. 'Judging by all the swords I'd guess . . . the former? But I suppose you'd be the expert. I saw you at Cardotti's and I see you here, equally comfortable dressed as warrior or whore.'

'Strange how it goes, eh? I wear the whore's clothes and you do the whore's business.'

'Perhaps I should turn my hand to murdering children instead?'

'For pity's sake, enough!' snapped Rogont. 'Am I doomed to be always surrounded by women, showing off? Have the two of you not noticed I have a battle to lose? All I need now is for that vanishing devil Ishri to spring out of my horse's arse and give me my death of shock to complete the trio! My Aunt Sefeline was the same, always trying to prove she had the biggest cock in the chamber! If all your purpose is to posture, the two of you can get that done behind the city walls and leave me out here to ponder my downfall alone.'

Eider bowed her head. 'Your Excellency, I would hate to intrude. I am here merely to wish you the best of fortune.'

'Sure you wouldn't care to fight?' snapped Monza at her.

'Oh, there are other ways of fighting than bloody in the mud, Murcatto.' She leaned from her saddle and hissed it. 'You'll see!'

'Your Excellency!' A shrill call, soon joined by others, a ripple of excitement spreading through the horsemen. One of Rogont's officers was pointing over the river, towards the ridge on the far side of the valley. There was movement there against the pale sky. Monza nudged her horse towards it, sliding out a borrowed eyeglass and scanning across the ridge.

A scattering of horsemen came first. Outriders, officers and standard-bearers, banners held high, white flags carrying the black cross of Talins, the names of battles stitched along their edges in red and silver thread. It hardly helped that a good number of the victories she'd had a hand in herself. A wide column of men tramped into view behind them, marching steadily down the brown stripe of the Imperial road towards the lower ford, spears shouldered.

The foremost regiment stopped and began to spread out about a half-mile from the water. Other columns began to spill from the road, forming battle lines across the valley. There was nothing clever about the plan, as far as she could see.

But they had the numbers. They didn't need to be clever.

'The Talinese have arrived,' murmured Rogont, pointlessly.

Orso's army. Men she'd fought alongside this time last year, led to victory at Sweet Pines. Men Ganmark had led until Stolicus fell on him. Men Foscar was leading now. That eager young lad with the fluff moustache who'd laughed with Benna in the gardens of Fontezarmo. That eager young lad she'd sworn to kill. She chewed her lip as she moved the eyeglass across the dusty front ranks, more men and more flooding over the hill behind them.

'Regiments from Etrisani and Cesale on their right wing, some Baolish on their left.' Ragged-marching men in fur and heavy chain mail, savage fighters from the hills and the mountains in the far east of Styria.

'The great majority of Duke Orso's regular troops. But where, oh where, are your comrades of the Thousand Swords?'

Monza nodded up towards Menzes Hill, a green lump speckled with olive groves above the upper ford. 'I'd bet my life they're there, behind the brow. Foscar will cross the lower ford in strength and give you no choice but to meet him head on. Once you're committed, the Thousand Swords will cross the upper ford unopposed and take you in the flank.'

'Very likely. What would be your advice?'

'You should've turned up to Sweet Pines on time. Or Musselia. Or the High Bank.'

'Alas, I was late for those battles then. I am extremely late for them now.'

'You should have attacked long before this. Taken a gamble as they marched down the Imperial road from Puranti.' Monza frowned at the valley, the great number of soldiers on both sides of the river. 'You have the smaller force.'

'But the better position.'

'To get it you gave up the initiative. Lost your chance at surprise. Trapped yourself. The general with the smallest numbers is well advised to stay always on the offensive.'

'Stolicus, is it? I never had you down for book learning.'

‘I know my business, Rogont, books and all.’

‘My epic thanks to you and your friend Stolicus for explaining my failures. Perhaps one of you might furnish an opinion on how I might now achieve success?’

Monza let her eyes move over the landscape, judging the angles of the slopes, the distances from Menzes Hill to the upper ford, from the upper to the lower, from the striped walls of the city to the river. The position seemed better than it was. Rogont had too much ground to cover and not enough men for the job.

‘All you can do now is the obvious. Hit the Talinese with all your archers as they cross, then all your foot as soon as their front ranks touch dry land. Keep the cavalry here to at least hold up the Thousand Swords when they show. Hope to break Foscar quickly, while his feet are in the river, then turn to the mercenaries. They won’t stick if they see the game’s against them. But breaking Foscar . . .’ She watched the great body of men forming up into lines as wide as the wide ford, more columns belching from the Imperial road to join them. ‘If Orso thought you had a chance at it he’d have picked a commander more experienced and less valuable. Foscar’s got more than twice your numbers on his own, and all he has to do is hold you.’ She peered up the slope. The Gurkish priests sat observing the battle not far from the Styrian ladies, their white robes bright in the sunlight, their dark faces grim. ‘If the Prophet sent you a miracle, now might be the time.’

‘Alas, he sent only money. And kind words.’

Monza snorted. ‘You’ll need more than kind words to win today.’

‘We’ll need,’ he corrected, ‘since you fight beside me. Why do you fight beside me, by the way?’

Because she was too tired and too sick to fight alone any more. ‘Seems I can’t resist pretty men in lots of trouble. When you held all the cards I fought for Orso. Now look at me.’

‘Now look at us both.’ He took in a long breath, and gave a happy sigh.

‘What the hell are you so pleased about?’

‘Would you rather I despaired?’ Rogont grinned at her, handsome and doomed. Maybe the two went together. ‘If the truth be known, I’m relieved the waiting is over, whatever odds we face. Those of us who carry great responsibilities must learn patience, but I have never had much taste for it.’

‘That’s not your reputation.’

‘People are more complicated than their reputations, General Murcatto. You should know that. We will settle our business here, today. No more delays.’ He twitched his horse away to confer with one of his aides, and left Monza slumped in her saddle, arms limp across the bow, frowning up towards Menzes Hill.

She wondered if Nicomo Cosca was up there, squinting towards them through his eyeglass.

Cosca squinted through his eyeglass towards the mass of soldiery on the far side of the river. The enemy, though he held no personal rancour towards them. The battlefield was no place for rancour. Blue flags carrying the white tower of Ospria fluttered above them, but one larger than the others, edged with gold. The standard of the Duke of Delay himself. Horsemen were scattered about it, a group of ladies too, by the look of things, ridden out to watch the battle, all in their best. Cosca fancied he could even see some Gurkish priests, though he could not imagine what their interest might be. He wondered idly whether Monzcarro Murcatto was there. The notion of her sitting side-saddle in floating silks fit for a coronation gave him a brief moment of amusement. The battlefield was most definitely a place for amusement. He lowered his eyeglass, took a swig from his flask and happily closed his eyes, feeling the sun flicker through the branches of the old olive trees.

‘Well?’ came Andiche’s rough voice.

‘What? Oh, you know. Still forming up.’

‘Rigrat sends word the Talinese are beginning their attack.’

‘Ah! So they are.’ Cosca sat forwards, training his eyeglass on the ridge to his right. The front ranks of Foscar’s foot were close to the river now, spread out across the flower-dotted sward in orderly lines, the hard dirt of the Imperial road invisible beneath that mass of men. He could faintly hear the tramping of their feet, the disembodied calls of their officers, the regular thump, thump of their drums floating on the warm air, and he waved one hand gently back and forth in time. ‘Quite the spectacle of military splendour!’

He moved his round window on the world down the road to the glittering, slow-flowing water, across it to the far bank and up the slope. The Osprian regiments were deploying to meet them, perhaps a hundred strides above

the river. Archers had formed a long line behind them on higher ground, kneeling, making ready their bows. ‘Do you know, Andiche . . . I have a feeling we will shortly witness some bloodshed. Order the men forwards, up behind us here. Fifty strides, perhaps, beyond the brow of the hill.’

‘But . . . they’ll be seen. We’ll lose the surprise—’

‘Shit on the surprise. Let them see the battle, and let the battle see them. Give them a taste for it.’

‘But General—’

‘Give the orders, man. Don’t fuss.’

Andiche turned away, frowning, and beckoned over one of his sergeants. Cosca settled back with a satisfied sigh, stretched his legs out and crossed one highly polished boot over the other. Good boots. How long had it been since he’d last worn good boots? The front rank of Foscar’s men were in the river. Wading forwards with grim determination, no doubt, up to their knees in cold water, looking without relish at the considerable body of soldiers drawn up in good order on the high ground to their front. Waiting for the arrows to start falling. Waiting for the charge to come. An unenviable task, forcing that ford. He had to admit to being damn pleased he had talked his way clear of it.

He raised Morveer’s flask and wet his lips, just a little.

Shivers heard the faint cries of the orders, the rattling rush of a few hundred shafts loosed together. The first volley went up from Rogont’s archers, black splinters drifting, and rained down on the Talinese as they waded on through the shallows.

Shivers shifted in his saddle, rubbed gently at his itching scar as he watched the lines twist and buckle, holes opening up, flags drooping. Some men slowing, wanting to get back, others moving faster, wanting to press on. Fear and anger, two sides to the same coin. No one’s favourite job, trying to march tight over bad terrain while men shoot arrows at you. Stepping over corpses. Friends, maybe. The horrible chance of it, knowing a little gust might be the difference between an arrow in the earth by your boot or an arrow through your face.

Shivers had seen battles enough, of course. A lifetime of ’em. He’d watched them play out or listened to the sounds in the distance, waiting to hear the call and take his own part, fretting on his chances, trying to hide his

fear from those he led and those he followed. He remembered Black Well, running through the mist, heart pounding, startling at shadows. The Cumnur, where he'd screamed the war cry with five thousand others as they thundered down the long slope. Dunbrec, where he'd followed Rudd Threetrees in a charge against the Feared, damn near given his life to hold the line. The battle in the High Places, Shanka boiling up out of the valley, mad Easterners trying to climb the wall, fighting back to back with the Bloody-Nine, stand or die. Memories sharp enough to cut himself on – the smells, the sounds, the feel of the air on his skin, the desperate hope and mad anger.

He watched another volley go up, watched the great mass of Talinese coming on through the water, and felt nothing much but curious. No kinship with either side. No sorrow for the dead. No fear for himself. He watched men dropping under the hail of fire, and he burped, and the mild burning up his throat gave him a sight more worry than if the river had suddenly flooded and washed every one of those bastards down there out to the ocean. Drowned the fucking world. He didn't care a shit about the outcome. It wasn't his war.

Which made him wonder why he was ready to fight in it, and more'n likely on the losing side.

His eye twitched from the brewing battle to Monza. She clapped Rogont on the shoulder and Shivers felt his face burn like he'd been slapped. Each time they spoke it stung at him. Her black hair blew back for a moment, showed him the side of her face, jaw set hard. He didn't know if he loved her, or wanted her, or just hated that she didn't want him. She was the scab he couldn't stop picking, the split lip he couldn't stop biting at, the loose thread he couldn't stop tugging 'til his shirt came all to pieces.

Down in the valley the front rank of the Talinese had worse troubles, floundering from the river and up onto the bank, lost their shape from slogging across the ford under fire. Monza shouted something at Rogont, and he called to one of his men. Shivers heard the cries creep up from the slopes below. The order to charge. The Osprian foot lowered their spears, blades a glittering wave as they swung down together, then began to move. Slow at first, then quicker, then breaking into a jog, pouring away from the archers, still loading and firing fast as they could, down the long slope

towards the sparkling water, and the Talinese trying to form some kind of line on the bank.

Shivers watched the two sides come together, merge. A moment later he heard the contact, faint on the wind. That rattling, clattering, jangling din of metal, like a hailstorm on a lead roof. Roars, wails, screams from nowhere floating with it. Another volley fell among the ranks still struggling through the water. Shivers watched it all, and burped again.

Rogont's headquarters was quiet as the dead, everyone staring down towards the ford, mouths and eyes wide, faces pale and reins clenched tight with worry. The Talinese had flatbowmen of their own ready now, sent a wave of bolts up from the water, flying flat and hissing among the archers. More'n one fell. Someone started squealing. A rogue bolt thudded into the turf not far from one of Rogont's officers, made his horse startle and near dumped him from the saddle. Monza urged her own mount a pace or two forwards, standing in the stirrups to get a better view, borrowed armour gleaming dully in the morning sun. Shivers frowned.

One way or another, he was here for her. To fight for her. Protect her. Try to make things right between them. Or maybe just hurt her like she'd hurt him. He closed his fist, nails digging into his palm, knuckles sore from knocking that servant's teeth out. They weren't done yet, that much he knew.

All Business

The upper ford was a patch of slow-moving water, sparkling in the morning sun as it broke up in the shallows. A faint track led from the far bank between a few scattered buildings, then through an orchard and up the long slope to a gate in the black-banded outermost wall of Ospria. All seemingly deserted. Rogont's foot were mostly committed to the savage fight at the lower ford. Only a few small units hung back to guard the archers, loading and firing into the mass of men in the midst of the river as fast as they possibly could.

The Osprian cavalry were waiting in the shadow of the walls as a last reserve, but too few, and too far away. The Thousand Swords' path to victory appeared unguarded. Cosca stroked gently at his neck. In his judgement, now was the perfect moment to attack.

Andiche evidently agreed. 'Getting hot down there. Should I tell the men to mount up?'

'Let's not trouble them quite yet. It's still early.'

'You sure?'

Cosca turned to look evenly back at him. 'Do I look unsure?' Andiche puffed out his pitted cheeks, then stomped off to confer with some of his own officers. Cosca stretched out, hands clasped behind his head, and watched the battle slowly develop. 'What was I saying?'

'A chance to leave all this behind,' said Friendly.

'Ah yes! I had the chance to leave all this behind. Yet I chose to come back. Change is not a simple thing, eh, Sergeant? I entirely see and understand the pointlessness and waste of it all, yet I do it anyway. Does that make me worse or better than the man who does it thinking himself ennobled by a righteous cause? Or the man who does it for his own profit, without the slightest grain of thought for right or wrong? Or are we all the same?'

Friendly only shrugged.

'Men dying. Men maimed. Lives destroyed.' He might as well have been reciting a list of vegetables for all the emotion he felt. 'I have spent half my life in the business of destruction. The other half in the dogged pursuit of

self-destruction. I have created nothing. Nothing but widows, orphans, ruins and misery, a bastard or two, perhaps, and a great deal of vomit. Glory? Honour? My piss is worth more, that at least makes nettles grow.' But if his aim was to prick his own conscience into wakefulness it still slumbered on regardless. 'I have fought in many battles, Sergeant Friendly.'

'How many?'

'A dozen? A score? More? The line between battle and skirmish is a fuzzy one. Some of the sieges dragged on, with many engagements. Do those count as one, or several?'

'You're the soldier.'

'And even I don't have the answers. In war, there are no straight lines. What was I saying?'

'Many battles.'

'Ah, yes! Many! And though I have tried always to avoid becoming closely involved in the fighting, I have often failed. I am fully aware of what it's like in the midst of that mêlée. The flashing blades. Shields cloven and spears shattered. The crush, the heat, the sweat, the stink of death. The tiny heroics and the petty villainies. Proud flags and honourable men crushed underfoot. Limbs lopped off, showers of blood, split skulls, spilled guts, and all the rest.' He raised his eyebrows. 'Reasonable to suppose some drownings too, under the circumstances.'

'How many, would you say?'

'Difficult to be specific.' Cosca thought of the Gurkish drowning in the channel at Dagoska, brave men swept out to sea, their corpses washed up on every tide, and gave a long sigh. 'Still, I find I can watch without much sentiment. Is it ruthlessness? Is it the fitting detachment of command? Is it the configuration of the stars at my birth? I find myself always sanguine in the face of death and danger. More so than at any other time. Happy when I should be horrified, fearful when I should be calm. I am a riddle, to be sure, even to myself. I am a back-to-front man, Sergeant Friendly!' He laughed, then chuckled, then sighed, then was silent. 'A man upside down and inside out.'

'General.' Andiche was leaning over him again, lank hair hanging.

'What, for pity's sake? I am trying to philosophise!'

'The Osprians are fully engaged. All their foot are tackling Foscar's troops. They've no reserves but a few horse.'

Cosca squinted down towards the valley. ‘I see that, Captain Andiche. We all quite clearly see that. There is no need to state the obvious.’

‘Well . . . we’ll sweep those bastards away, no trouble. Give me the order and I’ll see to it. We’ll get no easier chance.’

‘Thank you, but it looks dreadfully hot out there now. I am quite comfortable where I am. Perhaps later.’

‘But why not—’

‘It amazes me, that after so long on campaign, the whole business of the chain of command still confounds you! You will find it far less worrisome if, rather than trying to anticipate my orders, you simply wait for me to give them. It really is the simplest of military principles.’

Andiche scratched his greasy head. ‘I understand the concept.’

‘Then act according to it. Find a shady spot, man, take the weight from your feet. Stop running to nowhere. Take a lesson from my goat. Do you see her fussing?’

The goat lifted her head from the grass between the olive trees for a moment, and bleated.

Andiche put his hands on his hips, winced, stared down at the valley, up at Cosca, frowned at the goat, then turned away and walked off, shaking his head.

‘Everyone rushing, rushing, Sergeant Friendly, do we get no peace? Is a quiet moment out of the sun really too much to ask? What was I saying?’

‘Why isn’t he attacking?’

When Monza had seen the Thousand Swords easing onto the brow of the hill, the tiny shapes of men, horses, spears black against the blue morning sky, she’d known they were about to charge. To splash happily across the upper ford and take Rogont’s men in the flank, just the way she’d said they would. Just the way she’d have done. To put a bloody end to the battle, to the League of Eight, to her hopes, such as they were. No man was quicker to pluck the easy fruit than Nicomo Cosca, and none quicker to wolf it down than the men she used to lead.

But the Thousand Swords only sat there, in plain view, on top of Menzes Hill, and waited. Waited for nothing. Meanwhile Foscar’s Talinese struggled on the banks of the lower ford, at push of pike with Rogont’s Osprians, water, ground and slope all set against them, arrows raining down

on the men behind the front line with punishing regularity. Bodies were carried by the current, limp shapes washing up on the bank of the river, bobbing in the shallows below the ford.

Still the Thousand Swords didn't move.

'Why show himself in the first place, if he doesn't mean to come down?' Monza chewed at her lip, not trusting it. 'Cosca's no fool. Why give away the surprise?'

Duke Rogont only shrugged. 'Why complain about it? The longer he waits, the better for us, no? We have enough to worry on with Foscar.'

'What's he up to?' Monza stared up at the mass of horsemen ranged across the crest of the hill, beside the olive grove. 'What's that old bastard about?'

Colonel Rigrat whipped his well-lathered horse between the tents, sending idle mercenaries scattering, and reined the beast in savagely not far away. He slid from the saddle, nearly fell, tore his boot from the stirrup and stormed up, ripping off his gloves, face flushed with sweaty fury. 'Cosca! Nicomo Cosca, damn you!'

'Colonel Rigrat! A fine morning, my young friend! I hope all is well?'

'Well? Why are you not attacking?' He stabbed one finger down towards the river, evidently having misplaced his baton. 'We are engaged in the valley! Most hotly engaged!'

'Why, so you are.' Cosca rocked forwards and rose smoothly from the captain general's chair. 'Perhaps it would be better if we were to discuss this away from the men. Not good form, to bicker. Besides, you're scaring my goat.'

'What?'

Cosca patted the animal gently on the back as he passed. 'She's the only one who truly understands me. Come to my tent. I have fruit there! Andiche! Come join us!'

He strode off, Rigrat blustering after, Andiche falling into puzzled step behind. Past Nocau, on guard before the flap with his great scimitar drawn, and into the cool, dim interior of the tent, draped all around with the victories of the past. Cosca ran the back of his hand affectionately down one swathe of threadbare cloth, edges blackened by fire. 'The flag that hung upon the walls of Muris, during the siege . . . was it truly a dozen years

ago?' He turned to see Friendly sidle through the flap after the others and lurk near the entrance. 'I brought it down from the highest parapet with my own hand, you know.'

'After you tore it from the hand of the dead hero who was up there first,' said Andiche.

'Whatever is the purpose of dead heroes, if not to pass on stolen flags to more prudent fellows in the rank behind?' He snatched the bowl of fruit from the table and shoved it under Rigrat's nose. 'You look ill, Colonel. Have a grape.'

The man's trembling face was rapidly approaching grape colour. 'Grape? Grape?' He lashed at the flap with his gloves. 'I demand that you attack at once! I flatly demand it!'

'Attack.' Cosca winced. 'Across the upper ford?'

'Yes!'

'According to the excellent plan you laid out to me last night?'

'Yes, damn it! Yes!'

'In all honesty, nothing would please me more. I love a good attack, ask anyone, but the problem is . . . you see . . .' Pregnant silence stretched out as he spread his hands wide. 'I took such an enormous sum of money from Duke Rogont's Gurkish friend not to.'

Ishri came from nowhere. Solidified from the shadows at the edges of the tent, slid from the folds in the ancient flags and strutted into being. 'Greetings,' she said. Rigrat and Andiche both stared at her, equally stunned.

Cosca peered up at the gently flapping roof of the tent, tapping at his pursed lips with one finger. 'A dilemma. A moral quandary. I want so badly to attack, but I cannot attack Rogont. And I can scarcely attack Foscar, when his father has also paid me so handsomely. In my youth I jerked this way and that just as the wind blew me, but I am trying earnestly to change, Colonel, as I explained to you the other evening. Really, in all good conscience, the only thing I can do is sit here.' He popped a grape into his mouth. 'And do nothing.'

Rigrat gave a splutter and made a belated grab for his sword, but Friendly's big fist was already around the hilt, knife gleaming in his other hand. 'No, no, no.' The colonel froze as Friendly slid his sword carefully from its sheath and tossed it across the tent.

Cosca snatched it from the air and took a couple of practice swipes. ‘Fine steel, Colonel, I congratulate you on your choice of blades, if not of strategy.’

‘You were paid by both? To fight neither?’ Andiche was smiling ear to ear as he draped one arm around Cosca’s shoulders. ‘My old friend! Why didn’t you tell me? Damn, but it’s good to have you back!’

‘Are you sure?’ Cosca ran him smoothly through the chest with Rigrat’s sword, right to the polished hilt. Andiche’s eyes bulged, his mouth dropped open and he dragged in a great long wheeze, his pockmarked face twisted, trying to scream. But all that came out was a gentle cough.

Cosca leaned close. ‘You think a man can turn on me? Betray me? Give my chair to another for a few pieces of silver, then smile and be my friend? You mistake me, Andiche. Fatally. I may make men laugh, but I’m no clown.’

The mercenary’s coat glistened with dark blood, his trembling face had turned bright red, veins bulging in his neck. He clawed weakly at Cosca’s breastplate, bloody bubbles forming on his lips. Cosca let go the hilt, wiped his hand on Andiche’s sleeve and shoved him over. He fell on his side, spitted, gave a gentle groan and stopped moving.

‘Interesting.’ Ishri squatted over him. ‘I am rarely surprised. Surely Murcatto is the one who stole your chair. You let her go free, no?’

‘On reflection, I doubt the facts of my betrayal quite match the story. But in any case, a man can forgive all manner of faults in beautiful women that in ugly men he finds entirely beyond sufferance. And if there’s one thing I absolutely cannot abide, it’s disloyalty. You have to stick at something in your life.’

‘Disloyalty?’ screeched Rigrat, finally finding his voice. ‘You’ll pay for this, Cosca, you treacherous—’

Friendly’s knife thumped into his neck and out, blood showered across the floor of the tent and spattered the Musselian flag that Sazine had taken the day the Thousand Swords were formed.

Rigrat fell to his knees, one hand clutched to his throat, blood pouring down the sleeve of his jacket. He flopped forwards onto his face, trembled for a moment, then was still. A dark circle bloomed out through the material of the groundsheet and merged with the one already creeping from Andiche’s corpse.

‘Ah,’ said Cosca. He had been planning to ransom Rigrat back to his family. It did not seem likely now. ‘That was . . . ungracious of you, Friendly.’

‘Oh.’ The convict frowned at his bloody knife. ‘I thought . . . you know. Follow your lead. I was being first sergeant.’

‘Of course you were. I take all the blame myself. I should have been more specific. I have ever suffered from . . . unspecificity? Is that a word?’

Friendly shrugged. So did Ishri.

‘Well.’ Cosca scratched gently at his neck as he looked down at Rigrat’s body. ‘An annoying, pompous, swollen-headed man, from what I saw. But if those were capital crimes I daresay half the world would hang, and myself first to the gallows. Perhaps he had many fine qualities of which I was unaware. I’m sure his mother would say so. But this is a battle. Corpses are a sad inevitability.’ He crossed to the tent flap, took a moment to compose himself, then clawed it desperately aside. ‘Some help here! For pity’s sake, some help!’

He hurried back to Andiche’s body and squatted beside it, knelt one way and then another, found what he judged to be the most dramatic pose just as Sesaria burst into the tent.

‘God’s breath!’ as he saw the two corpses, Victus bundling in behind, eyes wide.

‘Andiche!’ Cosca gestured at Rigrat’s sword, still where he had left it. ‘Run through!’ He had observed that people often state the obvious when distressed.

‘Someone get a surgeon!’ roared Victus.

‘Or better yet a priest.’ Ishri swaggered across the tent towards them. ‘He’s dead.’

‘What happened?’

‘Colonel Rigrat stabbed him.’

‘Who the hell are you?’

‘Ishri.’

‘He was a great heart!’ Cosca gently touched Andiche’s staring-eyed, gape-mouthed, blood-spattered face. ‘A true friend. He stepped before the thrust.’

‘Andiche did?’ Sesaria did not look convinced.

‘He gave his life . . . to save mine.’ Cosca’s voice almost croaked away to nothing at the end, and he dashed a tear from the corner of his eye. ‘Thank the Fates Sergeant Friendly moved as quickly as he did or I’d have been done for too.’ He beat at Andiche’s chest, fist squelching on his warm, blood-soaked coat. ‘My fault! My fault! I blame myself!’

‘Why?’ snarled Victus, glaring down at Rigrat’s corpse. ‘I mean, why did this bastard do it?’

‘My fault!’ wailed Cosca. ‘I took money from Rogont to stay out of the battle!’

Sesaria and Victus exchanged a glance. ‘You took money . . . to stay out?’

‘A huge amount of money! There will be shares by seniority, of course.’ Cosca waved his hand as though it was a trifle now. ‘Danger pay for every man, in Gurkish gold.’

‘Gold?’ rumbled Sesaria, eyebrows going up as though Cosca had pronounced a magic word.

‘But I would sink it all in the ocean for one minute longer in my old friend’s company! To hear him speak again! To see him smile. But never more. Forever . . .’ Cosca swept off his hat, laid it gently over Andiche’s face and hung his head. ‘Silent.’

Victus cleared his throat. ‘How much gold are we talking about, exactly?’

‘A . . . huge . . . quantity.’ Cosca gave a shuddering sniff. ‘As much again as Orso paid us to fight on his behalf.’

‘Andiche dead. A heavy price to pay.’ But Sesaria looked as if he perceived the upside.

‘Too heavy a price. Far too heavy.’ Cosca slowly stood. ‘My friends . . . could you bring yourselves to make arrangements for the burial? I must observe the battle. We must stumble on. For him. There is one consolation, I suppose.’

‘The money?’ asked Victus.

Cosca slapped down a hand on each captain’s shoulder. ‘Thanks to my bargain we will not need to fight. Andiche will be the only casualty the Thousand Swords suffer today. You could say he died for all of us. Sergeant Friendly!’ And Cosca turned and pushed past into the bright sunlight. Ishri glided silently at his elbow.

‘Quite the performance,’ she murmured. ‘You really should have been an actor rather than a general.’

‘There’s not so much air between the two as you might imagine.’ Cosca walked to the captain general’s chair and leaned on the back, feeling suddenly tired and irritable. Considering the long years he had dreamed of taking revenge for Afieri, it was a disappointing pay-off. He was in terrible need of a drink, fumbled for Morveer’s flask, but it was empty. He frowned down into the valley. The Talinese were engaged in a desperate battle perhaps half a mile wide at the bank of the lower ford, waiting for help from the Thousand Swords. Help that would never come. They had the numbers, but the Osprians were still holding their ground, keeping the battle narrow, choking them up in the shallows. The great mêlée heaved and glittered, the ford crawling with men, bobbing with bodies.

Cosca gave a long sigh. ‘You Gurkish think there’s a point to it all, don’t you? That God has a plan, and so forth?’

‘I’ve heard it said.’ Ishri’s black eyes flicked from the valley to him. ‘And what do you think God’s plan is, General Cosca?’

‘I have long suspected that it might be to annoy me.’

She smiled. Or at least her mouth curled up to show sharp white teeth. ‘Fury, paranoia and epic self-centredness in the space of a single sentence.’

‘All the fine qualities a great military leader requires . . .’ He shaded his eyes, squinting off to the west, towards the ridge behind the Talinese lines. ‘And here they are. Perfectly on schedule.’ The first flags were showing there. The first glittering spears. The first of what appeared to be a considerable body of men.

The Fate of Styria

‘Up there.’ Monza’s gloved forefinger, and her little finger too, of course, pointed towards the ridge. More soldiers were coming over the crest, a mile or two to the south of where the Talinese had first appeared. A lot more. It seemed Orso had kept a few surprises back. Reinforcements from his Union allies, maybe. Monza worked her sore tongue around her sour mouth and spat. From faint hopes to no hopes. A small step, but one nobody ever enjoys taking. The leading flags caught a gust of wind and unfurled for a moment. She peered at them through her eyeglass, frowned, rubbed her eye and peered again. There was no mistaking the cockleshell of Sipani.

‘Sipanese,’ she muttered. Until a few moments ago, the world’s most neutral men. ‘Why the hell are they fighting for Orso?’

‘Who says they are?’ When she turned to Rogont, he was smiling like a thief who’d whipped the fattest purse of his career. He spread his arms out wide. ‘Rejoice, Murcatto! The miracle you asked for!’

She blinked. ‘They’re on our side?’

‘Most certainly, and right in Foscar’s rear! And the irony is that it’s all your doing.’

‘Mine?’

‘Entirely yours! You remember the conference in Sipani, arranged by that preening mope the King of the Union?’

The great procession through the crowded streets, the cheering as Rogont and Salier led the way, the jeering as Ario and Foscar followed. ‘What of it?’

‘I had no more intention of making peace with Ario and Foscar than they had with me. My only care was to talk old Chancellor Sotorius over to my side. I tried to convince him that if the League of Eight lost then Duke Orso’s greed would not end at Sipani’s borders, however neutral they might be. That once my young head was off, his ancient one would be next on the block.’

More than likely true. Neutrality was no better defence against Orso than it was against the pox. His ambitions had never stopped at one river or the

next. One reason why, until the moment he'd tried to kill her, he'd made Monza such a fine employer.

'But the old man clung to his cherished neutrality, tight as a captain to the wheel of his sinking ship, and I despaired of dislodging him. I am ashamed to admit I began to despair entirely, and was seriously considering fleeing Styria for happier climes.' Rogont closed his eyes and tilted his face towards the sun. 'And then, oh, happy day, oh, serendipity . . .' He opened them and looked straight at her. 'You murdered Prince Ario.'

Black blood pumping from his pale throat, body tumbling through the open window, fire and smoke as the building burned. Rogont grinned with all the smugness of a magician explaining the workings of his latest trick.

'Sotorius was the host. Ario was under his protection. The old man knew Orso would never forgive him for the death of his son. He knew the doom of Sipani was sounded. Unless Orso could be stopped. We came to an agreement that very night, while Cardotti's House of Leisure was still burning. In secret, Chancellor Sotorius brought Sipani into the League of Nine.'

'Nine,' muttered Monza, watching the Sipanese host march steadily down the gentle hillside towards the fords, and Foscar's almost undefended rear.

'My long retreat from Puranti, which you thought so ill-advised, was intended to give him time to prepare. I backed willingly into this little trap so I could play the bait in a greater one.'

'You're cleverer than you look.'

'Not difficult. My aunt always told me I looked a dunce.'

She frowned across the valley at the motionless host on top of Menzes Hill. 'What about Cosca?'

'Some men never change. He took a very great deal of money from my Gurkish backers to keep out of the battle.'

It suddenly seemed she didn't understand the world nearly as well as she'd thought. 'I offered him money. He wouldn't take it.'

'Imagine that, and negotiation so very much your strong point. He wouldn't take the money from you. Ishri, it seems, talks more sweetly. "War is but the pricking point of politics. Blades can kill men, but only words can move them, and good neighbours are the surest shelter in a storm." I quote from Juvens' Principles of Art. Flim-flam and superstition mostly, but the

volume on the exercise of power is quite fascinating. You should read more widely, General Murcatto. Your book-learning is narrow in scope.'

'I came to reading late,' she grunted.

'You may enjoy the full use of my library, once I've butchered the Talinese and conquered Styria.' He smiled happily down towards the bottom of the valley, where Foscar's army were in grave danger of being surrounded. 'Of course, if Orso's troops had a more seasoned leader today than the young Prince Foscar, things might have been very different. I doubt a man of General Ganmark's abilities would have fallen so completely into my trap. Or even one of Faithful Carpi's long experience.' He leaned from his saddle and brought his self-satisfied smirk a little closer. 'But Orso has suffered some unfortunate losses in the area of command, lately.'

She snorted, turned her head and spat. 'So glad to be of help.'

'Oh, I couldn't have done it without you. All we need do is hold the lower ford until our brave allies of Sipani reach the river, crush Foscar's men between us, and Duke Orso's ambitions will be drowned in the shallows.'

'That all?' Monza frowned towards the water. The Affoians, an untidy red-brown mass on the neglected far right of the battle, had been forced back from the bank. No more than twenty paces of churned-up mud, but enough to give the Talinese a foothold. Now it looked as if some Baolish had waded through the deeper water upstream and got around their flank.

'It is, and it appears that we are already well on our way to . . . ah.' Rogont had seen it too. 'Oh.' Men were beginning to break from the fighting, struggling up the hillside towards the city.

'Looks as if your brave allies of Affoia have tired of your hospitality.'

The mood of smug jubilation that had swept through Rogont's headquarters when the Sipanese appeared was fading rapidly as more and more dots crumbled from the back of the bulging Affoian lines and began to scatter in every direction. Above them the companies of archers grew ragged as bowmen looked nervously up towards the city. No doubt they weren't keen to get closer acquainted with the men they'd been shooting arrows down at for the last hour.

'If those Baolish bastards break through they'll take your people in the flank, roll your whole line up. It'll be a rout.'

Rogont chewed at his lip. 'The Sipanese are less than half an hour away.'

'Excellent. They'll turn up just in time to count our corpses. Then theirs.'

He glanced nervously back towards the city. ‘Perhaps we should retire to our walls—’

‘You haven’t the time to disengage from that mess. Even as skilled a withdrawer as you are.’

The duke’s face had lost its colour. ‘What do we do?’

It suddenly seemed she understood the world perfectly. Monza drew her sword with a faint ringing of steel. A cavalry sword she’d borrowed from Rogont’s armoury – simple, heavy and murderously well-sharpened. His eyes rolled down to it. ‘Ah. That.’

‘Yes. That.’

‘I suppose there comes a time when a man must truly cast prudence to one side.’ Rogont set his jaw, muscles working on the side of his head. ‘Cavalry. With me . . .’ His voice died to a throaty croak.

A loud voice to a general, Farans wrote, is worth a regiment.

Monza stood in her stirrups and screamed at the top of her lungs. ‘Form the horse!’

The duke’s staff began to screech, point, wave their swords. Mounted men drew in all around, forming up in long ranks. Harness rattled, armour clanked, lances clattered against each other, horses snorted and pawed at the ground. Men found their places, tugged their restless mounts around, cursed and bellowed, strapped on helmets and slapped down visors.

The Baolish were breaking through in earnest, boiling out of the widening gaps in Rogont’s shattered right wing like the rising tide through a wall of sand. Monza could hear their shrill war cries as they streamed up the slope, see their tattered banners waving, the glitter of metal on the move. The lines of archers above them dissolved all at once, men tossing away their bows and running for the city, mixed up with fleeing Affoians and a few Osprians who were starting to think better of the whole business. It had always amazed her how quickly an army could come apart once the panic started to spread. Like pulling out the keystone of a bridge, the whole thing, so firm and ordered one minute, could be nothing but ruins the next. They were on the brink of that moment of collapse now, she could feel it.

Monza felt a horse pull up beside her and Shivers met her eye, axe in one hand, reins and a heavy shield in the other. He hadn’t bothered with armour. Just wore the shirt with the gold thread on the cuffs. The one she’d picked

out for him. The one that Benna might have worn. It didn't seem to suit him much now. Looked like a crystal collar on a killing dog.

'Thought maybe you'd headed back North.'

'Without all that money you owe me?' His one eye shifted down into the valley. 'Never yet turned my back on a fight.'

'Good. Glad to have you.' It was true enough, at that moment. Whatever else, he had a handy habit of saving her life. She'd already looked away by the time she felt him look at her. And by that time, it was time to go.

Rogont raised his sword, and the noon sun caught the mirror-bright blade and struck flashing fire from it. Just like in the stories.

'Forward!'

Tongues clicked, heels kicked, reins snapped. Together, as if they were one animal, the great line of horsemen started to move. First at a walk, horses stirring, snorting, jerking sideways. The ranks twisted and flexed as eager men and mounts broke ahead. Officers bellowed, bringing them back into formation. Faster they moved, and faster, armour and harness clattering, and Monza's heart beat faster with them. That tingling mix of fear and joy that comes when the thinking's done and there's nothing left but to do. The Baolish had seen them, were struggling to form some kind of line. Monza could see their snarling faces in the moments when the world held still, wild-haired men in tarnished chain mail and ragged fur.

The lances of the horsemen around her began to swing down, points gleaming, and they broke into a trot. The breath hissed cold in Monza's nose, sharp in her dry throat, burned hot in her chest. Not thinking about the pain or the husk she needed for it. Not thinking about what she'd done or what she'd failed to do. Not thinking about her dead brother or the men who'd killed him. Just gripping with all her strength to her horse and to her sword. Just staying fixed on the scattering of Baolish on the slope in front of her, already wavering. They were tired out and ragged from fighting in the valley, running up the hill. And a few hundred tons of horseflesh bearing down on a man could tax his nerve at the best of times.

Their half-formed line began to crumble.

'Charge!' roared Rogont. Monza screamed with him, heard Shivers bellowing beside her, shouts and wails from every man in the line. She dug her heels in hard and her horse swerved, righted itself, sprang down the hill at a bone-cracking gallop. Hooves thudded at the ground, mud and grass

flicked and flew, Monza's teeth rattled in her head. The valley bounced and shuddered around her, the sparkling river rushed up towards her. Her eyes were full of wind, she blinked back wet, the world turned to a blurry, sparkling smear then suddenly, mercilessly sharp again. She saw the Baolish scattering, flinging down weapons as they ran. Then the cavalry were among them.

A horse ahead of the pack was impaled on a spear, shaft bending, shattering. It took spearman and rider with it, tumbling over and over down the slope, straps and harness flailing in the air.

She saw a lance take a running man in the back, rip him open from his arse to his shoulders and send the corpse reeling. The fleeing Baolish were spitted, hacked, trampled, broken.

One was flung spinning from the chest of a horse in front, chopped across the back with a sword, clattered shrieking against Monza's leg and was broken apart under the hooves of Rogont's charger.

Another dropped his spear, turning away, his face a pale blur of fear. She swung her sword down, felt the jarring impact up her arm as the heavy blade stoved his helmet deep in with a hollow clonk.

Wind rushed in her ears, hooves pounded. She was screaming still, laughing, screaming. Cut another man down as he tried to run, near taking his arm off at the shoulder and sending blood up in a black gout. Missed another with a full-blooded sweep and only just kept her saddle as she was twisted round after her sword. Righted herself just in time, clinging to the reins with her aching hand.

They were through the Baolish now, had left their torn and bloody corpses in their wake. Shattered lances were flung aside, swords were drawn. The slope levelled off as they plunged on, closer to the river, the ground spotted with Affoian bodies. The battle was a tight-packed slaughter ahead, brought out in greater detail now, more and more Talinese crossing the ford, adding their weight to the mindless press on the banks. Polearms waved and glittered, blades flashed, men struggled and strained. Over the wind and her own breath Monza could hear it, like a distant storm, metal and voices mangled together. Officers rode behind the lines, screaming vainly, trying to bring some trace of order to the madness.

A fresh Talinese regiment had started to push through the gap the Baolish had made on the far right – heavy infantry, well armoured. They'd wheeled

and were pressing at the end of the Osprian line, the men in blue straining to hold them off but sorely outnumbered now, more men coming up from the river every moment and forcing the gap wider.

Rogont, shining armour streaked with blood, turned in his saddle and pointed his sword towards them, screamed something no one could hear. It hardly mattered. There was no stopping now.

The Talinese were forming a wedge around a white battle flag, black cross twisting in the wind, an officer at the front stabbing madly at the air as he tried to get them ready to meet the charge. Monza wondered briefly whether she'd ever met him. Men knelt, a mass of glittering armour at the point of the wedge, bristling with polearms, waving and rattling further back, half still caught up with the Osprians, tangled together every which way, a thicket of blades.

Monza saw a cloud of bolts rise from the press in the ford. She winced as they flickered towards her, held her breath for no reason that made any sense. Held breath won't stop an arrow. Rattle and whisper as they showered down, clicking into turf, pinging from heavy armour, thudding into horseflesh.

A horse took a bolt in the neck, twisted, went over on its flank. Another careered into it and its rider came free of the saddle, thrashing at the air, his lance tumbling down the hillside, digging up clods of black soil. Monza wrenched her horse around the wreckage. Something rattled off her breastplate and spun up into her face. She gasped, rolling in her saddle, pain down her cheek. Arrow. The flights had scratched her. She opened her eyes to see an armoured man clutching at a bolt in his shoulder, jolting, jolting, then tumbling sideways, dragged clanking after his madly galloping horse, foot still caught in one stirrup. The rest of them plunged on, horses flowing round the fallen or over them, leaving them trampled.

She'd bitten her tongue somewhere. She spat blood, digging her spurs in again and forcing her mount on, lips curled right back, wind rushing cold at her mouth.

'We should've stuck to farming,' she whispered. The Talinese came pounding up to meet her.

*

Shivers never had understood where the eager fools came from in every battle, but there were always enough of the bastards to make a show. These ones drove their horses straight for the white flag, at the point of the wedge where the spears were well set. The front horse checked before it got there, skidded and reared, rider just clinging on. The horse behind crashed into it and sent beast and man both onto the gleaming points, blood and splinters flying. Another bucked behind, pitching its rider forwards over its head and tumbling into the muck where the front rank gratefully stabbed at him.

Calmer-headed horsemen broke to the sides, flowing round the wedge like a stream round a rock and into its softer flanks where the spears weren't set. Squealing soldiers clambered over each other as the riders bore down, fighting to be anywhere but the front, spears wobbling at all angles.

Monza went left and Shivers followed, his eye fixed on her. Up ahead a couple of horses jumped the milling front rank and into the midst, riders lashing about with swords and maces. Others crashed into the scrambling men, crushing them, trampling them, sending them spinning, screaming, begging, driving through 'em towards the river. Monza chopped some stumbling fool down as she passed and was into the press, hacking away with her sword. A spearman jabbed at her and caught her in the backplate, near tore her from the saddle.

Black Dow's words came to mind – there's no better time to kill a man than in a battle, and that goes double when he's on your own side. Shivers gave his horse the spurs and urged it up beside Monza, standing tall in his stirrups, bringing his axe up high above her head. His lips curled back. He swung it down with a roar and right into the spearman's face, burst it wide open and sent his corpse tumbling. He heaved the axe all the way over to the other side and it crashed into a shield and left a great dent in it, knocked the man who held it under the threshing hooves of the horse beside. Might've been one of Rogont's people, but it was no time to be thinking on who was who.

Kill everyone not on a horse. Kill anyone on a horse who got in his way.

Kill everyone.

He screamed his war cry, the one he'd used outside the walls of Adua, when they scared the Gurkish off with screams alone. The high wail, out of the icy North, though his voice was cracked and creaking now. He laid

about him, hardly looking what he was chopping at, axe blade clanking, banging, thudding, voices crying, blubbering, screeching.

A broken voice roared in Northern. ‘Die! Die! Back to the mud, fuckers!’ His ears were full of mindless roar and rattle. A shifting sea of jabbing weapons, squealing shields, shining metal, bone shattered, blood spattered, furious, terrified faces washing all round him, squirming and wriggling, and he hacked and chopped and split them like a mad butcher going at a carcass.

His muscles were throbbing hot, his skin was on fire to the tips of his fingers, damp with sweat in the burning sun. Forwards, always forwards, part of the pack, towards the water, leaving a bloody path of broken bodies, dead men and dead horses behind them. The battle opened up and he was through, men scattering in front of him. He spurred his horse between two of them, jolting down the bank and into the shallow river. He hacked one between the shoulders as they fled then chopped deep into the other’s neck on the backswing, sent him spinning into the water.

There were riders all round him now, splashing into the ford, hooves sending up showers of bright spray. He caught a glimpse of Monza, still ahead, horse struggling through deeper water, sword blade twinkling as it went up and cut down. The charge was spent. Lathered horses floundered in the shallows. Riders leaned down, chopping, barking, soldiers stabbed back at them with spears, cut at their legs and their mounts with swords. A horseman floundered desperately in the water, crest of his helmet skewed while men battered at him with maces, knocking him this way and that, leaving great dents in his heavy armour.

Shivers grunted as something grabbed him round the stomach, was bent back, shirt ripping. He flailed with his elbow but couldn’t get a good swing. A hand clutched at his head, fingers dug at the scarred side of his face, nails scraping at his dead eye. He roared, kicked, squirmed, tried to swing his left arm but someone had hold of that too. He let go his shield, was dragged back, off his horse and down, twisting into the shallows, rolling sideways and up onto his knees.

A young lad in a studded leather jacket was right next to him in the river, wet hair hanging round his face. He was staring down at something in his hand, something flat and glinting. Looked like an eye. The enamel that’d been in Shivers’ face until a moment before. The boy looked up, and they stared at each other. Shivers felt something beside him, ducked, wind on his

wet hair as his own shield swung past his head. He spun, axe following him in a great wide circle and thudding deep into someone's ribs, blood showering out. It bent him sideways and snatched him howling off his feet, flung him splashing down a stride or two away.

When he turned, the lad was coming at him with a knife. Shivers twisted sideways, managed to catch his forearm and hold it. They staggered, tangled together, went over, cold water clutching. The knife nicked Shivers' shoulder but he was far bigger, far stronger, rolled out on top. They wrestled and clawed, snorting in each other's faces. He let the axe shaft drop through his fist until he was gripping it right under the blade, the lad caught his wrist with his free hand, water washing around his head, but he didn't have the strength to stop it. Shivers gritted his teeth, twisted the axe until the heavy blade slid up across his neck.

'No,' whispered the boy.

The time to say no was before the battle. Shivers pushed with all his weight, growling, moaning. The lad's eyes bulged as the metal bit slowly into his throat, deeper, deeper, the red wound opening wider and wider. Blood squirted out in sticky spurts, down Shivers' arm, over his shirt, into the river and washed away. The lad trembled for a moment, red mouth wide open, then he went limp, staring at the sky.

Shivers staggered up. His rag of a shirt was trapping him, heavy with blood and water. He tore it off, hand so clumsy from gripping his shield hard as murder that he clawed hair from his chest while he did it. He stared about, blinking into the ruthless sun. Men and horses thrashed in the glittering river, blurred and smeary. He bent down and jerked his axe from the boy's half-severed neck, leather twisted round the grip finding the grooves in his palm like a key finds its lock.

He sloshed on through the water on foot, looking for more. Looking for Murcatto.

The dizzy surge of strength the charge had given her was fading fast. Monza's throat was raw from screaming, her legs were aching from gripping her horse. Her right hand was a crooked mass of pain on the reins, her sword arm burned from fingers to shoulder, the blood pounded behind her eyes. She twisted about, not sure any more which was east or west. It hardly mattered now.

In war, Verturio wrote, there are no straight lines.

There were no lines at all down in the ford, just horsemen and soldiers all tangled up into a hundred murderous, mindless little fights. You could hardly tell friend from enemy and, since no one was checking too closely, there wasn't much difference between the two. Your death could come from anywhere.

She saw the spear, but too late. Her horse shuddered as the point sank into its flank just beside her leg. Its head twisted, one eye rolling wild, foam on its bared teeth. Monza clung to the saddle-bow as it lurched sideways, spear rammed deeper, her leg hot with horse blood. She gave a helpless shriek as she went over, feet still in the stirrups, sword tumbling from her hand as she clutched at nothing. Water hit her in the side, the saddle dug her in the stomach and drove her breath out.

She was under, head full of light, bubbles rushing round her face. Cold clutched at her, and cold fear too. She thrashed her way up for a moment, out of the darkness and suddenly into the glare, the sound of battle crashing at her ears again. She gasped in a breath, shipped some water, coughed it out, gasped in another. She clawed at the saddle with her left hand, tried to drag herself free, but her leg was trapped under her horse's thrashing body.

Something cracked against her forehead and she was under for a moment, dizzy, floppy. Her lungs were burning, her arms were made of mud. Fought her way up again, but weaker this time, only far enough to snatch one breath. Blue sky reeling, shreds of white cloud, like the sky as she tumbled down from Fontezarmo.

The sun flickered at her, searing bright along with her whooping breath, then blurred and sparkling with muffled gurgles as the river washed over her face. No strength left to twist herself out of the water. Was this what Faithful's last moments had been like, drowned on the mill-wheel?

Here was justice.

A black shape blotted out the sun. Shivers, seeming ten feet tall as he stood over her. Something gleamed bright in the socket of his blinded eye. He lifted one boot slowly clear of the river, frowning hard, water trickling from the edges of the sole and into her face. For a moment she was sure he was going to plant that foot on her neck and push her under. Then it splashed down beside her. She heard him growling, straining at the corpse of her horse. She felt the weight across her leg release a little, then a little

more. She squirmed, groaned, breathed in water and coughed it out, finally dragged her leg free and floundered up.

She trembled on hands and knees, up to her elbows in the river, babbling water sparkling and flickering in front of her, drips falling from her wet hair. ‘Shit,’ she whispered, every breath shuddering in her sore ribs. ‘Shit.’ She needed a smoke.

‘They’re coming,’ came Shivers’ voice. She felt his hand rammed into her armpit, dragging her up. ‘Get a blade.’

She staggered under the weight of wet clothes and wet armour to a bobbing corpse caught on a rock. A heavy mace with a metal shaft was still hanging by its strap from his wrist, and she dragged it free with fumbling fingers, pulled a long knife from his belt.

Just in time. An armoured man was bearing down on her, planting his feet carefully, peering at her with hard little eyes over the top of his shield, sword beaded with wet sticking out sideways. She backed off a step or two, pretending to be finished. Didn’t take much pretending. As he took another step she came at him. Couldn’t have called it a spring. More of a tired half-dive, hardly able to shove her feet through the water fast enough to keep up with the rest of her body.

She swung at him mindlessly with the mace and it clanged off his shield, made her arm sing to the shoulder. She grunted, wrestled with him, stabbed at him with her knife, but it caught the side of his breastplate and scraped off harmless. The shield barged into her and sent her stumbling. She saw one swing of his sword coming and just had the presence of mind to duck it. She flailed with the mace and caught air, reeled off balance, hardly any strength left, gulping for air. His sword went up again.

She saw Shivers’ mad grin behind him, a flash as the red blade of his axe caught the sun. It split the man’s armoured shoulder down to his chest with a heavy thud, sent blood spraying in Monza’s face. She reeled away, ears full of his gargling shriek, nose full of his blood, trying to scrape her eyes clear on the back of one hand.

First thing she saw was another soldier, open helmet with a bearded face inside, stabbing with a spear. She tried to twist away but it caught her hard in the chest, point shrieked down her breastplate, sent her toppling, head snapping forwards. She was on her back in the ford and the soldier stumbled past, floundering into a crack in the river bed, sending water

showering in her eyes. She fought her way up to one knee, bloody hair tangled across her face. He turned, lifting the spear to stab at her again. She twisted round and rammed the knife between two plates of armour, into the side of his knee right to the crosspiece.

He bent down over her, eyes bulging, opened his mouth wide to scream. She snarled as she jerked the mace up and smashed it into the bottom of his jaw. His head snapped back, blood and teeth and bits of teeth flew high. He seemed to stay there for a moment, hands dangling, then she clubbed his stretched-out throat with the mace, sprawled on top of him as he fell, rolled about in the river and came up spitting.

There were men around her still, but none of them fighting. Standing or sitting in their saddles, staring about. Shivers stood watching her, axe hanging from one hand. For some reason he was stripped half-naked, his white skin dashed and spattered with red. The enamel was gone from his eye and the bright metal ball behind it gleamed in the socket with the midday sun, dewy with beads of wet.

'Victory!' She heard someone scream. Blurry, quivering, wet-eyed, she saw a man on a brown horse, in the midst of the river, standing in his stirrups, shining sword held high. 'Victory!'

She took a wobbling step towards Shivers and he dropped his scarred axe, caught her as she fell. She clung on to him, right arm around his shoulder, left dangling, still just gripping the mace, if only because she couldn't make the fingers open.

'We won,' she whispered at him, and she felt herself smiling.

'We won,' he said, squeezing her tight, half-lifting her off her feet.

'We won.'

Cosca lowered his eyeglass, blinked and rubbed his eyes, one half-blind from being shut for the best part of the hour, the other half-blind from being jammed into the eyepiece for the same period. 'Well, there we are.' He shifted uncomfortably in the captain general's chair. His trousers had become wedged in the sweaty crack of his arse and he wriggled as he tugged them free. 'God smiles on results, do you Gurkish say?'

Silence. Ishri had melted away as swiftly as she had appeared. Cosca swivelled the other way, towards Friendly. 'Quite the show, eh, Sergeant?'

The convict looked up from his dice, frowned down into the valley and said nothing. Duke Rogont's timely charge had plugged the gaping hole in his lines, crushed the Baolish, driven deep into the Talinese ranks and left them broken. Not at all what the Duke of Delay was known for. In fact, Cosca was oddly pleased to perceive the audacious hand, or perhaps the fist, of Monzcarro Murcatto all over it.

The Osprian infantry, the threat on their right wing extinguished, had blocked off the eastern bank of the lower ford entirely. Their new Sipanese allies had well and truly joined the fray, won a brief engagement with Foscar's surprised rearguard and were close to sealing off the western bank. A good half of Orso's army – or of those that were not now scattered dead on the slopes, on the banks downstream or floating face-down out to sea – were trapped hopelessly in the shallows between the two, and were laying down their arms. The other half were fleeing, dark specks scattered across the green slopes on the valley's western side. The very slopes down which they had so proudly marched but a few short hours ago, confident of victory. Sipanese cavalry moved in clumps around their edges, armour gleaming in the fierce noon sun, rounding up the survivors.

'All done now, though, eh, Victus?'

'Looks that way.'

'Everyone's favourite part of a battle. The rout.' Unless you were in it, of course. Cosca watched the tiny figures spilling from the fords, spreading out across the trampled grass, and had to shake off a sweaty shiver at the memory of Afieri. He forced the carefree grin to stay on his face. 'Nothing like a good rout, eh, Sesaria?'

'Who'd have thought it?' The big man slowly shook his head. 'Rogont won.'

'Grand Duke Rogont would appear to be a most unpredictable and resourceful gentleman.' Cosca yawned, stretched, smacked his lips. 'One after my own heart. I look forward to having him as an employer. Probably we should help with the mopping up.' The searching of the dead. 'Prisoners to be taken and ransomed.' Or murdered and robbed, depending on social station. 'Unguarded baggage that should be confiscated, lest it spoil in the open air.' Lest it be plundered or burned before they could get their gauntlets on it.

Victus split a toothy grin. ‘I’ll make arrangements to bring it all in from the cold.’

‘Do so, brave Captain Victus, do so. I declare the sun is on its way back down and it is past time the men were on the move. I would be ashamed if, in after times, the poets said the Thousand Swords were at the Battle of Ospria . . . and did nothing.’ Cosca smiled wide, and this time with feeling. ‘Lunch, perhaps?’

To the Victors . . .

Black Dow used to say the only thing better'n a battle was a battle then a fuck, and Shivers couldn't say he disagreed. Seemed she didn't either. She was waiting there for him, after all, when he stalked into the darkened room, bare as a baby, stretched out on the bed, her hands behind her head and one long, smooth leg pointing out towards him.

'What kept you?' she asked, rocking her hips from one side to the other.

Time was he'd reckoned himself a quick thinker but the only thing moving fast right then was his cock. 'I was . . .' He was having trouble thinking much beyond the patch of dark hair between her legs, his anger all leaked away like beer from a broken jar. 'I was . . . well . . .' He kicked the door shut and walked slowly to her. 'Don't matter much, does it?'

'Not much.' She slipped off the bed, started undoing his borrowed shirt, going about it as if it was something they'd arranged.

'Can't say I was expecting . . . this.' He reached out, almost scared to touch her in case he found he was dreaming it. Ran his fingertips down her bare arms, skin rough with gooseflesh. 'Not after last time we spoke.'

She pushed her fingers into his hair and pulled his head down towards her, breath on his face. She kissed his neck, then his chin, then his mouth. 'Shall I go?' She sucked gently at his lips again.

'Fuck, no,' his voice hardly more'n a croak.

She had his belt open now, dug inside and pulled his cock free, started working at it with one hand while his trousers sagged slowly down, catching on his knees, belt buckle scraping on the floor.

Her lips were cool on his chest, on his stomach, her tongue tickled his belly. Her hand slid under his fruits, cold and ticklish and he squirmed, gave a womanly kind of a squeak. He heard a quiet slurp as she wrapped her lips around him and he stood there, bent over some, knees weak and trembling and his mouth hanging open. Her head started bobbing slowly in and out, and he moved his hips in time without thinking, grunting to himself like a pig got the swill.

*

Monza wiped her mouth on the back of her arm, squirmed her way onto the bed, pulling him after, kissing at her neck, at her breastbone, nipping at her chest, growling to himself like a dog got the bone.

She brought her knee up and flipped him over onto his back. He frowned, left side of his face all in darkness, right side full of shadows from the shifting lamplight, running his fingertips gently along the scars on her ribs. She slapped his hand away. 'Told you. I fell down a mountain. Get your trousers off.'

He wriggled eagerly free of them, got them tangled around his ankles. 'Shit, damn, bastard—Ah!' He finally kicked them off and she shoved him down onto his back, clambered on top of him, one of his hands sliding up her thigh, wet fingers working between her legs. She stayed there a while, crouched over him, growling in his face and feeling his breath coming quick back at her, grinding her hips against his hand, feeling his prick rubbing up against the inside of her thigh—

'Ah, wait!' He wriggled away, sitting up, winced as he fiddled with the skin at the end of his cock. 'Got it. Go!'

'I'll tell you when to go.' She worked her way forwards on her knees, finding the spot and then nudging her cunt against him softly, gently, not in and not out, halfway between.

'Oh.' He wriggled his way up onto his elbows, straining vainly up against her.

'Ah.' She leaned down over him, her hair tickling his face, and he smiled, snapped his teeth at it.

'Oh-urgh.' She pushed her thumb into his mouth, dragged his head sideways and he sucked at it, bit at it, catching her wrist, licking at her hand, then her chin, then her tongue.

'Ah.' She started to push down on him, smiling herself, grunting in her throat and him grunting back at her.

'Oh.'

She had the root of his cock in one hand, rubbing herself against the end of it, not in and not out, always halfway between. She had the other round the

back of Shivers' head, holding his face against her tits while he gathered them up, squeezed them, bit at them.

Her fingers worked under his jaw, thumb-tip sliding ever so gently onto his ruined cheek, tickling, teasing, scratching. He felt a sudden stab of fury, snatched hold of her wrist, hard, twisted it round, twisted her off him and onto her knees, twisted her arm behind her, face pushed down into the sheet, making her gasp.

He was grunting something in Northern and even he didn't know what. He felt a burning need to hurt her. Hurt himself. He tangled his free hand in her hair and shoved her head hard against the wall, growling and whimpering at her from behind while she groaned, gasped, mouth wide open, hair across her face fluttering with her breath. He still had her arm twisted behind her and her hand curled round, gripping his wrist hard while he gripped hers, dragging him down over her.

Uh, uh, their mindless grunting. Creak, creak, the bed moaning along with them. Squelch, squelch, his skin slapping hard against her arse.

Monza worked her hips against him a few more times, and with each one he gave a little hoot, head back, veins standing from his stretched-out neck. With each one she gave a snarl through gritted teeth, muscles all clenched aching tight, then slowly going soft. She stayed there for a moment, hunched over, limp as wet leaves, hard breath catching in the back of her throat. She winced and he shivered as she ground herself against him one last time. Then she slid off, gathered up a handful of sheet and wiped herself on it.

He lay there on his back, sweaty chest rising and falling fast, arms spread out wide, staring at the gilded ceiling. 'So this is what victory feels like. If I'd known I'd have taken some gambles sooner.'

'No, you wouldn't. You're the Duke of Delay, remember?'

He peered down at his wet cock, nudged it to one side, then the other. 'Well, some things it's best to take your time with . . .'

Shivers prised his fingers open, scuffed, scabbed, scratched and clicking from gripping his axe all the long day. They left white marks across her wrist, turning slowly pink. He rocked back on his haunches, body sagging,

aching muscles loose, heaving in air. His lust all spent and his rage spent with it. For now.

Her necklace of red stones rattled as she rolled over towards him. Onto her back, tits flattened against her ribs, the knobbles of her hip bones sticking sharp from her stomach, of her collarbones sticking sharp from her shoulders. She winced, working her hand around, rubbing at her wrist.

'Didn't mean to hurt you,' he grunted, lying badly, and not much caring either.

'Oh, I'm nothing like that delicate. And you can call me Carlot.' She reached up and brushed his lips gently with a fingertip. 'I think we know each other well enough for that . . .'

Monza clambered off the bed and walked to the desk, legs weak and aching, feet flapping against the cool marble. The husk lay on it, beside the lamp. The knife blade gleamed, the polished stem of the pipe shone. She sat down in front of it. Yesterday she wouldn't have been able to keep her trembling hands away from it. Today, even with a legion of fresh aches, cuts, grazes from the battle, it didn't call to her half so loud. She held her left hand up, knuckles starting to scab over, and frowned at it. It was firm.

'I never really thought I could do it,' she muttered.

'Eh?'

'Beat Orso. I thought I might get three of them. Four, maybe, before they killed me. Never thought I'd live this long. Never thought I could actually do it.'

'And now one would say the odds favour you. How quickly hope can flicker into life once more.' Rogont drew himself up before the mirror. A tall one, crusted with coloured flowers of Visserine glass. She could hardly believe, watching him pose, that she'd once been every bit as vain. The hours she'd wasted preening before the mirror. The fortunes she and Benna had spent on clothes. A fall down a mountain, a body scarred, a hand ruined and six months living like a hunted dog seemed to have cured her of that, at least. Perhaps she should've suggested the same remedy to Rogont.

The duke lifted his chin in a regal gesture, chest inflated. He frowned, sagged, pressed at a long scratch just below his collarbone. 'Damn it.'

'Nick yourself on your nail-file, did you?'

‘A savage sword-cut like this could easily have been the death of a lesser man, I’ll have you know! But I braved it, without complaint, and fought on like a tiger, blood streaming, streaming I say, down my armour! I am beginning to suspect it could even leave a mark.’

‘No doubt you’ll wear it with massive pride. You could have a hole cut in all your shirts to display it to the public.’

‘If I didn’t know better I’d suspect I was being mocked. You do realise, if things unfold according to my plans – and they have so far, I might observe – you will soon be directing your sarcasm at the King of Styria. I have already, in fact, commissioned my crown, from Zoben Casoum, the world-famous master jeweller of Corontiz—’

‘Cast from Gurkish gold, no doubt.’

Rogont paused for a moment, frowning. ‘The world is not as simple as you think, General Murcatto. A great war rages.’

She snorted. ‘You think I missed that? These are the Years of Blood.’

He snorted back. ‘The Years of Blood are only the latest skirmish. This war began long before you or I were born. A struggle between the Gurkish and the Union. Or between the forces that control them, at least, the church of Gurkhul and the banks of the Union. Their battlefields are everywhere, and every man must pick his side. The middle ground contains only corpses. Orso stands with the Union. Orso has the backing of the banks. And so I have my . . . backers. Every man must kneel to someone.’

‘Perhaps you didn’t notice. I’m not a man.’

Rogont’s smile broke out again. ‘Oh, I noticed. It was the second thing that attracted me to you.’

‘The first?’

‘You can help me unite Styria.’

‘And why should I?’

‘A united Styria . . . she could be as great as the Union, as great as the Empire of Gurkhul. Greater, even! She could free herself from their struggle, and stand alone. Free. We have never been closer! Nicante and Puranti fall over themselves to re-enter my good graces. Affoia never left them. Sotorius is my man, with certain trifling concessions to Sipani, no more than a few islands and the city of Borletta—’

‘And what do the citizens of Borletta have to say to it?’

‘Whatever I tell them to say. They are a changeable crowd, as you discovered when they scrambled to offer you their beloved Duke Cantain’s head. Muris bowed to Sipani long ago, and Sipani now bows to me, in name at least. The power of Visserine is broken. As for Musselia, Etrea and Caprile, well. You and Orso between you, I suspect, have quite crushed their independent temper out of them.’

‘Westport?’

‘Details, details. Part of the Union or of Kanta, depending on who you ask. No, it is Talins that concerns us now. Talins is the key in the lock, the hub of the wheel, the missing piece in my majestic jigsaw.’

‘You love to listen to your own voice, don’t you?’

‘I find it talks a lot of good sense. Orso’s army is scattered, and with it his power is vanished, like smoke on the wind. He has ever resorted first to the sword, as certain others are wont to do, in fact . . .’ He raised his brows significantly at her, and she waved him on. ‘He finds, now his sword is broken, that he has no friends to sustain him. But it will not be enough to destroy Orso. I need someone to replace him, someone to guide the troublesome citizens of Talins into my gracious fold.’

‘Let me know when you find the right shepherd.’

‘Oh, I already have. Someone of skill, cunning, matchless resilience and fearsome reputation. Someone loved in Talins far more than Orso himself. Someone he tried to kill, in fact . . . for stealing his throne . . .’

She narrowed her eyes at him. ‘I didn’t want his throne then. I don’t want it now.’

‘But since it is there for the taking . . . what comes once you have your revenge? You deserve to be remembered. You deserve to shape the age.’ Benna would have said so, and Monza had to admit that part of her was enjoying the flattery. Enjoying being so close to power again. She’d been used to both, and it had been a long time since she’d had a taste of either. ‘Besides, what better revenge could you have than making Orso’s greatest fear come to pass?’ That struck a fine note with her, and Rogont gave her a sly grin to show he knew it. ‘Let me be honest. I need you.’

‘Let me be honest. I need you.’ That rested easily on Shivers’ pride, and she gave him a sly smile to show she knew it. ‘I scarcely have a friend left in all the wide Circle of the World.’

‘Seems you’ve a knack for making new ones.’

‘It’s harder than you’d think. To be always the outsider.’ He didn’t need to be told that after the few months he’d had. She didn’t lie, from what he could tell, just led the truth by the nose whichever way it suited her. ‘And sometimes it can be hard to tell your friends from your enemies.’

‘True enough.’ He didn’t need to be told that either.

‘I daresay where you come from loyalty is considered a noble quality. Down here in Styria, a man has to bend with the wind.’ Hard to believe anyone who smiled so sweetly could have anything dark in mind. But everything was dark to him now. Everything had a knife hidden in it. ‘Your friends and mine General Murcatto and Grand Duke Rogont, for example.’ Carlot’s two eyes drifted up to his one. ‘I wonder what they’re about, right now?’

‘Fucking!’ he barked at her, the fury boiling out of him so sharp she flinched away, like she was expecting him to smash her head into the wall. Maybe he nearly did. That or smash his own. But her face soon smoothed out and she smiled some more, like murderous rage was her favourite quality in a man.

‘The Snake of Talins and the Worm of Ospria, all stickily entwined together. Well matched, that treacherous pair. Styria’s greatest liar and Styria’s greatest murderer.’ She gently traced the scar on his chest with one fingertip. ‘What comes once she has her revenge? Once Rogont has raised her up and dangled her like a child’s toy for the people of Talins to stare at? Will you have a place when the Years of Blood are finally ended? When the war is over?’

‘I don’t have a place anywhere without a war. That much I’ve proved.’

‘Then I fear for you.’

Shivers snorted. ‘I’m lucky to have you watching my back.’

‘I wish I could do more. But you know how the Butcher of Caprile solves her problems, and Duke Rogont has scant regard for honest men . . .’

‘I have nothing but the highest regard for honest men, but fighting stripped to the waist? It’s so . . .’ Rogont grimaced as though he’d tasted off milk. ‘Cliché. You wouldn’t catch me doing it.’

‘What, fighting?’

‘How dare you, woman, I am Stolicus reborn! You know what I mean. Your Northern accomplice, with the . . .’ Rogont waved a lazy hand at the left side of his face. ‘Eye. Or lack thereof.’

‘Jealous, already?’ she muttered, sick at even coming near the subject.

‘A little. But it’s his jealousy that concerns me. This is a man much prone to violence.’

‘It’s what I took him on for.’

‘Perhaps the time has come to lay him off. Mad dogs savage their owner more often than their owner’s enemies.’

‘And their owner’s lovers first of all.’

Rogont nervously cleared his throat. ‘We certainly would not want that. He seems firmly attached to you. When a barnacle is firmly attached to the hull of a ship, it is sometimes necessary to remove it with a sudden, unexpected and . . . decisive force.’

‘No!’ Her voice stabbed out far sharper than she’d had in mind. ‘No. He’s saved my life. More than once, and risked his life to do it. Just yesterday he did it, and today have him killed? No. I owe him.’ She remembered the smell as Langrier pushed the brand into his face, and she flinched. It should’ve been you. ‘No! I’ll not have him touched.’

‘Think about it.’ Rogont padded slowly towards her. ‘I understand your reluctance, but you must see it’s the safe thing to do.’

‘The prudent thing?’ she sneered at him. ‘I’m warning you. Leave him be.’

‘Monzcarro, please understand, it’s your safety I’m—Oooof!’ She sprang up from the chair, kicking his foot away, caught his arm as he lurched onto his knees and twisted his wrist behind his shoulder blade, forced him down until she was squatting over his back, his face squashed against the cool marble.

‘Didn’t you hear me say no? If it’s sudden, unexpected and decisive force I want . . .’ She twisted his hand a little further and he squeaked, struggled helplessly. ‘I can manage it myself.’

‘Yes! Ah! Yes! I quite clearly see that!’

‘Good. Don’t bring him up again.’ She let go of his wrist and he lay there for a moment, breathing hard. He wriggled onto his back, rubbing gently at his hand, looking up with a hurt frown as she straddled his stomach.

‘You didn’t have to do that.’

‘Maybe I enjoyed doing it.’ She looked over her shoulder. His cock was half-hard, nudging at the back of her leg. ‘I’m not sure you didn’t.’

‘Now that you mention it . . . I must confess I rather relish being looked down on by a strong woman.’ He brushed her knees with his fingertips, ran his hands slowly up the insides of her scarred thighs to the top, and then gently back down. ‘I don’t suppose . . . you could be persuaded . . . to piss on me, at all?’

Monza frowned. ‘I don’t need to go.’

‘Perhaps . . . some water, then? And afterwards—’

‘I think I’ll stick to the pot.’

‘Such a waste. The pot will not appreciate it.’

‘Once it’s full you can do what you like with it, how’s that?’

‘Ugh. Not at all the same thing.’

Monza slowly shook her head as she stepped off him. ‘A pretend grand duchess, pissing on a would-be king. You couldn’t make it up.’

‘Enough.’ Shivers was covered with bruises, grazes, scratches. A bastard of a gash across his back, just where it was hardest to scratch. Now his cock was going soft they were all niggling at him again in the sticky heat, stripping his patience. He was sick of talking round and round it, when it was lying between ’em, plain as a rotting corpse in the bed. ‘You want Murcatto dead, you can out and say it.’

She paused, mouth half-open. ‘You’re surprisingly blunt.’

‘No, I’m about as blunt as you’d expect for a one-eyed killer. Why?’

‘Why what?’

‘Why do you need her dead so bad? I’m an idiot, but not that big an idiot. I don’t reckon a woman like you is drawn to my pretty face. Nor my sense of humour neither. Maybe you want yourself some revenge for what we did to you in Sipani. Everyone likes revenge. But that’s just part of it.’

‘No small part . . .’ She let one fingertip trail slowly up his leg. ‘As far as being drawn to you, I was always more interested in honest men than pretty faces, but I wonder . . . can I trust you?’

‘No. If you could I wouldn’t be much suited to the task, would I?’ He caught hold of her trailing finger and twisted it towards him, dragged her wincing face close. ‘What’s in it for you?’

‘Ah! There’s a man in the Union! The man I work for, the one who sent me to Styria in the first place, to spy on Orso!’

‘The Cripple?’ Vitari had said the name. The man who stood behind the King of the Union.

‘Yes! Ah! Ah!’ She squealed as he twisted her finger further, then he let it go and she snatched it back, holding it to her chest, bottom lip stuck out at him. ‘You didn’t have to do that.’

‘Maybe I enjoyed doing it. Go on.’

‘When Murcatto made me betray Orso . . . she made me betray the Cripple too. Orso I can live with as an enemy, if I must—’

‘But not this Cripple?’

She swallowed. ‘No. Not him.’

‘A worse enemy than the great Duke Orso, eh?’

‘Far worse. Murcatto is his price. She threatens to rip apart all his carefully woven plans to bring Talins into the Union. He wants her dead.’ The smooth mask had slipped and she had this look, shoulders slumped, staring down wide-eyed at the sheet. Hungry, and sick, and very, very scared. Shivers liked seeing it. Might’ve been the first honest look he’d seen since he landed in Styria. ‘If I can find a way to kill her, I get my life,’ she whispered.

‘And I’m your way.’

She looked back up at him, and her eyes were hard. ‘Can you do it?’

‘I could’ve done it today.’ He’d thought of splitting her head with his axe. He’d thought of planting his boot on her face and shoving her under the water. Then she’d have had to respect him. But instead he’d saved her. Because he’d been hoping. Maybe he still was . . . but hoping had made a fool of him. And Shivers was good and sick of looking the fool.

How many men had he killed? In all those battles, skirmishes, desperate fights up in the North? Just in the half-year since he came to Styria, even? At Cardotti’s, in the smoke and the madness? Among the statues in Duke Salier’s palace? In the battle just a few hours back? It might’ve been a score. More. And women among ’em. He was steeped in blood, deep as the Bloody-Nine himself. Didn’t seem likely that adding one more to the tally would cost him a place among the righteous. His mouth twisted.

‘I could do it.’ It was plain as the scar on his face that Monza cared nothing for him. Why should he care anything for her? ‘I could do it easily.’

‘Then do it.’ She crept forwards on her hands and knees, mouth half-open, pale tits hanging heavy, looking him right in his one eye. ‘For me.’ Her nipples brushed against his chest, one way then the other as she crawled over him. ‘For you.’ Her necklace of blood-red stones clicked gently against his chin. ‘For us.’

‘I’ll need to pick my moment.’ He slid his hand down her back and up onto her arse. ‘Caution first, eh?’

‘Of course. Nothing done well is ever . . . rushed.’

His head was full of her scent, sweet smell of flowers mixed with the sharp smell of fucking. ‘She owes me money,’ he growled, the last objection.

‘Ah, money. I used to be a merchant, you know. Buying. Selling.’ Her breath was hot on his neck, on his mouth, on his face. ‘And in my long experience, when people begin to talk prices, the deal is already done.’ She nuzzled at him, lips brushing the mass of scar down his cheek. ‘Do this thing for me, and I promise you’ll get all you could ever spend.’ The cool tip of her tongue lapped gently at the raw flesh round his metal eye, sweet and soothing. ‘I have an arrangement . . . with the Banking House . . . of Valint and Balk . . .’

So Much for Nothing

Silver gleamed in the sunlight with that special, mouth-watering twinkle that somehow only money has. A whole strongbox full of it, stacked in plain sight, drawing the eyes of every man in the camp more surely than if a naked countess had been sprawled suggestively upon the table. Piles of sparking, sparkling coins, freshly minted. Some of the cleanest currency in Styria, pressed into some of its grubbiest hands. A pleasing irony. The coins carried the scales on one side, of course, traditional symbol of Styrian commerce since the time of the New Empire. On the other, the stern profile of Grand Duke Orso of Talins. An even more pleasing irony, to Cosca's mind, that he was paying the men of the Thousand Swords with the face of the man they had but lately betrayed.

In a pocked and spattered, squinting and scratching, coughing and slovenly line the soldiers and staff of the first company of the first regiment of the Thousand Swords passed by the makeshift table to receive their unjust deserts. They were closely supervised by the chief notary of the brigade and a dozen of its most reliable veterans, which was just as well, because during the course of the morning Cosca had witnessed every dispiriting trick imaginable.

Men approached the table on multiple occasions in different clothes, giving false names or those of dead comrades. They routinely exaggerated, embellished or flat-out lied in regards to rank or length of service. They wept for sick mothers, children or acquaintances. They delivered a devastating volley of complaints about food, drink, equipment, runny shits, superiors, the smell of other men, the weather, items stolen, injuries suffered, injuries given, perceived slights on non-existent honour and on, and on, and on. Had they demonstrated the same audacity and persistence in combat that they did in trying to prise the slightest dishonest pittance from their commander they would have been the greatest fighting force of all time.

But First Sergeant Friendly was watching. He had worked for years in the kitchens of Safety, where dozens of the world's most infamous swindlers vied daily with each other for enough bread to survive, and so he knew

every low trick, con and stratagem practised this side of hell. There was no sliding around his basilisk gaze. The convict did not permit a single shining portrait of Duke Orso to be administered out of turn.

Cosca shook his head in deep dismay as he watched the last man trudge away, the unbearable limp for which he had demanded compensation miraculously healed. 'By the Fates, you would have thought they'd be glad of the bonus! It isn't as if they had to fight for it! Or even steal it themselves! I swear, the more you give a man, the more he demands, and the less happy he becomes. No one ever appreciates what he gets for nothing. A pox on charity!' He slapped the notary on the shoulder, causing him to scrawl an untidy line across his carefully kept page.

'Mercenaries aren't all they used to be,' grumbled the man as he sourly blotted it.

'No? To my eye they seem very much as violent-tempered and mean-spirited as ever. "Things aren't what they used to be" is the rallying cry of small minds. When men say things used to be better, they invariably mean they were better for them, because they were young, and had all their hopes intact. The world is bound to look a darker place as you slide into the grave.'

'So everything stays the same?' asked the notary, looking sadly up.

'Some men get better, some get worse.' Cosca heaved a weighty sigh. 'But on the grand scale, I have observed no significant changes. How many of our heroes have we paid now?'

'That's all of Squire's company, of Andiche's regiment. Well, Andiche's regiment that was.'

Cosca put a hand over his eyes. 'Please, don't speak of that brave heart. His loss still stabs at me. How many have we paid?'

The notary licked his fingers, flipped over a couple of crackling leaves of his ledger, started counting the entries. 'One, two, three—'

'Four hundred and four,' said Friendly.

'And how many persons in the Thousand Swords?'

The notary winced. 'Counting all ancillaries, servants and tradesmen?'

'Absolutely.'

'Whores too?'

'Counting them first, they're the hardest workers in the whole damned brigade!'

The lawyer squinted skywards. ‘Er . . .’

‘Twelve thousand, eight-hundred and nineteen,’ said Friendly.

Cosca stared at him. ‘I’ve heard it said a good sergeant is worth three generals, but you may well be worth three dozen, my friend! Thirteen thousand, though? We’ll be here tomorrow night still!’

‘Very likely,’ grumbled the notary, flipping over the page. ‘Crapstane’s company of Andiche’s regiment will be next. Andiche’s regiment . . . as was . . . that is.’

‘Meh.’ Cosca unscrewed the cap of the flask Morveer had thrown at him in Sipani, raised it to his lips, shook it and realised it was empty. He frowned at the battered metal bottle, remembering with some discomfort the poisoner’s sneering assertion that a man never changes. So much discomfort, in fact, that his need for a drink was sharply increased. ‘A brief interlude, while I obtain a refill. Get Crapstane’s company lined up.’ He stood, grimacing as his aching knees crunched into life, then cracked a smile. A large man was walking steadily towards him through the mud, smoke, canvas and confusion of the camp.

‘Why, Master Shivers, from the cold and bloody North!’ The Northman had evidently given up on fine dressing, wearing a leather jack and rough-spun shirt with sleeves rolled to the elbows. His hair, neat as any Musselian dandy’s when Cosca first laid eyes upon the man, had grown back to an unkempt tangle, heavy jaw fuzzed with a growth between beard and stubble. None of it did anything to disguise the mass of scar covering one side of his face. It would take more than hair to hide that. ‘My old partner in adventure!’ Or murder, as was in fact the case. ‘You have a twinkle in your eye.’ Literally he did, for bright metal in the Northman’s empty socket was catching the noon sun and shining with almost painful brightness. ‘You look well, my friend, most well!’ Though he looked, in fact, a mutilated savage.

‘Happy face, happy heart.’ The Northman showed a lopsided smile, burned flesh shifting only by the smallest margin.

‘Quite so. Have a smile for breakfast, you’ll be shitting joy by lunch. Were you in the battle?’

‘That I was.’

‘I thought as much. You have never struck me as a man afraid to roll up his sleeves. Bloody, was it?’

‘That it was.’

‘Some men thrive on blood, though, eh? I daresay you’ve known a few who were that way.’

‘That I have.’

‘And where is your employer, my infamous pupil, replacement and predecessor, General Murcatto?’

‘Behind you,’ came a sharp voice.

He spun about. ‘God’s teeth, woman, but you haven’t lost the knack of creeping up on a man!’ He pretended at shock to smother the sentimental welling-up that always accompanied her appearance, and threatened to make his voice crack with emotion. She had a long scratch down one cheek, some bruising on her face, but otherwise looked well. Very well. ‘My joy to see you alive knows no bounds, of course.’ He swept off his hat, feather drooping apologetically, and kneeled in the dirt in front of her. ‘Say you forgive me my theatrics. You see now I was thinking only of you all along. My fondness for you is undiminished.’

She snorted at that. ‘Fondness, eh?’ More than she could ever know, or he would ever tell her. ‘So this pantomime was for my benefit? I may swoon with gratitude.’

‘One of your most endearing features was always your readiness to swoon.’ He cranked himself back up to standing. ‘A consequence of your sensitive, womanly heart, I suppose. Walk with me, I have something to show you.’ He led her off through the trees towards the farmhouse, its whitewashed walls gleaming in the midday sun, Friendly and Shivers trailing them like bad memories. ‘I must confess that, as well as doing you a favour, and the sore temptation of placing my boot in Orso’s arse at long last, there were some trifling issues of personal gain to consider.’

‘Some things never change.’

‘Nothing ever does, and why should it? A considerable quantity of Gurkish gold was on offer. Well, you know it was, you were the first to offer it. Oh, and Rogont was kind enough to promise me, in the now highly likely event that he is crowned King of Styria, the Grand Duchy of Visserine.’

He was deeply satisfied by her gasp of surprise. ‘You? Grand fucking Duke of Visserine?’

‘I probably won’t use the word fucking on my decrees, but otherwise, correct. Grand Duke Nicomo sounds rather well, no? After all, Salier is

dead.'

'That much I know.'

'He had no heirs, not even distant ones. The city was plundered, devastated by fire, its government collapsed, much of the populace fled, killed or otherwise taken advantage of. Visserine is in need of a strong and selfless leader to restore her to her glories.'

'And instead they'll have you.'

He allowed himself a chuckle. 'But who better suited? Am I not a native of Visserine?'

'A lot of people are. You don't see them helping themselves to its dukedom.'

'Well, there's only one, and it's mine.'

'Why do you even want it? Commitments? Responsibilities? I thought you hated all that.'

'I always thought so, but my wandering star led me only to the gutter. I have not had a productive life, Monzcarro.'

'You don't say.'

'I have frittered my gifts away on nothing. Self-pity and self-hatred have led me by unsavoury paths to self-neglect, self-injury and the very brink of self-destruction. The unifying theme?'

'Yourself?'

'Precisely so. Vanity, Monza. Self-obsession. The mark of infancy. I need, for my own sake and those of my fellow men, to be an adult. To turn my talents outwards. It is just as you always tried to tell me – the time comes when a man has to stick. What better way than to commit myself wholeheartedly to the service of the city of my birth?'

'Your wholehearted commitment. Alas for the poor city of Visserine.'

'They'll do better than they did with that art-thieving gourmand.'

'Now they'll have an all-thieving drunk.'

'You misjudge me, Monzcarro. A man can change.'

'I thought you just said nothing ever does?'

'Changed my mind. And why not? In one day I bagged myself a fortune, and one of the richest dukedoms in Styria too.'

She shook her head in combined disgust and amazement. 'And all you did was sit here.'

‘Therein lies the real trick. Anyone can earn rewards.’ Cosca tipped his head back, smiled up at the black branches and the blue sky beyond them. ‘Do you know, I think it highly unlikely that ever in history has one man gained so much for doing absolutely nothing. But I am hardly the only one to profit from yesterday’s exploits. Grand Duke Rogont, I daresay, is happy with the outcome. And you are a great stride nearer to your grand revenge, are you not?’ He leaned close to her. ‘Speaking of which, I have a gift for you.’

She frowned at him, ever suspicious. ‘What gift?’

‘I would hate to spoil the surprise. Sergeant Friendly, could you take your ex-employer and her Northern companion into the house, and show her what we found yesterday? For her to do with as she pleases, of course.’ He turned away with a smirk. ‘We’re all friends now!’

‘In here.’ Friendly pushed the low door creaking open. Monza gave Shivers a look. He shrugged back. She ducked under the lintel and into a dim room, cool after the sun outside, with a ceiling of vaulted brick and patches of light across a dusty stone floor. As her eyes adjusted to the gloom she saw a figure wedged into the furthest corner. He shuffled forwards, chain between his ankles rattling faintly, and criss-cross shadows from the grubby window panes fell across one half of his face.

Prince Foscar, Duke Orso’s younger son. Monza felt her whole body stiffen.

It seemed he’d finally grown up since she last saw him, running from his father’s hall in Fontezarmo, wailing that he wanted no part in her murder. He’d lost the fluff on his top lip, gained a bloom of bruises ringing one eye and swapped the apologetic look for a fearful one. He stared at Shivers, then at Friendly as they stepped through into the room behind her. Not two men to give a prisoner hope, on the whole. He met Monza’s eye, finally, reluctantly, with the haunted look of a man who knows what’s coming.

‘It’s true then,’ he whispered. ‘You’re alive.’

‘Unlike your brother. I stabbed him through his throat then threw him out of the window.’ The sharp knobble in Foscar’s neck bobbed up and down as he swallowed. ‘I had Mauthis poisoned. Ganmark run through with a ton of bronze. Faithful’s stabbed, slashed, drowned and hung from a waterwheel. Still turning on it, for all I know. Gobba was lucky. I only smashed his

hands, and his knees, and his skull to bonemeal with a hammer.' The list gave her grim nausea rather than grim satisfaction, but she forced her way through it. 'Of the seven men who were in that room when they murdered Benna, there's just your father left.' She slid the Calvez from its sheath, the gentle scraping of the blade as ugly as a child's scream. 'Your father . . . and you.'

The room was close, stale. Friendly's face was empty as a corpse's. Shivers leaned back against the wall beside her, arms folded, grinning.

'I understand.' Foscar came closer. Small, unwilling steps, but towards her still. He stopped no more than a stride away, and sank to his knees. Awkwardly, since his hands were tied behind him. The whole time his eyes were on hers. 'I'm sorry.'

'You're fucking sorry?' she squeezed through gritted teeth.

'I didn't know what was going to happen! I loved Benna!' His lip trembled, a tear ran down the side of his face. Fear, or guilt, or both. 'Your brother was like . . . a brother to me. I would never have wanted . . . that, for either of you. I'm sorry . . . for my part in it.' He'd had no part in it. She knew that. 'I just . . . I want to live!'

'So did Benna.'

'Please.' More tears trickled, leaving glistening trails down his cheeks. 'I just want to live.'

Her stomach churned, acid burning her throat and washing up into her watering mouth. Do it. She'd come all this way to do it, suffered all this and made all those others suffer just so she could do it. Her brother would have had no doubts, not then. She could almost hear his voice.

Do what you have to. Conscience is an excuse. Mercy and cowardice are the same.

It was time to do it. He had to die.

Do it now.

But her stiff arm seemed to weigh a thousand tons. She stared at Foscar's ashen face. His big, wide, helpless eyes. Something about him reminded her of Benna. When he was young. Before Caprile, before Sweet Pines, before they betrayed Cosca, before they joined up with the Thousand Swords, even. When she'd wanted just to make things grow. Long ago, that boy laughing in the wheat.

The point of the Calvez wobbled, dropped, tapped against the floor.

Foscar took a long, shuddering breath, closed his eyes, then opened them again, wet glistening in the corners. ‘Thank you. I always knew you had a heart . . . whatever they said. Thank—’

Shivers’ big fist crunched into his face and knocked him on his back, blood bubbling from his broken nose. He got out a shocked splutter before the Northman was on top of him, hands closing tight around his throat.

‘You want to fucking live, eh?’ hissed Shivers, teeth bared in a snarling grin, the sinews squirming in his forearms as he squeezed tighter and tighter. Foscar kicked helplessly, struggled silently, twisted his shoulders, face turning pink, then red, then purple. Shivers dragged up Foscar’s head with both his hands, lifted it towards him, close enough to kiss, almost, then rammed it down against the stone flags with a sharp crack. Foscar’s boots jerked, the chain between them rattling. Shivers worked his head to one side then the other as he shifted his hands around Foscar’s neck for a better grip, tendons standing stark from their scabbed backs. He dragged him up again, no hurry, and rammed his head back down with a dull crunch. Foscar’s tongue lolled out, one eyelid flickering, black blood creeping down from his hairline.

Shivers growled something in Northern, words she couldn’t understand, lifted Foscar’s head, smashed it down with all the care of a stonemason getting the details right. Again, and again. Monza watched, her mouth half-open, still holding weakly onto her sword, doing nothing. Not sure what she could do, or should do. Whether to stop him or help him. Blood dashed the rendered walls and the stone flags in spots and spatters. Over the pop and crackle of shattering bone she could hear a voice. Benna’s voice, she thought for a minute, still whispering at her to do it. Then she realised it was Friendly, calmly counting the number of times Foscar’s skull had been smashed into the stones. He got up to eleven.

Shivers lifted the prince’s mangled head once more, hair all matted glistening black, then he blinked, and let it drop.

‘Reckon that’s got it.’ He came slowly up to standing, one boot planted on either side of Foscar’s corpse. ‘Heh.’ He looked at his hands, looked around for something to wipe them on, ended up rubbing them together, smearing black streaks of blood dry brown to his elbows. ‘One more to the good.’ He looked sideways at her with his one eye, corner of his mouth curled up in a sick smile. ‘Six out o’ seven, eh, Monza?’

‘Six and one,’ Friendly grunted to himself.

‘All turning out just like you hoped.’

She stared down at Foscar, flattened head twisted sideways, crossed eyes goggling up at the wall, blood spreading out across the stone floor in a black puddle from his broken skull. Her voice seemed to come from a long way off, reedy thin. ‘Why did you—’

‘Why not?’ whispered Shivers, coming close. She saw her own pale, scabbed, pinched-in face reflected, bent and twisted in that dead metal ball of an eye. ‘What we came here for, ain’t it? What we fought for all the day, down in the mud? I thought you was all for never turning back? Mercy and cowardice the same and all that hard talk you gave me. By the dead, Chief.’ He grinned, the mass of scar across his face squirming and puckering, his good cheek all dotted with red. ‘I could almost swear you ain’t half the evil bitch you pretend to be.’

Shifting Sands

With the greatest of care not to attract undue attention, Morveer insinuated himself into the back of Duke Orso's great audience chamber. For such a vast and impressive room, it numbered but a few occupants. Perhaps a function of the difficult circumstances in which the great man found himself. Having catastrophically lost the most important battle in the history of Styria was bound to discourage visitors. Still, Morveer had always been drawn to employers in difficult circumstances. They tended to pay handsomely.

The Grand Duke of Talins was without doubt still a majestic presence. He sat upon a gilded chair, on a high dais, all in sable velvet trimmed with gold, and frowned down with regal fury over the shining helmets of half a dozen no less furious guardsmen. He was flanked by two men who could not have been more polar opposites. On the left a plump, ruddy-faced old fellow stood with a respectful but painful-looking bend to his hips, gold buttons about his chubby throat fastened to the point of uncomfortable tightness and, indeed, considerably beyond. He had ill-advisedly attempted to conceal his utter and obvious baldness by combing back and forth a few sad strands of wiry grey hair, cultivated to enormous length for this precise purpose. Orso's chamberlain. On the right, a curly-haired young man slouched with unexpected ease in travel-stained clothes, resting upon what appeared to be a long stick. Morveer had the frustrating sensation of having seen him somewhere before, but could not place him, and his relationship to the duke was, for now, a slightly worrying mystery.

The only other occupant of the chamber had his well-dressed back to Morveer, prostrate upon one knee on the strip of crimson carpet, clutching his hat in one hand. Even from the very back of the hall the gleaming sheen of sweat across his bald patch was most evident.

'What help from my son-in-law,' Orso was demanding in stentorian tones, 'the High King of the Union?'

The voice of the ambassador, for it appeared to be none other, had the whine of a well-whipped dog expecting further punishment. 'Your son-in-law sends his earnest regrets—'

‘Indeed? But no soldiers! What would he have me do? Shoot his regrets at my enemies?’

‘His armies are all committed in our unfortunate Northern wars, and a revolt in the city of Rostod causes further difficulties. The nobles, meanwhile, are reluctant. The peasantry are again restless. The merchants —’

‘The merchants are behind on their payments. I see. If excuses were soldiers he would have sent a mighty throng indeed.’

‘He is beset by troubles—’

‘He is beset? He is? Are his sons murdered? Are his soldiers butchered? Are his hopes all in ruins?’

The ambassador wrung his hands. ‘Your Excellency, he is spread thin! His regrets have no end, but—’

‘But his help has no beginning! High King of the Union! A fine talker, and a goodly smile when the sun is up, but when the clouds come in, look not for shelter in Adua, eh? My intervention on his behalf was timely, was it not? When the Gurkish horde clamoured at his gates! But now I need his help . . . forgive me, Father, I am spread thin. Out of my sight, bastard, before your master’s regrets cost you your tongue! Out of my sight, and tell the Cripple that I see his hand in this! Tell him I will whip the price from his twisted hide!’ The grand duke’s furious screams echoed out over the hurried footsteps of the ambassador, edging backwards as quickly as he dared, bowing profusely and sweating even more. ‘Tell him I will be revenged!’

The ambassador genuflected his way past Morveer, and the double doors were heaved booming shut upon him.

‘Who is that skulking at the back of the chamber?’ Orso’s voice was no more reassuring for its sudden calmness. Quite the reverse.

Morveer swallowed as he processed down the blood-red strip of carpet. Orso’s eye held a look of the most withering command. It reminded Morveer unpleasantly of his meeting with the headmaster of the orphanage, when he was called to account for the dead birds. His ears burned with shame and horror at the memory of that interview, more even than his legs burned at the memory of his punishment. He swept out his lowest and most sycophantic bow, unfortunately spoiling the effect by rapping his knuckles against the floor in his nervousness.

‘This is one Castor Morveer, your Excellency,’ intoned the chamberlain, peering down his bulbous nose.

Orso leaned forwards. ‘And what manner of a man is Castor Morveer?’

‘A poisoner.’

‘Master . . . Poisoner,’ corrected Morveer. He could be as obsequious as the next man, when it was required, but he flatly insisted on his proper title. Had he not earned it, after all, with sweat, danger, deep wounds both physical and emotional, long study, short mercy and many, many painful reverses?

‘Master, is it?’ sneered Orso. ‘And what great notables have you poisoned to earn the prefix?’

Morveer permitted himself the faintest of smiles. ‘Grand Duchess Sefeline of Ospria, your Excellency. Count Binardi of Etrea, and both his sons, though their boat subsequently sank and they were never found. Ghassan Maz, Satrap of Kadir, and then, when further problems presented themselves, his successor Souvon-yin-Saul. Old Lord Isher, of Midderland, he was one of mine. Prince Amrit, who would have been heir to the throne of Muris—’

‘I understood he died of natural causes.’

‘What could be a more natural death for a powerful man than a dose of Leopard Flower administered into the ear by a dangling thread? Then Admiral Brant, late of the Murisian fleet, and his wife. His cabin boy too, alas, who happened by, a young life cut regrettably short. I would hate to prevail upon your Excellency’s valuable time, the list is long indeed, most distinguished and . . . entirely dead. With your permission I will add only the most recent name upon it.’

Orso gave the most minute inclination of his head, sneering no longer, Morveer was pleased to note. ‘One Mauthis, head of the Westport office of the Banking House of Valint and Balk.’

The duke’s face had gone blank as a stone slab. ‘Who was your employer for that last?’

‘I make it a point of professionalism never to mention the names of my employers . . . but I believe these are exceptional circumstances. I was hired by none other than Monzcarro Murcatto, the Butcher of Caprile.’ His blood was up now, and he could not resist a final flourish. ‘I believe you are acquainted.’

‘Some . . . what,’ whispered Orso. The duke’s dozen guards stirred ominously as if controlled directly by their master’s mood. Morveer became aware that he might have gone a flourish too far, felt his bladder weaken and was forced to press his knees together. ‘You infiltrated the offices of Valint and Balk in Westport?’

‘Indeed,’ croaked Morveer.

Orso glanced sideways at the man with the curly hair. ‘I congratulate you on the achievement. Though it has been the cause of some considerable discomfort to me and my associates. Pray explain why I should not have you killed for it.’

Morveer attempted to pass it off with a vivacious chuckle, but it died a slow death in the chilly vastness of the hall. ‘I . . . er . . . had no notion, of course, that you were in any way to be discomfited. None. Really, it was all due to a regrettable failing, or indeed a wilful oversight, deliberate dishonesty, a lie, even, on the part of my cursed assistant that I took the job in the first place. I should never have trusted that greedy bitch . . .’ He realised he was doing himself no good by blaming the dead. Great men want living people to hold responsible, that they might have them tortured, hanged, beheaded and so forth. Corpses offer no recompense. He swiftly changed tack. ‘I was but the tool, your Excellency. Merely the weapon. A weapon I now offer for your own hand to wield, as you see fit.’ He bowed again, even lower this time, muscles in his rump, already sore from climbing the cursed mountainside to Fontezarmo, trembling in their efforts to prevent him from pitching on his face.

‘You seek a new employer?’

‘Murcatto proved as treacherous towards me as she did towards your illustrious Lordship. The woman is a snake indeed. Twisting, poisonous and . . . scaly,’ he finished lamely. ‘I was lucky to escape her toxic clutches with my life, and now seek redress. I am prepared to seek it most earnestly, and will not be denied!’

‘Redress would be a fine thing for us all,’ murmured the man with the curly hair. ‘News of Murcatto’s survival spreads through Talins like wild-fire. Papers bearing her face on every wall.’ A fact, Morveer had seen them as he passed through the city. ‘They say you stabbed her through the heart but she lived, your Excellency.’

The duke snorted. ‘Had I stabbed her, I would never have aimed for her heart. Without doubt her least vulnerable organ.’

‘They say you burned her, drowned her, cut her into quarters and tossed them from your balcony, but she was stitched back together and lived again. They say she killed two hundred men at the fords of the Sulva. That she charged alone into your ranks and scattered them like chaff on the wind.’

‘The stamp of Rogont’s theatrics,’ hissed the duke through gritted teeth. ‘That bastard was born to be an author of cheap fantasies rather than a ruler of men. We will hear next that Murcatto has sprouted wings and given birth to the second coming of Euz!’

‘I wouldn’t be at all surprised. Bills are posted on every street corner proclaiming her an instrument of the Fates, sent to deliver Styria from your tyranny.’

‘Tyrant, now?’ The duke barked a grim chuckle. ‘How quickly the wind shifts in the modern age!’

‘They say she cannot be killed.’

‘Do . . . they . . . indeed?’ Orso’s red-rimmed eyes swivelled to Morveer. ‘What do you say, poisoner?’

‘Your Excellency,’ and he plunged down into the lowest of bows once more, ‘I have fashioned a successful career upon the principle that there is nothing that lives that cannot be deprived of life. It is the remarkable ease of killing, rather than the impossibility of it, that has always caused me astonishment.’

‘Do you care to prove it?’

‘Your Excellency, I humbly entreat only the opportunity.’ Morveer swept out another bow. It was his considered opinion that one could never bow too much to men of Orso’s stamp, though he did reflect that persons of huge ego were a great drain on the patience of bystanders.

‘Then here it is. Kill Monzcarro Murcatto. Kill Nicomo Cosca. Kill Countess Cotarda of Affoia. Kill Duke Lirozio of Puranti. Kill First Citizen Patine of Nicante. Kill Chancellor Sotorius of Sipani. Kill Grand Duke Rogont, before he can be crowned. Perhaps I will not have Styria, but I will have revenge. On that you can depend.’

Morveer had been warmly smiling as the list began. By its end he was smiling no longer, unless one could count the fixed rictus he maintained across his trembling face only by the very greatest of efforts. It appeared his

bold gambit had spectacularly oversucceeded. He was forcibly reminded of his attempt to discomfort four of his tormentors at the orphanage by placing Lankam salts in the water, which had ended, of course, with the untimely deaths of all the establishment's staff and most of the children too.

'Your Excellency,' he croaked, 'that is a significant quantity of murder.'

'And some fine names for your little list, no? The rewards will be equally significant, on that you can rely, will they not, Master Sulfur?'

'They will.' Sulfur's eyes moved from his fingernails to Morveer's face. Different-coloured eyes, Morveer now noticed, one green, one blue. 'I represent, you see, the Banking House of Valint and Balk.'

'Ah.' Suddenly, and with profound discomfort, Morveer placed the man. He had seen him talking with Mauthis in the banking hall in Westport but a few short days before he had filled the place with corpses. 'Ah. I really had not the slightest notion, you understand . . .' How he wished now that he had not killed Day. Then he could have noisily denounced her as the culprit and had something tangible with which to furnish the duke's dungeons. Fortunately, it seemed Master Sulfur was not seeking scapegoats. Yet.

'Oh, you were but the weapon, as you say. If you can cut as sharply on our behalf you have nothing to worry about. And besides, Mauthis was a terrible bore. Shall we say, if you are successful, the sum of one million scales?'

'One . . . million?' muttered Morveer.

'There is nothing that lives that cannot be deprived of life.' Orso leaned forwards, eyes fixed on Morveer's face. 'Now get about it!'

Night was falling when they came to the place, lamps lit in the grimy windows, stars spilled out across the soft night sky like diamonds on a jeweller's cloth. Shenkt had never liked Affoia. He had studied there, as a young man, before he ever knelt to his master and before he swore never to kneel again. He had fallen in love there, with a woman too rich, too old and far too beautiful for him, and been made a whining fool of. The streets were lined not only with old pillars and thirsty palms, but with the bitter remnants of his childish shame, jealousy, weeping injustice. Strange, that however tough one's skin becomes in later life, the wounds of youth never close.

Shenkt did not like Affoia, but the trail had led him here. It would take more than ugly memories to make him leave a job half-done.

‘That is the house?’ It was buried in the twisting backstreets of the city’s oldest quarter, far from the thoroughfares where the names of men seeking public office were daubed on the walls along with their great qualities and other, less complimentary words and pictures. A small building, with slumping lintels and a slumping roof, squeezed between a warehouse and a leaning shed.

‘That’s the house.’ The beggar’s voice was soft and stinking as rotten fruit.

‘Good.’ Shenkt pressed five scales into his scabby palm. ‘This is for you.’ He closed the man’s fist around the money then held it with his own. ‘Never come back here.’ He leaned closer, squeezed harder. ‘Not ever.’

He slipped across the cobbled street, over the wall before the house. His heart was beating unusually fast, sweat prickling his scalp. He crept across the overgrown front garden, old boots finding the silent spaces between the weeds, and to the lighted window. Reluctant, almost afraid, he peered through. Three children sat on a worn red carpet beside a small fire. Two girls and a boy, all with the same orange hair. They were playing with a brightly painted wooden horse on wheels. Clambering onto it, pushing each other around on it, pushing each other off it, to faint squeals of amusement. He squatted there, fascinated, and watched them.

Innocent. Unformed. Full of possibilities. Before they began to make their choices, or had their choices made for them. Before the doors began to close, and sent them down the only remaining path. Before they knelt. Now, for this briefest spell, they could be anything.

‘Well, well. What have we here?’

She was crouching above him on the low roof of the shed, her head on one side, a line of light from a window across the way cutting hard down her face, strip of spiky red hair, red eyebrow, narrowed eye, freckled skin, corner of a frowning mouth. A chain hung gleaming down from one fist, cross of sharpened metal swinging gently on the end of it.

Shenkt sighed. ‘It seems you have the better of me.’

She slid from the wall, dropped to the dirt and thumped smoothly down on her haunches, chain rattling. She stood, tall and lean, and took a step towards him, raising her hand.

He breathed in, slow, slow.

He saw every detail of her face: lines, freckles, faint hairs on her top lip, sandy eyelashes crawling down as she blinked.

He could hear her heart beating, heavy as a ram at a gate.

Thump . . . thump . . . thump . . .

She slid her hand around his head, and they kissed. He wrapped his arms about her, pressed her thin body tight against him, she tangled her fingers in his hair, chain brushing against his shoulders, dangling metal knocking lightly against the backs of his legs. A long, gentle, lingering kiss that made his body tingle from his lips to his toes.

She broke away. ‘It’s been a while, Cas.’

‘I know.’

‘Too long.’

‘I know.’

She nodded towards the window. ‘They miss you.’

‘Can I . . .’

‘You know you can.’

She led him to the door, into the narrow hallway, unbuckling the chain from her wrist and slinging it over a hook, cross-shaped knife dangling. The oldest girl dashed out from the room, stopped dead when she saw him.

‘It’s me.’ He edged slowly towards her, his voice strangled. ‘It’s me.’ The other two children came out from the room, peering around their sister. Shenkt feared no man, but before these children, he was a coward. ‘I have something for you.’ He reached into his coat with trembling fingers.

‘Cas.’ He held out the carved dog, and the little boy with his name snatched it from his hand, grinning. ‘Kande.’ He put the bird in the cupped hands of the littlest girl, and she stared dumbly at it. ‘For you, Tee,’ and he offered the cat to the oldest girl.

She took it. ‘No one calls me that any more.’

‘I’m sorry it’s been so long.’ He touched the girl’s hair and she flinched away, he jerked his hand back, awkward. He felt the weight of the butcher’s sickle in his coat as he moved, and he stood sharply, took a step back. The three of them stared up at him, carved animals clutched in their hands.

‘To bed now,’ said Shylo. ‘He’ll still be here tomorrow.’ Her eyes were on him, hard lines across the freckled bridge of her nose. ‘Won’t you, Cas?’

‘Yes.’

She brushed their complaints away, pointed to the stairs. ‘To bed.’ They filed up slowly, step by step, the boy yawning, the younger girl hanging her head, the other complaining that she wasn’t tired. ‘I’ll come sing to you later. If you’re quiet until then, maybe your father will even hum the low parts.’ The youngest of the two girls smiled at him, between the banisters at the top of the stairs, until Shylo pushed him into the living room and shut the door.

‘They got so big,’ he muttered.

‘That’s what they do. Why are you here?’

‘Can’t I just—’

‘You know you can, and you know you haven’t. Why are you . . .’ She saw the ruby on his forefinger and frowned. ‘That’s Murcatto’s ring.’

‘She lost it in Puranti. I nearly caught her there.’

‘Caught her? Why?’

He paused. ‘She has become involved . . . in my revenge.’

‘You and your revenge. Did you ever think you might be happier forgetting it?’

‘A rock might be happier if it was a bird, and could fly from the earth and be free. A rock is not a bird. Were you working for Murcatto?’

‘Yes. So?’

‘Where is she?’

‘You came here for that?’

‘That.’ He looked towards the ceiling. ‘And them.’ He looked her in the eye. ‘And you.’

She grinned, little lines cutting into the skin at the corners of her eyes. It took him by surprise, how much he loved to see those lines. ‘Cas, Cas. For such a clever bastard you’re a stupid bastard. You always look for all the wrong things in all the wrong places. Murcatto’s in Ospria, with Rogont. She fought in the battle there. Any man with ears knows that.’

‘I didn’t hear.’

‘You don’t listen. She’s tight with the Duke of Delay, now. My guess is he’ll be putting her in Orso’s place, keep the people of Talins alongside when he reaches for the crown.’

‘Then she’ll be following him. Back to Talins.’

‘That’s right.’

‘Then I will follow them. Back to Talins.’ Shenkt frowned. ‘I could have stayed there these past weeks, and simply waited for her.’

‘That’s what happens if you’re always chasing things. Works better if you wait for what you want to come to you.’

‘I was sure you’d have found another man by now.’

‘I found a couple. They didn’t stick.’ She held out her hand to him. ‘You ready to hum?’

‘Always.’ He took her hand, and she pulled him from the room, and through the door, and up the stairs.

VII

TALINS

‘Revenge is a dish best served cold’

Pierre Choderlos de Laclos

R*ogont of Ospria was late to the field at Sweet Pines, but Salier of Visserine still enjoyed the weight of numbers and was too proud to retreat. Especially when the enemy was commanded by a woman. He fought, he lost, he ended up retreating anyway, and left the city of Caprile defenceless. Rather than face a certain sack, the citizens opened their gates to the Serpent of Talins in the hope of mercy.*

Monza rode in, but most of her men she left outside. Orso had made allies of the Baolish, convinced them to fight with the Thousand Swords under their ragged standards. Fierce fighters, but with a bloody reputation. Monza had a bloody reputation of her own, and that only made her trust them less.

‘I love you.’

‘Of course you do.’

‘I love you, but keep the Baolish out of town, Benna.’

‘You can trust me.’

‘I do trust you. Keep the Baolish out of town.’

She rode three hours as the sun went down, back to the rotting battlefield at Sweet Pines, to dine with Duke Orso and learn his plans for the close of the season.

‘Mercy for the citizens of Caprile, if they yield to me entirely, pay indemnities and acknowledge me their rightful ruler.’

‘Mercy, your Excellency?’

‘You know what it is, yes?’ She knew what it was. She had not thought he did. ‘I want their land, not their lives. Dead men cannot obey. You have won a famous victory here. You shall have a great triumph, a procession through the streets of Talins.’

That would please Benna, at least. 'Your Excellency is too kind.'

'Hah. Few would agree with that.'

She laughed as she rode back in the cool dawn, and Faithful laughed beside her. They talked of how rich the soil was, on the banks of the Capra, watching the good wheat shift in the wind.

Then she saw the smoke above the city, and she knew.

The streets were full of dead. Men, women, children, young and old. Birds gathered on them. Flies swarmed. A confused dog limped along beside their horses. Nothing else living showed itself. Empty windows gaped, empty doorways yawned. Fires still burned, whole rows of houses nothing but ash and tottering chimney stacks.

Last night, a thriving city. This morning, Caprile was hell made real.

It seemed Benna had not been listening. The Baolish had begun it, but the rest of the Thousand Swords – drunk, angry, fearing they would miss out on the easy pickings – had eagerly joined in. Darkness and dark company make it easy for even half-decent men to behave like animals, and there were few half-decent men among the scum Monza commanded. The boundaries of civilisation are not the impregnable walls civilised men take them for. As easily as smoke on the wind, they can dissolve.

Monza flopped down from her horse and puked Duke Orso's fine breakfast over the rubbish-strewn cobbles.

'Not your fault,' said Faithful, one big hand on her shoulder.

She shook him off. 'I know that.' But her rebellious guts thought otherwise.

'It's the Years of Blood, Monza. This is what we are.'

Up the steps to the house they'd taken, tongue rough with sick. Benna lay on the bed, fast asleep, husk pipe near one hand. She dragged him up, made him squawk, cuffed him one way and the other.

'Keep them out of town, I told you!' And she forced him to the window, forced him to look down into the bloodstained street.

'I didn't know! I told Victus . . . I think . . .' He slid to the floor, and wept, and her anger leaked away and left her empty. Her fault, for leaving him in charge. She could not let him shoulder the blame. He was a good man, and sensitive, and would not have borne it well. There was nothing she could do but kneel beside him, and hold him, and whisper soothing words while the flies buzzed outside the window.

‘Orso wants to give us a triumph . . .’

Soon afterwards the rumours spread. The Serpent of Talins had ordered the massacre that day. Had urged the Baolish on and screamed for more. The Butcher of Caprile, they called her, and she did not deny it. People would far rather believe a lurid lie than a sorry string of accidents. Would far rather believe the world is full of evil than full of bad luck, selfishness and stupidity. Besides, the rumours served a purpose. She was more feared than ever, and fear was useful.

In Ospria they denounced her. In Visserine they burned her image. In Affoia and Nicante they offered a fortune to any man who could kill her. All around the Azure Sea they rang out the bells to her shame. But in Etrisani they celebrated. In Talins they lined the streets to chant her name, to shower her with flower petals. In Cesale they raised a statue in her honour. A gaudy thing, smothered with gold leaf that soon peeled. She and Benna, as they never looked, seated on great horses, frowning boldly towards a noble future.

That was the difference between a hero and a villain, a soldier and a murderer, a victory and a crime. Which side of a river you called home.

Return of the Native

Monza was far from comfortable. Her legs ached, her arse was chafed raw from riding, her shoulder had stiffened up again so she was constantly twisting her head to one side like a demented owl in a futile attempt to loosen it. Whenever one source of sweaty agony would ease for a moment, another would flare up to plug the gap. Her prodding joke of a little finger seemed attached to a cord of cold pain, tightening relentlessly right to her elbow if she tried to use the hand. The sun was merciless in the clear blue sky, making her squint, niggling at the headache leaking from the coins that held her skull together. Sweat tickled her scalp, ran down her neck, gathered in the scars Gobba's wire had left and made them itch like fury. Her crawling skin was prickly, clammy, sticky. She cooked in her armour like offal in a can.

Rogont had her dressed up like some simpleton's notion of the Goddess of War, an unhappy collision of shining steel and embroidered silk that offered the comfort of full plate and the protection of a nightgown. It might all have been made to measure by Rogont's own armourer, but there was a lot more room for chest in her gold-chased breastplate than there was a need for. This, according to the Duke of Delay, was what people wanted to see.

And enough of them had turned out for the purpose.

Crowds lined the narrow streets of Talins. They squashed into windows and onto roofs to catch a glimpse of her. They packed into the squares and gardens in dizzying throngs, throwing flowers, waving banners, boiling over with hope. They shouted, bellowed, roared, squealed, clapped, stamped, hooted, competing with each other to be the first to burst her skull with their clamour. Sets of musicians had formed at street corners, would strike up martial tunes as she came close, brassy and blaring, clanging away behind her, merging with the off-key offering of the next impromptu band to form a mindless, murderous, patriotic din.

It was like the triumph after her victory at Sweet Pines, only she was older and even more reluctant, her brother was rotting in the mud instead of basking in the glory and her old enemy Rogont was at her back rather than her old friend Orso. Perhaps that was what history came down to, in the

end. Swapping one sharp bastard for another was the best you could hope for.

They crossed the Bridge of Tears, the Bridge of Coins, the Bridge of Gulls, looming carvings of seabirds glaring angrily down at the procession as it crawled past, brown waters of the Etris sluggishly churning beneath them. Each time she rounded a corner another wave of applause would break upon her. Another wave of nausea. Her heart was pounding. Every moment, she expected to be killed. Blades and arrows seemed more likely than flowers and kind words, and far more deserved. Agents of Duke Orso, or his Union allies, or a hundred others with a private grudge against her. Hell, if she'd been in the crowd and seen some woman ride past dressed like this, she'd have killed her on general principle. But Rogont must have spread his rumours well. The people of Talins loved her. Or loved the idea of her. Or had to look like they did.

They chanted her name, and her brother's name, and the names of her victories. Afieri. Caprile. Musselia. Sweet Pines. The High Bank. The fords of the Sulva too. She wondered if they knew what they were cheering for. Places she'd left trails of corpses behind her. Cantain's head rotting on the gates of Borletta. Her knife in Hermon's eye. Gobba, hacked to pieces, pulled apart by rats in the sewers beneath their feet. Mauthis and his clerks with their poisoned ledgers, poisoned fingers, poisoned tongues. Ario and all his butchered revellers at Cardotti's, Ganmark and his slaughtered guards, Faithful dangling from the wheel, Foscar's head broken open on the dusty floor. Corpses by the cartload. Some of it she didn't regret, some of it she did. But none of it seemed like anything to cheer about. She winced up towards the happy faces at the windows. Maybe that was where she and these folk differed.

Maybe they just liked corpses, so long as they weren't theirs.

She glanced over her shoulder at her so-called allies, but they hardly gave her comfort. Grand Duke Rogont, the king-in-waiting, smiling to the crowds from a knot of watchful guards, a man whose love would last exactly as long as she was useful. Shivers, steel eye glinting, a man who'd turned under her tender touch from likeable optimist to maimed murderer. Cosca winked back at her – the world's least reliable ally and most unpredictable enemy, and he could still prove to be either one. Friendly . . . who knew what went on behind those dead eyes?

Further back rode the other surviving leaders of the League of Eight. Or Nine. Lirozio of Puranti, fine moustaches bristling, who'd slipped nimbly back into Rogont's camp after the very briefest of alliances with Orso. Countess Cotarda, her watchful uncle never far behind. Patine, First Citizen of Nicante, with his emperor's bearing and his ragged peasant's clothes, who had declined to share in the battle at the fords but seemed more than happy to share in the victory. There were even representatives of cities she'd sacked on Orso's behalf – citizens of Musselia and Etrea, a sly-eyed young niece of Duke Cantain's who'd suddenly found herself Duchess of Borletta, and appeared to be greatly enjoying the experience.

People she'd thought of as her enemies for so long she was having trouble making the adjustment, and by the looks on their faces when her eyes met theirs, so were they. She was the spider they had to suffer in their larder to rid them of their flies. And once the flies are dealt with, who wants a spider in their salad?

She turned back, sweaty shoulders prickling, tried to fix her eyes ahead. They passed along the endless curve of the seafront, gulls sweeping, circling, calling above. All the way her nose was full of that rotten salt tang of Talins. Past the boatyards, the half-finished hulls of two great warships sitting on the rollers like the skeletons of two beached and rotted whales. Past the rope-makers and the sail-weavers, the lumber-yards and the wood-turners, the brass-workers and the chain-makers. Past the vast and reeking fish-market, its flaking stalls empty, its galleries quiet for the first time maybe since the victory at Sweet Pines last emptied the buildings and filled the streets with savagely happy crowds.

Behind the multicoloured splatters of humanity the buildings were smothered with bills, as they had been in Talins more or less since the invention of the press. Old victories, warnings, incitements, patriotic bluster, endlessly pasted over by the new. The latest set carried a woman's face – stern, guiltless, coldly beautiful. Monza realised with a sick turning of her guts that it was meant to be hers, and beneath it, boldly printed: Strength, Courage, Glory. Orso had once told her that the way to turn a lie into the truth was to shout it often enough, and here was her self-righteous face, repeated over and over, plastered torn and dog-eared across the salt-stained walls. On the side of the next crumbling façade another set of posters, badly drawn and smudgily printed, had her awkwardly holding high

a sword, beneath the legend: Never Surrender, Never Relent, Never Forgive. Daubed across the bricks above them in letters of streaky red paint tall as a man was one simple word:

Vengeance.

Monza swallowed, less comfortable than ever. Past the endless docks where fishing vessels, pleasure vessels, merchant vessels of every shape and size, from every nation beneath the sun, stirred on the waves of the great bay, cobwebs of rigging spotted with sailors up to watch the Snake of Talins take the city for her own.

Just as Orso had feared she would.

Cosca was entirely comfortable.

It was hot, but there was a soothing breeze wafting off the glittering sea, and one of his ever-expanding legion of new hats was keeping his eyes well shaded. It was dangerous, the crowd very likely containing more than one eager assassin, but for once there were several more hated targets than himself within easy reach. A drink, a drink, a drink, of course, that drunkard's voice in his head would never be entirely silent. But it was less a desperate scream now than a grumpy murmur, and the cheering was very definitely helping to drown it out.

Aside from the vague smell of seaweed it was just as it had been in Ospria, after his famous victory at the Battle of the Isles. When he had stood tall in his stirrups at the head of the column, acknowledging the applause, holding his hands up and shouting, 'Please, no!' when he meant, 'More, more!' It was Grand Duchess Sefeline, Rogont's aunt, who had basked in his reflected glory then, mere days before she tried to have him poisoned. Mere months before the tide of battle turned against her and she was poisoned herself. That was Styrian politics for you. It made him wonder, just briefly, why he was getting into it.

'The settings change, the people age, the faces swap one with another, but the applause is just the same – vigorous, infectious and so very short-lived.'

'Uh,' grunted Shivers. It seemed to be most of the Northman's conversation, now, but that suited Cosca well enough. In spite of occasional efforts to change, he had always vastly preferred talking to listening.

‘I always hated Orso, of course, but I find little pleasure in his fall.’ A towering statue of the fearsome Duke of Talins could be seen down a side street as they passed. Orso had ever been a keen patron to sculptors, provided they used him as their subject. Scaffolding had been built up its front, and now men clustered around the face, battering its stern features away gleefully with hammers. ‘So soon, yesterday’s heroes are shuffled off. Just as I was shuffled off myself.’

‘Seems you’ve shuffled back.’

‘My point precisely! We all are washed with the tide. Listen to them cheer for Rogont and his allies, so recently the most despicable slime on the face of the world.’ He pointed out the fluttering papers pasted to the nearest wall, on which Duke Orso was displayed having his face pushed into a latrine. ‘Only peel back this latest layer of bills and I’ll wager you’ll find others denouncing half this procession in the filthiest ways imaginable. I recall one of Rogont shitting onto a plate and Duke Salier tucking into the results with a fork. Another of Duke Lirozio trying to mount his horse. And when I say “mount” . . .’

‘Heh,’ said Shivers.

‘The horse was not impressed. Dig through a few layers more and – I blush to admit – you’ll find some condemning me as the blackest-hearted rogue in the Circle of the World, but now . . .’ Cosca blew an extravagant kiss towards some ladies on a balcony, and they smiled, pointed, showed every sign of regarding him as their delivering hero. The Northman shrugged. ‘People got no weight to ’em down here. Wind blows ’em whatever way it pleases.’

‘I have travelled widely,’ if fleeing one war-torn mess after another qualified, ‘and in my experience people are no heavier elsewhere.’ He unscrewed the cap from his flask. ‘Men can have all manner of deeply held beliefs about the world in general that they find most inconvenient when called upon to apply to their own lives. Few people let morality get in the way of expediency. Or even convenience. A man who truly believes in a thing beyond the point where it costs him is a rare and dangerous thing.’

‘It’s a special kind o’ fool takes the hard path just ’cause it’s the right one.’

Cosca took a long swallow from his flask, winced and scraped his tongue against his front teeth. ‘It’s a special kind of fool who can even tell the right

path from the wrong. I've certainly never had that knack.' He stood in his stirrups, swept off his hat and waved it wildly in the air, whooping like a boy of fifteen. The crowds roared their approval back. Just as if he was a man worth cheering for. And not Nicomo Cosca at all.

So quietly that no one could possibly have heard, so softly that the notes were almost entirely in his mind, Shenkt hummed.

'Here she is!'

The pregnant silence gave birth to a storm of applause. People danced, threw up their arms, cheered with hysterical enthusiasm. People laughed and wept, celebrated as if their own lives might be changed to any significant degree by Monzcarro Murcatto being given a stolen throne.

It was a tide Shenkt had often observed in politics. There is a brief spell after a new leader comes to power, however it is achieved, during which they can do no wrong. A golden period in which people are blinded by their own hopes for something better. Nothing lasts for ever, of course. In time, and usually with alarming speed, the leader's flawless image grows tarnished with their subjects' own petty disappointments, failures, frustrations. Soon they can do no right. The people clamour for a new leader, that they might consider themselves reborn. Again.

But for now they cheered Murcatto to the heavens, so loud that, even though he had seen it all a dozen times before, Shenkt almost allowed himself to hope. Perhaps this would be a great day, the first of a great era, and he would be proud in after years to have had his part in it. Even if his part had been a dark one. Some men, after all, can only play dark parts.

'The Fates.' Beside him, Shylo's lip curled up with scorn. 'What does she look like? A fucking gold candlestick. A gaudy figurehead, gilded up to hide the rot.'

'I think she looks well.' Shenkt was glad to see her still alive, riding a black horse at the head of the sparkling column. Duke Orso might have been all but finished, his people hailing a new leader, his palace at Fontezarmo surrounded and under siege. None of that made the slightest difference. Shenkt had his work, and he would see it through to the end, however bitter. Just as he always did. Some stories, after all, are only suited to bitter endings.

Murcatto rode closer, eyes fixed ahead in an expression of the most bloody-minded resolve. Shenkt would have liked very much to step forwards, to brush the crowds aside, to smile, to hold out his hand to her. But there were altogether too many onlookers, altogether too many guards. The moment was coming when he would greet her, face to face.

For now he stood, as her horse passed by, and hummed.

So many people. Too many to count. If Friendly tried, it made him feel strange. Vitari's face jumped suddenly from the crowd, beside her a gaunt man with short, pale hair and a washed-out smile. Friendly stood in the stirrups but a waving banner swept across his sight and they were gone. A thousand other faces in a blinding tangle. He watched the procession instead.

If this had been Safety, and Murcatto and Shivers had been convicts, Friendly would have known without doubt from the look on the Northman's face that he wanted to kill her. But this was not Safety, more was the pity, and there were no rules here that Friendly understood. Especially once women entered the case, for they were a foreign people to him. Perhaps Shivers loved her, and that look of hungry rage was what love looked like. Friendly knew they had been fucking in Visserine, he had heard them at it enough, but then he thought she might have been fucking the Grand Duke of Ospria lately, and had no idea what difference that might make. Here was the problem.

Friendly had never really understood fucking, let alone love. When he came back to Talins, Sajaam had sometimes taken him to whores, and told him it was a reward. It seemed rude to turn down a reward, however little he wanted it. To begin with he had trouble keeping his prick hard. Even later, the most enjoyment he ever got from the messy business was counting the number of thrusts before it was all over.

He tried to settle his jangling nerves by counting the hoofbeats of his horse. It seemed best that he avoid embarrassing confusions, keep his worries to himself and let things take the course they would. If Shivers did kill her, after all, it meant little enough to Friendly. Probably lots of people wanted to kill her. That was what happened when you made yourself conspicuous.

Shivers was no monster. He'd just had enough.

Enough of being treated like a fool. Enough of his good intentions fucking him in the arse. Enough of minding his conscience. Enough worrying on other people's worries. And most of all enough of his face itching. He grimaced as he dug at his scars with his fingernails.

Monza was right. Mercy and cowardice were the same. There were no rewards for good behaviour. Not in the North, not here, not anywhere. Life was an evil bastard, and gave to those who took what they wanted. Right was on the side of the most ruthless, the most treacherous, the most bloody, and the way all these fools cheered for her now was the proof of it. He watched her riding slowly up at the front, on her black horse, black hair stirring in the breeze. She'd been right about everything, more or less.

And he was going to murder her, pretty much just for fucking someone else.

He thought of stabbing her, cutting her, carving her ten different ways. He thought of the marks on her ribs, of sliding a blade gently between them. He thought of the scars on her neck, and how his hands would fit just right against them to throttle her. He guessed it would be good to be close to her one last time. Strange, that he should've saved her life so often, risked his own to do it, and now be thinking out the best way to put an end on it. It was like the Bloody-Nine told him once – love and hate have just a knife's edge between 'em.

Shivers knew a hundred ways to kill a woman that'd all leave her just as dead. It was where and when that were the problems. She was watchful all the time, now, expecting knives. Not from him, maybe, but from somewhere. There were plenty of 'em aimed at her besides his, no doubt. Rogont knew it, and was careful with her as a miser with his hoard. He needed her to bring all these people over to his side, always had men watching. So Shivers would have to wait, and pick his time. But he could show some patience. It was like Carlot said. Nothing done well is ever . . . rushed.

'Keep closer to her.'

'Eh?' None other than the great Duke Rogont, ridden up on his blind side. It took an effort for Shivers not to smash his fist right into the man's sneering, handsome face.

‘Orso still has friends out there.’ Rogont’s eyes jumped nervously over the crowds. ‘Agents. Assassins. There are dangers everywhere.’

‘Dangers? Everyone seems so happy, though.’

‘Are you trying to be funny?’

‘Wouldn’t know how to begin.’ Shivers kept his face so slack Rogont couldn’t tell whether he was being mocked or not.

‘Keep closer to her! You are supposed to be her bodyguard!’

‘I know what I am.’ And Shivers gave Rogont his widest grin. ‘Don’t worry yourself on that score.’ He dug his horse’s flanks and urged on ahead. Closer to Monza, just like he’d been told. Close enough that he could see her jaw muscles clenched tight on the side of her face. Close enough, almost, that he could have pulled out his axe and split her skull.

‘I know what I am,’ he whispered. He was no monster. He’d just had enough.

The procession finally came to an end in the heart of the city, the square before the ancient Senate House. The mighty building’s roof had collapsed centuries ago, its marble steps cracked and rooted with weeds. The carvings of forgotten gods on the colossal pediment had faded to a tangle of blobs, perches for a legion of chattering gulls. The ten vast pillars that supported it looked alarmingly out of true, streaked with droppings, stuck with flapping fragments of old bills. But the mighty relic still dwarfed the meaner buildings that had flourished around it, proclaiming the lost majesty of the New Empire.

A platform of pitted blocks thrust out from the steps and into the sea of people crowding the square. At one corner stood the weathered statue of Scarpius, four times the height of a man, holding out hope to the world. His outstretched hand had broken off at the wrist several hundred years ago and, in what must have been the most blatant piece of imagery in Styria, no one had yet bothered to replace it. Guardsmen stood grimly before the statue, on the steps, at the pillars. They wore the cross of Talins on their coats but Monza knew well enough they were Rogont’s men. Perhaps Styria was meant to be one family now, but soldiers in Osprian blue might not have been well received here.

She slid from her saddle, strode down the narrow valley through the crowds. People strained against the guardsmen, calling to her, begging for

blessings. As though touching her might do them any good. It hadn't done much to anyone else. She kept her eyes ahead, always ahead, jaw aching from being clenched tight, waiting for the blade, the arrow, the dart that would be the end of her. She'd happily have killed for the sweet oblivion of a smoke, but she was trying to cut back, on the killing and the smoking both.

Scarpius towered over her as she started up the steps, peering down out of the corners of his lichen-crusted eyes as if to say, Is this bitch the best they could do? The monstrous pediment loomed behind him, and she wondered if the hundred tons of rock balanced on those pillars might finally choose that moment to crash down and obliterate the entire leadership of Styria, herself along with them. No small part of her hoped that it would, and bring this sticky ordeal to a swift end.

A gaggle of leading citizens – meaning the sharpest and the greediest – had clustered nervously in the centre of the platform, sweating in their most expensive clothes, looking hungrily towards her like geese at a bowl of crumbs. They bowed as she and Rogont came closer, heads bobbing together in a way that suggested they'd been rehearsing. That somehow made her more irritated than ever.

'Get up,' she growled.

Rogont held his hand out. 'Where is the circlet?' He snapped his fingers. 'The circlet, the circlet!'

The foremost of the citizens looked like a bad caricature of wisdom – all hooked nose, snowy beard and creaky deep voice under a green felt hat like an upended chamber pot. 'Madam, my name is Rubine, nominated to speak for the citizens.'

'I am Scavier.' A plump woman whose azure bodice exposed a terrifying immensity of cleavage.

'And I am Grulo.' A tall, lean man, bald as an arse, not quite shouldering in front of Scavier but very nearly.

'Our two most senior merchants,' explained Rubine.

It carried little weight with Rogont. 'And?'

'And, with your permission, your Excellency, we were hoping to discuss some details of the arrangements—'

'Yes? Out with it!'

‘As regards the title, we had hoped perhaps to steer away from nobility. Grand duchess smacks rather of Orso’s tyranny.’

‘We hoped . . .’ ventured Grulo, waving a vulgar finger-ring, ‘something to reflect the mandate of the common people.’

Rogont winced at Monza, as though the phrase ‘common people’ tasted of piss. ‘Mandate?’

‘President elect, perhaps?’ offered Scavier. ‘First citizen?’

‘After all,’ added Rubine, ‘the previous grand duke is still, technically . . . alive.’

Rogont ground his teeth. ‘He is besieged two dozen miles away in Fontezarmo like a rat in his hole! Only a matter of time before he is brought to justice.’

‘But you understand the legalities may prove troublesome—’

‘Legalities?’ Rogont spoke in a furious whisper. ‘I will soon be King of Styria, and I mean to have the Grand Duchess of Talins among those who crown me! I will be king, do you understand? Legalities are for other men to worry on!’

‘But, your Excellency, it might not be seen as appropriate—’

For a man with a reputation for too much patience, Rogont’s had grown very short over the last few weeks. ‘How appropriate would it be if I was to, say, have you hanged? Here. Now. Along with every other reluctant bastard in the city. You could argue the legalities to each other while you dangle.’

The threat floated between them for a long, uncomfortable moment. Monza leaned towards Rogont, acutely aware of the vast numbers of eyes fixed upon them. ‘What we need here is a little unity, no? I’ve a feeling hangings might send the wrong message. Let’s just get this done, shall we? Then we can all lie down in a dark room.’

Grulo carefully cleared his throat. ‘Of course.’

‘A long conversation to end where we began!’ snapped Rogont. ‘Give me the damn circlet!’

Scavier produced a thin golden band. Monza turned slowly to face the crowd.

‘People of Styria!’ Rogont roared behind her. ‘I give you the Grand Duchess Monzcarro of Talins!’ There was a slight pressure as he lowered the circlet onto her head.

And that simply she was raised to the giddy heights of power.

With a faint rustling, everyone knelt. The square was left silent, enough that she could hear the birds flapping and squawking on the pediment above. Enough that she could hear the spatters as some droppings fell not far to her right, daubing the ancient stones with spots of white, black and grey.

'What are they waiting for?' she muttered to Rogont, doing her best not to move her lips.

'Words.'

'Me?'

'Who else?'

A wave of dizzy horror broke over her. By the look of the crowd, she might easily have been outnumbered five thousand to one. But she had the feeling that, for her first action as head of state, fleeing the platform in terror might send the wrong message. So she stepped slowly forwards, as hard a step as she'd ever taken, struggling to get her tumbling thoughts in order, dig up words she didn't have in the splinter of time she did. She passed through Scarpius' great shadow and out into the daylight, and a sea of faces opened up before her, tilted up towards her, wide-eyed with hope. Their scattered muttering dropped to nervous whispering, then to eerie silence. She opened her mouth, still hardly knowing what might come out of it.

'I've never been one . . .' Her voice was a reedy squeak. She had to cough to clear it, spat the results over her shoulder then realised she definitely shouldn't have. 'I've never been one for speeches!' That much was obvious. 'Rather get right to it than talk about it! Born on a farm, I guess. We'll deal with Orso first! Rid ourselves of that bastard. Then . . . well . . . then the fighting's over.' A strange kind of murmur went through the kneeling crowd. No smiles, exactly, but some faraway looks, misty eyes, a few heads nodding. She was surprised by a longing tug in her own chest. She'd never really thought before that she'd wanted the fighting to end. She'd never known much else.

'Peace.' And that needy murmur rippled across the square again. 'We'll have ourselves a king. All Styria, marching one way. An end to the Years of Blood.' She thought of the wind in the wheat. 'Try to make things grow, maybe. Can't promise you a better world because, well, it is what it is.' She looked down awkwardly at her feet, shifted her weight from one leg to

another. ‘I can promise to do my best at it, for what that’s worth. Let’s aim at enough for everyone to get by, and see how we go.’ She caught the eye of an old man, staring at her with teary-eyed emotion, lip quivering, hat clasped to his chest.

‘That’s all!’ she snapped.

Any normal person would have been lightly dressed on a day so sticky warm, but Murcatto, with characteristic contrariness, had opted for full and, as it happened, ludicrously flamboyant armour. Morveer’s only option, therefore, was to take aim at her exposed face. Still, a smaller target only presented the greater and more satisfying challenge for a marksman of his sublime skills. He took a deep breath.

To his horror she shifted at the crucial moment, looking down at the platform, and the dart missed her face by the barest whisker and glanced from one of the pillars of the ancient Senate House behind her.

‘Damn it!’ he hissed around the mouthpiece of his blowpipe, already fumbling in his pocket for another dart, removing its cap, sliding it gently into the chamber.

It was a stroke of ill fortune of the variety that had tormented Morveer since birth that, just as he was applying his lips to the pipe, Murcatto terminated her incompetent rhetoric with a perfunctory, ‘That’s all!’ The crowd broke into rapturous applause, and his elbow was jogged by the enthusiastic clapping of a peasant beside the deep doorway in which he had secreted himself.

The lethal missile went well wide of its target and vanished into the heaving throng beside the platform. The man whose wild gesticulations had been responsible for his wayward aim looked about, his broad, greasy face puckering with suspicion. He had the appearance of a labourer, hands like rocks, the flame of human intellect barely burning behind his piggy eyes.

‘Here, what are you—’

Curse the proletariat, Morveer’s attempt was now quite foiled. ‘My profound regrets, but could I prevail upon you to hold this for just a moment?’

‘Eh?’ The man stared down at the blowpipe pressed suddenly into his calloused hands. ‘Ah!’ As Morveer jabbed him in the wrist with a mounted needle. ‘What the hell?’

‘Thank you ever so much.’ Morveer reclaimed the pipe and slid it into one of his myriad of concealed pockets along with the needle. It takes the vast majority of men a great deal of time to become truly incensed, usually following a predictable ritual of escalating threats, insults, posturing, jostling and so forth. Instantaneous action is entirely foreign to them. So the elbow-jogger was only now beginning to look truly angry.

‘Here!’ He seized Morveer by the lapel. ‘Here . . .’ His eyes took on a faraway look. He wobbled, blinked, his tongue hung out. Morveer took him under the arms, gasped at the sudden dead weight as the man’s knees collapsed, and wrestled him to the ground, suffering an unpleasant twinge in his back as he did so.

‘He alright?’ someone grunted. Morveer looked up to see a half-dozen not dissimilar men frowning down at him.

‘Altogether too much beer!’ Morveer shouted over the noise, adding a false little chuckle. ‘My companion here has become quite inebriated!’

‘Inebri-what?’ said one.

‘Drunk!’ Morveer leaned close. ‘He was so very, very proud to have the great Serpent of Talins as the mistress of our fates! Are not we all?’

‘Aye,’ one muttered, utterly confused but partially mollified. ‘’Course. Murcatto!’ he finished lamely, to grunts of approval from his simian comrades.

‘Born among us!’ shouted another, shaking his fist.

‘Oh, absolutely so. Murcatto! Freedom! Hope! Deliverance from coarse stupidity! Here we are, friend!’ Morveer grunted with effort as he wriggled the big man, now a big corpse, into the shadows of the doorway. He winced as he arched his aching back. Then, since the others were no longer paying attention, he slid away into the crowds, boiling with resentment all the way. It really was insufferable that these imbeciles should cheer so very enthusiastically for a woman who, far from being born among them, had been born on a patch of scrub on the very edge of Talinese territory where the border was notoriously flexible. A ruthless, scheming, lying, apprentice-seducing, mass-murdering, noisily fornicating peasant thief without a filigree shred of conscience, whose only qualifications for command were a sulky manner, a few victories against incompetent opposition, the aforementioned propensity to swift action, a fall down a mountain and the accident of a highly attractive face.

He was forced to reflect once again, as he had so often, that life was rendered immeasurably easier for the comely.

The Lion's Skin

A lot had changed since Monza last rode up to Fontezarmo, laughing with her brother. Hard to believe it was only a year ago. The darkest, maddest, most bloody year in a life made of them. A year that had taken her from dead woman to duchess, and might well still shove her back the other way.

It was dusk instead of dawn, the sun sinking behind them in the west as they climbed the twisting track. To either side of it, wherever the ground was anything close to flat, men had pitched tents. They sat in front of them in lazy groups by the flickering light of campfires – eating, drinking, mending boots or polishing armour, staring slack-faced at Monza as she clattered past.

She'd had no honour guard a year ago. Now a dozen of Rogont's picked men followed eagerly as puppies wherever she went. It was a surprise they didn't all try to tramp into the latrine after her. The last thing the king-in-waiting wanted was for her to get pushed off a mountain again. Not before she'd had the chance to help crown him, anyway. It was Orso she'd been helping to his crown twelve months ago, and Rogont her bitter enemy. For a woman who liked to stick, she'd slid around some in four seasons.

Back then she'd had Benna beside her. Now it was Shivers. That meant no talk at all, let alone laughter. His face was just a hard black outline, blind eye gleaming with the last of the fading light. She knew he couldn't see a thing through it, but still she felt like it was always fixed right on her. Even though he scarcely spoke, still he was always saying, It should've been you.

There were fires burning at the summit. Specks of light on the slopes, a yellow glow behind the black shapes of walls and towers, smudges of smoke hanging in the deep evening sky. The road switched back once more, then petered away altogether at a barricade made from three upended carts. Victus sat there on a field chair, warming his hands at a campfire, his collection of stolen chains gleaming round his neck. He grinned as she reined up her horse, and flourished out an absurd salute.

'The Grand Duchess of Talins, here in our slovenly camp! Your Excellency, we're all shame! If we'd had more time to prepare for your royal visit, we'd have done something about all the dirt.' And he spread his

arms wide at the sea of churned-up mud, bare rock, broken bits of crate and wagon scattered around the mountainside.

'Victus. The embodiment of the mercenary spirit.' She clambered down from her saddle, trying not to let the pain show. 'Greedy as a duck, brave as a pigeon, loyal as a cuckoo.'

'I always modelled myself on the nobler birds. Afraid you'll have to leave the horses, we'll be going by trench from here. Duke Orso's a most ungracious host – he's taken to shooting catapults at any of his guests who show themselves.' He sprang up, slapping dust from the canvas he'd been sitting on, then holding one ring-encrusted hand out towards it. 'Perhaps I could have some of the lads carry you up?'

'I'll walk.'

He gave her a mocking leer. 'And a fine figure you'll appear, I've no doubt, though I would've thought you could've stretched to silk, given your high station.'

'Clothes don't make the person, Victus.' She gave his jewellery a mocking leer of her own. 'A piece of shit is still a piece of shit, however much gold you stick on it.'

'Oh, how we've missed you, Murcatto. Follow on, then.'

'Wait here,' she snapped at Rogont's guards. Having them behind her all the time made her look weak. Made her look like she needed them.

Their sergeant winced. 'His Excellency was most—'

'Piss on his Excellency. Wait here.'

She creaked down some steps made of old boxes and into the hillside, Shivers at her shoulder. The trenches weren't much different from the ones they'd dug around Muris, years ago – walls of hard-packed earth held back by odds and ends of timber, with that same smell of sickness, mould, damp earth and boredom. The trenches they'd lived in for the best part of six months, like rats in a sewer. Where her feet had started to rot, and Benna got the running shits so bad he lost a quarter of his weight and all his sense of humour. She even saw a few familiar faces as they threaded their way through ditch, tunnel and dugout – veterans who'd been fighting with the Thousand Swords for years. She nodded to them just as she used to when she was in charge, and they nodded back.

'You sure Orso's inside?' she called to Victus.

'Oh, we're sure. Cosca spoke to him, first day.'

Monza didn't draw much comfort from that idea. When Cosca started talking to an enemy he usually ended up richer and on the other side. 'What did those two bastards have to say to each other?'

'Ask Cosca.'

'I will.'

'We've got the place surrounded, don't worry about that. Trenches on three sides.' Victus slapped the earth beside them. 'If you can trust a mercenary to do one thing, it's dig himself a damn good hole to hide in. Then there's pickets down in the woods at the bottom of the cliff.' The woods where Monza had slid to a halt in the rubbish, broken to pulp, groaning like the dead in hell. 'And a wide selection of Styria's finest soldiery further out. Osprians, Sipanese, Affoians, in numbers. All set on seeing our old employer dead. There ain't a rat getting out without our say-so. But then if Orso wanted to run, he could've run weeks ago. He didn't. You know him better than anyone, don't you? You reckon he'll try and run now?'

'No,' she had to admit. He'd sooner die, which suited her fine. 'How about us getting in?'

'Whoever designed the bastard place knew what they were doing. Ground around the inner ward's way too steep to try anything.'

'I could've told you that. North side of the outer ward's your best chance at an assault, then try the inner wall from there.'

'Our very thoughts, but there's a gulf between thinking and doing, specially when high walls are part of the case. No luck yet.' Victus clambered up on a box and beckoned to her. Between two wicker screens, beyond a row of sharpened stakes pointing up the broken slope, she could see the nearest corner of the fortress. One of the towers was on fire, its tall roof fallen in leaving only a cone of naked beams wreathed in flames, notches of battlements picked out in red and yellow, black smoke belching into the dark blue sky. 'We set that tower to burning,' he pointed proudly towards it, 'with a catapult.'

'Beautiful. We can all go home.'

'Something, ain't it?' He led them through a long dugout smelling of damp and sour sweat, men snoring on pallets down both sides. ' "Wars are won not by one great action," ' intoning the words like a bad actor, ' "but

many small chances.” Weren’t you always telling us that? Who was it? Stalicus?’

‘Stolicus, you dunce.’

‘Some dead bastard. Anyway, Cosca’s got a plan, but I’ll let him tell you himself. You know how the old man loves to put on a show.’ Victus stopped at a hollow in the rock where four trenches came together, sheltered by a roof of gently flapping canvas and lit by a single rustling torch. ‘The captain general said he’d be along. Feel free to make use of the facilities while you wait.’ Facilities which amounted to dirt. ‘Unless there’s anything else, your Excellency?’

‘Just one more thing.’ He flinched in surprise as her spit spattered softly across his eye. ‘That’s from Benna, you treacherous little fuck.’

Victus wiped his face, eyes creeping shiftily to Shivers, then back to her. ‘I didn’t do nothing you wouldn’t have done. Nothing your brother wouldn’t have done, that’s certain. Nothing you didn’t both do to Cosca, and you owed him more than I owed you—’

‘That’s why you’re wiping your face instead of trying to hold your guts in.’

‘You ever think you might have brought this on yourself? Big ambitions mean big risks. All I’ve done is float with the current—’

Shivers took a sudden step forwards. ‘Off you float, then, ’fore you get your throat cut.’ Monza realised he had a knife out in one big fist. The one she’d given him the first day they met.

‘Whoah there, big man.’ Victus held up his palms, rings glittering. ‘I’m on my way, don’t worry.’ He made a big show of turning and strutting off into the night. ‘You two need to work on your tempers,’ wagging one finger over his shoulder. ‘No point getting riled up over every little thing. That’ll only end in blood, believe me!’

It wasn’t so hard for Monza to believe. Everything ended in blood, whatever she did. She realised she was left alone with Shivers, something she’d spent the last few weeks avoiding like the rot. She knew she should say something, take some sort of step towards making things square with him. They had their problems, but at least he was her man, rather than Rogont’s. She might have need of someone to save her life in the coming days, and he was no monster, however he might look.

‘Shivers.’ He turned to her, knife still clutched tight, steel blade and steel eye catching the torch flame and twinkling the colours of fire. ‘Listen—’

‘No, you listen.’ He bared his teeth, taking a step towards her.

‘Monza! You came!’ Cosca emerged from one of the trenches, arms spread wide. ‘And with my favourite Northman!’ He ignored the knife and shook Shivers warmly by his free hand, then grabbed Monza’s shoulders and kissed her on both cheeks. ‘I haven’t had a chance to congratulate you on your speech. Born on a farm. A nice touch. Humble. And talk of peace. From you? It was like seeing a farmer express his hopes for famine. Even this old cynic couldn’t help but be moved.’

‘Fuck yourself, old man.’ But she was secretly glad she didn’t have to find the hard words now.

Cosca raised his brows. ‘You try and say the right thing—’

‘Some folk don’t like the right thing,’ said Shivers in his gravelly whisper, sliding his knife away. ‘You ain’t learned that yet?’

‘Every day alive is a lesson. This way, comrades! Just up ahead we can get a fine view of the assault.’

‘You’re attacking? Now?’

‘We tried in daylight. Didn’t work.’ It didn’t look like darkness was working any better. There were wounded men lining the next trench – grimaces, groans, bloody bandages. ‘Wherever is my noble employer, his Excellency Duke Rogont?’

‘In Talins.’ And Monza spat into the dirt. There was plenty of it for the purpose. ‘Preparing for his coronation.’

‘So soon? He is aware Orso’s still alive, I suppose, and by all indications will be for some time yet? Isn’t there a saying about selling the lion’s skin before he’s killed?’

‘I’ve mentioned it. Many times.’

‘I can only imagine. The Serpent of Talins, counselling caution to the Duke of Delay. Sweet irony!’

‘Some good it’s done. He’s got every carpenter, clothier and jeweller in the city busy at the Senate House, making it ready for the ceremony.’

‘Sure the bloody place won’t fall in on him?’

‘We can hope,’ muttered Shivers.

‘It will bring to mind proud shadows of Styria’s Imperial past, apparently, ’ said Monza.

Cosca snorted. ‘That or the shameful collapse of Styria’s last effort at unity.’

‘I’ve mentioned that too. Many times.’

‘Ignored?’

‘Getting used to it.’

‘Ah, hubris! As a long-time sufferer myself I quickly recognise the symptoms.’

‘You’ll like this one, then.’ Monza couldn’t stop herself sneering. ‘He’s importing a thousand white songbirds from distant Thond.’

‘Only a thousand?’

‘Symbol of peace, apparently. They’ll be released over the crowd when he rises to greet them as King of Styria. And admirers from all across the Circle of the World – counts, dukes, princes and the God of the fucking Gurkish too for all I know – will applaud his gigantic opinion of himself, and fall over themselves to lick his fat arse.’

Cosca raised his brows. ‘Do I detect a souring of relations between Talins and Ospria?’

‘There’s something about crowns that makes men act like fools.’

‘One takes it you’ve mentioned that too?’

‘Until my throat’s sore, but surprisingly enough, he doesn’t want to hear it.’

‘Sounds quite the event. Shame I won’t be there.’

Monza frowned. ‘You won’t?’

‘Me? No, no, no. I’d only lower the tone. There are concerns about some shady deal done for the Dukedom of Visserine, would you believe.’

‘Never.’

‘Who knows how these far-fetched rumours get started? Besides, someone needs to keep Duke Orso company.’

She worked her tongue sourly round her mouth and spat again. ‘I hear the two of you have been chatting already.’

‘No more than small talk. Weather, wine, women, his impending destruction, you know the sort of thing. He said he would have my head. I replied I quite understood his enthusiasm, as I find it hugely useful myself. I was firm yet amusing throughout, in fact, while he was, in all honesty, somewhat peevish.’ Cosca waved one long finger around. ‘The siege, possibly, has him out of sorts.’

‘Nothing about you changing sides, then?’

‘Perhaps that would have been his next topic, but we were somewhat interrupted by some flatbow fire and an abortive assault upon the walls. Perhaps it will come up when we next take tea together?’

The trench opened into a dugout mostly covered with a plank ceiling, almost too low to stand under. Ladders leaned against the right-hand wall, ready for men to climb and join the attack. A good three score of armed and armoured mercenaries knelt ready to do just that. Cosca went bent over between their ranks, slapping backs.

‘Glory, boys, glory, and a decent pay-off!’

Their frowns turned to grins, they tapped their weapons against their shields, their helmets, their breastplates, sending up an approving rattle.

‘General!’

‘The captain general!’

‘Cosca!’

‘Boys, boys!’ He chuckled, thumping arms, shaking hands, giving out lazy salutes. All as far from her style of command as could’ve been. She’d had to stay cold, hard, untouchable, or there would have been no respect. A woman can’t afford the luxury of being friendly with the men. So she’d let Benna do the laughing for her. Probably why the laughter had been thin on the ground since Orso killed him.

‘And up here is my little home from home.’ Cosca led them up a ladder and into a kind of shed built from heavy logs, lit by a pair of flickering lamps. There was a wide opening in one wall, the setting sun casting its last glare over the dark, flat country to the west. Narrow windows faced towards the fortress. A stack of crates took up one corner, the captain general’s chair sat in another. Beside it a table was covered with a mess of scattered cards, half-eaten sweetmeats and bottles of varying colour and fullness. ‘How goes the fight?’

Friendly sat cross-legged, dice between his knees. ‘It goes.’

Monza moved to one of the narrow windows. It was almost night, now, and she could barely see any sign of the assault. Perhaps the odd flicker of movement at the tiny battlements, the odd glint of metal in the light of the bonfires scattered across the rocky slopes. But she could hear it. Vague shouting, faint screaming, clattering metal, floating indistinctly on the breeze.

Cosca slid into the battered captain general's chair and rattled the bottles by putting his muddy boots up on the table. 'We four, together again! Just like Cardotti's House of Leisure! Just like Salier's gallery! Happy times, eh?'

There was the creaking swoosh of a catapult released and a blazing missile sizzled overhead, shattered against the great foremost tower of the fortress, sending up a gout of flame, shooting out arcs of glittering embers. The dull flare illuminated ladders against the stonework, tiny figures crawling up them, steel glimmering briefly then fading back into the black.

'You sure this is the best time for jokes?' Monza muttered.

'Unhappy times are the best for levity. You don't light candles in the middle of the day, do you?'

Shivers was frowning up the slope towards Fontezarmo. 'You really think you've a chance of carrying those walls?'

'Those? Are you mad? They're some of the strongest in Styria.'

'Then why—'

'Bad form to just sit outside and do nothing. They have ample stocks of food, water, weapons and, worst of all, loyalty. They might last months in there. Months during which Orso's daughter, the Queen of the Union, might prevail upon her reluctant husband to send aid.' Monza wondered whether the king learning that his wife preferred women would make any difference . . .

'How's watching your men fall off a wall going to help?' asked Shivers.

Cosca shrugged. 'It will wear down the defenders, deny them rest, keep them guessing and distract them from any other efforts we might make.'

'Lot of corpses for a distraction.'

'Wouldn't be much of a distraction without them.'

'How do you get men to climb the ladders for that?'

'Sazine's old method.'

'Eh?'

Monza remembered Sazine displaying the money to the new boys, all laid out in sparkling stacks. 'If the walls fall, a thousand scales to the first man on the battlements, a hundred each to the next ten who follow him.'

'Provided they survive to collect the bounty,' Cosca added. 'If the task's impossible, they'll never collect, and if they do, well, you achieved the impossible for two thousand scales. It ensures a steady flow of willing

bodies up the ladders, and has the added benefit of weeding the bravest men out of the company to boot.'

Shivers looked even more baffled. 'Why would you want to do that?'

'"Bravery is the dead man's virtue,"' Monza muttered. '"The wise commander never trusts it."'

'Verturio!' Cosca slapped one leg. 'I do love an author who can make death funny! Brave men have their uses but they're damned unpredictable. Worrying to the herd. Dangerous to bystanders.'

'Not to mention potential rivals for command.'

'Altogether safest to cream them off,' and Cosca mimed the action with a careless flick of two fingers. 'The moderately cowardly make infinitely better soldiers.'

Shivers shook his head in disgust. 'You people got a pretty fucking way of making war.'

'There is no pretty way of making war, my friend.'

'You said a distraction,' cut in Monza.

'I did.'

'From what?'

There was a sudden fizzing sound and Monza saw fire out of the corner of her eye. A moment later the heat of it washed across her cheek. She spun, the Calvez already part-drawn. Ishri was draped across the crates behind them, sprawled out lazily as an old cat in the sun, head back, one long, thin, bandaged leg dangling from the edge of the boxes and swinging gently back and forth.

'Can't you ever just say hello?' snapped Monza.

'Where would be the fun in that?'

'Do you have to answer every question with another?'

Ishri pressed one hand to her bandaged chest, black eyes opening wide. 'Who? Me?' She rolled something between her long finger and thumb, a little black grain, and flicked it with uncanny accuracy into the lamp beside Shivers. It went up with a flash and sizzle, cracking the glass hood and spraying sparks. The Northman stumbled away, cursing, flicking embers off his shoulder.

'Some of the men have taken to calling it Gurkish sugar.' Cosca smacked his lips. 'Sounds sweeter, to my ear, than Gurkish fire.'

'Two dozen barrels,' murmured Ishri, 'courtesy of the Prophet Khalul.'

Monza frowned. ‘For a man I’ve never met he likes us a lot.’

‘Better yet . . .’ The dark-skinned woman slithered from the boxes like a snake, waves running through her body from shoulders down to hips as if she had no bones in her, arms trailing after. ‘He hates your enemies.’

‘No better basis for an alliance than mutual loathing.’ Cosca watched her contortions with an expression stuck between distrust and fascination. ‘It’s a brave new age, my friends. Time was you had to dig for months, hundreds of strides of mine, tons of wood for props, fill it up with straw and oil, set it on fire, run like merry hell, then half the time it wouldn’t even bring the walls down. This way, all you need do is sink a shaft deep enough, pack the sugar in, strike a spark and—’

‘Boom,’ sang Ishri, up on her toes and stretching to her fingertips.

‘Ker-blow,’ returned Cosca. ‘It’s how everyone’s conducting sieges these days, apparently, and who am I to ignore a trend . . .’ He flicked dust from his velvet jacket. ‘Sesaria’s a genius at mining. He brought down the bell tower at Gancetta, you know. Somewhat before schedule, admittedly, and a few men did get caught in the collapse. Did I ever tell you—’

‘If you bring the wall down?’ asked Monza.

‘Well, then our men pour through the breach, overwhelm the stunned defenders and the outer ward will be ours. From the gardens within we’ll have level ground to work with and room to bring our numbers to bear. Carrying the inner wall should be a routine matter of ladders, blood and greed. Then storm the palace and, you know, keep it traditional. I’ll get my plunder and you’ll get—’

‘My revenge.’ Monza narrowed her eyes at the jagged outline of the fortress. Orso was in there, somewhere. Only a few hundred strides away. Perhaps it was the night, the fire, the heady mixture of darkness and danger, but some of that old excitement was building in her now. That fierce fury she’d felt when she hobbled from the bone-thief’s crumbling house and into the rain. ‘How long until the mine’s ready?’

Friendly looked up from his dice. ‘Twenty-one days and six hours. At the rate they’re going.’

‘A shame.’ Ishri pushed out her bottom lip. ‘I so love fireworks. But I must go back to the South.’

‘Tired of our company already?’ asked Monza.

‘My brother was killed.’ Her black eyes showed no sign of emotion. ‘By a woman seeking vengeance.’

Monza frowned, not sure if she was being mocked or not. ‘Those bitches find a way of doing damage, don’t they?’

‘But always to the wrong people. My brother is the lucky one, he is with God. Or so they tell me. It is the rest of my family that suffer. We must work the harder now.’ She swung herself smoothly down onto the ladder, let her head fall sideways. Uncomfortably far, until it was resting on the top rung. ‘Try not to get yourselves killed. I do not intend that my hard work here be wasted.’

‘Your wasted work will be my first concern when they cut my throat.’ Nothing but silence. Ishri was gone.

‘Looks like you’ve run out of brave men,’ came Shivers’ croak.

Cosca sighed. ‘We didn’t have many to begin with.’ The remnants of the assault were scrambling back down the rocky mountainside in the flickering light of the fires above. Monza could just make out the last ladder toppling down, perhaps a dot or two flailing as they fell from it. ‘But don’t worry. Sesaria’s still digging. Just a matter of time until Styria stands united.’ He slid a metal flask from his inside pocket and unscrewed the cap. ‘Or until Orso sees sense, and offers me enough to change sides again.’

She didn’t laugh. Perhaps she wasn’t meant to. ‘Maybe you should try sticking to one side or the other.’

‘Why ever would anyone do that?’ Cosca raised his flask, took a sip and smacked his lips in satisfaction. ‘It’s a war. There is no right side.’

Preparation

Regardless of the nature of a great event, the key to success is always preparation. For three weeks, all Talins had been preparing for the coronation of Grand Duke Rogont. Meanwhile, Morveer had been preparing for an attempt to murder him and his allies. So much work had been put into both schemes that, now the day for their consummation had finally arrived, Morveer almost regretted that the success of one could only mean the spectacular failure of the other.

In all honesty, he had been having little success achieving even the smallest part of Duke Orso's immensely ambitious commission to murder no fewer than six heads of state and a captain general. His abortive attempt on the life of Murcatto the day of her triumphant return to Talins, resulting in nothing more than at least one poisoned commoner and a sore back, had been but the first of several mishaps.

Gaining entrance to one of Talins' finest dressmakers through a loose rear window, he had secreted a lethal Amerind thorn within the bodice of an emerald-green gown meant for Countess Cotarda of Affoia. Alas, Morveer's expertise in dressmaking was most limited. Had Day been there she would no doubt have pointed out that the garment was twice too large for their waifish victim. The countess emerged resplendent at a soirée that very evening, her emerald-green gown a sensation. Morveer afterwards discovered, much to his chagrin, that the exceedingly large wife of one of Talins' leading merchants had also commissioned a green gown from that dressmaker, but was prevented from attending the event by a mysterious illness. She swiftly deteriorated and, alas, expired within hours.

Five nights later, after an uncomfortable afternoon spent hiding inside a heap of coal and breathing through a tube, he had succeeded in loading Duke Lirozio's oysters with spider venom. Had Day been with him in the kitchen she might have suggested they aim for a more basic foodstuff, but Morveer could not resist the most noteworthy dish. The duke, alas, had felt queasy after a heavy lunch and took only a little bread. The shellfish were administered to the kitchen cat, now deceased.

The following week, posing once more as the Purantine wine-merchant Rotsac Reevrom, he insinuated himself into a meeting to discuss trade levies chaired by Chancellor Sotorius of Sipani. During the meal he struck up lively conversation with one of the ancient statesman's aides on the subject of grapes and was able, much to his delight, deftly to brush the top of Sotorius' withered ear with a solution of Leopard Flower. He had sat back with great enthusiasm to observe the rest of the meeting, but the chancellor had steadfastly refused to die, showing, in fact, every sign of being in the most rude health. Morveer could only assume that Sotorius observed a morning routine not dissimilar to his own, and possessed immunities to who knew how many agents.

But Castor Morveer was not a man to be put off by a few reverses. He had suffered many in life, and saw no reason to alter his formula of commendable stoicism simply because the task seemed impossible. With the coronation almost upon him, he had therefore chosen to focus on the principal targets: Grand Duke Rogont and his lover, Morveer's hated ex-employer, now the Grand Duchess of Talins, Monzcarro Murcatto.

It would have been a rank understatement to say that no expense had been spared to ensure the coronation lived long in Styria's collective memory. The buildings enclosing the square had all been freshly painted. The stone platform where Murcatto had administered her fumbling speech, and where Rogont planned to soak up the adulation of his subjects as King of Styria, had been surfaced with gleaming new marble and adorned with a gilded rail. Workmen crawled on ropes and scaffolds across the looming frontage of the Senate House, garlanding the ancient stonework with fresh-cut white flowers, transforming the sullen edifice into a mighty temple to the Grand Duke of Ospria's vanity.

Working in dispiriting solitude, Morveer had appropriated the clothes, toolbox and documentation of a journeyman carpenter who had arrived in the city looking for piecework, and hence would be missed by nobody. Yesterday he had infiltrated the Senate House in this ingenious disguise to reconnoitre the scene and formulate a plan. While doing so, just as a bonus, he had carried out some challenging jointing work to a balustrade with almost conspicuous skill. Truly, he was a loss to carpentry, but he had in no way lost sight of the fact that his primary profession remained murder.

Today he had returned to execute his audacious scheme. And to execute Grand Duke Rogont, both together.

'Afternoon,' he grunted to one of the guards as he passed through the vast doorway along with the rest of the labourers returning from lunch, crunching carelessly at an apple with the surly manner he had often observed in common men on their way to labour. Caution first, always, but when attempting to fool someone, supreme confidence and simplicity was the approach that bore the ripest fruit. He excited, in fact, no attention whatsoever from the guards, either at the gate or at the far end of the vestibule. He stripped the core of his apple and tossed it into his workbox, with only the faintest maudlin moment spent reflecting on how much Day would have enjoyed it.

The Senate House was open to the sky, the great dome having collapsed long centuries ago. Three-quarters of the tremendous circular space was filled with concentric arcs of seating, enough for two thousand or more of the world's most honoured spectators. Each marble step was lower than the one behind, so that they formed a kind of theatre, with a space before them where the senators of old had once risen to make their grand addresses. A round platform had been built there now, of inlaid wood painted in meticulous detail with gilded wreaths of oak leaves about a gaudy golden chair.

Great banners of vividly coloured Suljuk silk hung down the full height of the walls, some thirty strides or more, at a cost Morveer hardly dared contemplate, one for each of the great cities of Styria. The azure cloth of Ospria, marked with the white tower, had pride of place, directly behind the central platform. The cross of Talins and the cockleshell of Sipani flanked it upon either side. Arranged evenly about the rest of the circumference were the bridge of Puranti, the red banner of Affoia, the three bees of Visserine, the six rings of Nicante, and the giant flags of Muris, Etrisani, Etrea, Borletta and Caprile besides. No one, it seemed, was to be excluded from the proud new order, whether they desired membership or not.

The whole space crawled with men and women hard at work. Tailors plucked at the hangings and the miles of white cushions provided for the comfort of the most honoured guests. Carpenters sawed and hammered at the platform and the stairways. Flower-sellers scattered the unused floor with a carpet of white blossom. Chandlers carefully positioned their waxen

wares in endless rows, teetered on ladders to reach a hundred sconces. All overseen by a regiment of Osprian guardsmen, halberds and armour buffed to mirror brightness.

For Rogont to choose to be crowned here, in the ancient heart of the New Empire? The arrogance was incalculable, and if there was one quality Morveer could not abide, it was arrogance. Humility, after all, cost nothing. He concealed his profound disgust and made his way nonchalantly down the steps, affecting the self-satisfied swagger of the working commoner, weaving through the other tradesmen busy among the curving banks of seating.

At the back of the great chamber, perhaps ten strides above the ground, were two small balconies in which, he believed, scribes had once recorded the debates beneath. Now they were adorned by two immense portraits of Duke Rogont. One showed him stern and manful, heroically posed with sword and armour. The other depicted his Excellency in pensive mood, attired as a judge, holding book and compass. The master of peace and war. Morveer could not suppress a mocking smirk. Up there, in one of those two balconies, would be the fitting spot from which to shoot a dart lethal enough to deflate that idiot's swollen head and puncture his all-vaulting ambitions. They were reached by narrow stairways from a small, unused chamber, where records had been kept in ancient—

He frowned. Though it stood open, a heavy door, thick oak intricately bound and studded with polished steel, had been installed across the entrance of the anteroom. He in no way cared for such an alteration at this late stage. Indeed his first instinct was simply to place caution first and quietly depart, as he had often done before when circumstances appeared to shift. But men did not secure their place in history with caution alone. The venue, the challenge, the potential rewards were too great to let slip on account of a new door. History was breathing upon his neck. For tonight only his name would be audacity.

He strode past the platform, where a dozen decorators were busily applying gilt paint, and to the door. He swung it one way then the other, lips pursed discerningly as if checking the smooth workings of its hinges. Then, with the swiftest and least conspicuous of glances to ensure he was unobserved, he slipped through.

There were neither windows nor lamps within, the only light in the vaulted chamber crept through the door or down the two coiling stairways. Empty boxes and barrels were scattered in disorderly heaps about the walls. He was just deciding which balcony to choose as his shooting position when he heard voices approaching the door. He slid quickly on his side into the narrow space behind a stack of crates, squeaked as he picked up a painful splinter in his elbow, remembered his workbox just in time and fished it after him with one foot. A moment later the door squealed open and scraping boots entered the room, men groaning as though under a dolorous load.

'By the Fates, it's heavy!'

'Set it here!' A noisy clatter and squeal of metal on stone. 'Bastard thing.'

'Where's the key?'

'Here.'

'Leave it in the lock.'

'And what, pray, is the purpose of a lock with the key in it?'

'To present no obstacle, idiot. When we bring the damn case out there in front of three thousand people, and his Excellency tells us to open it up, I don't want to be looking at you and asking where the key is, and you find you dropped the fucker somewhere. See what I mean?'

'You've a point.'

'It'll be safer in here, in a barred room with a dozen guards at the door, than in your dodgy pockets.'

'I'm convinced.' There was a gentle rattle of metal. 'There. Satisfied?'

Several sets of footsteps clattered away. There was the heavy clunk of the door being swung shut, the clicking of locks turned, the squealing of a bar, then silence. Morveer was sealed into a room with a dozen guards outside. But that alone struck no fear into a man of his exceptional fortitude. When the vital moment came, he would lower a cord from one of the balconies and hope to slip away while every eye was focused on Rogont's spectacular demise. With the greatest of care to avoid any further splinters, he wriggled out from behind the crates.

A large case had been placed in the centre of the floor. A work of art in itself, fashioned from inlaid wood, bound with bands of filigree silver, glimmering in the gloom. Plainly it contained something of great

importance to the coming ceremony. And since chance had provided him the key . . .

He knelt, turned it smoothly in the lock and with gentle fingers pushed back the lid. It took a great deal to impress a man of Morveer's experience, but now his eyes widened, his jaw dropped and sweat prickled at his scalp. The yellow sheen of gold almost warmed his skin, yet there was something more in his reaction than appreciation of the beauty, the symbolic significance or even the undoubted value of the object before him. Something teasing at the back of his mind . . .

Inspiration struck like lightning, making every hair upon his body suddenly stand tall. An idea of such scintillating brilliance, yet such penetrating simplicity, that he found himself almost in fear of it. The magnificent daring, the wonderful economy, the perfectly fitting irony. He only wished Day had lived to appreciate his genius.

Morveer triggered the hidden catch in his workman's box and removed the tray carrying the carpenter's equipment, revealing the carefully folded silken shirt and embroidered jacket in which he would make his escape. His true tools lay beneath. He carefully pulled on the gloves – lady's gloves of the finest calfskin, for they offered the least resistance to the dextrous operation of his fingers – and reached for the brown glass jar. He reached for it with some trepidation, for it contained a contact venom of his own devising which he called Preparation Number Twelve. There would be no repetition of his error with Chancellor Sotorius, for this was a poison so deadly that not even Morveer himself could develop the slightest immunity to it.

He carefully unscrewed the cap – caution first, always – and, taking up an artist's brush, began to work.

Rules of War

Cosca crept down the tunnel, knees and back aching fiercely from bending almost double, snatched breath echoing on the stale air. He had become far too accustomed to no greater exertions than sitting around and working his jaw over the last few weeks. He swore a silent oath to take exercise every morning, knowing full well he would never keep it even until tomorrow. Still, it was better to swear an oath and never follow through than not even to bother with the oath. Wasn't it?

His trailing sword scratched soil from the dirt walls with every step. Should have left the bloody thing behind. He peered down nervously at the glittering trail of black powder that snaked off into the shadows, holding his flickering lamp as far away as possible, for all it was made of thick glass and weighty cast iron. Naked flames and Gurkish sugar made unhappy companions in a confined space.

He saw flickering light ahead, heard the sounds of someone else's laboured breath, and the narrow passageway opened out into a chamber lit by a pair of guttering lamps. It was no bigger than a good-sized bedroom, walls and ceiling of scarred rock and hard-packed earth, held up by a web of suspect-looking timbers. More than half the room, or the cave, was taken up by large barrels. A single Gurkish word was painted on the side of each one. Cosca's Kantic did not extend far beyond ordering a drink, but he recognised the characters for fire. Sesaria was a great dark shape in the gloom, long ropes of grey hair hanging about his face, beads of sweat glistening on his black skin as he strained at a keg.

'It's time,' said Cosca, his voice falling flat in the dead air under the mountain. He straightened up with great relief, was hit with a dizzy rush of blood to the head and stumbled sideways.

'Watch!' screeched Sesaria. 'What you're doing with that lamp, Cosca! A spark in the wrong place and the pair of us'll be blown to heaven!'

'Don't let that worry you.' He regained control of his feet. 'I'm not a religious man, but I very much doubt anyone will be letting either of us near heaven.'

'Blown to hell, then.'

‘A much stronger possibility.’

Sesaria grunted as he ever so gingerly shifted the last of the barrels up tight to the rest. ‘All the others out?’

‘They should be back in the trenches by now.’

The big man wiped his hands on his grimy shirt. ‘Then we’re ready, General.’

‘Excellent. These last few days have positively crawled. It’s a crime, when you think about how little time we get, that a man should ever be bored. When you’re lying on your deathbed, I expect you regret those weeks wasted more than your worst mistakes.’

‘You should have said if you had nothing pressing. We could have used your help digging.’

‘At my age? The only place I’ll be moving soil is on the latrine. And even that’s a lot more work than it used to be. What happens now?’

‘I hear it only gets harder.’

‘Very good. I meant with the mine.’

Sesaria pointed to the trail of black powder, grains gleaming in the lamplight, stopping well short of the nearest keg. ‘That leads to the entrance to the mine.’ He patted a bag at his belt. ‘We join it up to the barrels, leave plenty of extra at the end to make sure it takes. We get to the mouth of the tunnel, we set a spark to one end, then—’

‘The fire follows it all the way to the barrels and . . . how big will the explosion be?’

Sesaria shook his head. ‘Never seen a quarter as much powder used at one time. That and they keep mixing it stronger. This new stuff . . . I have a worry it might be too big.’

‘Better a grand gesture than a disappointing one.’

‘Unless it brings the whole mountain down on us.’

‘It could do that?’

‘Who knows what it’ll do?’

Cosca considered the thousands of tons of rock above their heads without enthusiasm. ‘It’s a little late for second thoughts. Victus has his picked men ready for the assault. Rogont will be king tonight, and he’s expecting to honour us with his majestic presence at dawn, and very much inside the fortress so he can order the final attack. I’m damned if I’m going to spend my morning listening to that fool whine at me. Especially with a crown on.’

‘You think he’ll wear it, day to day?’

Cosca scratched thoughtfully at his neck. ‘Do you know, I’ve no idea. But it’s somewhat beside the point.’

‘True.’ Sesaria frowned at the barrels. ‘Doesn’t seem right, somehow. You dig a hole, you touch a torch to some dust, you run and—’

‘Pop,’ said Cosca.

‘No need for thinking. No need for courage. No way to fight, if you’re asking me.’

‘The only good way to fight is the one that kills your enemy and leaves you with the breath to laugh. If science can simplify the process, well, so much the better. Everything else is flimflam. Let’s get started.’

‘I hear my captain general and obey.’ Sesaria pulled the bag from his belt, bent down and started carefully tipping powder out, joining the trail up to the barrels. ‘Got to think about how you’d feel, though, haven’t you?’

‘Have you?’

‘One moment you’re going about your business, the next you’re blasted to bits. Never get to even look your killer in his face.’

‘No different from giving others the orders. Is killing a man with powder any worse than getting someone else to stab him with a spear? When exactly did you last look a man in the face?’ Not when he’d happily helped stab Cosca in the back at Afieri, that was sure.

Sesaria sighed, powder trickling out across the ground. ‘True, maybe. But sometimes I miss the old days, you know. Back when Sazine was in charge. Seemed like a different world, then. A more honest world.’

Cosca snorted. ‘You know as well as I do there wasn’t a dirty trick this side of hell Sazine would have balked at using. That old miser would have blown the world up if he thought a penny would fall out.’

‘Daresay you’ve the truth of it. Doesn’t seem fair, though.’

‘I never realised you were such an enthusiast for fair.’

‘It’s no deal-breaker, but I’d rather win a fair fight than an unfair one.’ He upended the bag, the last powder sliding out and leaving a glittering heap right against the side of the nearest barrel. ‘Leaves a better taste, somehow, fighting by some kind of rules.’

‘Huh.’ Cosca clubbed him across the back of the head with his lamp, sending up a shower of sparks and knocking Sesaria sprawling on his face. ‘This is war. There are no rules.’ The big man groaned, shifted, struggled

weakly to push himself up. Cosca leaned down, raised the lamp high and bashed him on the skull again with a crunching of breaking glass, knocked him flat, embers sizzling in his hair. A little closer to the powder than was comfortable, perhaps, but Cosca had always loved to gamble.

He had always loved triumphant rhetoric too, but time was a factor. So he turned for the shadowy passageway and hurried down it. A dozen cramped strides and he was already breathing hard again. A dozen more and he thought he caught the faintest glimmer of daylight up the tunnel. He knelt down, chewing at his lip. He was far from sure how fast the trail would burn once it was lit.

'Good thing I always loved to gamble . . .' He carefully began to unscrew the broken cage around the lamp. It was stuck.

'Shit.' He strained at it, fingers slipping, but it must have got bent when he clubbed Sesaria. 'Bastard thing!' He shifted his grip, growled as he twisted with all his force. The top popped off suddenly, he fumbled both halves, the lamp dropped, he tried to catch it, missed, it hit the floor, bounced, guttered and went out, sinking the passageway into inky darkness.

'Fucking . . . shit!' His only option was to retrace his steps and get one of the lamps from the end of the tunnel. He took a few steps, one hand stretched out in front of him, fishing in the black. A beam caught him right in the face, snapped his head back, mouth buzzing, salty with blood. 'Gah!'

He saw light, shook his throbbing head, strained into the darkness. Lamplight, catching the grain of the props, the stones and roots in the walls, making the snaking trail of powder glisten. Lamplight, and unless he had completely lost his bearings, it was coming from where he had left Sesaria.

Bringing his sword seemed suddenly to have been a stroke of genius. He slid it gently from its sheath with a reassuring ring of metal, had to work his elbow this way and that in the narrow space to get it pointing forwards, accidentally stuck the ceiling with the point and caused a long rivulet of soil to pour gently down onto his bald patch. All the while the light crept closer.

Sesaria appeared around the bend, lamp in one big fist, a line of blood creeping down his forehead. They faced one other for a moment, Cosca crouching, Sesaria bent double.

'Why?' grunted the big man.

'Because I make a point of never letting a man betray me twice.'

'I thought you were all business.'

‘Men change.’

‘You killed Andiche.’

‘Best moment of the last ten years.’

Sesaria shook his head, as much puzzled as angry and in pain. ‘Murcatto was the one took your chair, not us!’

‘Entirely different matter. Women can betray me as often as they please.’

‘You always did have a blind spot for that mad bitch.’

‘I’m an incurable romantic. Or maybe I just never liked you.’

Sesaria slid a heavy knife out in his free hand. ‘You should’ve stabbed me back there.’

‘I’m glad I didn’t. Now I get to use another clever line.’

‘Don’t suppose you’d consider putting that sword away and fighting knife to knife?’

Cosca gave a cackle. ‘You’re the one who likes things fair. I tried to kill you by clubbing you from behind then blowing you up, remember? Stabbing you with a sword will give me no sleepless nights.’ And he lunged.

In such a confined space, being a big man was a profound disadvantage. Sesaria almost entirely filled the narrow tunnel, which made him, fortunately, more or less impossible to miss. He managed to steer the clumsy jab away with his knife, but it still pricked him in the shoulder. Cosca pulled back for another thrust, squawked as he caught his knuckles on the earth wall. Sesaria swung his heavy lamp at him and Cosca flopped away, slipped and went over on one knee. The big man scrambled forwards, raising the knife. His fist scraped on the ceiling, bringing down a shower of earth, his knife thudded deep into a beam above. He mouthed some curse in Kantic, wincing as he struggled to drag the blade free. Cosca righted himself and made another clumsy lunge. Sesaria’s eyes bulged as the point punctured his shirt and slid smoothly through his chest.

‘There!’ Cosca snarled in his face. ‘Do you get . . . my point?’

Sesaria lurched forwards, groaning bloody drool, face locked in a desperate grimace, the blade sliding inexorably through him until the hilt got tangled with his sticky shirt. He seized hold of Cosca and toppled over, bearing him down on his back, the pommel of the sword digging savagely into his stomach and driving all his breath out in a creaking, ‘Ooooooooof.’

Sesaria curled back his lips to show red teeth. ‘You call . . . that . . . a clever line?’ He smashed his lamp down into the trail of powder beside Cosca’s face. Glass shattered, flame leaped up, there was a fizzling pop as the powder caught, the heat of it near to burning Cosca’s cheek. He struggled with Sesaria’s great limp body, struggled to untwist his fingers from the gilded basketwork of his sword, desperately tried to wrestle the big corpse sideways. His nose was full of the acrid reek of Gurkish sugar, snapping sparks moving off slowly down the passage.

He finally dragged himself free, clambered up and ran for the entrance, breath wheezing in his chest, one hand trailing along the dirt wall, knocking against the props. An oval of daylight appeared, wobbled steadily closer. He gave vent to a foolish giggle as he wondered whether it would be this moment or the next that saw the rock he was tottering through a mile in the sky. He burst out into open air.

‘Run!’ he screeched at no one, flinging his hands wildly around. ‘Run!’ He pounded down the hillside, tripped, fell, rolled head over heels, bounced painfully from a rock, struggled up and carried on scrambling in a cloud of dust, loose stones clattering around him. The wicker shields that marked the nearest trench crept closer and he charged towards them, screaming madly at the top of his voice. He flung himself onto his face, slid along in the dirt, crashed between two screens and headlong down into the trench in a shower of loose soil.

Victus stared at him as he struggled to right himself. ‘What the—’

‘Take cover!’ wailed Cosca. All around him armour rattled as men shrank down into their trenches, raised their shields over their heads, clapped their gauntleted hands over their ears, squeezed their eyes tight shut in anticipation of an explosion to end the world. Cosca jammed himself back against the hard-packed earth, teeth squeezed together, clasping his hands around his skull.

The silent moments stretched out.

Cosca prised one eye open. A bright-blue butterfly fluttered heedlessly down, circled widdershins around the cowering mercenaries and came peacefully to rest on the blade of a spear. Victus himself had his helmet pushed right down over his face. Now he slowly tipped it back to display an expression of some confusion.

‘What the hell happened? Is the fuse lit? Where’s Sesaria?’

A sudden image formed in Cosca's mind of the trail of powder sputtering out, of Victus' men creeping into the murky darkness, lamps raised, their light falling across Sesaria's corpse, impaled on a sword with unmistakable gilded basketwork. 'Erm . . .'

The very faintest of tremors touched the earth at Cosca's back. A moment later there was a thunderous detonation, so loud that it sent pain lancing through his head. The world went suddenly, entirely silent but for a faint, high-pitched whine. The earth shook. Wind ripped and eddied along the trench, tearing at his hair and nearly dragging him over. A cloud of choking dust filled the air, nipping at his lungs and making him cough. Gravel rained down from the sky, he gasped as he felt it sting at his arms, at his scalp. He cowered like a man caught out in a hurricane, every muscle tensed. For how long, he was not sure.

Cosca opened his eyes, dumbly uncurled his aching limbs and got weakly to his feet. The world was a ghost-place of silent fog. The land of the dead, surely, men and equipment no more than phantoms in the murk. The mist began to clear. He rubbed at his ears but the whining continued. Others got up, staring around, faces caked with grey dirt. Not far away someone lay still in a puddle in the bottom of a trench, his helmet stoved in by a chunk of rock, steered by the fickle Fates directly onto his head. Cosca peered over the lip of the trench, blinked up towards the summit of the mountain, straining through the gradually settling dust.

'Oh.' The wall of Fontezarmo appeared undamaged, the outline of towers and battlements still very much present against the lead-white sky. A vast crater had been blown from the rock, but the great round tower directly above it still clung stubbornly to the edge, even slightly overhanging empty space. It seemed for a moment to be perhaps the most crushing anticlimax of Cosca's life, and there had been many.

Then, in dreamlike silence and with syrupy slowness, that central tower leaned, buckled, fell in on itself and collapsed into the yawning crater. A huge section of wall to either side of it was dragged after, all folding up and dissolving into rubble under its own weight. A man-made landslide of hundreds of tons of stone rolled, bounced, crashed down towards the trenches.

'Ah,' said Cosca, silently.

For a second time men flung themselves on their faces, covered their heads, prayed to the Fates or whichever of a range of gods and spirits they did or did not believe in for deliverance. Cosca stayed standing, staring fascinated as a giant chunk of masonry perhaps ten tons in weight hurtled down the slope directly towards him, bouncing, spinning, flinging pieces of stone high into the air, all without the slightest sound but for perhaps a vague crunching, like footsteps on gravel. It came to an eventual stop no more than ten strides distant, rocked gently to one side and the other, and was still.

A second cloud of dust had plunged the trench into choking gloom, but as it gradually faded Cosca could see the vast breach left in the outer wall of Fontezarmo, no fewer than two hundred strides across, the crater beneath it now choked with settling rubble. A second tower at its edge leaned at an alarming angle, like a drunken man peering over a cliff, ready at any moment to topple into emptiness.

He saw Victus stand beside him, raise his sword and scream. The word didn't sound much louder than if he had spoken it.

'Charge.'

Men clambered, somewhat dazed, from the trenches. One took a couple of wobbling steps and fell on his face. Others stood there, blinking. Still others began to head uncertainly uphill. More followed, and soon there were a few hundred men scrambling through the rubble towards the breach, weapons and armour shining dully in the watery sun.

Cosca was left alone in the trench with Victus, both of them coated with grey dust.

'Where's Sesaria?' The words thudding dully through the whine in Cosca's ears.

His own voice was a weird burble. 'He wasn't behind me?'

'No. What happened?'

'An accident. An accident . . . as we came out.' It wasn't difficult to force out a tear, Cosca was covered head to toe in knocks and bruises. 'I dropped my lamp! Dropped it! Set off the trail of powder halfway down!' He seized Victus by his fluted breastplate. 'I told him to run with me, but he stayed! Stayed . . . to put it out.'

'He stayed?'

‘He thought he could save us both!’ Cosca put one hand over his face, voice choked with emotion. ‘My fault! All my fault. He truly was the best of us.’ He wailed it at the sky. ‘Why? Why? Why do the Fates always take the best?’

Victus’ eyes flickered down to Cosca’s empty scabbard, then back up to the great crater in the hillside, the yawning breach above it. ‘Dead, eh?’

‘Blown to hell,’ whispered Cosca. ‘Baking with Gurkish sugar can be a dangerous business.’ The sun had come out. Above them, Victus’ men were clambering up the sides of the crater and into the breach in a twinkling tide, apparently entirely unopposed. If any defenders had survived the blast, they were in no mood to fight. It seemed the outer ward of Fontezarmo was theirs. ‘Victory. At least Sesaria’s sacrifice was not in vain.’

‘Oh, no.’ Victus looked sideways at him through narrowed eyes. ‘He’d have been proud.’

One Nation

The echoing grumble of the crowd on the other side of the doors grew steadily louder, and the churning in Monza's guts grew with it. She tried to rub away the niggling tension under her jaw. It did no good. But there was nothing to do except wait. Her entire role in tonight's grand performance was to stand there with a straight face and look like the highest of nobility, and Talins' best dressmakers had done all the hard work in making that ludicrous lie seem convincing. They'd given her long sleeves to cover the scars on her arms, a high collar to cover the scars on her neck, gloves to render her ruined hand presentable. They'd been greatly relieved they could keep her neckline low without horrifying Rogont's delicate guests. It was a wonder they hadn't cut a great hole out of the back to show her arse – it was about the only other patch of her skin without a mark across it.

Nothing could be seen that might spoil the perfection of Duke Rogont's moment of history. No sword, certainly, and she missed the weight of it like a missing limb. She wondered when was the last time she'd stepped out without a blade in easy reach. Not in the meeting of the Council of Talins she'd attended the day after being lifted to her new station.

Old Rubine had suggested she had no need to wear a sword in the chamber. She replied she'd worn one every day for twenty years. He'd politely pointed out that neither he nor his colleagues carried arms, though they were all men and hence better suited. She asked him what she'd use to stab him with if she left her sword behind. No one was sure whether she was joking or not. But they didn't ask again.

'Your Excellency.' One of the attendants had oozed over and now offered her a silky bow. 'Your Grace,' and another to Countess Cotarda. 'We are about to begin.'

'Good,' snapped Monza. She faced the double doors, shifted her shoulders back and her chin up. 'Let's get this fucking pantomime over with.'

She had no time to spare. Every waking moment of the last three weeks – and she'd scarcely slept since Rogont jammed the circlet on her head – she'd spent struggling to drag the state of Talins out of the cesspit she'd fought so hard to shove it into.

Keeping in mind Bialoveld's maxim – any successful state is supported by pillars of steel and gold – she'd dug out every cringing bureaucrat she could find who wasn't besieged in Fontezarmo along with their old master. There'd been discussions about the Talinese army. There wasn't one. Discussions about the treasury. It was empty. The system of taxation, the maintenance of public works, the preservation of security, the administration of justice, all dissolved like cake in a stream. Rogont's presence, or that of his soldiers anyway, was all that was keeping Talins from anarchy.

But Monza had never been put off by a wind in the wrong direction. She'd always had a knack for reckoning a man's qualities, and picking the right one for a given job. Old Rubine was pompous as a prophet, so she made him high magistrate. Grulo and Scavier were the two most ruthless merchants in the city. She didn't trust either, so she made them joint chancellors, and set each one to dream up new taxes, compete in their collection while keeping one jealous eye on the other.

Already they were wringing money from their unhappy colleagues, and already Monza had spent it on arms.

Three long days into her unpromising rule, an old sergeant called Volfier had arrived in the city, a man almost laughably hardbitten, and nearly as scarred as she was. Refusing to surrender, he'd led the twenty-three survivors of his regiment back from the rout at Ospria and all the way across Styria with arms and honour intact. She could always use a man that bloody-minded, and set him to rounding up every veteran in the city. Paying work was thin on the ground and he already had two companies of volunteers, their glorious charge to escort the tax collectors and make sure not a copper went missing.

She'd marked Duke Orso's lessons well. Gold, to steel, to more gold – such was the righteous spiral of politics. Resistance, apathy and scorn from all quarters only made her shove harder. She took a perverse satisfaction in the apparent impossibility of the task, the work pushed the pain to one side, and the husk with it, and kept her sharp. It had been a long, long time since she'd made anything grow.

'You look . . . very beautiful.'

'What?' Cotarda had glided up silently beside her and was offering a nervous smile. 'Oh. Likewise,' grunted Monza, barely even looking.

‘White suits you. They tell me I’m too pale for white.’ Monza winced. Just the kind of mindless twittering she had no stomach for tonight. ‘I wish I was like you.’

‘Some time in the sun would do it.’

‘No, no. Brave.’ Cotarda looked down at her pale fingers, twisting them together. ‘I wish I was brave. They tell me I’m powerful. One would have thought being powerful would mean one need not be scared of anything. But I’m afraid all the time. Especially at events.’ The words spilled out of her to Monza’s mounting discomfort. ‘Sometimes I can’t move for the weight of it. All the fear. I’m such a disappointment. What can I do about that? What would you do?’

Monza had no intention of discussing her own fears. That would only feed them. But Cotarda blathered on regardless.

‘I’ve no character at all, but where does one get character from? Either you have it or you don’t. You have. Everyone says you have. Where did you get it? Why don’t I have any? Sometimes I think I’m cut out of paper, just acting like a person. They tell me I’m an utter coward. What can I do about that? Being an utter coward?’

They stared at each other for a long moment, then Monza shrugged. ‘Act like you’re not.’

The doors were pulled open.

Musicians somewhere out of sight struck up a stately refrain as she and Cotarda stepped out into the vast bowl of the Senate House. Though there was no roof, though the stars would soon show in the blue-black sky above, it was hot. Hot, and clammy as a tomb, and the perfumed stink of flowers caught at Monza’s tight throat and made her want to retch. Thousands of candles burned in the darkness, filling the great arena with creeping shadows, making gilt glimmer, gems glitter, turning the hundreds upon hundreds of smiling faces that soared up on all sides into leering masks. Everything was outsize – the crowd, the rustling banners behind them, the venue itself. Everything was overdone, like a scene from a lurid fantasy.

A hell of a lot of effort just to watch one man put on a new hat.

The audience were a varied lot. Styrians made up the bulk, rich and powerful men and women, merchants and minor nobility from across the land. A smattering of famous artists, diplomats, poets, craftsmen, soldiers – Rogont wanted no one excluded who might reflect some extra glory onto

him. Guests from abroad occupied most of the better seats, down near the front, come to pay their respects to the new King of Styria, or to try to wangle some advantage from his elevation, at least. There were merchant captains of the Thousand Isles with golden hoops through their ears. There were heavy-bearded Northmen, bright-eyed Baolish. There were natives of Suljuk in vivid silks, a pair of priestesses from Thond where they worshipped the sun, heads shaved to yellow stubble. There were three nervous-seeming Aldermen of Westport. The Union, unsurprisingly, was notable by its utter absence, but the Gurkish delegation had willingly spread out to fill their space. A dozen ambassadors from the Emperor Uthman-ul-Dosht, heavy with gold. A dozen priests from the Prophet Khalul, in sober white.

Monza walked through them all as if they weren't there, shoulders back, eyes fixed ahead, the cold sneer on her mouth she'd always worn when she was most terrified. Lirozio and Patine approached with equal pomposity down a walkway opposite. Sotorius waited by the chair that was the golden centrepiece of the entire event, leaning heavily on a staff. The old man had sworn he'd be consigned to hell before he walked down a ramp.

They reached the circular platform, gathering under the expectant gaze of several thousand pairs of eyes. The five great leaders of Styria who'd enjoy the honour of crowning Rogont, all dressed with a symbolism that a mushroom couldn't have missed. Monza was in pearly white, with the cross of Talins across her chest in sparkling fragments of black crystal. Cotarda wore Affoian scarlet. Sotorius had golden cockleshells around the hem of his black gown, Lirozio the bridge of Puranti on his gilded cape. They were like bad actors representing the cities of Styria in some cheap morality play, except at vast expense. Even Patine had shed any pretence at humility, and swapped his rough-spun peasant cloth for green silk, fur and sparkling jewels. Six rings were the symbol of Nicante, but he must have been sporting nine at the least, one with an emerald the size of Friendly's dice.

At close quarters, none of them looked particularly pleased with their role. Like a group who'd agreed, while blind drunk, to jump into the freezing sea in the morning but now, with the sober dawn, were thinking better of it.

'Well,' grunted Monza, as the musicians brought their piece to an end and the last notes faded. 'Here we are.'

‘Indeed.’ Sotorius swept the murmuring crowd with rheumy eyes. ‘Let us hope the crown is large. Here comes the biggest head in Styria.’

An ear-splitting fanfare blasted out from behind. Cotarda flinched, stumbled, would’ve fallen if Monza hadn’t seized her elbow on an instinct. The doors at the very back of the hall were opened, and as the blaring sound of trumpets faded a strange singing began, a pair of voices, high and pure, floating out over the audience. Rogont stepped smiling through into the Senate House, and his guests broke out into well-organised applause.

The king-in-waiting, all in Osprian blue, looked about him with humble surprise as he began to descend the steps. All this, for me? You shouldn’t have! When of course he’d planned every detail himself. Monza wondered for a moment, and not for the first time, whether Rogont would turn out to be a far worse king than Orso might’ve been. No less ruthless, no more loyal, but a lot more vain, and less sense of humour every day. He pressed favoured hands in his, laying a generous palm on a lucky shoulder or two as he passed. The unearthly singing serenaded him as he came through the crowd.

‘Can I hear spirits?’ muttered Patine, with withering scorn.

‘You can hear boys with no balls,’ replied Lirozio.

Four men in Osprian livery unlocked a heavy door behind the platform and passed inside, came out shortly afterwards struggling under the weight of an inlaid case. Rogont made a swift pass around the front row, pressing the hands of a few chosen ambassadors, paying particular attention to the Gurkish delegation and stretching the applause to breaking point. Finally he mounted the steps to the platform, smiling the way the winner of a vital hand of cards smiles at his ruined opponents. He held his arms out to the five of them. ‘My friends, my friends! The day is finally here!’

‘It is,’ said Sotorius, simply.

‘Happy day!’ sang Lirozio.

‘Long hoped for!’ added Patine.

‘Well done?’ offered Cotarda.

‘My thanks to you all.’ Rogont turned to face his guests, silenced their clapping with a gentle motion of his hands, swept his cloak out behind him, lowered himself into his chair and beckoned Monza over. ‘No congratulations from you, your Excellency?’

‘Congratulations,’ she hissed.

‘As graceful as always.’ He leaned closer, murmuring under his breath. ‘You did not come to me last night.’

‘Other commitments.’

‘Truly?’ Rogont raised his brows as though amazed that anything could possibly be more important than fucking him. ‘I suppose a head of state has many demands upon her time. Well.’ He waved her scornfully away.

Monza ground her teeth. At that moment, she would’ve been more than willing to piss on him.

The four porters set down their burden behind the throne, one of them turned the key in the lock and lifted the lid with a showy flourish. A sigh went up from the crowd. The crown lay on purple velvet inside. A thick band of gold, set all around with a row of darkly gleaming sapphires. Five golden oak leaves sprouted from it, and at the front a larger sixth curled about a monstrous, flashing diamond, big as a chicken’s egg. So large Monza felt a strange desire to laugh at it.

With the expression of a man about to clear a blocked latrine with his hand, Lirozio reached into the case and grasped one of the golden leaves. A resigned shrug of the shoulders and Patine did the same. Then Sotorius and Cotarda. Monza took hold of the last in her gloved right fist, poking little finger looking no better for being sheathed in white silk. She glanced across the faces of her supposed peers. Two forced smiles, a slight sneer and an outright scowl. She wondered how long it would take for these proud princes, so used to being their own masters, to tire of this less favourable arrangement.

By the look of things, the yoke was already starting to chafe.

Together, the five of them lifted the crown and took a few lurching steps forwards, Sotorius having to awkwardly negotiate the case, dragging each other clumsily about by the priceless symbol of majesty. They made it to the chair, and between them raised the crown high over Rogont’s head. They paused there for a moment, as if by mutual agreement, perhaps wondering if there was still some way out of this. The whole great space was eerily silent, every man and woman holding their breath. Then Sotorius gave a resigned nod, and together the five of them lowered the crown, seated it carefully on Rogont’s skull and stepped away.

Styria, it seemed, was one nation.

Its king rose slowly from the chair and spread his arms wide, palms open, staring straight ahead as though he could see right through the ancient walls of the Senate House and into a brilliant future.

'Our fellow Styrians!' he bellowed, voice ringing from the stones. 'Our humble subjects! And our friends from abroad, all welcome here!' Mostly Gurkish friends, but since the Prophet had stretched to such a large diamond for his crown . . . 'The Years of Blood are at an end!' Or they soon would be, once Monza had spilled Orso's. 'No longer will the great cities of our proud land struggle one against the other!' That remained to be seen. 'But will stand as brothers eternal, bound willingly by happy ties of friendship, of culture, of common heritage. Marching together!' In whatever direction Rogont dictated, presumably. 'It is as if . . . Styria wakes from a nightmare. A nightmare nineteen years long. Some among us, I am sure, can scarcely remember a time without war.' Monza frowned, thinking of her father's plough turning the black earth.

'But now . . . the wars are over! And all of us won! Every one of us.' Some won more than others, it needed hardly to be said. 'Now is the time for peace! For freedom! For healing!' Lirozio noisily cleared his throat, wincing as he tugged at his embroidered collar. 'Now is the time for hope, for forgiveness, for unity!' And abject obedience, of course. Cotarda was staring at her hand. Her pale palm was mottled pink, almost deep enough to match her scarlet dress. 'Now is the time for us to forge a great state that will be the envy of the world! Now is the time—' Lirozio had started to cough, beads of sweat showing on his ruddy face. Rogont frowned furiously sideways at him. 'Now is the time for Styria to become—' Patine bent forwards and gave an anguished groan, lips curled back from his teeth.

'One nation . . .' Something was wrong, and everyone was beginning to see it. Cotarda lurched backwards, stumbled. She caught the gilded railing, chest heaving, and sank to the floor with a rustling of red silk. The audience gave a stunned collective gasp.

'One nation . . .' whispered Rogont. Chancellor Sotorius sank trembling to his knees, one pink-stained hand clutching at his withered throat. Patine was crouched on all fours now, face bright red, veins bulging from his neck. Lirozio toppled onto his side, back to Monza, his breath a faint wheeze. His right arm stretched out behind him, the twitching hand blotched pink. Cotarda's leg kicked faintly, then she was still. All the while the crowd

stayed silent. Transfixed. Not sure if this was some demented part of the show. Some awful joke. Patine sagged onto his face. Sotorius fell backwards, spine arched, heels of his shoes squeaking against the polished wood, then flopped down limp.

Rogont stared at Monza and she stared back, as frozen and helpless as she had been when she watched Benna die. He opened his mouth, raised one hand towards her, but no breath moved. His forehead, beneath the fur-trimmed rim of the crown, had turned angry red.

The crown. They all had touched the crown. Her eyes rolled down to her gloved right hand. All except her.

Rogont's face twisted. He took one step, his ankle buckled and he pitched onto his face, bulging eyes staring sightlessly off to the side. The crown popped from his skull, bounced once, rolled across the inlaid platform to its edge and clattered to the floor below. Someone in the audience gave a single, ear-splitting scream.

There was the whoosh of a counterweight falling, a rattle of wood, and a thousand white songbirds were released from cages concealed around the edge of the chamber, rising up into the clear night air in a beautiful, twittering storm.

It was just as Rogont had planned.

Except that of the six men and women destined to unite Styria and bring an end to the Years of Blood, only Monza was still alive.

All Dust

Shivers took more'n a little satisfaction in the fact Grand Duke Rogont was dead. Maybe it should've been King Rogont, but it didn't matter much which you called him now, and that thought tickled Shivers' grin just a bit wider.

You can be as great a man as you please while you're alive. Makes not a straw of difference once you go back to the mud. And it only takes a little thing. Might happen in a silly moment. An old friend of Shivers' fought all seven days at the battle in the High Places and didn't get a nick. Scratched himself on a thorn leaving the valley next morning, got the rot in his hand, died babbling a few nights after. No point to it. No lesson. Except watch out for thorns, maybe.

But then a noble death like Rudd Threetrees won for himself, leading the charge, sword in his fist as the life left him – that was no better. Maybe men would sing a song about it, badly, when they were drunk, but for him who died, death was death, same for everyone. The Great Leveller, the hillmen called it. Lords and beggars made equal.

All of Rogont's grand ambitions were dirt. His power was mist, blown away on the dawn breeze. Shivers, no more'n a one-eyed killer, not fit to lick the king-in-waiting's boots clean yesterday, this morning was the better man by far. He was still casting a shadow. If there was a lesson, it was this – you have to take what you can while you still have breath. The earth holds no rewards but darkness.

They rode from the tunnel and into the outer ward of Fontezarmo, and Shivers gave a long, soft whistle.

'They done some building work.'

Monza nodded. 'Some knocking down, at least. Seems the Prophet's gift did the trick.'

It was a fearsome weapon, this Gurkish sugar. A great stretch of the walls on their left had vanished, a tower tilted madly at the far end, cracks up its side, looking sure to follow the rest down the mountain any moment. A few leafless shrubs clung to the ragged cliff-edge where the walls had been, clawing at empty air. Shivers reckoned there'd been gardens, but the

flaming shot the catapults had been lobbing in the last few weeks had turned 'em mostly to burned-up bramble, split tree-stump and scorched-out mud, all smeared down and puddle-pocked by last night's rain.

A cobbled way led through the midst of this mess, between a half-dozen stagnant fountains and up to a black gate, still sealed tight. A few twisted shapes lay round some wreckage, bristling with arrows. Dead men round a torched ram. Scanning along the battlements above, Shivers' practised eye picked out spears, bows, armour twinkling. Seemed the inner wall was still firm held, Duke Orso no doubt tucked in tight behind it.

They rode around a big heap of damp canvas weighted down with stones, patches of rainwater in the folds. As Shivers passed he saw there were boots sticking out of one end, a few pairs of dirty bare feet, all beaded up with wet.

Seemed one of Volfier's lads was a fresh recruit, went pale when he saw them dead men. Strange, but seeing him all broken up just made Shivers wonder when he got so comfortable around a corpse or two. To him they were just bits of the scenery now, no more meaning than the broken tree-stumps. It was going to take more'n a corpse or two to spoil his good mood that morning.

Monza reined her horse in and slid from the saddle. 'Dismount,' grunted Volfier, and the rest followed her.

'Why do some of 'em have bare feet?' The boy was still staring at the dead.

'Because they had good boots,' said Shivers. The lad looked down at his own foot-leather, then back to those wet bare feet, then put one hand over his mouth.

Volfier clapped the boy on the back and made him start, gave Shivers a wink while he did it. Seemed baiting the new blood was the same the world over. 'Boots or no boots, don't make no difference once they've killed you. Don't worry, boy, you get used to it.'

'You do?'

'If you're lucky,' said Shivers, 'you'll live long enough.'

'If you're lucky,' said Monza, 'you'll find another trade first. Wait here.'

Volfier gave her a nod. 'Your Excellency.' And Shivers watched her pick her way around the wreckage and off.

'Get on top of things in Talins?' he muttered.

‘Hope so,’ grunted the scarred sergeant. ‘Got the fires put out, in the end. Made us a deal with the criminals in the Old Quarter they’d keep an eye on things there for a week, and we wouldn’t keep an eye for a month after.’

‘Coming to something when you’re looking to thieves to keep order.’

‘It’s a topsy-turvy world alright.’ Volfier narrowed his eyes at the inner wall. ‘My old master’s on the other side o’ that. A man I fought my whole life for. Never had any riots when he was in charge.’

‘Wish you were with him?’

Volfier frowned sideways. ‘I wish we’d won at Ospria, then the choice wouldn’t have come up. But then I wish my wife hadn’t fucked the baker while I was away in the Union on campaign three years ago. Wishing don’t change nothing.’

Shivers grinned, and tapped at his metal eye with a fingernail. ‘That there is a fact.’

Cosca sat on his field chair, in the only part of the gardens that was still anything like intact, and watched his goat grazing on the wet grass. There was something oddly calming about her gradual, steady progress across the last remaining bit of lawn. The wriggling of her lips, the delicate nibbling of her teeth, the tiny movements that by patient repetition would soon shave that lawn down to stubble. He stuck a fingertip in his ear and waggled it around, trying to clear the faint ringing that still lurked at the edge of his hearing. It persisted. He sighed, raised his flask, heard footsteps crunching on gravel and stopped. Monza was walking towards him. She looked beyond tired, shoulders hunched, mouth twisted, eyes buried in dark pits.

‘Why the hell do you have a goat?’

Cosca took a slow swig from his flask, grimaced and took another. ‘Noble beast, the goat. She reminds me, in your absence, to be tenacious, single-minded and hard-working. You have to stick at something in your life, Monzcarro.’ The goat looked up, and bleated in apparent agreement. ‘I hope you won’t take offence if I say you look tired.’

‘Long night,’ she muttered, and Cosca judged it to be a tremendous understatement.

‘I’m sure.’

‘The Osprians pulled out of Talins. There was a riot. Panic.’

‘Inevitable.’

‘Someone spread a rumour that the Union fleet was on its way.’

‘Rumours can do more damage than the ships themselves.’

‘The crown was poisoned,’ she muttered.

‘The leaders of Styria, consumed by their own lust for power. There’s a message in there, wouldn’t you say? Murder and metaphor combined. The poisoner-poet responsible has managed to kill a chancellor, a duke, a countess, a first citizen and a king, and teach the world an invaluable lesson about life all in one evening. Your friend and mine, Morveer?’

She spat. ‘Maybe.’

‘I never thought that pedantic bastard had such a sense of humour.’

‘Forgive me if I don’t laugh.’

‘Why did he spare you?’

‘He didn’t.’ Monza held up her gloved right hand. ‘My glove did.’

Cosca could not help a snort of laughter. ‘Just think, one could say that by crushing your right hand, Duke Orso and his cohorts saved your life! The ironies pile one upon the other!’

‘I might wait for a more settled moment to enjoy them.’

‘Oh, I’d enjoy them now. I’ve wasted years waiting for more settled moments. In my experience they never come. Only look around you. The Affoians almost all deserted before daybreak. The Sipanese are already splitting into factions, falling back south – to fight each other, would be my guess. The army of Puranti were so keen to get their civil war under way they actually started killing each other in the trenches. Victus had to break it up! Victus, stopping a fight, can you imagine? Some of the Osprians are still here, but only because they haven’t a clue what else to do. The lot of them, running around like chickens with their heads cut off. Which I suppose they are. You know, I’m eternally amazed at just how quickly things can fall apart. Styria was united for perhaps the length of a minute and now is plunged into deeper chaos than ever. Who knows who’ll seize power, and where, and how much? It seems an end may have been called to the Years of Blood . . .’ and Cosca stuck his chin out and gave his neck a scratch, ‘somewhat prematurely.’

Monza’s shoulders seemed to slump a little lower. ‘The ideal situation for a mercenary, no?’

‘You’d have thought. But there’s such a thing as too much chaos, even for a man like me. I swear, the Thousand Swords are the most coherent and

orderly body of troops left up here. Which should give you some idea of the utter disorder that has struck your allies.' He stretched his legs out in front of him, one boot crossed over the other. 'I thought I might take the brigade down towards Visserine, and press my claims there. I very much doubt Rogont will be honouring our agreement now—'

'Stay,' she said, and fixed her eyes on his.

'Stay?'

'Stay.'

There was a long pause while they watched each other. 'You've no right to ask me that.'

'But I am asking. Help me.'

'Help . . . you? It's coming to something when I'm anyone's best hope. What of your loyal subjects, the good people of Talins? Is there no help to be had there?'

'They aren't as keen for a battle as they were for a parade. They won't lift a finger in case they get Orso back in charge and he hangs every man of them.'

'The fickle movements of power, eh? You've raised no soldiers while you had the throne? That hardly seems your style.'

'I raised what I could, but I can't trust them here. Not against Orso. Who knows which way they'll jump?'

'Ah, divided loyalties. I have some experience with them. An unpredictable scenario.' Cosca stuck his finger in his other ear, to no greater effect. 'Have you considered the possibility of . . . perhaps . . . leaving it be?'

She looked at him as if he was speaking in a foreign tongue. 'What?'

'I myself have left a thousand tasks unfinished, unstarted or outright failed across the whole breadth of the Circle of the World. In the end, they bother me considerably less than my successes.'

'I'm not you.'

'No doubt a cause of constant regret for us both. But still. You could forget about revenge. You could compromise. You could . . . be merciful.'

'Mercy and cowardice are the same,' she growled, narrow eyes fixed on the black gate at the far end of the blasted gardens.

Cosca gave a sad smile. 'Are they indeed?'

'Conscience is an excuse not to do what needs doing.'

‘I see.’

‘No use weeping about it. That’s how the world is.’

‘Ah.’

‘The good get nothing extra. When they die they turn to shit like the rest of us. You have to keep your eyes ahead, always ahead, fight one battle at a time. You can’t hesitate, no matter the costs, no matter the—’

‘Do you know why I always loved you, Monza?’

‘Eh?’ Her eyes flickered to him, surprised.

‘Even after you betrayed me? More, after you betrayed me?’ Cosca leaned slowly towards her. ‘Because I know you don’t really believe any of that rubbish. Those are the lies you tell yourself so you can live with what you’ve done. What you’ve had to do.’

There was a long pause. Then she swallowed as though she was about to puke. ‘You always said I had a devil in me.’

‘Did I? Well, so do we all.’ He waved a hand. ‘You’re no saint, that much we know. A child of a bloody time. But you’re nothing like as dark as you make out.’

‘No?’

‘I pretend to care for the men, but in truth I don’t give a damn whether they live or die. You always did care, but you pretend not to give a damn. I never saw you waste one man’s life. And yet they like me better. Hah. There’s justice. You always did the right thing by me, Monza. Even when you betrayed me, it was better than I deserved. I’ve never forgotten that time in Muris, after the siege, when you wouldn’t let the slavers have those children. Everyone wanted to take the money. I did. Faithful did. Even Benna. Especially Benna. But not you.’

‘Only gave you a scratch,’ she muttered.

‘Don’t be modest, you were ready to kill me. These are ruthless times we live in, and in ruthless times, mercy and cowardice are entire opposites. We all turn to shit when we die, Monza, but not all of us are shit while we’re alive. Most of us are.’ His eyes rolled to heaven. ‘God knows I am. But you never were.’

She blinked at him for a moment. ‘Will you help me?’

Cosca raised his flask again, realised it was empty and screwed the cap back on. The damn thing needed filling far too often. ‘Of course I’ll help

you. There was never the slightest question in my mind. I have already organised the assault, in fact.'

'Then—'

'I just wanted to hear you ask. I must say I am surprised you did, though. The mere idea that the Thousand Swords would do the hard work of a siege, have one of the richest palaces in Styria at their mercy and walk away without a scrap of booty? Have you lost your reason? I couldn't prise these greedy bastards away with a spade. We're attacking at dawn tomorrow, with or without you, and we'll be picking this place clean. More than likely my boys will have the lead off the roofs by lunchtime. Rule of Quarters, and all that.'

'And Orso?'

'Orso is yesterday's man.' Cosca sat back and patted his goat fondly on her flank. 'Do as you please with him.'

The Inevitable

The dice came up two and one. Three years ago today, Sajaam bought Friendly's freedom from Safety. Three years he had been homeless. He had followed three people, two men and one woman, all across Styria and back. In that time, the place he had hated least was the Thousand Swords, and not just because it had a number in its name, though that was, of course, a good start.

There was order, here, up to a point. Men had given tasks with given times to do them, knew their places in the big machine. The company was all neatly quantified in the notary's three ledgers. Number of men under each captain, length of service, amount of pay, times reported, equipment hired. Everything could be counted. There were rules, up to a point, explicit and implied. Rules about drinking, gambling and fighting. Rules about use of whores. Rules about who sat where. Who could go where, and when. Who fought and who did not. And the all-important Rule of Quarters, controlling the declaration and assignment of booty, enforced with eagle-eyed discipline.

When rules were broken there were fixed punishments, understood by all. Usually a number of lashes of the whip. Friendly had watched a man whipped for pissing in the wrong place, yesterday. It did not seem such a crime, but Victus had explained to everyone, you start off pissing where you please, then you shit where you please, then everyone dies of the plague. So it had been three lashes. Two and one.

Friendly's favourite place was the mess. There was a comforting routine to mealtimes that put him in mind of Safety. The frowning cooks in their stained aprons. The steam from the great pots. The rattle and clatter of knives and spoons. The slurp and splutter of lips, teeth, tongues. The line of jostling men, all asking for more than their share and never getting it.

The men who would be in the scaling parties this morning got two extra meatballs and an extra spoon of soup. Two and one. Cosca had said it was one thing to get poked off a ladder with a spear, but he could not countenance a man falling off from hunger.

'We'll be attacking within the hour,' he said now.

Friendly nodded.

Cosca took a long breath, pushed it out through his nose and frowned around him. ‘Ladders, mainly.’ Friendly had watched them being made, over the last few days. Twenty-one of them. Two and one. Each had thirty-one rungs, except for one, which had thirty-two. One, two, three. ‘Monza will be going with them. She wants to be the first to Orso. Entirely determined. She’s set firm on vengeance.’

Friendly shrugged. She always had been.

‘In all honesty, I worry for her.’

Friendly shrugged. He was indifferent.

‘A battle is a dangerous place.’

Friendly shrugged. That seemed obvious.

‘My friend, I want you to stick near her, in the fighting. Make sure no harm comes to her.’

‘What about you?’

‘Me?’ Cosca slapped Friendly on his shoulder. ‘The only shield I need is the universally high regard in which men hold me.’

‘You sure?’

‘No, but I’ll be where I always am. Well behind the fighting with my flask for company. Something tells me she’ll need you more. There are enemies still, out there. And Friendly . . .’

‘Yes?’

‘Watch closely and take great care. The fox is most dangerous when at bay – that Orso will have some deadly tricks in store, well . . .’ and he puffed out his cheeks, ‘it’s inevitable. Watch out, in particular . . . for Morveer.’

‘Alright.’ Murcatto would have him and Shivers watching her. A party of three, as it had been when they killed Gobba. Two watching one. He wrapped the dice up and slid them down into his pocket. He watched the steam rise as the food was ladled out. Listened to the men grumbling. Counted the complaints.

The washed-out grey of dawn was turning to golden daylight, sun creeping over the battlements at the top of the wall they’d all have to climb, its gap-toothed shadow slowly giving ground across the ruined gardens.

They'd be going soon. Shivers shut his eye and grinned into the sun. Tipped his head back and stuck his tongue out. It was getting colder as the year wore down. Felt almost like a fine summer morning in the North. Like mornings he'd fought great battles in. Mornings he'd done high deeds, and a few low ones too.

'You seem happy enough,' came Monza's voice, 'for a man about to risk his life.'

Shivers opened his eye and turned his grin on her. 'I've made peace with myself.'

'Good for you. That's the hardest war of all to win.'

'Didn't say I won. Just stopped fighting.'

'I'm starting to think that's the only victory worth a shit,' she muttered, almost to herself.

Ahead of them, the first wave of mercenaries were ready to go, stood about their ladders, big shields on their free arms, twitchy and nervous, which was no surprise. Shivers couldn't say he much fancied their job. They weren't making the least effort to hide what they had planned. Everyone knew what was coming, on both sides of the wall.

Close round Shivers, the second wave were getting ready too. Giving blades a last stroke with the whetstone, tightening straps on armour, telling a last couple of jokes and hoping they weren't the last they ever told. Shivers grinned, watching them at it. Rituals he'd seen a dozen times before and more. Felt almost like home.

'You ever have the feeling you were in the wrong place?' he asked. 'That if you could just get over the next hill, cross the next river, look down into the next valley, it'd all . . . fit. Be right.'

Monza narrowed her eyes at the inner walls. 'All my life, more or less.'

'All your life spent getting ready for the next thing. I climbed a lot of hills now. I crossed a lot of rivers. Crossed the sea even, left everything I knew and came to Styria. But there I was, waiting for me at the docks when I got off the boat, same man, same life. Next valley ain't no different from this one. No better anyway. Reckon I've learned . . . just to stick in the place I'm at. Just to be the man I am.'

'And what are you?'

He looked down at the axe across his knees. 'A killer, I reckon.'

'That all?'

‘Honestly? Pretty much.’ He shrugged. ‘That’s why you took me on, ain’t it?’

She frowned at the ground. ‘What happened to being an optimist?’

‘Can’t I be an optimistic killer? A man once told me – the man who killed my brother, as it goes – that good and evil are a matter of where you stand. We all got our reasons. Whether they’re decent ones all depends on who you ask, don’t it?’

‘Does it?’

‘I would’ve thought you’d say so, of all people.’

‘Maybe I would’ve, once. Now I’m not so sure. Maybe those are just the lies we tell ourselves, so we can live with what we’ve done.’

Shivers couldn’t help himself. He burst out laughing.

‘What’s funny?’

‘I don’t need excuses, Chief, that’s what I’m trying to tell you. What’s the name for it, when a thing’s bound to happen? There’s a word for it, ain’t there, when there’s no stopping something? No avoiding it, whatever you try to do?’

‘Inevitable,’ said Monza.

‘That’s it. The inevitable.’ Shivers chewed happily on the word like a mouthful of good meat. ‘I’m happy with what’s done. I’m happy with what’s coming.’

A shrill whistle cut through the air. All together, with a rattling of armour, the first wave knelt in parties of a dozen and took up their long ladders between them. They started to jog forwards, in piss-poor order if Shivers was honest, slipping and sliding across the slimy gardens. Others followed after, none too eager, sharpshooters with flatbows aiming to keep the archers on the walls busy. There were a few grunts, some calls of ‘steady’ and the rest, but a quiet rush, on the whole. It wouldn’t have seemed right, really, giving your war cry while you ran at a wall. What do you do when you get there? You can’t keep shouting all the way up a ladder.

‘There they go.’ Shivers stood, lifted his axe and shook it above his head. ‘Go on! Go on, you bastards!’

They made it halfway across the gardens before Shivers heard a floating shriek of, ‘Fire!’ A moment later a clicking rattle from the walls. Bolts flitted down into the charging men. There were a couple of screams, sobs, a few boys dropped, but most kept pressing forwards, faster’n ever now.

Mercenaries with bows of their own knelt, sent a volley back, pinging from battlements or flying right over.

The whistle went again and the next wave started forwards, the men who'd drawn the happy task of climbing. Light-armoured mostly, so they'd move nice and nimble. The first party had made it to the foot of the walls, were starting to raise their ladder. One of 'em dropped with a bolt in his neck, but the rest managed to push the thing the whole way. Shivers watched it swing over and clatter into the parapet. Other ladders started going up. More movement at the top of the walls, men leaning out with rocks and chucking them down. Bolts fell among the second wave, but most of 'em were getting close to the walls now, crowding round, starting to climb. There were six ladders up, then ten. The next one fell apart when it hit the battlements, bits of wood dropping on the shocked boys who'd raised it. Shivers had to chuckle.

More rocks dropped. A man tumbled from halfway up a ladder, his legs folding every which way underneath him, started shrieking away. There was plenty of shouting all round now, and no mistake. Some defenders on a tower roof upended a big vat of boiling water into the faces of a party trying to raise a ladder below. They made a hell of a noise, ladder toppling, running about clutching their heads like madmen.

Bolts and arrows hissed up and down each way. Stones tumbled, bounced. Men fell at the walls, or on their way to 'em. Others started crawling back through the mud, were dragged back, arms over the shoulders of comrades happy for an excuse to get clear. Mercenaries hacked about madly as they got to the top of the ladders, more'n one poked off by waiting spearmen, taking the quick way back down.

Shivers saw someone at the battlements upending a pot onto a ladder and the men climbing it. Someone else came up with a torch, set light to it, and the whole top half went up in flames. Oil, then. Shivers watched it burn, a couple of the men on it too. After a moment they toppled off, took some others with 'em, more screams. Shivers slid his axe through the loop over his shoulder. Best place for it when you're trying to climb. Unless you slip and it cuts your head off, of course. That thought made him chuckle again. Couple of men around him were frowning, he was chuckling that much, but he didn't care, the blood was pumping fast now. They just made him chuckle more.

Looked like some of the mercenaries had made it to the parapet over on the right. He saw blades twinkling at the battlements. More men pressed up behind. A ladder covered in soldiers was shoved away from the wall with poles. It teetered for a moment, upright, like the best stilt-show in the world. The poor bastards near the top wriggled, clutching at nothing, then it slowly toppled over and mashed them all into the cobbles.

They were up on the left too, just next to the gatehouse. Shivers saw men fighting their way up some steps onto the roof. Five or six of the ladders were down, two were still burning up against the wall, sending up plumes of dark smoke, but most of the rest were crawling with climbing soldiers from top to bottom. Couldn't have been too many men on the defence, and weight of numbers was starting to tell.

The whistle went again and the third wave started to move, heavier-armoured men who'd follow the first up the ladders and press on into the fortress.

'Let's go,' said Monza.

'Right y'are, Chief.' Shivers took a breath and started jogging.

The bows were more or less silenced now, only a few bolts still flitting from arrow-loops in the towers. So it was a happier journey than the folks before had taken, just a morning amble through the corpses scattered across the blasted gardens and over to one of the middle ladders. A couple of men and a sergeant were stood at the foot, boots up on the first rung, gripping it tight. The sergeant slapped each man as he began to climb.

'Up you go now, lads, up you go! Fast but steady! No loitering! Get up and kill those fuckers! You too, bastard—Oh. Sorry, your . . . er . . . Excellency?'

'Just hold it steady.' And Monza started climbing.

Shivers followed, hands sliding on the rough uprights, boots scraping on the wood, breath hissing through his smile as his muscles worked up an ache. He kept his eyes fixed on the wall in front. No point looking anywhere else. If an arrow came? Nothing you could do. If some bastard dropped a rock on you, or a pot of boiling water? Nothing you could do. If they pushed the ladder off? Shitty luck, alright, but looking out for it would only slow you down and make it the more likely. So he kept on, breathing hard through his clenched teeth.

Soon enough he got to the top, hauled himself over. Monza was there on the walkway, sword already drawn, looking down into the inner ward. He could hear fighting, but not near. There were a few dead men scattered on the walkway, from both sides. A mercenary propped against the stonework had an arm off at the elbow, rope lashed around his shoulder to stop the blood, moaning, 'It fell off the edge, it fell off the edge,' over and over. Shivers didn't reckon he'd last 'til lunch, but he guessed that meant more lunch for everyone else. You have to look at the sunny side, don't you? That's what being an optimist is all about.

He swung his shield off his back and slid his arm through the straps. He pulled his axe out, spun the grip round in his fist. Felt good to do it. Like a smith getting his hammer out, ready for the good work to start. There were more gardens down below, planted on steps cut from the summit of the mountain, nowhere near so battered as the ones further out. Buildings towered over the greenery on three sides. A mass of twinkling windows and fancy stonework, domes and turrets sprouting from the top, crusted with statues and glinting prongs. Didn't take a great mind to spot Orso's palace, which was just as well, 'cause Shivers knew he didn't have a great mind. Just a bloody one.

'Let's go,' said Monza.

Shivers grinned. 'Right behind you, Chief.'

The trenches that riddled the dusty mountainside were empty. The soldiers who had occupied them had dispersed, gone back to their homes, or to play their own small roles in the several power struggles set off by the untimely deaths of King Rogont and his allies. Only the Thousand Swords remained, swarming hungrily around Duke Orso's palace like maggots around a corpse. Shenkt had seen it all before. Loyalty, duty, pride – fleeting motivations on the whole, which kept men smugly happy in good weather but soon washed away when the storm came. Greed, though? On greed you can always rely.

He walked on up the winding track, across the battle-scarred ground before the walls, over the bridge, the looming gatehouse of Fontezarmo drawing steadily closer. A single mercenary sat slouched on a folding chair outside the open gate, spear leaning against the wall beside him.

'What's your business?' Asked with negligible interest.

‘Duke Orso commissioned me to kill Monzcarro Murcatto, now the Grand Duchess of Talins.’

‘Hilarious.’ The guard pulled his collars up around his ears and settled back against the wall.

Often, the last thing men believe is the truth. Shenkt pondered that as he passed through the long tunnel and into the outer ward of the fortress. The rigidly ordered beauty of Duke Orso’s formal gardens was entirely departed, along with half the north wall. The mercenaries had made a very great mess of the place. But that was war. There was much confusion. But that was war also.

The final assault was evidently well under way. Ladders stood against the inner wall, bodies scattered in the blasted gardens around their bases. Orderlies wandered among them, offering water, fumbling with splints or bandages, moving men onto stretchers. Shenkt knew few would survive who could not even crawl by themselves. Still, men always clung to the smallest sliver of hope. It was one of the few things to admire in them.

He came to a silent halt beside a ruined fountain and watched the wounded struggling against the inevitable. A man slipped suddenly from behind the broken stonework and almost ran straight into him. An unremarkable balding man, wearing a worn studded-leather jerkin.

‘Gah! My most profound apologies!’

Shenkt said nothing.

‘You are . . . are you . . . that is to say . . . here to participate in the assault?’

‘In a way.’

‘As am I, as am I. In a way.’ Nothing could have been more natural than a mercenary fleeing the fighting, but something did not tally. He was dressed like a thug, this man, but he spoke like a bad writer. His nearest hand flapped around as though to distract attention from the other, which was clearly creeping towards a concealed weapon. Shenkt frowned. He had no desire to draw undue attention. So he gave this man a chance, just as he always did, wherever possible.

‘We both have our work, then. Let us delay each other no longer.’

The stranger brightened. ‘Absolutely so. To work.’

Morveer gave a false chuckle, then realised he had accidentally strayed into using his accustomed voice. ‘To work,’ he grunted in an unconvincing commoner’s baritone.

‘To work,’ the man echoed, his bright eyes never wavering.

‘Right. Well.’ Morveer sidestepped the stranger and walked on, allowing his hand to come free of his mounted needle and drop, inconspicuous, to his side. Without doubt the fellow had been possessed of an unusual manner, but had Morveer’s mission been to poison every person with an unusual manner he would never have been halfway done. Fortunately his mission was only to poison seven of the most important persons in the nation, and it was one at which he had only lately achieved spectacular success.

He was still flushed by the sheer scale of his achievement, the sheer audacity of its execution, the unparalleled success of his plan. He was beyond doubt the greatest poisoner ever and had become, indisputably, a great man of history. How it galled him that he could never truly share his grand achievement with the world, never enjoy the adulation his triumph undoubtedly deserved. Oh, if the doubting headmaster at the orphanage could have only witnessed this happy day, he would have been forced to concede that Castor Morveer was indeed prize-winning material! If his wife could have seen it, she would have finally understood him, and never again complained about his unusual habits! If his infamous one-time teacher, Moumah-yin-Bek, could only have been there, he would have finally acknowledged that his pupil had forever eclipsed him. If Day had been alive, she would no doubt have given that silvery giggle in acknowledgement of his genius, smiled her innocent smile and perhaps touched him gently, perhaps even . . . But now was not the time for such fancies. There had been compelling reasons for poisoning all four of them, so Morveer would have to settle for his own congratulations.

It appeared that his murder of Rogont and his allies had quite eliminated any standards at the siege of Fontezarmo. It was not an overstatement to say that the outer ward of the fortress was scarcely guarded at all. He knew Nicomo Cosca for a bloated balloon of braggadocio, a committed drunkard and a rank incompetent to boot, but he had supposed the man would make some provision for security. This was almost disappointingly effortless.

Though the fighting upon the wall seemed largely to have ceased – the gate to the inner ward was now in the hands of the mercenaries and stood

wide – the sound of combat still emanated vaguely from the gardens beyond. An utterly distasteful business; he was pleased that he would have no occasion to stray near it. It appeared the Thousand Swords had captured the citadel and Duke Orso's doom was inevitable, but the thought gave Morveer no particular discomfort. Great men come and go, after all. He had a promise of payment from the Banking House of Valint and Balk, and that went beyond any one man, any one nation. That was deathless.

Some wounded had been laid out on a patch of scraggy grass, in the shadow of a tree to which a goat had, inexplicably, been tethered. Morveer grimaced, tiptoed between them, lip wrinkled at the sight of bloody bandages, of ripped and spattered clothing, of torn flesh—

'Water . . .' one of them whispered at him, clutching at his ankle.

'Always it's water!' Tearing his leg free. 'Find your own!' He hurried through an open doorway and into the largest tower in the outer ward where, he was reliably informed, the constable of the fortress had once had his quarters, and Nicomo Cosca now had his.

He slipped through the gloom of narrow passageways, barely lit by arrow-loops. He crept up a spiral staircase, back hissing against the rough stone wall, tongue pressed into the roof of his mouth. The Thousand Swords were as slovenly and easily fooled as their commander, but he was fully aware that fickle chance might deflate his delight at any moment. Caution first, always.

The first floor had been made a storeroom, filled with shadowy boxes. Morveer crept on. The second floor held empty bunks, no doubt previously utilised by the defenders of the fortress. Twice more around the spiralling steps, he softly tweaked a door open with a finger and applied his eye to the crack.

The circular room beyond contained a large, curtained bed, shelves with many impressive-looking books, writing desk and chests for clothes, an armour stand with suit of polished plate upon it, a sword-rack with several blades, a table with four chairs and a deck of cards, and a large, inlaid cupboard with glasses upon the top. On a row of pegs beside the bed hung several outrageous hats, crystal pins gleaming, gilt bands glinting, a rainbow of different-coloured feathers fluttering in the breeze from an open window. This, without doubt, was the chamber Cosca had taken for his own. No other man would dare to affect such absurd headgear, but for the

moment, there was no sign of the great drunkard. Morveer slid inside and eased the door shut behind him. He crossed on silent tiptoes to the cupboard, nimbly avoiding collision with a covered milking-bucket that sat beneath, and with gentle fingers teased open the doors.

Morveer allowed himself the smallest of smiles. Nicomo Cosca would, no doubt, have considered himself a wild and romantic maverick, unfettered by the bonds of routine. In fact he was predictable as the stars, as dully regular as the tide. Most men never change, and a drunk is always a drunk. The chief difficulty appeared to be the spectacular variety of bottles he had collected. There was no way to be certain from which he would drink next. Morveer had no alternative but to poison the entire collection.

He pulled his gloves on, carefully slid the Greenseed solution from his inside pocket. It was lethal only when swallowed, and the timing of its effect varied greatly with the victim, but it gave off only the very slightest fruity odour, entirely undetectable when mingled with wine or spirits. He took careful note of the position of each bottle, the degree to which the cork was inserted, then twisted each free, carefully let fall a drop from his pipette into the neck, replacing cork and bottle precisely as they had been prior to his arrival. He smiled as he poisoned bottles of varying sizes, shapes, colours. This was work as mundane as the poisoned crown had been inspired, but no less noble for that. He would blow through the room like a zephyr of death, undetected, and bring a fitting end to that repulsive drunkard. One more report of Nicomo Cosca's death, and one more only. Few people indeed would consider that anything other than an entirely righteous and public-spirited—

He froze in place. There were footsteps on the stairs. He swiftly pushed the cork back into the final bottle, slid it carefully into position and darted through a narrow doorway into the darkness of a small cell, some kind of—

He wrinkled his nose as he was assailed by a powerful reek of urine. Harsh Mistress Fortune never missed an opportunity to demean him. He might have known he would stumble into a latrine as his hiding place. He had now only to hope that Cosca was not taken with a sudden urge to void his bowels . . .

The battle on the walls appeared to have been settled, and with relatively little difficulty. No doubt the battle continued in the inner ward beyond,

through the rich staterooms and echoing marble halls of Duke Orso's palace. But from Cosca's vantage point atop the constable's tower he could not see a blow of it. And even if he could have, what difference? When you've seen one fortress stormed . . .

'Victus, my friend!'

'Uh?' The last remaining senior captain of the Thousand Swords lowered his eyeglass and gave Cosca his usual suspicious squint.

'I rather suspect the day is ours.'

'I rather suspect you're right.'

'The two of us can do no more good up here, even if we could see anything.'

'You speak true, as ever.' Cosca took that for a joke. 'It's all inevitable now. Nothing left but to divide the loot.' Victus absently stroked the many chains around his neck. 'My favourite part of any siege.'

'Cards, then?'

'Why ever not?'

Cosca slapped his eyeglass closed and led the way back down the winding stair to the chamber he had taken for his own. He strode to the cabinet and snatched the inlaid doors open. The many-coloured bottles greeted him like a crowd of old friends. Ah, a drink, a drink, a drink. He took down a glass, pulled the cork from the nearest bottle with a gentle thwop.

'Drink, then?' he called over his shoulder.

'Why ever not?'

There was still fighting, but nothing you could call an organised defence. The mercenaries had swept the walls clean, driven the defenders out of the gardens and were even now breaking into the towers, into the buildings, into the palace. More of them boiled up the ladders every moment, desperate not to miss out on the plunder. No one fought harder or moved faster than the Thousand Swords when they could smell booty.

'This way.' She hurried towards the main gate of the palace, retracing the steps she'd taken the day they killed her brother, past the circular pool, two bodies floating face-down in the shadow of Scarpius' pillar. Shivers followed, that strange smile on his scarred face he'd been wearing all day. They passed an eager clump of men clustered around a doorway, eyes all shining with greed, a couple of them swinging axes at the lock, door

wobbling with each blow. They scrambled over each other as it finally came open, screaming, shouting, elbowing to get past. Two of them wrestled each other to the ground, fighting over what they hadn't even stolen yet.

Further on a pair of mercenaries had a servant in a gold-trimmed jacket sitting on the side of a fountain, his shocked face smeared with blood. One would slap him and scream, 'Where's the fucking money?' Then the other would do the same. Back and forth his head went. 'Where's the fucking money, where's the fucking money, where's the fucking money . . .'

A window burst open in a shower of torn lead and broken glass and an antique cabinet tumbled out onto the cobbles, scattering splinters. A whooping mercenary ran past, arms heaped with glinting material. Curtains, maybe. Monza heard a scream, whipped about, saw someone plummet from an upstairs window and headfirst into the garden, drop bonelessly over. She heard shrieking from somewhere. Sounded like a woman's voice, but it was hard to tell when it was that desperate. There was shouting, screaming, laughing everywhere. She swallowed her sickness, tried not to think that she'd made this happen. That this was where her vengeance had led. All she could do was keep her eyes ahead, hope to find Orso first.

Find him and make him pay.

The studded palace doors were still locked, but the mercenaries had found a way round, smashed through one of the great arched windows to one side. Someone must have cut himself in the rush to get in and get rich – there was blood smeared on the windowsill. Monza eased through, boots crunching on broken glass, dropped down into a grand dining room beyond. She'd eaten there once, she realised, Benna beside her, laughing, Faithful too. Orso, Ario, Foscar, Ganmark had all been there, a whole crowd of other officers. It occurred to her that pretty much every guest from that night was dead. The room hadn't fared much better.

It was like a field after the locusts come through. They'd carried off half the paintings, slashed up the rest for the sake of it. The two huge vases beside the fireplace were too big to lift, so they'd smashed them and taken the gilt handles. They'd torn the hangings down, stolen all the plates apart from the ones broken to fragments across the polished floor. Strange, how men are almost as happy to break a thing as steal it, at a time like that. They were still rooting around, ripping drawers from cupboards, chiselling sconces from the walls, dismantling the place for anything worth one bit.

One fool had a chair balanced on the bare table and was straining up to reach the chandelier. Another was busy with a knife, trying to prise the crystal doorknobs loose.

A pock-faced mercenary grinned at her, fists bursting with gilded cutlery. ‘I got spoons!’ he shouted. Monza shoved him out of the way and he tripped, his treasure scattering, other men pouncing on it like ducks on stray crumbs. She pushed through the open doorway, out into a marble hall, Shivers at her shoulder. Sounds of fighting echoed down it. Wails and yells, metal scraping, wood crashing, from everywhere and nowhere. She squinted both ways into the gloom, trying to get her bearings, sweat tickling at her scalp.

‘This way.’ They passed a vast sitting room, men inside slashing the upholstery of some antique chairs, as if Orso kept his gold in his cushions. The next door was being kicked in by an eager crowd. One man took an arrow in his neck as they broke it open, others poured in past him, whooping, weapons clashed on the other side. Monza kept her eyes ahead, thoughts fixed on Orso. She pushed on up a flight of steps, teeth gritted, hardly feeling the ache in her legs.

Onto a dim gallery at one end of a high, vaulted chamber, its barrelled ceiling crusted with gilded leaves. The whole wall was a great organ, a range of polished pipes sprouting from carved wood, a stool drawn up before the keyboard for the player. Down below, beyond a delicately worked wooden rail, there was a music room. Mercenaries shrieked with laughter, battering a demented symphony from the instruments as they broke them apart.

‘We’re close,’ she whispered over her shoulder.

‘Good. Time to get this over with, I reckon.’

Her very thoughts. She crept towards the tall door in the far wall. ‘Orso’s chambers are up this way.’

‘No, no.’ She frowned over her shoulder. Shivers stood there, grinning, his metal eye shining in the half-light. ‘Not that.’

She felt a cold feeling creeping up her back. ‘What, then?’

‘You know what.’ His smile widened, scars twisting, and he stretched his neck out one way, then the other.

She dropped into a fighting crouch just in time. He snarled as he came at her, axe flashing across. She lurched into the stool and upended it, nearly

fell, mind still catching up. His axe thudded into the organ pipes, struck a mad clanging note from them. He wrenched the blade free, leaving a great wound behind in the thin metal. He sprang at her again but the shock had faded now and cold anger leaked in to fill the gap.

'You one-eyed cocksucker!' Not clever, perhaps, but from the heart. She lunged at him but he caught the Calvez on his shield, swung his axe, and she only just hopped away in time, the heavy blade crashing into the organ's surround and sending splinters flying. She dropped back, watchful, keeping her distance. She'd about as much chance of parrying that weight of steel as she did of playing sweet music on that organ.

'Why?' she snarled at him, point of the Calvez moving in little circles. She didn't care a shit about his reasons, really. Just playing for time, looking for an opening.

'Maybe I got sick o' your scorn.' He nudged forwards behind his shield and she backed off again. 'Or maybe Eider offered me more'n you.'

'Eider?' She spat laughter in his face. 'There's your problem! You're a fucking idiot!' She lunged on the last word, trying to catch him off guard, but he wasn't fooled, knocked her jabs calmly away with his shield.

'I'm the idiot? I saved you how many times? I gave up my eye! So you could sneer at me with that empty bastard Rogont? You treat me like a fucking fool and still expect my loyalty, and I'm the idiot?' Hard to argue with most of that, now it was stuck under her nose. She should've listened to Rogont, let him put Shivers down, but she'd let guilt get in the way. Mercy might be brave, like Cosca said, but it seemed it wasn't always clever. Shivers shuffled at her and she gave ground again, fast running out of it.

'You should've seen this coming,' he whispered, and she reckoned he had a point. It had been coming a long time. Since she fucked Rogont. Since she turned her back on Shivers. Since he lost his eye in the cells under Salier's palace. Maybe it had been coming from the first moment they met. Before, even. Always.

Some things are inevitable.

Thus the Whirligig . . .

Shivers' axe clanged into the pipes again. He didn't know what the hell they were for but they made a bastard of a racket. Monza had already dodged away though, weighing her sword, narrowed eyes fixed on his. More'n likely he should've just axed her in the back of the skull and put an end to it. But he wanted her to know who'd done it, and why. Needed her to know.

'You don't have to do this,' she hissed at him. 'You could still walk away.'

'I thought the dead could do the forgiving,' he said, circling to cut off her space.

'I'm offering you a chance, Shivers. Back to the North, no one would chase you.'

'They're free to fucking try, but I reckon I'll stay a little longer. A man has to stick at something, don't he? I've got my pride, still.'

'Shit on your pride! You'd be selling your arse in the alleys of Talins if it wasn't for me!' True, more'n likely. 'You knew the risks. You chose to take my money.' True too. 'I made no promises to you and I broke none!' True and all. 'That bitch Eider won't give you a scale!'

Hard to argue with most of that, maybe, but it was too late to go back now, and besides, an axe in the head is the last word in any argument. 'We'll see.' Shivers eased towards her, shield leading the way. 'But this ain't about money. This is about . . . vengeance. Thought you'd understand that.'

'Shit on your vengeance!' She snatched up the stool and flung it at him, underhand. He got his shield in the way and knocked it spinning over the balcony, but she pressed in fast behind it. He managed to catch her sword on the haft of his axe, blade scraping down and just holding on the studs in the wood. She ended up close, pressed against him almost, snarling, point of her sword waving near his good eye.

She spat in his face, made him flinch, threw an elbow and caught him under the jaw, knocked his head sideways. She pulled her sword back for a thrust but he lashed at her first. She dodged, the axe hacked into the railing and broke a great chunk of wood from it. He twisted away, knowing her sword would be coming, felt the steel slide through his shirt and leave a line

of hot pain across his stomach as it whipped out. She stumbled towards him, off balance. He shifted his weight, growled as he swung his shield round with all his strength and all his rage behind it. It hit her square in the face, snapped her head about and sent her reeling into the pipes with a dull clang, back of her skull leaving a great dent. She bounced off and pitched over on her back on the wooden floor, sword clattering from her hand.

He stared at her for a moment, blood whacking at his skull, sweat tickling his scarred face. A muscle twitched in her neck. Not a thick neck. He could've stepped up and cut her head off easy as chopping logs. His fingers worked nervously round the grip of his axe at the thought. She coughed out blood, groaned, shook her head. She started to roll over, eyes glassy, dragged herself up onto hands and knees. She reached out woozily for the grip of her sword.

'No, no.' He stepped up close and kicked it into the corner.

She flinched, turned her head away from him, started crawling slowly after the blade, breathing hard, blood from her nose pit-pattering on the wooden floor. He followed, standing over her, talking. Strange, that. The Bloody-Nine had told him once – if you mean to kill, you kill, you don't talk about it – and it was advice he'd always tried to stick to. He could've killed her easily as crushing a beetle, but he didn't. He wasn't sure if he was talking to stretch the moment out or talking to put the moment off. But he was talking, still.

'Let's not pretend like you're the injured party in all this! You've killed half o' Styria so you could get your way! You're a scheming, lying, poisoning, murdering, treacherous, brother-fucking cunt. Aren't you! I'm doing the right thing. S'all about where you stand and that. I'm no monster. So maybe my reasons ain't the noblest. Everyone's got their reasons. The world'll still be better for one less o' you!' He wished his voice hadn't been down to a croak, because that was a fact. 'I'm doing the right thing!' A fact, and he wanted her to admit it. She owed him that. 'Better for one less o' you!' He leaned down over her, lips curling back, heard footsteps hammering up to his side, turned—

Friendly rammed into him full-tilt and took him off his feet. Shivers snarled, caught him round the back with his shield arm, but the best he could do was drag the convict with him. They plunged through the railing with a snapping of wood and went tumbling out into empty air.

Nicomo Cosca came into view, whipping off his hat and flinging it theatrically across the room, where it presumably missed its intended peg since Morveer saw it tumble to the floor not far from the latrine door behind which he had concealed himself. His mouth twisted into a triumphant sneer in the pungent darkness. The old mercenary held in his hand a metal flask. The very one Morveer himself had tossed at Cosca as an offhand insult in Sipani. The wretched old drunk must have gone back and collected it afterwards, no doubt hoping to lick out the barest trickle of grog. How hollow now did his promise seem never to drink again? So much for man's ability to change. Morveer had expected little better, of course, from the world's leading expert on empty bravado, but Cosca's almost pitiable level of debasement surprised even him.

The sound of the cabinet being opened reached his ear. 'Just must fill this up.' Cosca's voice, though he was out of sight. Metal clinked.

Morveer could just observe the weasel-like visage of his companion. 'How can you drink that piss?'

'I have to drink something, don't I? It was recommended to me by an old friend, now, alas, dead.'

'Do you have any old friends who aren't dead?'

'Only you, Victus. Only you.'

A rattling of glass and Cosca swaggered through the narrow strip to which Morveer's vision was reduced, his flask in one hand, a glass and bottle in the other. It was a distinctive purple vessel, which Morveer clearly remembered poisoning but a few moments ago. It seemed he had engineered another fatal irony. Cosca would be responsible for his own destruction, as he had been so often before. But this time with a fitting finality. He heard the rustling, snapping sound of cards being shuffled.

'Five scales a hand?' came Cosca's voice. 'Or shall we play for honour?'

Both men burst out laughing. 'Let's make it ten.'

'Ten it is.' Further shuffling. 'Well, this is civilised. Nothing like cards while other men fight, eh? Just like old times.'

'Except no Andiche, no Sesaria and no Sazine.'

'Aside from that,' conceded Cosca. 'Now then. Will you deal, or shall I?'

Friendly growled as he dragged himself clear of the wreckage. Shivers was a few strides away, on the other side of the heap of broken wood and ivory, twisted brass and tangled wire that was all that remained of Duke Orso's harpsichord. The Northman rolled onto his knees, shield still on his arm, axe still gripped in his other fist, blood running down the side of his face from a cut just above his gleaming metal eye.

'You counting fuck! I was going to say my quarrel ain't with you. But now it is.'

They slowly stood, together, watching each other. Friendly slid his knife from its sheath, his cleaver out from his jacket, the worn grips smooth and familiar in his palms. He could forget about all the chaos in the gardens, now, all the madness in the palace. One man against one man, the way it used to be, in Safety. One and one. The plainest arithmetic he could ask for.

'Right, then,' said Friendly, and he grinned.

'Right, then,' hissed Shivers through gritted teeth.

One of the mercenaries who had been breaking the room apart took a half-step towards them. 'What the hell is—'

Shivers leaped the wreckage in one bound, axe a shining arc. Friendly dropped away to the right, ducking underneath it, the wind of it snatching at his hair. His cleaver caught the edge of Shivers' shield, the corner of the blade squealed off and dug into the Northman's shoulder. Not hard enough to do more than cut him, though. Shivers twisted round fast, axe flashing down. Friendly slid around it, heard it crash into the wreckage beside him. He stabbed with his knife but the Northman already had his shield in the way, twisted it, jerking the blade out of Friendly's fist, sending it clattering across the polished floor. He hacked with his cleaver but Shivers pressed close and caught Friendly's elbow against his shoulder, the blade flapping at the blind side of his face and leaving him a bloody nick under his ear.

Friendly took a half-step back, cleaver going out for a sideways sweep, not giving Shivers room to use his axe. He charged forwards behind his shield instead, caught Friendly's flailing cleaver against it and lifted him, growling like a mad dog. Friendly punched at his side, struggling to get a good fist around that big circle of wood, but Shivers had more weight and all the momentum. Friendly was bundled through the door, frame thudding against his shoulder, shield digging into his chest, gaining pace all the time. His boots kicked at the floor, then the floor was gone and he was falling.

The back of his head hit stone, he jolted, bounced, tumbling over and over, grunting and wheezing, light and darkness spinning round him. Stairs. Falling down stairs, and the worst of it was he couldn't even count them.

He growled again as he slowly picked himself up at the bottom. He was in a long kitchen, a vaulted cellar lit by small windows, high up. Left leg, right shoulder, back of his head all throbbing, blood on his cheek, one sleeve torn back and a long raw scrape down his forearm, blood on his trouser leg where he must have cut himself on his own cleaver as he fell. But everything still moved.

Shivers stood at the top of a flight of fourteen steps, two times seven, a big black shape with light twinkling from one eye. Friendly beckoned to him.

'Down you come.'

She kept crawling. That was all she could do. Drag herself one stride at a time. Keep both eyes ahead, on the hilt of the Calvez in the corner. Crawl, and spit blood, and will the room to stay still. All the slow way her back was itching, tingling, waiting for Shivers' axe to hack into it and give her the ugly ending she deserved.

At least the one-eyed bastard had stopped talking now.

Monza's hand closed around the hilt and she rolled over, snarling, waving the blade out in front of her like a coward might wave a torch into the night. There was no one there. Only a ragged gap in the railing at the edge of the gallery.

She wiped her bloody nose on her gloved hand, came up slowly to her knees. The dizziness was fading now, the roar in her ears had quieted to a steady thump, her face a throbbing mass, everything feeling twice the size it should have. She shuffled to the shattered balustrade and peered down. The three mercenaries who'd been busy destroying the room were still at it, stood staring down at a shattered harpsichord under the gallery. Still no sign of Shivers, still no clue what had happened. But there were other things on Monza's mind.

Orso.

She clenched her aching jaw, crossed to the far door and heaved it open. Down a gloomy corridor, the noise of fighting steadily growing louder. She edged out onto a wide balcony. Above her the great dome was painted with

a sky touched by a rising sun, seven winged women brandishing swords. Aropella's grand fresco of the Fates bearing destinies to earth. Below her the two great staircases swept upwards, carved from three different colours of marble. At their top were the double doors, inlaid with rare woods in the pattern of lions' faces. There, in front of those doors, she'd stood beside Benna for the last time, and told him she loved him.

Safe to say things had changed.

On the round mosaic floor of the hall below, and on the wide marble steps, and on the balcony above, a furious battle was being fought. Men from the Thousand Swords struggled to the death with Orso's guards, three score or more of them, a boiling, flailing mass. Swords crashed on shields, maces staved in armour, axes rose and fell, spears jabbed and thrust. Men roared with fury, blubbered with pain, fought and died, hacked down where they stood. The mercenaries were mad on the promise of plunder and the defenders had nowhere to run to. Mercy looked in short supply on both sides. A couple of men in Talinese uniform were kneeling on the balcony not far from her, cranking flatbows. As one of them stood to shoot he caught an arrow in his chest, fell back, coughing, eyes wide with surprise, spattering blood over a fine statue behind him.

Never fight your own battles, Verturio wrote, if someone else is willing to fight them for you. Monza eased carefully back into the shadows.

The cork came out with that sucking pop that was Cosca's favourite noise in all the world. He leaned across the table with the bottle and sloshed some of the syrupy contents into Victus' glass.

'Thanks,' he grunted. 'I think.'

To put it politely, Gurkish grape spirit was not to everyone's taste. Cosca had developed if not a love for it then certainly a tolerance, when employed to defend Dagoska. In fact he had developed a powerful tolerance for anything containing alcohol, and Gurkish grape spirit contained a very great deal at a most reasonable cost. The very thought of that gloriously repulsive burned-vomit taste was making his mouth flood with saliva. A drink, a drink, a drink.

He unscrewed the cap of his own flask, shifted in the captain general's chair, fondly stroking the battered wood of one of its arms. 'Well?'

Victus' thin face radiated suspicion, causing Cosca to reflect that no man he had ever met had a shiftier look to his eyes. They slid to his cards, to Cosca's cards, to the money between them, then slithered back to Cosca. 'Alright. Doubles it is.' He tossed some coins into the centre of the table with that delightful jingle that somehow only hard currency can make. 'What are you carrying, old man?'

'Earth!' Cosca smugly spread his cards out.

Victus flung his own hand down. 'Bloody earth! You always did have the luck of a demon.'

'And you the loyalty of one.' Cosca showed his teeth as he swept the coins towards him. 'I shouldn't worry, the boys will be bringing us plenty more silver in due course. Rule of Quarters, and all that.'

'At this rate I'll have lost all my share to you before they get here.'

'We can hope.' Cosca took a sip from his flask and grimaced. For some reason it tasted even more sour than usual. He wrinkled his lips, sucked his gums, then forced another acrid mouthful down and half-screwed the cap back on. 'Now! I am deeply in need of a shit.' He slapped the table with one hand and stood. 'No tampering with the deck while I'm away, you hear?'

'Me?' Victus was all injured innocence. 'You can trust me, General.'

'Of course I can.' Cosca began to walk, his eyes fixed on the dark crack down the edge of the doorway to the latrine, judging the distances, back prickling as he pictured where Victus was sitting. He twisted his wrist, felt his throwing-knife drop into his waiting palm. 'Just like I could trust you at Afieri—' He spun about, and froze. 'Ah.'

Victus had somehow produced a small flatbow, loaded, and now aimed with impressive steadiness at Cosca's heart. 'Andiche took a sword-thrust for you?' he sneered. 'Sesaria sacrificed himself? I knew those two bastards, remember! What kind of a fucking idiot do you take me for?'

Shenkt sprang through the shattered window and dropped silently down into the hall beyond. An hour ago it must have been a grand dining room indeed, but the Thousand Swords had already stripped it of anything that might raise a penny. Only fragments of glass and plate, slashed canvases in shattered frames and the shells of some furniture too big to move remained. Three little flies chased each other in geometric patterns through the air

above the stripped table. Near them two men were arguing while a boy perhaps fourteen years old watched nervously.

'I told you I had the fucking spoons!' a pock-faced man screamed at one with a tarnished breastplate. 'But that bitch knocked me down and I lost 'em! Why didn't you get nothing?'

''Cause I was watching the door while you got something, you fucking—'

The boy raised a silent finger to point at Shenkt. The other two abandoned their argument to stare at him. 'Who the hell are you?' demanded the spoon-thief.

'The woman who made you lose your cutlery,' asked Shenkt. 'Murcatto?'

'Who the hell are you, I asked?'

'No one. Only passing through.'

'That so?' He grinned at his fellows as he drew his sword. 'Well, this room's ours, and there's a toll.'

'There's a toll,' hissed the one with the breastplate, in a tone no doubt meant to be intimidating.

The two of them spread out, the boy reluctantly following their lead. 'What have you got for us?' asked the first.

Shenkt looked him in the eye as he came close, and gave him a chance. 'Nothing you want.'

'I'll be the judge of that.' His gaze settled on the ruby ring on Shenkt's forefinger. 'What about that?'

'It isn't mine to give.'

'Then it's ours to take.' They closed in, the one with the pocked face prodding at Shenkt with his sword. 'Hands behind your head, bastard, and get on your knees.'

Shenkt frowned. 'I do not kneel.'

The three zipping flies slowed, drifting lazily, then hanging almost still.

Slowly, slowly, the spoon-thief's hungry leer turned into a snarl.

Slowly, slowly, his arm drifted back for a thrust.

Shenkt stepped around his sword, the edge of his hand sank deep into the thief's chest then tore back out. A great chunk of rib and breastbone was ripped out with it, flew spinning through the air to embed itself deep in the ceiling.

Shenkt brushed the sword aside, seized the next man by his breastplate and flung him across the room, his head crumpling against the far wall,

blood showering out under such pressure it made a great star of spatters across the gilded wallpaper from floor to ceiling. The flies were sucked from their places by the wind of his passing, dragged through the air in mad spirals. The ear-splitting bang of his skull exploding joined the hiss of blood spraying from his friend's caved-in chest and all over the gaping boy as time resumed its normal flow.

'The woman who made your friend lose his cutlery.' Shenkt flicked the few drops of blood from his hand. 'Murcatto?'

The boy nodded dumbly.

'Which way did she go?'

His wide eyes rolled towards the far door.

'Good.' Shenkt would have liked to be kind. But then this boy might have run and brought more men, and there would have been further entanglements. Sometimes you must take one life to spare more, and when those times come, sentiment helps nobody. One of his old master's lessons that Shenkt had never forgotten. 'I am sorry for this.'

With a sharp crack, his forefinger sank up to the knuckle in the boy's forehead.

They smashed their way through the kitchens, both doing their level worst to kill each other. Shivers hadn't planned on this but his blood was boiling now. Friendly was in his fucking way, and had to be got out of it, simple as that. It had become a point of pride. Shivers was better armed, he had the reach, he had the shield. But Friendly was slippery as an eel and patient as winter. Backing off, dropping away, forcing nothing, giving no openings. All he had was his cleaver, but Shivers knew he'd killed enough men with that alone, and didn't plan on adding his name to the list.

They tangled again, Friendly weaving round an axe-blow and darting in close, hacking with the cleaver. Shivers stepped into it, caught it on his shield then charged on, sent Friendly stumbling back against a table, metal rattling. Shivers grinned, until he saw the table was covered with knives. Friendly snatched up a blade, arm going back to throw. Shivers dropped down behind his shield, felt the thud as the knife buried itself in the wood. He peered over the edge, saw another spinning at him. It bounced from the metal rim and flashed up into Shivers' face, left him a burning scratch across the cheek. Friendly whipped up another knife.

Shivers weren't about to crouch there and be target practice. He roared as he rushed forwards, shield leading the way. Friendly leaped back, rolled across the table, Shivers' axe just missed him, leaving a great wound in the wood and sending knives jumping in the air. He followed while the convict was off balance, punching away with the edge of his shield, swinging wild with his axe, skin burning, sweat tickling, one eye bulging wild, growling through gritted teeth. Plates shattered, pans scattered, bottles broke, splinters flew, a jar of flour burst open and filled the air with blinding dust.

Shivers left a trail of waste through that kitchen the Bloody-Nine himself might've been proud to make, but the convict dodged and danced, nipped and slashed with knife and cleaver, always just out of reach. All Shivers had to show for his fury by the time they'd done their ugly dance the length of the long room was a bleeding cut on his own arm and a reddening mark on the side of Friendly's face where he'd caught him with his shield.

The convict stood ready and waiting, a couple of steps up the flight leading out, knife and cleaver hanging by his sides, sheen of sweat across his flat chunk of face, skin bloody and battered from a dozen different little cuts and kicks, plus a fall off a balcony and a tumble down some stairs, of course. But Shivers hadn't landed nothing telling on him yet. He didn't look halfway to being finished.

'Come 'ere, you tricky fucker!' Shivers hissed, arm aching shoulder to fingers from swinging his axe. 'Let's put an end to you.'

'You come here,' Friendly grunted back at him. 'Let's put an end to you.'

Shivers shrugged his shoulders, shook out his arms, wiped blood off his forehead on the back of his sleeve, twisted his neck one way then the other. 'Right . . . you . . . fucking are!' And he came on again. He didn't need asking twice.

Cosca frowned down at his knife. 'If I said I was just going to peel an orange with it, any chance you'd believe me?'

Victus grinned, causing Cosca to reflect that no man he had ever met had a shiftier smile. 'Doubt I'll believe another word you say. But don't worry. You won't be saying many more.'

'Why is it that men pointing loaded flatbows always feel the need to gloat, rather than simply letting fly?'

‘Gloating’s fun.’ Victus reached for his glass, smirking eyes never leaving Cosca, glinting point of the flatbow bolt steady as stone, and quickly tossed back his spirit in one swallow. ‘Yeuch.’ He stuck his tongue out. ‘Damn, that stuff is sour.’

‘Sweeter than my situation,’ muttered Cosca. ‘I suppose now the captain general’s chair will be yours.’ A shame. He’d only just got used to sitting in it again himself.

Victus snorted. ‘Why would I want the fucking thing? Hasn’t done much good for the arses on it up to now, has it? Sazine, you, the Murcattos, Faithful Carpi, and you again. Each one ended up dead or close to it, and all the while I’ve stood behind, and got a lot richer than a nasty little bastard like me deserves.’ He winced, put one hand on his stomach. ‘No, I’ll find some new idiot to sit there, I think, and make me richer’n ever.’ He grimaced again. ‘Ah, shit on that stuff. Ah!’ He staggered up from his chair, clutching the edge of the table, a thick vein bulging from his forehead. ‘What’ve you done to me, you old bastard?’ He squinted over, flatbow suddenly wobbling.

Cosca flung himself forwards. The trigger clicked, the bowstring twanged, the bolt clattered against the plaster just to his left. He rolled up beside the table with a whoop of triumph, raising his knife. ‘Hah hah—’ Victus’ bow bashed him in the face, just above his eye. ‘Gurgh!’ Cosca’s vision was suddenly filled with light, his knees wobbling wildly. He clutched at the table, waved his knife at nothing. ‘Sfup.’ Hands closed around his throat. Hands crusted with heavy rings. Victus’ pink face loomed up before his, spit spluttering from his twisted mouth.

Cosca’s boots went out from under him, the room flipped over, his head crashed into the table. And all was dark.

The battle under the dome was over, and between the two sides they’d made quite a mess of Orso’s cherished rotunda. The glittering mosaic floor and the sweeping steps above it were strewn with corpses, scattered with fallen weapons, dashed and spattered, pooled and puddled with dark blood.

The mercenaries had won – if a dozen of them left standing counted as a victory. ‘Help me!’ one of the wounded was screeching. ‘Help me!’ But his fellows had other things on their minds.

‘Get these fucking things open!’ The one taking charge was Secco, the corporal who’d been on guard when she rode into the Thousand Swords’ camp only to find Cosca there ahead of her. He dragged a dead Talinese soldier out of the way of the lion-head doors and dumped the corpse down the stairs. ‘You! Find an axe!’

Monza frowned. ‘Orso’ll have more men in there for sure. We’d better wait for help.’

‘Wait? And split the takings?’ Secco gave her a withering sneer. ‘Fuck yourself, Murcatto, you don’t give us orders no more! Get it open!’ Two men started battering away with axes, splinters of veneer flying. The rest of the survivors jostled dangerously close behind them, breathless with greed. It seemed the doors had been made to impress guests, not keep out armies. They shuddered, loosening on their hinges. A few more blows and one axe broke clean through, a great chunk of wood splintering away. Secco whooped in triumph as he rammed his spear into the gap, levering the bar on the other side out of its brackets. He fumbled with the ragged edge, pulling the doors wide.

Squealing like children on a feast day, tangled up with each other, drunk on blood and avarice, the mercenaries spilled through into the bright hall where Benna died. Monza knew it was a bad idea to follow. She knew Orso might not even be in there, and if he was, he’d be ready.

But sometimes you have to grasp the nettle.

She dashed round the doorframe after them, keeping low. An instant later she heard the rattling of flatbows. The mercenary in front of her fell and she had to duck around him. Another tumbled backwards, clutching at a bolt in his chest. Boots hammered, men bellowed, the grand room with its great windows and its paintings of history’s winners wobbled around her as she ran. She saw figures in full armour, glimpses of steel shining. Orso’s closest guards.

She saw Secco jabbing away at one with his spear, the blade scraping uselessly off heavy plate. She heard a loud bonk as a mercenary smashed in a helmet with a big mace, then a scream as he was cut down himself, chopped near in half across the back with a two-handed sword, blood jumping. Another bolt snatched a man from his feet as he charged in and sent him sprawling backwards. Monza crouched, setting her shoulder under the edge of a marble table and heaved it over, a vase that had been on top

shattering across the floor. She ducked down behind it, flinched as a flatbow bolt glanced off the stone and clattered away.

'No!' she heard someone shout. 'No!' A mercenary flashed past her, running for the door he'd burst through with such enthusiasm a moment before. There was the sound of a bowstring and he stumbled, a bolt sticking from his back, tottered another step and fell, slid along on his face. He tried to push himself up, coughed blood, then sagged down. He died looking right at her.

This was what you got for being greedy. And here she was, wedged in behind a table and all out of friends, more than likely next.

'Grasp the fucking nettle,' she cursed at herself.

Friendly backed up the last of the steps, his boots suddenly striking echoes as a wide space opened up behind him. A great round room under a dome painted with winged women, seven lofty archways leading in. Statues looked down from the walls, sculptures in relief, hundreds of pairs of eyes following him as he moved. The defenders must have made a stand here, there were bodies scattered across the floor and up the two curving staircases. Cosca's mercenaries and Orso's guards mixed up together. All on the same side, now. Friendly thought he could hear fighting echoing from somewhere above, but there was still plenty of fight for him down here.

Shivers stepped out from the archway. His hair was dark with blood on one side, plastered to his skull, scarred face streaked red. He was covered with nicks and grazes, right sleeve ripped wide, blood running down his arm. But Friendly hadn't been able to put in that final blow. The Northman still had his axe in one fist, ready to fight, shield criss-crossed with gouges. He nodded as his one eye moved slowly around the room.

'Lot o' corpses,' he whispered.

'Forty-nine,' said Friendly. 'Seven times seven.'

'Fancy that. We add you, we'll make fifty.'

He threw himself forwards, feinting high then swinging his axe in a great low, ankle-chopping sweep. Friendly jumped it, cleaver coming down towards the Northman's head. Shivers jerked his shield up in time and the blade clanged from its dented boss, sending a jolt up Friendly's arm right to his shoulder. He stabbed at Shivers' side as he passed, got his arm tangled with the haft of the axe as it swung back, but still left the Northman a long

cut down his ribs. Friendly spun, raising his cleaver to finish the job, got Shivers' elbow in his throat before he could bring it down, staggered back, near tripping over a corpse.

They faced each other again, Shivers bent over, teeth bared, arm pressed to his wounded side, Friendly coughing as he fought to get his breath and his balance back both at once.

'Another?' whispered Shivers.

'One more,' croaked Friendly.

They went at each other again, their snatched breath, squeaking boots, grunting and growling, the scrape of metal on metal, the clang of metal on stone, all echoing from the marble walls and the painted ceiling, as though men were fighting to the death all around them. They chopped, hacked, spat, kicked, stabbed at each other, jumping over bodies, stumbling over weapons, boots slipping and squeaking in black blood on polished stone.

Friendly jerked away from a clumsy axe-swing that hit the wall and sent chips of marble spinning, found he was backing up the steps. They were both tiring now, slowing. A man can only fight, sweat, bleed for so long. Shivers came after him, breathing hard, shield up in front.

Backing up steps is a bad enough idea when they're not scattered with bodies. Friendly was so busy watching Shivers he put his boot down on a corpse's hand, twisted his ankle. Shivers saw it, jabbed with his axe. Friendly couldn't get his leg out of the way in time and the blade tore a gash out of his calf, half-dragged him over. Shivers growled as he lifted his axe high. Friendly lurched forwards, slashed Shivers' forearm with his knife, left a red-black wound, blood running. The Northman grunted, fumbled his axe, the heavy weapon clattering down beside them. Friendly chopped at his skull with the cleaver but Shivers got his shield arm in the way, the two of them getting tangled, the blade only slitting Shivers' scalp, blood bubbling from the wound, pattering over them both. The Northman grabbed Friendly's shoulder with his bloody hand, dragging him close, good eye bulging with crazy rage, steel eye spattered shining red, lips twisted in a mad snarl as he tipped his head backwards.

Friendly drove his knife into Shivers' thigh, felt the metal slide in to the hilt. Shivers gave a kind of squeal, pain and fury together. His forehead smashed into Friendly's mouth with a sick crunch. The hall reeled around, the steps hit Friendly in the back, his skull cracked against marble. He saw

Shivers loom over him, thought it would be a good idea to bring the cleaver up. Before he could do it, Shivers rammed his shield down, metal rim clanging against stone. Friendly felt the two bones in his forearm break, cleaver dropping from his numb fingers and clattering down the steps.

Shivers reached down, specks of pink spit flicking from his clenched teeth with each moaning breath, fist closing around the grip of his axe. Friendly watched him do it, feeling no more than a mild curiosity. Everything was bright and blurry, now. He saw the scar on the Northman's thick wrist, in the shape of a number seven. Seven was a good number, today, just as it had been the first day they met. Just as it always was.

'Excuse me.' Shivers froze for a moment, his one eye sliding sideways. He reeled around, axe coming after. A man stood behind him, a lean man with pale hair. It was hard to see what happened. The axe missed, Shivers' shield shattered in a tangle of flying wood, he was snatched off his feet and sent tumbling across the chamber. He crashed into the far wall with a gurgle, bounced off and rolled slowly down the opposite set of steps, flopping over once, twice, three times, and lying still at the bottom.

'Three times,' gurgled Friendly through his split lips.

'Stay,' said the pale man, stepping around him and off up the stairway. It was not so difficult to obey. Friendly had no other plans. He spat a lump of tooth out of his numb mouth, and that was all. He lay there, blinking slowly, staring up at the winged women on the ceiling.

Seven of them, with seven swords.

A rapid spectrum of emotions had swept over Morveer during the past few moments. Triumphant delight, as he had seen Cosca drink from his flask and all unknowing doom himself. Horror and a pointless search for a hiding place as the old mercenary declared his intention to visit the latrine. Curiosity, as he then saw Victus produce a loaded flatbow from beneath the table and train it on his general's back. Triumph once again as he watched Victus consume his own fatal measure of spirit. Finally he was forced to clamp one hand over his mouth to smother his amusement as the poisoned Cosca flung himself clumsily at his poisoned opponent and the two men wrestled, fell to the floor and lay still in a final embrace.

The ironies positively piled one upon the next. Most earnestly they had attempted to kill each other, never realising that Morveer had already done

both their jobs for them.

With the smile still on his face he slid his mounted needle from its hidden pocket within the lining of his mercenary's jerkin. Caution first, always. In case any trace of life remained in either of the two murderous old mercenaries, the lightest prick with this shining splinter of metal, coated with his own Preparation Number Twelve, would extinguish it for good and to the general benefit of the world. Morveer carefully eased the latrine door open with the gentlest of creaks, and on pointed toes crept out into the room beyond.

The table was tipped over on its side, coins and cards widely scattered. Cosca lay on his back beside it, left hand hanging nerveless, his flask not far away. Victus was draped on top of him, small flatbow still gripped in one fist, the clasp at its end spotted with red blood. Morveer knelt beside the deceased, hooked his free hand under Victus' corpse and with a grunting effort rolled it off.

Cosca's eyes were closed, his mouth open, blood streaked his cheek from a wound on his forehead. His skin was waxy pale with the unmistakable sheen of death.

'A man can change, eh?' sneered Morveer. 'So much for your promises!'

To his tremendous shock, Cosca's eyes snapped suddenly open.

To his even more tremendous shock, an indescribably awful pain lanced up through his stomach. He took in a great shuddering breath and gave vent to an unearthly howl. Looking down, he perceived that the old mercenary had driven a knife into his groin. Morveer's breath whooped in again. Desperately he raised his arm.

There was a faint slapping sound as Cosca seized his wrist and wrenched it sharply sideways, causing the needle to sink into Morveer's neck. There was a pregnant pause. They remained frozen, a human sculpture, the knife still in Morveer's groin, the needle in his neck, gripped by his hand, gripped by Cosca's hand. Cosca frowned up. Morveer stared down. His eyes bulged. His body trembled. He said nothing. What could one possibly say? The implications were crushingly obvious. Already the most potent poison of which he was aware, carried swiftly from neck to brain, was causing his extremities to become numb.

'Poisoned the grape spirit, eh?' hissed Cosca.

'Fuh,' gurgled Morveer, unable now to form words.

‘Did you forget I promised you never to drink again?’ The old mercenary released the knife, reached across the floor with his bloody hand, retrieved his flask, spun the cap off with a practised motion and tipped it up. White liquid splashed out across the floor. ‘Goat’s milk. I hear it’s good for the digestion. The strongest thing I’ve had since we left Sipani, but it would hardly do to let everyone know it. I have a certain reputation to uphold here. Hence all the bottles.’

Cosca shoved Morveer over. The strength was rapidly fading from his limbs and he was powerless to resist. He flopped limp across Victus’ corpse. He could scarcely feel his neck. The agony in his groin had faded to a dull throb. Cosca looked down at him.

‘Didn’t I promise you I’d stop? What kind of a man do you take me for, that I’d break my word?’

Morveer had no breath left to speak, let alone scream. The pain was fading in any case. He wondered, as he often had, how his life might have differed had he not poisoned his mother, and doomed himself to life in the orphanage. His vision was clouding, blurring, growing dark.

‘I need to thank you. You see, Morveer, a man can change, given the proper encouragement. And your scorn was the very spur I needed.’

Killed by his own agent. It was the way so many great practitioners of his profession ended their lives. And on the eve of his retirement, too. He was sure there was an irony there somewhere . . .

‘Do you know the best thing about all this?’ Cosca’s voice boomed in his ears, Cosca’s grin swam above him. ‘Now I can start drinking again.’

One of the mercenaries was pleading, blubbering, begging for his life. Monza sat against the cold marble slab of the tabletop and listened to him, breathing hard, sweating hard, weighing the Calvez in her hand. It would be little better than useless against the heavy armour of Orso’s guards, even if she’d fancied taking on that many at once. She heard the damp squelch of a blade rammed into flesh and the pleading was cut off in a long scream and a short gurgle.

Not really a sound to give anyone confidence.

She peered round the edge of the table. She counted seven guards still standing, one ripping his spear free of a dead mercenary’s chest, two turning towards her, heavy swords ready, one working an axe from Secco’s split

skull. Three were kneeling, busily cranking flatbows. Behind them stood the big round table on which the map of Styria was still unrolled. On the map was a crown, a ring of sparkling gold sprouting with gem-encrusted oak leaves, not unlike the one that had killed Rogont and his dream of Styria united. Beside the crown, dressed in black and with his iron-shot black hair and beard as neatly groomed as ever, stood Grand Duke Orso.

He saw her, and she saw him, and the anger boiled up, hot and comforting. One of his guards slipped a bolt into his flatbow and levelled it at her. She was about to duck behind the slab of marble when Orso held out one arm.

'Wait! Stop.' That same voice that she had never disobeyed in eight hard years. 'Is that you, Monzcarro?'

'Damn right it is!' she snarled back. 'Get ready to fucking die!' Though it looked as if she might be going first.

'I've been ready for some time,' he called out softly. 'You've seen to that. Well done! My hopes are all in ruins, thanks to you.'

'You needn't thank me!' she called. 'It was Benna I did it for!'

'Ario is dead.'

'Hah!' she barked back. 'That's what happens when I stab a worthless cunt in the neck and throw him from a window!' A flurry of twitches crawled up Orso's cheek. 'But why pick him out? There was Gobba, and Mauthis, and Ganmark, and Faithful – I've slaughtered the whole crowd! Everyone who was in this room when you murdered my brother!'

'And Foscar? I've heard no word since the defeat at the fords.'

'You can stop listening!' Said with a glee she hardly felt. 'Skull smashed to pulp on a farmhouse floor!'

The anger had all gone from Orso's face and it hung terribly slack. 'You must be happy.'

'I'm not fucking sad, I'll tell you that!'

'Grand Duchess Monzcarro of Talins.' Orso tapped two fingers slowly against his palm, the sharp snaps echoing off the high ceiling. 'I congratulate you on your victory. You have what you wanted after all!'

'What I wanted?' For a moment she could hardly believe what she was hearing. 'You think I wanted this? After the battles I fought for you? The victories I won for you?' She was near shrieking, spitting with fury. She ripped her glove off with her teeth and shook her mutilated hand at him. 'I

fucking wanted this? What reason did we give you to betray us? We were loyal to you! Always!'

'Loyal?' Orso gave a disbelieving gasp of his own. 'Crow your victory if you must, but don't crow your innocence to me! We both know better!'

All three flatbows were loaded and levelled now. 'We were loyal!' she screamed again, voice cracking.

'Can you deny it? That Benna met with malcontents, revolutionaries, traitors among my ungrateful subjects? That he promised them weapons? That he promised you would lead them to glory? Claim my place? Usurp me! Did you think I would not learn of it? Did you think I would stand idly by?'

'What the . . . you fucking *liar* !'

'Still you deny it? I would not believe it myself when they told me! My Monza? Closer to me than my own children? My Monza, betray me? With my own eyes I saw him! With my own eyes!' The echoes of his voice slowly faded, and left the hall almost silent. Only the gentle clanking of the four armoured men as they edged ever so slowly towards her. She could only stare, the realisation creeping slowly through her.

We could have our own city, Benna had said. You could be the Duchess Monzcarro of . . . wherever. Of Talins, had been his thought. We deserve to be remembered. He'd planned it himself, alone, and given her no choice. Just as he had when he betrayed Cosca. It's better this way. Just as he had when he took Hermon's gold. This is for us.

He'd always been the one with the big plans.

'Benna,' she mouthed. 'You fool.'

'You didn't know,' said Orso quietly. 'You didn't know, and now we are come to this. Your brother doomed himself, and both of us, and half of Styria besides.' A sad little chuckle bubbled out of him. 'Just when I think I know it all, life always finds a way to surprise me. You're late, Shenkt.' His eyes flicked to the side. 'Kill her.'

Monza felt a shadow fall across her, lurched around. A man had stolen up while they spoke, his soft work boots making not the slightest sound. Now he stood over her, close enough to touch. He held out his hand. There was a ring in his palm. Benna's ruby ring.

'I believe this is yours,' he said.

A pale, lean face. Not old, but deeply lined, with harsh cheekbones and eyes hungry bright in bruised sockets. Monza's eyes went wide, the chill shock of recognition washing over her like ice water.

'Kill her!' shouted Orso.

The newcomer smiled, but it was like a skull's smile, never touching his eyes. 'Kill her? After all the effort I went to keeping her alive?'

The colour had drained from her face. Indeed she looked almost as pale as she had done when he first found her, broken amongst the rubbish on the slopes of Fontezarmo. Or when she'd first woken after he pulled the stitches, and stared down in horror at her own scarred body.

'Kill her?' he asked again. 'After I carried her from the mountain? After I mended her bones and stitched her back together? After I protected her from your hirelings in Puranti?'

Shenkt turned his hand over and let the ring fall, and it bounced once and tinkled down spinning on the floor beside her twisted right hand. She did not thank him, but he had not expected thanks. It was not for her thanks that he had done it.

'Kill them both!' screamed Orso.

Shenkt was always surprised by how treacherous men could be over trifles, yet how loyal they could be when their lives were forfeit. These last few guards still fought to the death for Orso, even though his day was clearly done. Perhaps they could not comprehend that a man so great as the Grand Duke of Talins might die like any other, and all his power so easily turn to dust. Perhaps for some men obedience became a habit they could not question. Or perhaps they came to define themselves by their service to a master, and chose to take the short step into death as part of something great, rather than walk the long, hard road of life in insignificance.

If so, then Shenkt would not deny them. Slowly, slowly, he breathed in.

The drawn-out twang of the flatbow string throbbed deep in his ears. He stepped out of the path of the first bolt, let it drift under his raised arm. The aim of the next was good, right for Murcatto's throat. He plucked it from the air between finger and thumb as it crawled past, set it carefully down on a polished table as he crossed the room. He took up an idealised bust of one of Orso's forebears from beside it – his grandfather, Shenkt suspected, the one who had himself been a mercenary. He flung it at the nearest

flatbowman, just in the process of lowering his bow, puzzled. It caught him in the stomach, sank deep into his armour, folded him in half in a cloud of stone chips and tore him off his feet towards the far wall, legs and arms stretched out in front of him, his bow spinning high into the air. Shenkt hit the nearest man on the helmet and stove it deep into his shoulders, blood spraying from the crumpled visor, axe dropping slowly from his twisting hand. The next had an open helm, the look of surprise just forming as Shenkt's fist drove a dent into his breastplate so deep that it bent his backplate out with a groan of twisted metal. He sprang to the table, marble floor splitting under his boots as he came down. The nearest of the two remaining archers slowly raised his flatbow as though to use it as a shield. Shenkt's hand split it in half, string flailing, tore the man's helmet off and sent it hurtling up into the ceiling, his body tumbling sideways, spraying blood, to crumple against the wall in a shower of plaster. Shenkt seized hold of the other archer and tossed him out of one of the high windows, sparkling fragments tumbling down, bouncing, spinning, breaking apart, deep clangour of shattering glass making the air hum.

The last but one had his sword raised, flecks of spit floating from his twisted lips as he gave his war cry. Shenkt caught him by the wrist, hurled him upside-down across the room and into his final comrade. They were mangled together, a tangle of dented armour, crashed into a set of shelves, gilded books ripped open, loose papers spewing into the air, gently fluttering down as Shenkt breathed out, and let time find its course again.

The spinning flatbow fell, bounced from the tiles and clattered away into a corner. Grand Duke Orso stood just where he had before, beside the round table with its map of Styria, the sparkling crown sitting in its centre. His mouth fell open.

'I never leave a job half-done,' said Shenkt. 'But I was never working for you.'

Monza got to her feet, staring at the bodies tangled, scattered, twisted about the far end of the hall. Papers fluttered down like autumn leaves, from a bookcase shattered around a mass of bloody armour, cracks lancing out through the marble walls all about it.

She stepped around the upended table. Past the bodies of mercenaries and guards. Over Secco's corpse, his smeared brains gleaming in one of the long

stripes of sunlight from the high windows.

Orso watched her come in silence, the great painting of him proudly claiming victory at the Battle of Etrea looming ten strides high over his shoulder. The little man and his outsized myth.

The bone-thief stood back, hands spattered with blood to the elbow, watching them. She didn't know what he had done, or how, or why. It didn't matter now.

Her boots crunched on broken glass, on splintered wood, ripped paper, shattered pottery. Everywhere black spots of blood were scattered and her soles soaked them up and left bloody footprints behind her. Like the bloody trail she'd left across Styria, to come here. To stand on the spot where they killed her brother.

She stopped, a sword's length away from Orso. Waiting, she hardly knew what for. Now the moment had come, the moment she'd strained for with every muscle, endured so much pain, spent so much money, wasted so many lives to reach, she found it hard to move. What would come after?

Orso raised his brows. He picked up the crown from the table with exaggerated care, the way a mother might pick up a newborn baby. 'This was to be mine. This almost was mine. This is what you fought for, all those years. And this is what you kept from me, in the end.' He turned it slowly around in his hands, the jewels sparkling. 'When you build your life around only one thing, love only one person, dream only one dream, you risk losing everything at a stroke. You built your life around your brother. I built mine around a crown.' He gave a heavy sigh, pursed his lips, then tossed the circle of gold aside and watched it rattle round and round on the map of Styria. 'Now look at us. Both equally wretched.'

'Not equally.' She lifted the scuffed, notched, hard-used blade of the Calvez. The blade she'd had made for Benna. 'I still have you.'

'And when you have killed me, what will you live for then?' His eyes moved from the sword to hers. 'Monza, Monza . . . what will you do without me?'

'I'll think of something.'

The point punctured his jacket with a faint pop, slid effortlessly through his chest and out of his back. He gave a gentle grunt, eyes widening, and she slid the blade free. They stood there, opposite each other, for a moment.

‘Oh.’ He touched one finger to dark cloth and it came away red. ‘Is that all?’ He looked up at her, puzzled. ‘I was expecting . . . more.’

He crumpled all at once, knees dropping against the polished floor, then he toppled forwards and the side of his face thumped damply against the marble beside her boot. The one eye she could see rolled slowly towards her, and the corner of his mouth twitched into a smile. Then he was still.

Seven out of seven. It was done.

Seeds

It was a winter's morning, cold and clear, and Monza's breath smoked on the air.

She stood outside the chamber where they killed her brother. On the terrace they threw her from. Her hands resting on the parapet they'd rolled her off. Above the mountainside that had broken her apart. She felt that nagging ache still up the bones of her legs, across the back of her gloved hand, down the side of her skull. She felt that prickling need for the husk-pipe that she knew would never quite fade. It was far from comfortable, staring down that long drop towards the tiny trees that had snatched at her as she fell. That was why she came here every morning.

A good leader should never be comfortable, Stolicus wrote.

The sun was climbing, now, and the bright world was full of colour. The blood had drained from the sky and left it a vivid blue, white clouds crawling high above. To the east, the forest crumbled away into a patchwork of fields – squares of fallow green, rich black earth, golden-brown stubble. Her fields. Further still and the river met the grey sea, branching out in a wide delta, choked with islands. Monza could just make out the suggestion of tiny towers there, buildings, bridges, walls. Great Talins, no bigger than her thumbnail. Her city.

That idea still seemed a madman's ranting.

'Your Excellency.' Monza's chamberlain lurked in one of the high doorways, bowing so low he almost tongued the stone. The same man who'd served Orso for fifteen years, had somehow come through the sack of Fontezarmo unscathed, and now had made the transition from master to mistress with admirable smoothness. Monza had stolen Orso's city, after all, his palace, some of his clothes, even, with a few adjustments. Why not his retainers too? Who knew their jobs better?

'What is it?'

'Your ministers are here. Lord Rubine, Chancellor Grulo, Chancellor Scavier, Colonel Volfier and . . . Mistress Vitari.' He cleared his throat, looking somewhat pained. 'Might I enquire whether Mistress Vitari has a specific title yet?'

‘She handles those things no one with a specific title can.’

‘Of course, your Excellency.’

‘Bring them in.’

The heavy doors were swung open, faced with beaten copper engraved with twisting serpents. Not the works of art Orso’s lion-face veneers had been, perhaps, but a great deal stronger. Monza had made sure of that. Her five visitors strutted, strode, bustled and shuffled through, their footsteps echoing around the chill marble of Orso’s private audience hall. Two months in, and still she couldn’t think of it as hers.

Vitari came first, with much the same dark clothes and smirk she’d worn when Monza first met her in Sipani. Volfier was next, walking stiffly in his braided uniform. Scavier and Grulo competed with each other to follow him. Old Rubine laboured along at the rear, bent under his chain of office, taking his time getting to the point, as always.

‘So you still haven’t got rid of it.’ Vitari frowned at the vast portrait of Orso gazing down from the far wall.

‘Why would I? Reminds me of my victories, and my defeats. Reminds me where I came from. And that I have no intention of going back.’

‘And it is a fine painting,’ observed Rubine, looking sadly about. ‘Precious few remain.’

‘The Thousand Swords are nothing if not thorough.’ The room had lost almost everything not nailed down or carved into the mountainside. Orso’s vast desk still crouched grimly at the far end, if somewhat wounded by an axe as someone had searched in vain for hidden compartments. The towering fireplace, held up by monstrous marble figures of Juvens and Kanedias, had proved impossible to remove and now contained a few flaming logs, failing utterly to warm the cavernous interior. The great round table too was still in place, the same map unrolled across it. As it had been the last day that Benna lived, but stained now in one corner with a few brown spots of Orso’s blood.

Monza walked to it, wincing at a niggle through her hip, and her ministers gathered around the table in a ring just as Orso’s ministers had. They say history moves in circles. ‘The news?’

‘Good,’ said Vitari, ‘if you love bad news. I hear the Baolish have crossed the river ten thousand strong and invaded Osprian territory. Muris has declared independence and gone to war with Sipani, again, while Sotorius’

sons fight each other in the streets of the city.' Her finger waved over the map, carelessly spreading chaos across the continent. 'Visserine remains leaderless, a plundered shadow of her former glory. There are rumours of plague in Affoia, of a great fire in Nicante. Puranti is in uproar. Musselia is in turmoil.'

Rubine tugged unhappily at his beard. 'Woe is Styria! They say Rogont was right. The Years of Blood are at an end. The Years of Fire are just beginning. In Westport, the holy men are proclaiming the end of the world.'

Monza snorted. 'Those bastards proclaim the end of the world whenever a bird shits. Anywhere without calamities?'

'Talins?' Vitari glanced around the room. 'Though I hear the palace at Fontezarmo did suffer some light looting recently. And Borletta.'

'Borletta?' It wasn't much more than a year since Monza had told Orso, in this very hall, how she'd thoroughly looted that very city. Not to mention spiked its ruler's head above the gates.

'Duke Cantain's young niece foiled a plot by the nobles of the city to depose her. Apparently, she made such a fine speech they all threw aside their swords, fell to their knees and swore undying fealty to her on the spot. Or that's the story they're telling, at any rate.'

'Making armed men fall to their knees is a neat trick, however she managed it.' Monza remembered how Rogont won his great victory. Blades can kill men, but only words can move them, and good neighbours are the surest shelter in a storm. 'Do we have such a thing as an ambassador?'

Rubine looked around the table. 'I daresay one could be produced.'

'Produce one and send him to Borletta, with a suitable gift for the persuasive duchess and . . . offers of our sisterly affection.'

'Sisterly . . . affection?' Vitari looked like she'd found a turd in her bed. 'I didn't think that was your style.'

'My style is whatever works. I hear good neighbours are the surest shelter in a storm.'

'Them and good swords.'

'Good swords go without saying.'

Rubine was looking deeply apologetic. 'Your Excellency, your reputation is not . . . all it might be.'

'It never has been.'

‘But you are widely blamed for the death of King Rogont, Chancellor Sotorius and their comrades in the League of Nine. Your lone survival was . . .’

Vitari smirked at her. ‘Damnably suspicious.’

‘In Talins that only makes you better loved, of course. But elsewhere . . . if Styria were not so deeply divided, it would undoubtedly be united against you.’

Grulo frowned across at Scavier. ‘We need someone to blame.’

‘Let’s put the blame where it belongs,’ said Monza, ‘this once. Castor Morveer poisoned the crown, on Orso’s instructions, no doubt. Let it be known. As widely as possible.’

‘But, your Excellency . . .’ Rubine had moved from apologetic to abject. ‘No one knows the name. For great crimes, people must blame great figures.’

Monza’s eyes rolled up. Duke Orso smirked triumphantly at her from the painting of a battle he was never at. She found herself smirking back. Fine lies beat tedious truths every time.

‘Inflate him, then. Castor Morveer, death without a face, most infamous of Master Poisoners. The greatest and most subtle murderer in history. A poisoner-poet. A man who could slip into the best-guarded building in Styria, murder its monarch and four of its greatest leaders and away unnoticed like a night breeze. Who is safe from the very King of Poisons? Why, I was lucky to escape with my life.’

‘Poor innocent that you are.’ Vitari slowly shook her head. ‘Rubs me wrong to heap fame on that slime of a man.’

‘I daresay you live with worse.’

‘Dead men make poor scapegoats.’

‘Oh, come now, you can breathe some life into him. Bills at every corner, proclaiming his guilt in this heinous crime and offering, let’s say, a hundred thousand scales for his head.’

Volfier was looking more worried by the moment. ‘But . . . he is dead, isn’t he?’

‘Buried with the rest when we filled in the trenches. Which means we’ll never have to pay. Hell, make it two hundred thousand, then we look rich at the same time.’

‘And looking rich is almost as useful as being it,’ said Scavier, frowning at Grulo.

‘With the tale I’ll get told, the name of Morveer will be spoken with hushed awe when we’re long dead and gone.’ Vitari smiled. ‘Mothers will scare their children with it.’

‘No doubt he’s grinning in his grave at the thought,’ said Monza. ‘I hear you unpicked a little revolt, by the way.’

‘I wouldn’t insult the term by applying it to those amateurs. The fools put up bills advertising their meetings! We knew already, but bills? In plain sight? You ask me, they deserve the death penalty just for stupidity.’

‘Or there is exile,’ offered Rubine. ‘A little mercy makes you look just, virtuous and powerful.’

‘And I could do with a touch of all three, eh?’ She thought about it for a moment. ‘Fine them heavily, publish their names, parade them naked before the Senate House, then . . . set them free.’

‘Free?’ Rubine raised his thick white eyebrows.

‘Free?’ Vitari raised her thin orange ones.

‘How just, virtuous and powerful does that make me? Punish them harshly, we give their friends a wrong to avenge. Spare them, we make resistance seem absurd. Watch them. You said yourself they’re stupid. If they plan more treason they’ll lead us to it. We can hang them then.’

Rubine cleared his throat. ‘As your Excellency commands. I will have bills printed detailing your mercy to these men. The Serpent of Talins forbears to use her fangs.’

‘For now. How are the markets?’

A hard smile crossed Scavier’s soft face. ‘Busy, busy, morning until night. Traders have come to us fleeing the chaos in Sipani, in Ospria, in Affoia, all more than willing to pay our dues if they can bring in their cargoes unmolested.’

‘The granaries?’

‘The harvest was good enough to see us through the winter without riots, I hope.’ Grulo clicked his tongue. ‘But much of the land towards Musselia still lies fallow. Farmers driven out when Rogont’s conquering forces moved through, foraging. Then the Thousand Swords left a sweep of devastation almost all the way to the banks of the Etris. The farmers are always the first to suffer in hard times.’

A lesson Monza hardly needed to be taught. ‘The city is full of beggars, yes?’

‘Beggars and refugees.’ Rubine tugged his beard again. He’d tug the bastard out if he told many more sad tales. ‘A sign of the times—’

‘Give the land away, then, to anyone who can yield a crop, and pay us tax. Farmland without farmers is nothing more than mud.’

Grulo inclined his head. ‘I will see to it.’

‘You’re quiet, Volfier.’ The old veteran stood there, glaring at the map and grinding his teeth.

‘Fucking Etrisani!’ he burst out, bashing his sword-hilt with one big fist. ‘I mean, sorry, that is, my apologies, your Excellency, but . . . those bastards!’

Monza grinned. ‘More trouble on the border?’

‘Three farms burned out.’ Her grin faded. ‘The farmers missing. Then the patrol who went looking for them was shot at from the woods, one man killed, two wounded. The rest pursued, but mindful of your orders left off at the border.’

‘They’re testing you,’ said Vitari. ‘Angry because they were Orso’s first allies.’

Grulo nodded. ‘They gave up everything in his cause and hoped to reap a golden harvest when he became king.’

Volfier slapped angrily at the table’s edge. ‘Bastards think we’re too weak to stop ’em!’

‘Are we?’ asked Monza.

‘We’ve three thousand foot and a thousand horse, all armed, drilled, all good men seen action before.’

‘Ready to fight?’

‘Only give the word, they’ll prove it!’

‘What about the Etrisanese?’

‘All bluster,’ sneered Vitari. ‘A second-rate power at the best of times, and their best was long ago.’

‘We have the advantage in numbers and quality,’ growled Volfier.

‘Undeniably, we have just cause,’ said Rubine. ‘A brief sortie across the border to teach a sharp lesson—’

‘We have the funds for a more significant campaign,’ said Scavier. ‘I already have some ideas for financial demands that might leave us

considerably enriched—’

‘The people will support you,’ cut in Grulo. ‘And indemnities will more than cover the expense!’

Monza frowned at the map, frowned in particular at those spots of blood in the corner. Benna would have counselled caution. Would have asked for time to think out a plan . . . but Benna was a long time dead, and Monza’s taste had always been to move fast, strike hard and worry about the plans afterwards. ‘Get your men ready to march, Colonel Volfier. I’ve a mind to take Etrisani under siege.’

‘Siege?’ muttered Rubine.

Vitari grinned sideways. ‘It’s when you surround a city and force its surrender.’

‘I am aware of the definition!’ snapped the old man. ‘But caution, your Excellency, Talins has but lately come through the most painful of upheavals—’

‘I have only the greatest respect for your knowledge of the law, Rubine,’ said Monza, ‘but war is my department, and believe me, once you go to war, there is nothing worse than half measures.’

‘But what of making allies—’

‘No one wants an ally who can’t protect what’s theirs. We need to demonstrate our resolve, or the wolves will all be sniffing round our carcass. We need to bring these dogs in Etrisani to heel.’

‘Make them pay,’ hissed Scavier.

‘Crush them,’ growled Grulo.

Volfier was grinning wide as he saluted. ‘I’ll have the men mustered and ready within the week.’

‘I’ll polish up my armour,’ she said, though she kept it polished anyway. ‘Anything else?’ The five of them stayed silent. ‘My thanks, then.’

‘Your Excellency.’ They bowed each in their own ways, Rubine with the frown of weighty doubts, Vitari with the slightest, lingering smirk.

Monza watched them file out. She might have liked to put aside the sword and make things grow. The way she’d wanted to long ago, after her father died. Before the Years of Blood began. But she’d seen enough to know that no battle is ever the last, whatever people might want to believe. Life goes on. Every war carries within it the seeds of the next, and she planned to be good and ready for the harvest.

Get out your plough, by all means, Farans wrote, but keep a dagger handy, just in case.

She frowned at the map, left hand straying down to rest on her stomach. It was starting to swell. Three months, now, since her blood had come. That meant it was Rogont's child. Or maybe Shivers'. A dead man's child or a killer's, a king's or a beggar's. All that really mattered was that it was hers.

She walked slowly to the desk, dropped into the chair, pulled the chain from her shirt and turned the key in the lock. She took out Orso's crown, the reassuring weight between her palms, the reassuring pain in her right hand as she lifted it and placed it carefully on the papers scattered across the scuffed leather top. Gold gleamed in the winter sun. The jewels she'd had prised out, sold to pay for weapons. Gold, to steel, to more gold, just as Orso always told her. Yet she found she couldn't part with the crown itself.

Rogont had died unmarried, without heirs. His child, even his bastard, would have a good claim on his titles. Grand Duke of Ospria. King of Styria, even. Rogont had worn the crown, after all, even if it had been a poisoned one, and only for a vainglorious instant. She felt the slightest smile at the corner of her mouth. When you lose all you have, you can always seek revenge. But if you get it, what then? Orso had spoken that much truth. Life goes on. You need new dreams to look to.

She shook herself, snatched the crown up and slid it back inside the desk. Staring at it wasn't much better than staring at her husk-pipe, wondering whether or not to put the fire to it. She was just turning the key in the lock as the doors were swung open and her chamberlain grazed the floor again with his face.

'And this time?'

'A representative of the Banking House of Valint and Balk, your Excellency.'

Monza had known they were coming, of course, but they were no more welcome for that. 'Send him in.'

For a man from an institution that could buy and sell nations, he didn't look like much. Younger than she'd expected, with a curly head of hair, a pleasant manner and an easy grin. That worried her more than ever.

The bitterest enemies come with the sweetest smiles. Verturio. Who else?

'Your Excellency.' He bowed almost as low as her chamberlain, which took some doing.

‘Master . . . ?’

‘Sulfur. Yoru Sulfur, at your service.’ He had different-coloured eyes, she noticed as he drew closer to the desk – one blue, one green.

‘From the Banking House of Valint and Balk.’

‘I have the honour of representing that proud institution.’

‘Lucky you.’ She glanced around the great chamber. ‘I’m afraid a lot of damage was done in the assault. Things are more . . . functional than they were in Orso’s day.’

His smile only widened. ‘I noticed a little damage to the walls on my way in. But functional suits me perfectly, your Excellency. I am here to discuss business. To offer you, in fact, the full backing of my employers.’

‘I understand you came often to my predecessor, Grand Duke Orso, to offer him your full backing.’

‘Quite so.’

‘And now I have murdered him and stolen his place, you come to me.’

Sulfur did not even blink. ‘Quite so.’

‘Your backing moulds easily to new situations.’

‘We are a bank. Every change must be an opportunity.’

‘And what do you offer?’

‘Money,’ he said brightly. ‘Money to fund armies. Money to fund public works. Money to return glory to Talins, and to Styria. Perhaps even money to render your palace less . . . functional.’

Monza had left a fortune in gold buried near the farm where she was born. She preferred to leave it there still. Just in case. ‘And if I like it sparse?’

‘I feel confident that we could lend political assistance also. Good neighbours, you know, are the surest shelter in a storm.’ She did not like his choice of words, so soon after she’d used them herself, but he went smoothly on. ‘Valint and Balk have deep roots in the Union. Extremely deep. I do not doubt we could arrange an alliance between you and their High King.’

‘An alliance?’ She didn’t mention that she’d very nearly consummated an alliance of a different kind with the King of the Union, in a gaudy bedchamber at Cardotti’s House of Leisure. ‘Even though he’s married to Orso’s daughter? Even though his sons may have a claim on my dukedom? A better claim than mine, many would say.’

‘We strive always to work with what we find, before we strive to change it. For the right leader, with the right backing, Styria is there for the taking. Valint and Balk wish to stand with the victor.’

‘Even though I broke into your offices in Westport and murdered your man Mauthis?’

‘Your success in that venture only demonstrates your great resourcefulness. ’ Sulfur shrugged. ‘Men are easily replaced. The world is full of them.’

She tapped thoughtfully at the top of her desk. ‘Strange that you should come here, making such an offer.’

‘How so?’

‘Only yesterday I had a very similar visit from a representative of the Prophet of Gurkhul, offering his . . . backing.’

That gave him a moment’s pause. ‘Whom did he send?’

‘A woman called Ishri.’

Sulfur’s eyes narrowed by the smallest fraction. ‘You cannot trust her.’

‘But I can trust you, because you smile so sweetly? So did my brother, and he lied with every breath.’

Sulfur only smiled the more. ‘The truth, then. Perhaps you are aware that the Prophet and my employers stand on opposite sides of a great struggle.’

‘I’ve heard it mentioned.’

‘Believe me when I say you would not wish to find yourself on the wrong side.’

‘I’m not sure I wish to find myself on either side.’ She slowly settled back into her chair, faking comfort when she felt like a fraud at a stolen desk. ‘But never fear. I told Ishri the price of her support was too high. Tell me, Master Sulfur, what price will Valint and Balk ask for their help?’

‘No more than what is fair. Interest on their loans. Preference in their business dealings and those of their partners and associates. That you refuse to deal with the Gurkish and their allies. That you act, when my employers request, in concert with the forces of the Union—’

‘Only whenever your employers request?’

‘Perhaps once or twice in your lifetime.’

‘Or perhaps more, as you see fit. You want me to sell Talins to you and thank you for the privilege. You want me to kneel at your vault door and beg for favours.’

‘You over-dramatise—’

‘I do not kneel, Master Sulfur.’

It was his turn to pause at her choice of words. But only for a moment. ‘May I be candid, your Excellency?’

‘I’d like to see you try.’

‘You are new to the ways of power. Everyone must kneel to someone. If you are too proud to take our hand of friendship, others will.’

Monza snorted, though behind her scorn her heart was pounding. ‘Good luck, to them and to you. May your hand of friendship bring them happier results than it brought to Orso. I believe Ishri was going to start looking for friends in Puranti. Perhaps you should go to Ospria first, or Sipani, or Affoia. I’m sure you’ll find someone in Styria to take your money. We’re famous for our whores.’

Sulfur’s grin twitched even wider. ‘Talins owes great debts to my employers.’

‘Orso owes great debts to them, you can ask him for your money back. I believe he was thrown out with the kitchen waste, but you should find him if you dig, down there at the bottom of the cliff. I’ll happily lend you a trowel for the purpose.’

Still he smiled, but there was no missing his threat. ‘It would be a shame if you left us no choice but to yield to the rage of Queen Terez, and let her seek vengeance for her father’s death.’

‘Ah, vengeance, vengeance.’ Monza gave him a smile of her own. ‘I don’t startle at shadows, Master Sulfur. I’m sure Terez talks a grand war, but the Union is spread thin. They have enemies both North and South and inside their borders too. If your High King’s wife wants my little chair, well, she can come and fight me for it. But I rather suspect his August Majesty has other worries.’

‘I do not think you realise the dangers that fill the dark corners of the world.’ There was no good humour in Sulfur’s huge grin now. ‘Why, even as we speak you sit here . . . alone.’ It had become a hungry leer, filled with sharp, white teeth. ‘So very, very fragile.’

She blinked, as if baffled. ‘Alone?’

‘You are mistaken.’ Shenkt had walked up in utter silence until he stood, unobserved, right at Sulfur’s shoulder, close as his shadow. Valint and

Balk's representative spun about, took a shocked step back and stood frozen, as though he'd turned to see the dead breathing in his ear.

'You,' he whispered.

'Yes.'

'I thought—'

'No.'

'Then . . . this is your doing?'

'I have had my hand in it.' Shenkt shrugged. 'But chaos is the natural state of things, for men pull always in their own directions. It is those who want the world to march all the same way that give themselves the challenge.'

The different-coloured eyes swivelled to Monza, and back. 'Our master will not—'

'Your master,' said Shenkt. 'I have none, any more, remember? I told him I was done. I always give a warning when I can, and here is yours. Get you gone. Return, you will not find me in a warning mood. Go back, and tell him you serve. Tell him I used to serve. We do not kneel.'

Sulfur slowly nodded, then his mouth slipped back into the smirk he wore when he came in. 'Die standing, then.' He turned to Monza, gave his graceful bow once more. 'You will hear from us.' And he strutted easily from the room.

Shenkt raised his brows as Sulfur disappeared from sight. 'He took it well.'

She didn't feel like laughing. 'There's a lot you're not telling me.'

'Yes.'

'Who are you, really?'

'I have been many things. An apprentice. An ambassador. A solver of stubborn problems, and a maker of them. Today, it seems, I am a man who settles other people's scores.'

'Cryptic shit. If I want riddles I can visit a fortune-teller.'

'You're a grand duchess. You could probably get one to come to you.'

She nodded towards the doors. 'You knew him.'

'I did.'

'You had the same master?'

'Once. Long ago.'

'You worked for a bank?'

He gave his empty smile. ‘In a manner of speaking. They do far more than count coins.’

‘So I’m beginning to see. And now?’

‘Now, I do not kneel.’

‘Why have you helped me?’

‘Because they made Orso, and I break whatever they have made.’

‘Revenge,’ she murmured.

‘Not the best of motives, but good outcomes can flow from evil motives, still.’

‘And the other way about.’

‘Of course. You brought the Duke of Talins all his victories, and so I had been watching you, thinking to weaken him by killing you. As it happened, Orso tried to do it himself. So I mended you instead, thinking to persuade you to kill Orso and take his place. But I underestimated your determination, and you slipped away. As it happened, you set about trying to kill Orso . . .’

She shifted, somewhat uncomfortably, in her ex-employer’s chair. ‘And took his place.’

‘Why dam a river that already flows your way? Let us say we have helped each other.’ And he gave his skull’s grin one more time. ‘We all of us have our scores to settle.’

‘In settling yours, it seems you have made me some powerful enemies.’

‘In settling yours, it seems you have plunged Styria into chaos.’

That was true enough. ‘Not quite my intention.’

‘Once you choose to open the box, your intentions mean nothing. And the box is yawning wide as a grave now. I wonder what will spill from it? Will righteous leaders rise from the madness to light the way to a brighter, fairer Styria, a beacon for all the world? Or will we get ruthless shadows of old tyrants, treading circles in the bloody footsteps of the past?’ Shenkt’s bright eyes did not leave hers. ‘Which will you be?’

‘I suppose we’ll see.’

‘I suppose we will.’ He turned, his footfalls making not the slightest sound, and pulled the doors silently shut behind him, leaving her alone.

All Change

‘You need not do this, you know.’ ‘I know.’ But Friendly wanted to do it. Cosca squirmed in his saddle with frustration. ‘If only I could make you see how the world out here . . . swarms with infinite possibilities! ’ He had been trying to make Friendly see it the entire way from the unfortunate village where the Thousand Swords were camped. He had failed to realise that Friendly saw it with perfect, painful clarity already. And he hated it. As far as he was concerned, fewer possibilities was better. And that meant infinite was far, far too many for comfort.

‘The world changes, alters, is born anew and presents a different face each day! A man never knows what each moment will bring!’

Friendly hated change. The only thing he hated more was not knowing what each moment might bring.

‘There are all manner of pleasures to sample out here.’

Different men take pleasure in different things.

‘To lock yourself away from life is . . . to admit defeat!’

Friendly shrugged. Defeat had never scared him. He had no pride.

‘I need you. Desperately. A good sergeant is worth three generals.’

There was a long moment of silence while their horses’ hooves crunched on the dry track.

‘Well, damn it!’ Cosca took a swig from his flask. ‘I have made every effort.’

‘I appreciate it.’

‘But you are resolved?’

‘I am.’

Friendly’s worst fear had been that they might not let him back in. Until Murcatto had given him a document with a great seal for the authorities of the city of Musselia. It detailed his convictions as an accomplice in the murders of Gobba, Mauthis, Prince Ario, General Ganmark, Faithful Carpi, Prince Foscar and Grand Duke Orso of Talins, and sentenced him to imprisonment for life. Or until such time as he desired to be released. Friendly was confident that would be never. It was the only payment he had

asked for, the best gift he had ever been given, and sat now neatly folded in his inside pocket, just beside his dice.

'I will miss you, my friend, I will miss you.'

'And I you.'

'But not so much I can persuade you to remain in my company?'

'No.'

For Friendly, this was a homecoming long anticipated. He knew the number of trees on the road leading to the gate, the warmth welling up in his chest as he counted them off. He stood eagerly in his stirrups, caught a tingling glimpse of the gatehouse, a looming corner of dark brickwork above the greenery. Hardly architecture to fill most convicted men with joy, but Friendly's heart leaped at the sight of it. He knew the number of bricks in the archway, had been waiting for them, longing for them, dreaming of them for so long. He knew the number of iron studs on the great doors, he knew—

Friendly frowned as the track curved about to face the gate. The doors stood open. A terrible foreboding crowded his joy away. What could be more wrong in a prison than that its doors should stand open and unlocked? That was not part of the grand routine.

He slid from his horse, wincing at the pain in his stiff right arm, still healing even though the splints were off. He walked slowly to the gate, almost scared to look inside. A ragged-looking man sat on the steps of the hut where the guards should have been watching, all alone.

'I've done nothing!' He held up his hands. 'I swear!'

'I have a letter signed by the Grand Duchess of Talins.' Friendly unfolded the treasured document and held it out, still hoping. 'I am to be taken into custody at once.'

The man stared at him for a moment. 'I'm no guard, friend. Just using the hut to sleep in.'

'Where are the guards?'

'Gone.'

'Gone?'

'With riots in Musselia I reckon no one was paying 'em, so . . . they up and left.'

Friendly felt a cold prickle of horror on the back of his neck. 'The prisoners?'

‘They got free. Most of ’em ran right off. Some of ’em waited. Shut ’emselves into their own cells at night, only imagine that!’

‘Only imagine,’ said Friendly, with deep longing.

‘Didn’t know where to run to, I guess. But they got hungry, in the end. Now they’ve gone too. There’s no one here.’

‘No one?’

‘Only me.’

Friendly looked up the narrow track to the archway in the rocky hillside. All empty. The halls were silent. The circle of sky still looked down into the old quarry, maybe, but there was no rattling of bars as the prisoners were locked up safe and sound each night. No comforting routine, enfolding their lives as tightly as a mother holds her child. No more would each day, each month, each year be measured out into neat little parcels. The great clock had stopped.

‘All change,’ whispered Friendly.

He felt Cosca’s hand on his shoulder. ‘The world is all change, my friend. We all would like to go back, but the past is done. We must look forwards. We must change ourselves, however painful it may be, or be left behind.’

So it seemed. Friendly turned his back on Safety, clambered dumbly up onto his horse. ‘Look forwards.’ But to what? Infinite possibilities? He felt panic gripping him. ‘Forwards all depends on which way you face. Which way should I face now?’

Cosca grinned as he turned his own mount about. ‘Making that choice is what life is. But if I may make a suggestion?’

‘Please.’

‘I will be taking the Thousand Swords – or those who have not retired on the plunder of Fontezarmo, at least, or found regular employment with the Duchess Monzcarro – down towards Visserine to help me press my claims on Salier’s old throne.’ He unscrewed the cap of his flask. ‘My entirely righteous claims.’ He took a swig and burped, blasting Friendly with an overpowering reek of strong spirits. ‘A title promised me by the King of Styria, after all. The city is in chaos, and those bastards need someone to show them the way.’

‘You?’

‘And you, my friend, and you! Nothing is more valuable to the ruler of a great city than an honest man who can count.’

Friendly took one last longing look back, the gatehouse already disappearing into the trees. ‘Perhaps they’ll start it up again, one day.’

‘Perhaps they will. But in the meantime I can make noble use of your talents in Visserine. I have entirely rightful claims. Born in the city, you know. There’ll be work there. Lots of . . . work.’

Friendly frowned sideways. ‘Are you drunk?’

‘Ludicrously, my friend, quite ludicrously so. This is the good stuff. The old grape spirit.’ Cosca took another swig and smacked his lips. ‘Change, Friendly . . . change is a funny thing. Sometimes men change for the better. Sometimes men change for the worse. And often, very often, given time and opportunity . . .’ He waved his flask around for a moment, then shrugged. ‘They change back.’

Happy Endings

Few days after they'd thrown him in there, they'd set up a gallows just outside. He could see it from the little window in his cell, if he climbed up on the pallet and pressed his face to the bars. A man might wonder why a prisoner would go to all that trouble to taunt himself, but somehow he had to. Maybe that was the point. It was a big wooden platform with a crossbeam and four neat nooses. Trapdoors in the floor so they only had to kick a lever to snap four necks at a go, easy as snapping twigs. Quite a thing. They had machines for planting crops, and machines for printing paper, and it seemed they had machines for killing folk too. Maybe that's what Morveer had meant when he spouted off about science, all those months ago.

They'd hanged a few men right after the fortress fell. Some who'd worked for Orso, given some offence someone needed vengeance for. A couple of the Thousand Swords as well, must've stepped onto some dark ground indeed, since there weren't many rules to break during a sack. But no one had swung for a long time now. Seven weeks, or eight. Maybe he should've counted the days, but what difference would counting 'em have made? It was coming, of that much he was sure.

Every morning when the first light crept into the cell and Shivers woke, he wondered if that would be the morning they'd hang him.

Sometimes he wished he hadn't turned on Monza. But only because it had come out the way it had. Not because he regretted any part of what he'd done. Probably his father wouldn't have approved of it. Probably his brother would've sneered and said he expected no better. No doubt Rudd Threetrees would've shook his head, and said justice would come for it. But Threetrees was dead, and justice with him. Shivers' brother had been a bastard with a hero's face, and his sneers meant nothing no more. And his father had gone back to the mud and left him to work out his own way of doing things. So much for the good men, and the right thing too.

From time to time he wondered whether Carlot dan Eider got away from the mess his failure must've left her in, or whether the Cripple caught up with her. He wondered whether Monza got to kill Orso, and whether it had

been all she hoped for. He wondered who that bastard had been who came out of nowhere and knocked him across the hall. Didn't seem likely he'd ever find out the answers now. But that's how life is. You don't always get all the answers.

He was up at the window when he heard keys rattling down the corridor, and he almost smiled at the relief of knowing it was time. He hopped down from his pallet, right leg still stiff where Friendly had stuck his knife in it, stood up tall and faced the metal gate.

He hadn't thought she'd come herself, but he was glad she had. Glad for the chance to look her in the eye one more time, even if they had the jailer and a half-dozen guards for company. She looked well, no doubt of that, not so gaunt as she used to, nor so hard. Clean, smooth, sleek and rich. Like royalty. Hard to believe she ever had aught to do with him.

'Well, look at you,' he said. 'Grand Duchess Monzcarro. How the hell did you come out o' this mess so fine?'

'Luck.'

'There you go. Never had much myself.' The jailer unlocked the gate and pushed it squealing open. Two of the guards came in, snapped manacles shut round Shivers' wrists. He didn't see much purpose in making a fight of it. Would've been just an embarrassment all round. They marched him out into the corridor to face her.

'Quite the trip we've been on, ain't it, Monza, you and I?'

'Quite the trip,' she said. 'You lost yourself, Shivers.'

'No. I found myself. You going to hang me now?' He didn't feel much joy at the thought, but not much sorrow either. Better'n rotting in that cell, he reckoned.

She watched him for a long moment. Blue eyes, and cold. Looked at him like she did the first time they met. Like nothing he could do would surprise her. 'No.'

'Eh?' Hadn't been expecting that. Left him disappointed, almost. 'What, then?'

'You can go.'

He blinked. 'I can what?'

'Go. You're free.'

'Didn't think you still cared.'

‘Who says I ever did? This is for me, not you. I’ve had enough vengeance.’

Shivers snorted. ‘Well, who’d have fucking thought it? The Butcher of Caprile. The Snake of Talins. The good woman, all along. I thought you didn’t have much use for the right thing. I thought mercy and cowardice were the same.’

‘Mark me down a coward, then. That I can live with. Just don’t ever come back here. My cowardice has limits.’ She twisted the ring off her finger. The one with the big, blood-red ruby in it, and tossed it in the dirty straw at his feet. ‘Take it.’

‘Alright.’ He bent down and dug it out of the muck, wiped it on his shirt. ‘I ain’t proud.’ Monza turned and walked away, towards the stairway, towards the lamplight spilling from it. ‘So that’s how this ends, is it?’ he called after her. ‘That’s the ending?’

‘You think you deserve something better?’ And she was gone.

He slid the ring onto his little finger and watched it sparkle. ‘Something worse.’

‘Move, then, bastard,’ snarled one of the guards, waving a drawn sword.

Shivers grinned back. ‘Oh, I’m gone, don’t you worry on that score. I’ve had my fill of Styria.’

He smiled as he stepped out of the darkness of the tunnel and onto the bridge that led away from Fontezarmo. He scratched at his itching face, took in a long breath of cold, free air. All things considered, and well against the run of luck, he reckoned he’d come out alright. Might be he’d lost an eye down here in Styria. Might be he was leaving no richer than when he’d stepped off the boat. But he was a better man, of that he’d no doubt. A wiser man. Used to be he was his own worst enemy. Now he was everyone else’s.

He was looking forward to getting back to the North, finding some work that suited him. Maybe he’d make a stop in Uffrith, pay his old friend Vossula a little visit. He set off down the mountain, away from the fortress, boots crunching in the grey dust.

Behind him, the sunrise was the colour of bad blood.

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GOLLANCZ
LONDON

For Eve
One day you will read this
And say, ‘Dad, why all the swords?’

Contents

Order of Battle

BEFORE THE BATTLE

The Times

The Peacemaker

The Best of Us

Black Dow

What War?

Old Hands

New Hands

Reachey

The Right Thing

DAY ONE

Silence

Ambition

Give and Take

The Very Model

Scale

Ours Not to Reason Why

Cry Havoc and …

Devoutly to be Wished

Casualties

The Better Part of Valour

Paths of Glory
The Day's Work
The Defeated
Fair Treatment
Tactics
Rest and Recreation
DAY TWO
Dawn
Opening Remarks
The Infernal Contraptions
Reasoned Debate
Chains of Command
Closing Arguments
Straight Edge
Escape
The Bridge
Strange Bedfellows
Hearts and Minds
Good Deeds
One Day More
Bones
The King's Last Hero
My Land
DAY THREE
The Standard Issue
Shadows

Under the Wing
Names
Still Yesterday
For What We Are About to Receive …
The Riddle of the Ground
Onwards and Upwards
More Tricks
The Tyranny of Distance
Blood
Pointed Metal
Peace in Our Time
The Moment of Truth
Spoils
Desperate Measures
Stuff Happens
AFTER THE BATTLE
End of the Road
By the Sword
The Currents of History
Terms
Family
New Hands
Old Hands
Everyone Serves
Just Deserts
Black Calder
Retired

Acknowledgements

Order of Battle

THE UNION
High Command

Lord Marshal Kroy – commander-in-chief of his Majesty's armies in the North.
Colonel Felnigg – his chief of staff, a remarkably chinless man.

Colonel Bremer dan Gorst – royal observer of the Northern War and disgraced master swordsman, formerly the king's First Guard.
Rurgen and **Younger** – his faithful servants, one old, one … younger.

Bayaz, the First of the Magi – a bald wizard supposedly hundreds of years old and an influential representative of the Closed Council, the king's closest advisors.
Yoru Sulfur – his butler, bodyguard and chief bookkeeper.
Denka and **Saurizin** – two old Adepti of the University of Adua, academics conducting an experiment for Bayaz.

Jalenhorm's Division

General Jalenhorm – an old friend of the king, fantastically young for his position, described as brave yet prone to blunders.
Retter – his thirteen-year-old bugler.

Colonel Vallimir – ambitious commanding officer of the King's Own First Regiment.

First Sergeant Forest – chief non-commissioned officer with the staff of the First.
Corporal Tunny – long-serving profiteer, and standard-bearer of the First.
Troopers Yolk, Klige, Worth, and **Lederlingen** – clueless recruits attached to Tunny as messengers.
Colonel Wetterlant – punctilious commanding officer of the Sixth Regiment.
Major Culfer – his panicky second in command.
Sergeant Gaunt, Private Rose – soldiers with the Sixth.

Major Popol – commanding the first battalion of the Rostod Regiment.
Captain Lasmark – a poor captain with the Rostod Regiment.

Colonel Vinkler – courageous commanding officer of the Thirteenth Regiment.

Mitterick's Division

General Mitterick – a professional soldier with much chin and little loyalty, described as sharp but reckless.
Colonel Opker – his chief of staff.
Lieutenant Dimbik – an unconfident young officer on Mitterick's staff.

Meed's Division

Lord Governor Meed – an amateur soldier with a neck like a turtle, in peacetime the governor of Angland, described as hating Northmen like a pig hates butchers.
Colonel Harod dan Brock – an honest and hard-working member of Meed's staff, the son of a notorious traitor.
Finree dan Brock – Colonel Brock's venomously ambitious wife, the daughter of Lord Marshal Kroy.
Colonel Brint – senior on Meed's staff, an old friend of the king.
Aliz dan Brint – Colonel Brint's naive young wife.
Captain Hardrick – an officer on Meed's staff, affecting tight trousers.

The Dogman's Loyalists

The Dogman – Chief of those Northmen fighting with the Union. An old companion of the Bloody-Nine, once a close friend of Black Dow, now his bitter enemy.
Red-Hat – the Dogman's Second, who wears a red hood.
Hardbread – a Named Man of long experience, leading a dozen for the Dogman.
Redcrow – one of Hardbread's Carls.

THE NORTH
In and Around Skarling's Chair

Black Dow – the Protector of the North, or stealer of it, depending on who you ask.
Splitfoot – his Second, meaning chief bodyguard and arse-licker.
Ishri – his advisor, a sorceress from the desert South, and sworn enemy of Bayaz.
Caul Shivers – a scarred Named Man with a metal eye, who some call Black Dow's dog.

Curnden Craw – a Named Man thought of as a straight edge, once Second to Rudd Threetrees, then close to Bethod, now leading a dozen for Black Dow.
Wonderful – his long-suffering Second.
Whirrun of Bligh – a famous hero from the utmost North, who wields the Father of Swords. Also called Cracknut, on account of his nut being cracked.
Jolly Yon Cumber, Brack-i-Dayn, Scorry Tiptoe, Agrick, Athroc and **Drofd** – other members of Craw's dozen.

Scale's Men

Scale – Bethod's eldest son, now the least powerful of Dow's five War Chiefs, strong as a bull, brave as a bull, and with a bull's brain too.
Pale-as-Snow – once one of Bethod's War Chiefs, now Scale's Second.
White-Eye Hansul – a Named Man with a blind eye, once Bethod's herald.

‘Prince’ Calder – Bethod’s younger son, an infamous coward and schemer, temporarily exiled for suggesting peace.
Seff – his pregnant wife, the daughter of Caul Reachey.
Deep and **Shallow** – a pair of killers, watching over Calder in the hope of riches.

Caul Reachey’s Men

Caul Reachey – one of Dow’s five War Chiefs, an elderly warrior, famously honourable, father to Seff, father-in-law to Calder.
Brydian Flood – a Named Man formerly a member of Craw’s dozen.
Beck – a young farmer craving glory on the battlefield, the son of Shama Heartless.
Reft, Colving, Stodder and **Brait** – other young lads pressed into service with Beck.

Glama Golden’s Men

Glama Golden – one of Dow’s five War Chiefs, intolerably vain, locked in a feud with Cairm Ironhead.
Sutt Brittle – a famously greedy Named Man. **Lightsleep** – a Carl in Golden’s employ.

Cairm Ironhead’s Men

Cairm Ironhead – one of Dow’s five War Chiefs, notoriously stubborn, locked in a feud with Glama Golden.
Curly – a stout-hearted scout.
Irig – an ill-tempered axeman.
Temper – a foul-mouthed bowman.

Others

Brodd Tenways – the most loyal of Dow’s five War Chiefs, ugly as incest.
Stranger-Come-Knocking – a giant savage obsessed with civilisation, Chief of all the lands east of the Crinna.

Back to the Mud (dead, thought dead, or long dead)

Bethod – the first King of the Northmen, father to Scale and Calder.

Skarling Hoodless – a legendary hero who once united the North against the Union.

The Bloody-Nine – once Bethod's champion, the most feared man in the North, and briefly King of the Northmen before being killed by Black Dow (supposedly).

Rudd Threetrees – a famously honourable Chief of Uffrith, who fought against Bethod and was beaten in a duel by the Bloody-Nine.

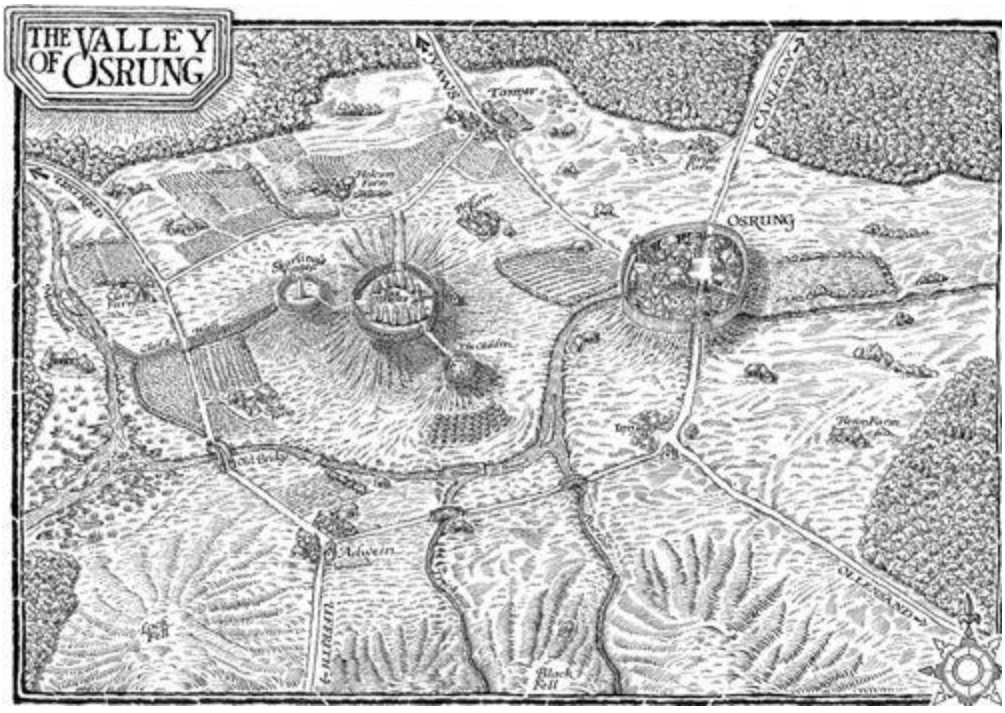
Forley the Weakest – a notoriously weak fighter, companion to Black Dow and the Dogman, ordered killed by Calder.

Shama Heartless – a famous champion killed by the Bloody-Nine. Beck's father.

BEFORE THE BATTLE

‘Unhappy the land that
is in need of heroes’

Bertolt Brecht



The Times

‘Too old for this shit,’ muttered Craw, wincing at the pain in his dodgy knee with every other step. High time he retired. Long past high time. Sat on the porch behind his house with a pipe, smiling at the water as the sun sank down, a day’s honest work behind him. Not that he had a house. But when he got one, it’d be a good one.

He found his way through a gap in the tumble-down wall, heart banging like a joiner’s mallet. From the long climb up the steep slope, and the wild grass clutching at his boots, and the bullying wind trying to bundle him over. But mostly, if he was honest, from the fear he’d end up getting killed at the top. He’d never laid claim to being a brave man and he’d only got more cowardly with age. Strange thing, that – the fewer years you have to lose the more you fear the losing of ’em. Maybe a man just gets a stock of courage when he’s born, and wears it down with each scrape he gets into.

Craw had been through a lot of scrapes. And it looked like he was about to snag himself on another.

He snatched a breather as he finally got to level ground, bent over, rubbing the wind-stung tears from his eyes. Trying to muffle his coughing which only made it louder. The Heroes loomed from the dark ahead, great holes in the night sky where no stars shone, four times man-height or more. Forgotten giants, marooned on their hilltop in the scouring wind. Standing stubborn guard over nothing.

Craw found himself wondering how much each of those great slabs of rock weighed. Only the dead knew how they’d dragged the bastard things

up here. Or who had. Or why. The dead weren't telling, though, and Craw had no plans on joining 'em just to find out.

He saw the faintest glow of firelight now, at the stones' rough edges. Heard the chatter of men's voices over the wind's low growl. That brought back the risk he was taking, and a fresh wave of fear washed up with it. But fear's a healthy thing, long as it makes you think. Rudd Threetrees told him that, long time ago. He'd thought it through, and this was the right thing to do. Or the least wrong thing, anyway. Sometimes that's the best you can hope for.

So he took a deep breath, trying to remember how he'd felt when he was young and had no dodgy joints and didn't care a shit for nothing, picked out a likely gap between two of those big old rocks and strolled through.

Maybe this had been a sacred place, once upon an ancient day, high magic in these stones, the worst of crimes to wander into the circle uninvited. But if any old Gods took offence they'd no way of showing it. The wind dropped away to a mournful sighing and that was all. Magic was in scarce supply and there wasn't much sacred either. Those were the times.

The light shifted on the inside faces of the Heroes, faint orange on pitted stone, splattered with moss, tangled with old bramble and nettle and seeding grass. One was broken off half way up, a couple more had toppled over the centuries, left gaps like missing teeth in a skull's grin.

Craw counted eight men, huddled around their wind-whipped campfire with patched cloaks and worn coats and tattered blankets wrapped tight. Firelight flickered on gaunt, scarred, stubbled and bearded faces. Glinted on the rims of their shields, the blades of their weapons. Lots of weapons. Fair bit younger, in the main, but they didn't look much different to Craw's own crew of a night. Probably they weren't much different. He even thought for a moment one man with his face side-on was Jutlan. Felt that jolt of recognition, the eager greeting ready on his lips. Then he remembered Jutlan was twelve years in the ground, and he'd said the words over his grave.

Maybe there are only so many faces in the world. You get old enough, you start seeing 'em used again.

Craw lifted his open hands high, palms forward, doing his best to stop 'em shaking any. 'Nice evening!'

The faces snapped around. Hands jerked to weapons. One man snatched up a bow and Craw felt his guts drop, but before he got close to drawing the string the man beside him stuck out an arm and pushed it down.

‘Whoa there, Redcrow.’ The one who spoke was a big old lad, with a heavy tangle of grey beard and a drawn sword sitting bright and ready across his knees. Craw found a rare grin, ’cause he knew the face, and his chances were looking better.

Hardbread he was called, a Named Man from way back. Craw had been on the same side as him in a few battles down the years, and the other side from him in a few more. But he’d a solid reputation. A long-seasoned hand, likely to think things over, not kill then ask the questions, which was getting to be the more popular way of doing business. Looked like he was Chief of this lot too, ’cause the lad called Redcrow sulkily let his bow drop, much to Craw’s relief. He didn’t want anyone getting killed tonight, and wasn’t ashamed to say that counted double for his self.

There were still a fair few hours of darkness to get through, though, and a lot of sharpened steel about.

‘By the dead.’ Hardbread sat still as the Heroes themselves, but his mind was no doubt doing a sprint. ‘’Less I’m much mistaken, Curnden Craw just wandered out o’ the night.’

‘You ain’t.’ Craw took a few slow paces forwards, hands still high, doing his best to look light-hearted with eight sets of unfriendly eyes weighing him down.

‘You’re looking a little greyer, Craw.’

‘So are you, Hardbread.’

‘Well, you know. There’s a war on.’ The old warrior patted his stomach. ‘Plays havoc with my nerves.’

‘All honesty, mine too.’

‘Who’d be a soldier?’

‘Hell of a job. But they say old horses can’t jump new fences.’

‘I try not to jump at all these days,’ said Hardbread. ‘Heard you was fighting for Black Dow. You and your dozen.’

‘Trying to keep the fighting to a minimum, but as far as who I’m doing it for, you’re right. Dow buys my porridge.’

‘I love porridge.’ Hardbread’s eyes rolled down to the fire and he poked thoughtfully at it with a twig. ‘The Union pays for mine now.’ His lads were

twitchy – tongues licking at lips, fingers tickling at weapons, eyes shining in the firelight. Like the audience at a duel, watching the opening moves, trying to suss who had the upper hand. Hardbread's eyes came up again. 'That seems to put us on opposite sides.'

'We going to let a little thing like sides spoil a polite conversation?' asked Craw.

As though the very word 'polite' was an insult, Redcrow had another rush of blood. 'Let's just kill this fucker!'

Hardbread turned slowly to him, face squeezed up with scorn. 'If the impossible happens and I feel the need for your contribution, I'll tell you what it is. 'Til then keep it shut, halfhead. Man o' Curnden Craw's experience don't just wander up here to get killed by the likes o' you.' His eyes flicked around the stones, then back to Craw. 'Why'd you come, all by your lone self? Don't want to fight for that bastard Black Dow no more, and you've come over to join the Dogman?'

'Can't say I have. Fighting for the Union ain't really my style, no disrespect to those that do. We all got our reasons.'

'I try not to damn a man on his choice o' friends alone.'

'There's always good men on both sides of a good question,' said Craw. 'Thing is, Black Dow asked me to stroll on down to the Heroes, stand a watch for a while, see if the Union are coming up this way. But maybe you can spare me the bother. Are the Union coming up this way?'

'Dunno.'

'You're here, though.'

'I wouldn't pay much mind to that.' Hardbread glanced at the lads around the fire without great joy. 'As you can see, they more or less sent me on my own. The Dogman asked me to stroll up to the Heroes, stand a watch, see if Black Dow or any of his lot showed up.' He raised his brows. 'You think they will?'

Craw grinned. 'Dunno.'

'You're here, though.'

'Wouldn't pay much mind to that. It's just me and my dozen. 'Cept for Brydian Flood, he broke his leg a few months ago, had to leave him behind to mend.'

Hardbread gave a rueful smile, prodded the fire with his twig and sent up a dusting of sparks. 'Yours always was a tight crew. I daresay they're

scattered around the Heroes now, bows to hand.'

'Something like that.' Hardbread's lads all twitched to the side, mouths gaping. Shocked at the voice coming from nowhere, shocked on top that it was a woman's. Wonderful stood with her arms crossed, sword sheathed and bow over her shoulder, leaning up against one of the Heroes as careless as she might lean on a tavern wall. 'Hey, hey, Hardbread.'

The old warrior winced. 'Couldn't you even nock an arrow, make it look like you take us serious?'

She jerked her head into the darkness. 'There's some boys back there, ready to put a shaft through your face if one o' you looks at us wrong. That make you feel better?'

Hardbread winced even more. 'Yes and no,' he said, his lads staring into the gaps between the stones, the night suddenly heavy with threat. 'Still acting Second to this article, are you?'

Wonderful scratched at the long scar through her shaved-stubble hair. 'No better offers. We've got to be like an old married couple who haven't fucked for years, just argue.'

'Me and my wife were like that, 'til she died.' Hardbread's finger tapped at his drawn sword. 'Miss her now, though. Thought you'd have company from the first moment I saw you, Craw. But since you're still jawing and I'm still breathing, I reckon you're set on giving us a chance to talk this out.'

'Then you've reckoned the shit out o' me,' said Craw. 'That's exactly the plan.'

'My sentries alive?'

Wonderful turned her head and gave one of her whistles, and Scorry Tiptoe slid out from behind one of the stones. Had his arm around a man with a big pink birthmark on his cheek. Looked almost like two old mates, 'til you saw Scorry's hand had a blade in it, edge tickling at Birthmark's throat.

'Sorry, Chief,' said the prisoner to Hardbread. 'Caught me off guard.'

'It happens.'

A scrawny lad came stumbling into the firelight like he'd been shoved hard, tripped over his own feet and sprawled in the long grass with a squawk. Jolly Yon stalked from the darkness behind him, axe held loose in

one fist, heavy blade gleaming down by his boot, heavy frown on his bearded face.

'Thank the dead for that.' Hardbread waved his twig at the lad, just clambering up. 'My sister's son. Promised I'd keep an eye out. If you'd killed him I'd never have heard the end of it.'

'He was asleep,' growled Yon. 'Weren't looking out too careful, were you?'

Hardbread shrugged. 'Weren't expecting anyone. If there's two things we've got too much of in the North it's hills and rocks. Didn't reckon a hill with rocks on it would be a big draw.'

'It ain't to me,' said Craw, 'but Black Dow said come down here—'

'And when Black Dow says a thing …' Brack-i-Dayn half-sang the words, that way the hillmen tend to. He stepped into the wide circle of grass, tattooed side of his great big face turned towards the firelight, shadows gathered in the hollows of the other.

Redcrow made to jump up but Hardbread weighed him down with a pat on the shoulder. 'My, my. You lot just keep popping up.' His eyes slid from Jolly Yon's axe, to Wonderful's grin, to Brack's belly, to Scorry's knife still at his man's throat. Judging the odds, no doubt, just the way Craw would've done. 'You got Whirrun of Bligh with you?'

Craw slowly nodded. 'I don't know why, but he insists on following me around.'

Right on cue, Whirrun's strange valley accent floated from the dark. 'Shoglig said … I would be shown my destiny … by a man choking on a bone.' It echoed off the stones, seeming to come from everywhere at once. He'd quite the sense of theatre, Whirrun. Every real hero needs one. 'And Shoglig is old as these stones. Hell won't take her, some say. Blade won't cut her. Saw the world born, some say, and will see it die. That's a woman a man has to listen to, ain't it? Or so some say.'

Whirrun strolled through the gap one of the missing Heroes had left and into the firelight, tall and lean, face in shadow from his hood, patient as winter. He had the Father of Swords across his shoulders like a milkmaid's yoke, dull grey metal of the hilt all agleam, arms slung over the sheathed blade and his long hands dangling. 'Shoglig told me the time, and the place, and the manner of my death. She whispered it, and made me swear to keep it secret, for magic shared is no magic at all. So I cannot tell you where it

will be, or when, but it is not here, and it is not now.' He stopped a few paces from the fire. 'You boys, on the other hand …' Whirrun's hooded head tipped to one side, only the end of his sharp nose, and the line of his sharp jaw, and his thin mouth showing. 'Shoglig didn't say when you'd be going.' He didn't move. He didn't have to. Wonderful looked at Craw, and rolled her eyes towards the starry sky.

But Hardbread's lads hadn't heard it all a hundred times before. 'That Whirrun?' one muttered to his neighbour. 'Cracknut Whirrun? That's him?'

His neighbour said nothing, just the lump on the front of his throat moving as he swallowed.

'Well, my old arse if I'm fighting my way out o' this,' said Hardbread, brightly. 'Any chance you'd let us clear out?'

'I've a mind to insist on it,' said Craw.

'We can take our gear?'

'I'm not looking to embarrass you. I just want your hill.'

'Or Black Dow does, at any rate.'

'Same difference.'

'Then you're welcome to it.' Hardbread slowly got to his feet, wincing as he straightened his legs, no doubt cursed with some sticky joints of his own. 'Windy as anything up here. Rather be down in Osrung, feet near a fire.' Craw had to admit he'd a point there. Made him wonder who'd got the better end of the deal. Hardbread sheathed his sword, thoughtful, while his lads gathered their gear. 'This is right decent o' you, Craw. You're a straight edge, just like they say. Nice that men on different sides can still talk things through, in the midst of all this. Decent behaviour … it's out o' fashion.'

'Those are the times.' Craw jerked his head at Scorry and he slipped his knife away from Birthmark's throat, gave this little bow and held his open hand out towards the fire. Birthmark backed off, rubbing at the new-shaved patch on his stubbly neck, and started rolling up a blanket. Craw hooked his thumbs in his sword-belt and kept his eyes on Hardbread's crew as they made ready to go, just in case anyone had a mind to play hero.

Redcrow looked most likely. He'd slung his bow over his shoulder and now he was standing there with a black look, an axe in one white-knuckled fist and a shield on his other arm, a red bird painted on it. If he'd been for killing Craw before, didn't seem the last few minutes had changed his mind.

‘A few old shits and some fucking woman,’ he snarled. ‘We’re backing down to the likes o’ these without a fight?’

‘No, no.’ Hardbread slung his own scarred shield onto his back. ‘I’m backing down, and these fellows here. You’re going to stay, and fight Whirrun of Bligh on your own.’

‘I’m what?’ Redcrow frowned at Whirrun, twitchy, and Whirrun looked back, what showed of his face still stony as the Heroes themselves.

‘That’s right,’ said Hardbread, ‘since you’re itching for a brawl. Then I’m going to cart your hacked-up corpse back to your mummy and tell her not to worry ’cause this is the way you wanted it. You loved this fucking hill so much you just had to die here.’

Redcrow’s hand worked nervously around his axe handle. ‘Eh?’

‘Or maybe you’d rather come down with the rest of us, blessing the name o’ Curnden Craw for giving us a fair warning and letting us go without any arrows in our arses.’

‘Right,’ said Redcrow, and turned away, sullen.

Hardbread puffed his cheeks at Craw. ‘Young ones these days, eh? Were we ever so stupid?’

Craw shrugged. ‘More’n likely.’

‘Can’t say I felt the need for blood like they seem to, though.’

Craw shrugged again. ‘Those are the times.’

‘True, true, and three times true. We’ll leave you the fire, eh? Come on, boys.’ They made for the south side of the hill, still stowing the last of their gear, and one by one faded into the night between the stones.

Hardbread’s nephew turned in the gap and gave Craw the fuck yourself finger. ‘We’ll be back here, you sneaking bastards!’ His uncle cuffed him across the top of his scratty head. ‘Ow! What?’

‘Some respect.’

‘Ain’t we fighting a war?’

Hardbread cuffed him again and made him squeal. ‘No reason to be rude, you little shit.’

Craw stood there as the lad’s complaints faded into the wind beyond the stones, swallowed sour spit, and eased his thumbs out from his belt. His hands were trembling, had to rub ’em together to hide it, pretending he was cold. But it was done, and everyone involved still drawing breath, so he guessed it had worked out as well as anyone could’ve hoped.

Jolly Yon didn't agree. He stepped up beside Craw frowning like thunder and spat into the fire. 'Time might come we regret not killing those folks there.'

'Not killing don't tend to weigh as heavy on my conscience as the alternative.'

Brack tut-tutted from Craw's other side. 'A warrior shouldn't carry too much conscience.'

'A warrior shouldn't carry too much belly either.' Whirrun had shrugged the Father of Swords off his shoulders and stood it on end, the pommel coming up to his neck, watching how the light moved on the crosspiece as he turned it round and round. 'We all got our weights to heft.'

'I've got just the right amount, you stringy bastard.' And the hillman gave his great gut a proud pat like a father might give his son's head.

'Chief.' Agrick strode into the firelight, bow loose in his hand and an arrow dangling between two fingers.

'They away?' asked Craw.

'Watched 'em down past the Children. They're crossing the river now, heading towards Osrung. Athroc's keeping a watch on 'em, though. We'll know if they double back.'

'You reckon they will?' asked Wonderful. 'Hardbread's cut from the old cloth. He might smile, but he won't have liked this any. You trust that old bastard?'

Craw frowned into the night. ''Bout as much as I'd trust anyone these days.'

'Little as that? Best post guards.'

'Aye,' said Brack. 'And make sure ours stay awake.'

Craw thumped his arm. 'Nice o' you to volunteer for first shift.'

'Your belly can keep you company,' said Yon.

Craw thumped his arm next. 'Glad you're in favour, you can go second.'

'Shit!'

'Drofd!'

You could tell the curly lad was the newest of the crew 'cause he actually hurried up with some snap. 'Aye, Chief?'

'Take the saddle horse and head back up the Yaws Road. Not sure whose lads you'll meet first – Ironhead's most likely, or maybe Tenways'. Let 'em

know we ran into one of the Dogman's dozens at the Heroes. More'n likely just scouting, but …'

'Just scouting.' Wonderful nibbled some scab off one knuckle and spat it from the tip of her tongue. 'The Union are miles away, split up and spread out, trying to make straight lines out of a country with none.'

'More'n likely. But hop on the horse and pass on the message anyway.'

'Now?' Drofd's face was all dismay. 'In the dark?'

'No, next summer'll be fine,' snapped Wonderful. 'Yes, now, fool, all you've got to do is follow a road.'

Drofd heaved a sigh. 'Hero's work.'

'All war work is hero's work, boy,' said Craw. He'd rather have sent someone else, but then they'd have been arguing 'til dawn over why the new lad wasn't going. There are right ways of doing things a man can't just step around.

'Right y'are, Chief. See you in a few days, I reckon. And with a sore arse, no doubt.'

'Why?' And Wonderful gave a few thrusts of her hips. 'Tenways a special friend o' yours is he?' That got some laughs. Brack's big rumble, Scorry's little chuckle, even Yon's frown got a touch softer which meant he had to be rightly tickled.

'Ha, bloody ha.' And Drofd stalked off into the night to find the horse and make a start.

'I hear chicken fat can ease the passage!' Wonderful called after him, Whirrun's cackle echoing around the Heroes and off into the empty dark.

With the excitement over Craw was starting to feel all burned out. He dropped down beside the fire, wincing as his knees bent low, the earth still warm from Hardbread's rump. Scorry had found a place on the far side, sharpening his knife, the scraping of metal marking the rhythm to his soft, high singing. A song of Skarling Hoodless, greatest hero of the North, who brought the clans together long ago to drive the Union out. Craw sat and listened, chewed at the painful skin around his fingernails and thought about how he really had to stop doing it.

Whirrun set the Father of Swords down, squatted on his haunches and pulled out the old bag he kept his runes in. 'Best do a reading, eh?'

'You have to?' muttered Yon.

'Why? Scared o' what the signs might tell you?'

‘Scared you’ll spout a stack of nonsense and I’ll lie awake half the night trying to make sense of it.’

‘Guess we’ll see.’ Whirrun emptied his runes into his cupped hand, spat on ’em then tossed ’em down by the fire.

Craw couldn’t help craning over to see, though he couldn’t read the damn things for any money. ‘What do the runes say, Cracknut?’

‘The runes say …’ Whirrun squinted down like he was trying to pick out something a long way off. ‘There’s going to be blood.’

Wonderful snorted. ‘They always say that.’

‘Aye.’ Whirrun wrapped himself in his coat, nuzzled up against the hilt of his sword like a lover, eyes already shut. ‘But lately they’re right more often than not.’

Craw frowned around at the Heroes, forgotten giants, standing stubborn guard over nothing. ‘Those are the times,’ he muttered.

The Peacemaker

He stood by the window, one hand up on the stone, fingertips drumming, drumming, drumming. Frowning off across Carleon. Across the maze of cobbled streets, the tangle of steep slate roofs, the looming city walls his father built, all turned shiny black by the drizzle. Into the hazy fields beyond, past the fork of the grey river and towards the streaky rumour of hills at the head of the valley. As if, by sulking hard enough, he could see further. Over two score miles of broken country to Black Dow's scattered army. Where the fate of the North was being decided.

Without him.

'All I want is just for everyone to do what I tell them. Is that too much to ask?'

Seff slid up behind him, belly pressing into his back. 'I'd say it's no more than good sense on their part.'

'I know what's best anyway, don't I?'

'I do, and I tell you what it is, so … yes.'

'It seems there are a few pig-headed bastards in the North who don't realise we have all the answers.'

Her hand slipped up his arm and trapped his restless fingers against the stone. 'Men don't like to come out for peace, but they will. You'll see.'

'And until then, like all visionaries, I find myself spurned. Scorned. Exiled.'

'Until then, you find yourself locked in a room with your wife. Is that so bad?'

'There's nowhere I'd rather be,' he lied.

‘Liar,’ she whispered, lips tickling his ear. ‘You’re almost as much of a liar as they say you are. You’d rather be out there, beside your brother, with your armour on.’ Her hands slid under his armpits and across his chest, giving him a ticklish shiver. ‘Hacking the heads from cartloads of Southerners.’

‘Murder is my favourite hobby, as you know.’

‘You’ve killed more men than Skarling.’

‘And I’d wear my armour to bed if I could.’

‘It’s only concern for my soft, soft skin that stops you.’

‘But severed heads are prone to squirt.’ He wriggled around to face her and pushed one lazy fingertip into her breastbone. ‘I prefer a quick thrust through the heart.’

‘Just like you’ve skewered mine. Aren’t you the swordsman.’

He squeaked as he felt her hand between his legs and slid away sniggering across the wall, arms up to fend her off. ‘All right, I admit it! I’m more lover than fighter!’

‘At last the truth. Only look what you’ve done to me.’ Putting one hand on her stomach and giving him a disapproving frown. It turned into a smile as he came close, slid his hand over hers, fingertips between hers, stroking her swollen belly.

‘It’s a boy,’ she whispered. ‘I feel it. An heir to the North. You’ll be king, and then—’

‘Shhhhh.’ And he stopped her mouth with a kiss. There was no way of knowing when someone might be listening, and anyway, ‘I’ve got an older brother, remember?’

‘A pinhead of an older brother.’

Calder winced, but didn’t deny it. He sighed as he looked down at that strange, wonderful, frightening belly of hers. ‘My father always said there’s nothing more important than family.’ Except power. ‘Besides, there’s no point arguing over what we don’t have. Black Dow’s the one who wears my father’s chain. Black Dow’s the one we need to worry on.’

‘Black Dow’s nothing but a one-eared thug.’

‘A thug with all the North under his boot and its mightiest War Chiefs taking his say-so.’

‘Mighty War Chiefs.’ She snorted in his face. ‘Dwarves with big men’s names.’

‘Brodd Tenways.’

‘That rotten old maggot? Even the thought of him makes me sick.’

‘Cairm Ironhead.’

‘I hear he has a tiny little prick. That’s why he frowns all the time.’

‘Glama Golden.’

‘Even tinier. Like a baby’s finger. And you have allies.’

‘I do?’

‘You know you do. My father likes you.’

Calder screwed up his face. ‘Your father doesn’t hate me, but I doubt he’ll be leaping up to cut the rope if they hang me.’

‘He’s an honourable man.’

‘Of course he is. Caul Reachey’s a real straight edge, everyone knows it.’ For what that was worth. ‘But you and I were promised when I was the son of the King of the Northmen and the world was all different. He was getting a prince for a son-in-law, not just a well-known coward.’

She patted his cheek, hard enough to make a gentle slapping sound. ‘A beautiful coward.’

‘Beautiful men are even less well liked in the North than cowardly ones. I’m not sure your father’s happy with the way my luck’s turned.’

‘Shit on your luck.’ She took a fistful of his shirt and dragged him closer, much stronger than she looked. ‘I wouldn’t change a thing.’

‘Neither would I. I’m just saying your father might.’

‘And I’m saying you’re wrong.’ She caught his hand in hers and pressed it against her bulging stomach again. ‘You’re family.’

‘Family.’ He didn’t bother saying that family could be as much a weakness as a strength. ‘So we have your honourable father and my pinhead brother. The North is ours.’

‘It will be. I know it.’ She was swaying backwards slowly, leading him away from the window and towards the bed. ‘Dow may be the man for war, but wars don’t last forever. You’re better than him.’

‘Few would agree.’ But it was nice to hear it, especially whispered in his ear in that soft, low, urgent voice.

‘You’re cleverer than him.’ Her cheek brushing his jaw. ‘Far cleverer.’ Her nose nuzzling his chin. ‘The cleverest man in the North.’ By the dead, how he loved flattery.

‘Go on.’

‘You’re certainly better looking than him.’ Squeezing his hand and sliding it down her belly. ‘The most handsome man in the North …’

He licked her lips with the tip of his tongue. ‘If the most beautiful ruled you’d be Queen of the Northmen already …’

Her fingers were busy with his belt. ‘You always know just what to say, don’t you, Prince Calder …’

There was a thumping at the door and he froze, the blood suddenly pounding in his head and very much not in his cock. Nothing like the threat of sudden death for killing a romantic mood. The thumping came again, making the heavy door rattle. They broke apart, flushed and fussing with their clothes. More like a pair of child lovers caught by their parents than a man and woman five years married. So much for his dreams of being king. He didn’t even command the lock on his own door.

‘The damn bolt’s on your side isn’t it?’ he snapped.

Metal scraped and the door creaked open. A man stood in the archway, shaggy head almost touching the keystone. The ruined side of his face was turned forwards, a mass of scar running from near the corner of his mouth, through his eyebrow and across his forehead, the dead metal ball in his blind socket glinting. If any trace of romance had been lingering in the corners, or in Calder’s trousers, that eye and that scar were its grisly end. He felt Seff stiffen and, since she was a long stretch braver than he was, her fear did nothing for his own. Caul Shivers was about the worst omen a man could see. Folk called him Black Dow’s dog, but never to his burned-out face. The man the Protector of the North sent to do his blackest work.

‘Dow wants you.’ If the sight of Shivers’ face had only got some hero half way horrified, his voice would have done the rest of the job. A broken whisper that made every word sound like it hurt.

‘Why?’ asked Calder, keeping his own voice sunny as a summer morning in spite of his hammering heart. ‘Can’t he beat the Union without me?’

Shivers didn’t laugh. He didn’t frown. He stood there, in the doorway, a silent slab of menace.

Calder tried his best at a carefree shrug. ‘Well, I suppose everyone serves someone. What about my wife?’

Shivers’ good eye flicked across to Seff. If he’d looked with leering lust, or sneering disgust, Calder would’ve been happier. But Shivers looked at a pregnant woman like a butcher at a carcass, only a job to be done. ‘Dow

wants her to stay and stand hostage. Make sure everyone behaves. She'll be safe.'

'As long as everyone behaves.' Calder found he'd stepped in front of her, as if to shield her with his body. Not much of a shield against a man like Shivers.

'That's it.'

'And if Black Dow misbehaves? Where's my hostage?'

Shivers' eye slid back to Calder, and stuck. 'I'll be your hostage.'

'And if Dow breaks his word I can kill you, can I?'

'You can try.'

'Huh.' Caul Shivers had one of the hardest names in the North. Calder, it hardly needed to be said, didn't. 'Can you give us a moment to say our goodbyes?'

'Why not?' Shivers slid back until only the glint of his metal eye showed in the shadows. 'I'm no monster.'

'Back to the snake pit,' muttered Calder.

Seff caught his hand, eyes wide as she looked up at him, fearful and eager at once. Almost as fearful and eager as he was. 'Be patient, Calder. Tread carefully.'

'I'll tiptoe all the way there.' If he even made it. He reckoned there was about a one in four Shivers had been told to cut his throat on the way and toss his corpse in a bog.

She took his chin between her finger and thumb and shook it, hard. 'I mean it. Dow fears you. My father says he'll take any excuse to kill you.'

'Dow should fear me. Whatever else I am, I'm my father's son.'

She squeezed his chin even harder, looking him right in the eye. 'I love you.'

He looked down at the floor, feeling the sudden pressure of tears at the back of his throat. 'Why? Don't you realise what an evil shit I am?'

'You're better than you think.'

When she said it he could almost believe it. 'I love you too.' And he didn't even have to lie. How he'd raged when his father announced the match. Marry that pig-nosed, dagger-tongued little bitch? Now she looked more beautiful every time he saw her. He loved her nose, and her tongue even more. It was almost enough to make him swear off other women. He drew her close, blinking back the wet, and kissed her once more. 'Don't

worry. No one's less keen to attend my hanging than I am. I'll be back in your bed before you know it.'

'With your armour on?'

'If you like,' as he backed away.

'And no lying while you're gone.'

'I never lie.'

'Liar,' she mouthed at him before the guards closed the door and slid the bolt, leaving Calder in the shadowy hallway with only the sappy-sad thought that he might never see his wife again. That gave him a rare touch of bravery and he hurried after Shivers, catching up with him as he trudged away and slapping a hand down on his shoulder. He was more than a little unnerved by the wood-like solidity of it, but plunged on regardless.

'If anything happens to her, I promise you—'

'I hear your promises ain't up to much.' Shivers' eye went to the offending hand and Calder carefully removed it. He might only rarely be brave, but he was never brave past the point of good sense.

'Who says so? Black Dow? If there's anyone in the North whose promises are worth less than mine it's that bastard's.' Shivers stayed silent, but Calder wasn't a man to be easily put off. Good treachery takes effort. 'Dow won't ever give you more than you can rip from him with both hands, you know. There'll be nothing for you, however loyal you are. In fact, the more loyal you are, the less there'll be. You'll see. Not enough meat and too many hungry dogs to feed.'

Shivers' one eye narrowed just the slightest fraction. 'I'm no dog.'

That chink of anger would have been enough to scare most men silent, but to Calder it was only a crack to chisel at. 'I see that,' he whispered, as low and urgent as Seff had whispered to him. 'Most men don't see past their fear of you, but I do. I see what you are. A fighter, of course, but a thinker too. An ambitious man. A proud man, and why not?' Calder brought them to a halt in a shadowy stretch of the hallway, leaned in to a conspiratorial distance, smothering his instinct to cringe away as that awful scar turned towards him. 'If I had a man like you working for me I'd make better use of him than Black Dow does, that much I promise.'

Shivers raised one beckoning hand, a big ruby on his little finger gleaming the colour of blood in the gloom. Giving Calder no choice but to come closer, closer, far too close for comfort. Close enough to feel Shivers'

warm breath. Close enough almost to kiss. Close enough so all Calder could see was his own distorted, unconvincing grin reflected in that dead metal ball of an eye.

‘Dow wants you.’

The Best of Us

Your August Majesty,

We are entirely recovered from the reverse at Quiet Ford and the campaign proceeds. For all Black Dow's cunning, Lord Marshal Kroy is driving him steadily north towards his capital at Carleon. We are no more than two weeks' march from the city, now. He cannot fall back for ever. We will have him, your Majesty can depend upon it.

General Jalenhorm's division won a small engagement on a chain of hills to the northeast yesterday. Lord Governor Meed leads his division south towards Ollensand in the hope of forcing the Northmen to split their forces and give battle at a disadvantage. I travel with General Mitterick's division, close to Marshal Kroy's headquarters. Yesterday, near a village called Barden, Northmen ambushed our supply column as it was stretched out along the bad roads. Through the alertness and bravery of our rearguard they were beaten back with heavy losses. I recommend to your Majesty one Lieutenant Kerns who showed particular valour and lost his life in the engagement, leaving, I understand, a wife and young child behind him.

The columns are well ordered. The weather is fair. The army moves freely and the men are in the highest spirits.

I remain your Majesty's most faithful and unworthy servant,

Bremer dan Gorst, Royal Observer of the Northern War

The column was in chaos. The rain poured down. The army was mired in the filth and the men were in the most rotten spirits. *And mine the most*

rotten in the whole putrefying swarm.

Bremer dan Gorst forced his way through a mud-spattered crush of soldiers, all wriggling like maggots, their armour running with wet, their shouldered pikes poking lethally in all directions. They were stopped as solid as milk turned rank in a bottle but men still squelched up from behind, adding their own burdens of ill temper to the jostling mass, choking the thread of muck that passed for a road and forcing men cursing into the trees. Gorst was already late and had to assert himself as the press tightened, brushing men aside. Sometimes they would turn to argue as they stumbled in the slop, but they soon shut their mouths when they saw who he was. They knew him.

The adversary that had so confounded his Majesty's army proved to be one of its own wagons, slid from the ankle-deep mud of the track and into the considerably deeper bog beside. Following the universal law that the most frustrating thing will always happen, no matter how unlikely, it had somehow ended up almost sideways, back wheels mired to their axles. A snarling driver whipped two horses into a pointless lather of terror while a half-dozen bedraggled soldiers floundered ineffectually about the back. On both sides of the road men slithered through the sodden undergrowth, cursing as gear was torn by brambles, pole-arms were tangled by branches, eyes were whipped at by twigs.

Three young officers stood nearby, the shoulders of their scarlet uniforms turned soggy maroon by the downpour. Two were arguing, stabbing at the wagon with pointed fingers while the other stood and watched, one hand carelessly resting on the gilded hilt of his sword, idle as a mannequin in a military tailor's.

The enemy could scarcely have arranged a more effective blockage with a thousand picked men.

'What is this?' Gorst demanded, fighting and, of course, failing, to sound authoritative.

'Sir, the supply train should be nowhere near this track!'

'That's nonsense, sir! The infantry should be held up while—'

Because the blame is what matters, of course, not the solution. Gorst shouldered the officers aside and squelched into the quagmire, wedging himself between the muddy soldiers, delving into the muck for the wagon's

back axle, boots twisting through the slime to find a solid footing. He took a few short breaths and braced himself.

'Go!' he squeaked at the driver, for once forgetting even to try to lower his voice.

Whip snapped. Men groaned. Horses snorted. Mud sucked. Gorst strained from his toes to his scalp, every muscle locked and vibrating with effort. The world faded and he was left alone with his task. He grunted, then growled, then hissed, the rage boiling up in him as if he had a bottomless tank of it instead of a heart and he only had to turn the tap to rip this wagon apart.

The wheels gave with a protesting shriek, lurched from the bog and forward. Suddenly straining at nothing Gorst stumbled despairingly then flopped face down in the mire, one of the soldiers falling beside him. He struggled up as the wagon rattled away, the driver fighting to bring his plunging horses under control.

'Thanks for the help, sir.' The mud-caked soldier reached out with a clumsy paw and managed to smear the muck that now befouled Gorst's uniform even more widely. 'Sorry, sir. Very sorry.'

Keep your axles oiled you retarded scum. Keep your cart on the road you gawping halfwits. Do your damn jobs you lazy vermin. Is that too much to ask? 'Good,' muttered Gorst, brushing the man's hand away and making a futile attempt to straighten his jacket. 'Thank you.' He stalked off into the drizzle after the wagon, and could almost hear the mocking laughter of the men and their officers prickling at his back.

Lord Marshal Kroy, commander-in-chief of his Majesty's armies in the North, had requisitioned for his temporary headquarters the grandest building within a dozen miles, namely a squat cottage so riddled with moss it looked more like an abandoned dunghill. A toothless old woman and her even more ancient husband, presumably the dispossessed owners, sat in the doorway of the accompanying barn under a threadbare shawl, and watched Gorst squelch up towards their erstwhile front door. They did not look impressed. Neither did the four guards loitering about the porch in wet oilskins. Nor the collection of damp officers infesting the low living room,

who all looked around expectantly when Gorst ducked through the door, and all looked equally crestfallen when they realised who it was.

'It's Gorst,' sneered one, as if he had been expecting a king and got a pot-boy.

It was quite the concentration of martial splendour. Marshal Kroy was the centrepiece, sitting with unflinching discipline at the head of the table, impeccable as always in a freshly pressed black uniform, stiff collar encrusted with silver leaves, every iron grey hair on his skull positioned at rigid attention. His chief of staff Colonel Felnigg sat bolt upright beside him, small, nimble, with sparkling eyes that missed no detail, his chin lifted uncomfortably high. Or rather, since he was a remarkably chinless man, his neck formed an almost straight line from his collar to the nostrils of his beaked nose. *Like an over-haughty vulture waiting for a corpse to feast upon.*

General Mitterick would have made a considerable meal. He was a big man with a big face, oversized features positively stuffed into the available room on the front of his head. Where Felnigg had too little chin Mitterick had far too much, and with a big, reckless cleft down the middle. *As if he had an arse suspended from his magnificent moustache.* He had affected buff leather gauntlets reaching almost to the elbow, probably intended to give the impression of a man of action, but which put Gorst in mind of the gloves a farmer might wear to wind a troubled cow.

Mitterick cocked an eyebrow at Gorst's mud-crusted uniform. 'More heroics, Colonel Gorst?' he asked, accompanied by some light sniggering.

Ram it up your chin-arse, you cow-winding bladder of vanity. The words tickled Gorst's lips. But in his falsetto, whatever he said the joke would be on him. He would rather have faced a thousand Northmen than this ordeal by conversation. So he turned the first sound into a queasy grin, and smiled along with his humiliation as he always did. He found the gloomiest corner, crossed his arms over his filthy jacket and dampened his fury by imagining the smirking heads of Mitterick's staff impaled on the pikes of Black Dow's army. Not the most patriotic pastime, perhaps, but among his most satisfying.

It's an upside-down sham of a world in which men like these, if they can be called men at all, can look down on a man like me. I am worth twice the lot of you. And this is the best the Union has to offer? We deserve to lose.

‘Can’t win a war without getting your hands dirty.’

‘What?’ Gorst frowned sideways. The Dogman was leaning beside him in his battered coat, a look of world-weary resignation on his no less battered face.

The Northman let his head tip back until it bumped gently against the peeling wall. ‘Some folk would rather keep clean, though, eh? And lose.’

Gorst could ill afford to strike up an alliance with the one man even more of an outsider than himself. He slipped into his accustomed silence like a well-worn suit of armour, and turned his attention to the nervous chatter of the officers.

‘When are they getting here?’

‘Soon.’

‘How many of them?’

‘I heard three.’

‘Only one. It only takes one member of the Closed Council.’

‘The Closed Council?’ squeaked Gorst, voice driven up almost beyond the range of human hearing by a surge of nerves. A nauseating after-taste of the horror he had felt the day those horrible old men had stripped him of his position. *Squashing my dreams as carelessly as a boy might squash a beetle.* ‘And next …’ as he was ushered into the hallway and the black doors were shut on him like coffin lids. *No longer commander of the king’s guards. No longer a Knight of the Body. No longer anything but a squealing joke, my name made a byword for failure and disgrace.* He could see that panel of creased and sagging sneers still. And at the head of the table the king’s pale face, jaw clenched, refusing to meet Gorst’s eye. *As though the ruin of his most loyal servant was no more than an unpleasant chore …*

‘Which of them will it be?’ Felnigg was asking. ‘Do we know?’

‘It hardly matters.’ Kroy looked towards the window. Beyond the half-open shutters the rain was getting heavier. ‘We already know what they will say. The king demands a great victory, at twice the speed and half the cost.’

‘As always!’ Mitterick crowed with the regularity of an overeager cockerel. ‘Damn politicians, sticking their noses into our business! I swear those swindlers on the Closed Council cost us more lives than the bloody enemy ever—’

The doorknob turned with a loud rattle and a heavy-set old man entered the room, entirely bald with a short grey beard. He gave no immediate

impression of supreme power. His clothes were only slightly less rain-soaked and mud-spattered than Gorst's own. His staff was of plain wood shod with steel, more walking stick than rod of office. But still, though he and the single, unassuming servant who scraped in after him were outnumbered ten to one by some of the finest peacocks in the army, it was the officers who held their breath. The old man carried about him an air of untouchable confidence, disdainful ownership, masterful control. *The air of a slaughterman casting an eye over that morning's hogs.*

'Lord Bayaz.' Kroy's face had paled, slightly. It might have been the very first time Gorst had seen the marshal surprised, and he was not alone. The crowded room could not have been more dumbstruck if the corpse of Harod the Great had been trundled in on a trolley to address them.

'Gentlemen.' Bayaz tossed his staff carelessly to his curly-headed servant, wiped the beads of moisture from his bald pate with a faint hissing and flicked them from the edge of his hand. For a legendary figure, there was no ceremony to him. 'Some weather we're having, eh? Sometimes I love the North and sometimes … less so.'

'We were not expecting—'

'Why would you be?' Bayaz chuckled with a show of good humour that somehow managed to seem a threat. 'I am retired! I had left my seat on the Closed Council empty once again and was seeing out my dotage at my library, far removed from the grind of politics. But since this war is taking place on my very doorstep, I thought it would be neglectful of me not to stop by. I have brought money with me – I understand pay is standing somewhat in arrears.'

'A little,' conceded Kroy.

'A little more and the soldier's veneer of honour and obedience might swiftly rub away, eh, gentlemen? Without its golden lubricant the great machine of his Majesty's army would soon stutter to a halt, would it not, as with so much in life?'

'Concern for the welfare of our men is always uppermost in our minds,' said the marshal, uncertainly.

'And mine!' answered Bayaz. 'I am here only to help. To keep the wheels oiled, if you will. To observe and perhaps, should the occasion call, offer some trifling guidance. Yours is the command, Lord Marshal, of course.'

‘Of course,’ echoed Kroy, but no one was convinced. This, after all, was the First of the Magi. A man supposedly hundreds of years old, supposedly possessed of magical powers, who had supposedly forged the Union, brought the king to his throne, driven out the Gurkish and laid a good section of Adua to waste doing it. Supposedly. *Hardly a man noted for a reluctance to interfere.* ‘Er … might I introduce General Mitterick, commander of his Majesty’s second division?’

‘General Mitterick, even sealed away with my books I have heard tales of your valour. An honour.’

The general fluffed up with happiness. ‘No, no! The honour is mine!’

‘Yes,’ said Bayaz, with casual brutality.

Kroy charged boldly into the ensuing silence. ‘This is my chief of staff, Colonel Felnigg, and this the leader of those Northmen who oppose Black Dow and fight alongside us, the Dogman.’

‘Ah, yes!’ Bayaz raised his brows. ‘I believe we had a mutual friend in Logen Ninefingers.’

The Dogman stared evenly back, the one man in the room who showed no sign of being overawed. ‘I’m a long way from sure he’s dead.’

‘If anyone can cheat the Great Leveller it was – or is – he. Either way, he is a loss to the North. To the world. A great man, and much missed.’

Dogman shrugged. ‘A man, anyway. Some good and some bad in him, like most. As for much missed, depends on who you ask, don’t it?’

‘True.’ Bayaz gave a rueful smile, and spoke a few words in fluent Northern: ‘You have to be realistic about these things.’

‘You do,’ replied the Dogman. Gorst doubted whether anyone else in the room had understood their little exchange. He was not entirely sure he had, for all he knew the language.

Kroy tried to usher things on. ‘And this is—’

‘Bremer dan Gorst, of course!’ Bayaz shocked Gorst to his boots by warmly shaking his hand. For a man of his years, he had quite the grip. ‘I saw you fence against the king, how long ago, now? Five years? Six?’

Gorst could have counted the hours since. *And it says a great deal for my shadow of a life that my proudest moment is still being humiliated in a fencing match.* ‘Nine.’

‘Nine, imagine that! The decades flit past me like leaves on the wind, I swear. No man ever deserved the title more.’

‘I was fairly beaten.’

Bayaz leaned close. ‘You were beaten, anyway, which is all that really counts, eh?’ And he slapped Gorst on the arm as if they had shared a private joke, though if they had it was private to Bayaz alone. ‘I thought you were with the Knights of the Body? Were you not guarding the king at the Battle of Adua?’

Gorst felt himself colouring. *I was, as everyone here well knows, but now I am nothing but a wretched scapegoat, used and discarded like some stuttering serving girl by his lordship’s caddish youngest son. Now I am—*

‘Colonel Gorst is here as the king’s observer,’ ventured Kroy, seeing his discomfort.

‘Of course!’ Bayaz snapped his fingers. ‘After that business in Sipani.’

Gorst’s face burned as though the city’s very name was a slap. *Sipani.* And as simply as that the best part of him was where he spent so much of his time: four years ago, back in the madness of Cardotti’s House of Leisure. Stumbling through the smoke, searching desperately for the king, reaching the staircase, seeing that masked face – and then the long, bouncing trip down the stairs, into unjust disgrace. He saw smirks among the over-bright smear of faces the room had suddenly become. He opened his dry mouth but, as usual, nothing of any use emerged.

‘Ah, well.’ The Magus gave Gorst’s shoulder the kind of consoling pat one might give to a guard dog long ago gone blind, and occasionally tossed a bone for sentimental reasons. ‘Perhaps you can work your way back into the king’s good graces.’

Depend upon it, you arcane fuck-hole, if I must spill every drop of blood in the North. ‘Perhaps,’ Gorst managed to whisper.

But Bayaz had already drawn out a chair and was steepling his fingers before him. ‘So! The situation, Lord Marshal?’

Kroy jerked the front of his jacket smooth as he advanced on the great map, so large it had been folded at the edges to fit on the biggest wall of the mean little building. ‘General Jalenhorm’s division is here, to our west.’ Paper crackled as Kroy’s stick hissed over it. ‘He is pushing northwards, firing crops and villages in the hope of drawing the Northmen into battle.’

Bayaz looked bored. ‘Mmmm.’

‘Meanwhile Lord Governor Meed’s division, accompanied by the majority of the Dogman’s loyalists, have marched southeast to take

Ollensand under siege. General Mitterick's division remains between the two.' Tap, tap, stick on paper, ruthlessly precise. 'Ready to lend support to either one. The route of supply runs south towards Uffrith over poor roads, no more than tracks, really, but we are—'

'Of course.' Bayaz rendered it all irrelevant with a wave of one meaty hand. 'I have not come to interfere in the details.'

Kroy's stick hovered uselessly. 'Then—'

'Imagine yourself a master mason, Lord Marshal, working upon one turret of a grand palace. A craftsman whose dedication, skill and attention to detail are disputed by no one.'

'Mason?' Mitterick looked baffled.

'Then imagine the Closed Council as the architects. Our responsibility is not the fitting of one stone to another, it is the design of the building overall. The politics, rather than the tactics. An army is an instrument of government. It must be used in such a way that it furthers the interests of government. Otherwise what use is it? Only an extremely costly machine for … minting medals.' The room shifted uncomfortably. *Hardly the sort of talk the toy soldiers appreciate.*

'The policies of government are subject to sudden change,' grumbled Felnigg.

Bayaz looked upon him like a schoolmaster at the dunce ruining the standard of his class. 'The world is fluid. We must be fluid also. And since these latest hostilities began, circumstances have not flowed for the better. At home the peasants are restless again. War taxes, and so on. Restless, restless, always restless.' He drummed his thick fingers restlessly on the table-top. 'And the new Lords' Round is finally completed, so the Open Council is in session and the nobles have somewhere to complain. They are doing so. At tremendous length. They are impatient with the lack of progress, apparently.'

'Damn windbags,' grunted Mitterick. *Lending considerable support to the maxim that men always hate in others what is most hateful in themselves.*

Bayaz sighed. 'Sometimes I feel I am building sandcastles against the tide. The Gurkish are never idle, there is no end to their intrigues. But once they were the only real challenge to us abroad. Now there is the Snake of Talins, too. Murcatto.' He frowned as if the name tasted foul, hard lines deepening across his face. 'While our armies are entangled here that cursed

woman continues to tighten her grip on Styria, emboldened by the knowledge that the Union can do little to oppose her.' Some patriotic tutting stirred the assembly. 'Put simply, gentlemen, the costs of this war, in treasure, in prestige, in lost opportunities, are becoming too high. The Closed Council require a swift conclusion. Naturally, as soldiers, you all are prone to be sentimental about warfare. But fighting is only any use when it's cheaper than the alternatives.' He calmly picked a piece of fluff from his sleeve, frowned at it, and flicked it away. 'This is the North, after all. I mean to say … what's it worth?'

There was a silence. Then Marshal Kroy cleared his throat. 'The Closed Council require a swift conclusion … do they mean by the end of the campaigning season?'

'The end of the season? No, no.' The officers blew out their cheeks with evident relief. It was short-lived. 'Considerably sooner than that.'

The noise slowly built. Shocked gasps, then horrified splutters, then whispered swear-words and grumbles of disbelief, the officers' professional affront scoring a rare victory over their usually unconquerable servility.

'But we cannot possibly—!' Mitterick burst out, striking the table with one gauntleted fist then hastily remembering himself. 'I mean to say, I apologise, but we cannot—'

'Gentlemen, gentlemen.' Kroy ushered down his unruly brood, and appealed to reason. *The lord marshal is nothing if not a reasonable man.* 'Lord Bayaz … Black Dow continues to evade us. To manoeuvre and fall back.' He gestured at the map as though it was covered in realities that simply could not be argued with. 'He has staunch war leaders at his side. His men know the land, are sustained by its people. He is a master at swift movement and retreat, at swift concentration and surprise. He has already wrong-footed us once. If we rush to battle, there is every chance that—'

But he might as well have reasoned with the tide. The First of the Magi was not interested. 'You stray onto the details again, Lord Marshal. Masons and architects and so forth, did I speak about that? The king sent you here to fight, not march around. I have no doubt you will find a way to bring the Northmen to a decisive battle, and if not, well … every war is only a prelude to talk, isn't it?' Bayaz stood, and the officers belatedly struggled up after him, chairs screeching and swords clattering in an ill-coordinated shambles.

‘We are … delighted you could join us,’ Kroy managed, though the army’s feelings were very clearly the precise opposite.

Bayaz appeared impervious to irony, however. ‘Good, because I will be staying to observe. Some gentlemen from the University of Adua accompanied me. They have an invention that I am curious to see tested.’

‘Anything we can do to assist.’

‘Excellent.’ Bayaz smiled broadly. *The only smile in the room.* ‘I will leave the shaping of the stones in your …’ He raised an eyebrow at Mitterick’s absurd gauntlets. ‘Capable hands. Gentlemen.’

The officers kept their nervous silence, as the First of the Magi’s worn boots and those of his single servant receded down the hallway, like children sent early to bed, preparing to throw back the covers as soon as their parents reached a safe distance.

Angry babbling broke out the moment they heard the front door close. ‘What the hell—’

‘How dare he?’

‘Before the end of the season?’ frothed Mitterick. ‘He is quite mad!’

‘Ridiculous!’ snapped Felnigg. ‘Ridiculous!’

‘Bloody politicians!’

But Gorst had a smile, and not just at the dismay of Mitterick and the rest. Now they would have to seek battle. *And whatever they came for, I came to fight.*

Kroy brought his fractious officers to order by banging at the table with his stick. ‘Gentlemen, please! The Closed Council have spoken, and so the king has spoken, and we can only strive to obey. We are but the masons, after all.’ He turned towards the map as the room quieted, eyes running over the roads, the hills, the rivers of the North. ‘I fear we must abandon caution and concentrate the army for a concerted push northwards. Dogman?’

The Northman stepped up to the table and snapped out a vibrating salute. ‘Marshal Kroy, sir!’ A joke, of course, since he was an ally rather than an underling.

‘If we march for Carleon in force, is it likely that Black Dow will finally offer battle?’

The Dogman rubbed a hand over his stubbled jaw. ‘Maybe. He ain’t the most patient. Looks bad for him, letting you tramp all over his back yard these past few months. But he’s always been an unpredictable bastard,

Black Dow.' He had a bitter look on his face for a moment, as if remembering something painful. 'One thing I can tell you, if he decides on battle he won't offer nothing. He'll ram it right up your arse. Still, it's worth a try.' Dogman grinned around the officers. ''Specially if you like it up your arse.'

'Not my first choice, but they say a general should be prepared for anything.' Kroy traced a road to its junction, then tapped at the paper. 'What is this town?'

The Dogman leaned over the table to squint at the map, considerably inconveniencing a pair of unhappy staff officers and giving the impression of not caring in the least. 'That's Osrung. Old town, set in fields, with a bridge and a mill, might have, what … three or four hundred people in peacetime? Some stone buildings, more wood. High fence around the outside. Used to have a damn fine tavern but, you know, nothing's how it used to be.'

'And this hill? Near where the roads from Ollensand and Uffrith meet?'

'The Heroes.'

'Odd name for a hill,' grunted Mitterick.

'Named after a ring of old stones on top. Some warriors of ancient days are buried beneath 'em, or that's one rumour, anyway. You get quite a view from up there. I sent a dozen to have a look-see the other day, in fact, check if any of Dow's boys have shown their faces.'

'And?'

'Nothing yet, but no reason there should be. There's help nearby, if they get pressed.'

'That's the spot, then.' Kroy craned closer to the map, pressing the point of his stick into that hill as though he could will the army there. 'The Heroes. Felnigg?'

'Sir?'

'Send word to Lord Governor Meed to abandon the siege of Ollensand and march with all haste to meet us near Osrung.'

That got a few sharp in-breaths. 'Meed will be furious,' said Mitterick.

'He often is. That cannot be helped.'

'I'll be heading back that way,' said Dogman. 'Meet up with the rest o' my boys and get 'em moving north. I can take the message.'

‘It might be better if Colonel Felnigg carries it personally. Lord Governor Meed is … not the greatest admirer of Northmen.’

‘Unlike the rest of you, eh?’ The Dogman showed the Union’s finest a mouthful of sharp yellow teeth. ‘I’ll make a move, then. With any luck I’ll see you up the Heroes in what … three days? Four?’

‘Five, if this weather gets no better.’

‘This is the North. Let’s call it five.’ And he followed Bayaz out of the low sitting room.

‘Well, it might not be the way we wanted it.’ Mitterick smashed a meaty fist into a meaty palm. ‘But we can show them something, now, eh? Get those skulking bastards out in the open and *show* them something!’ The legs of his chair shrieked as he stood. ‘I will hurry my division along. We should make a night march, Lord Marshal! Get at the enemy!’

‘No.’ Kroy was already sitting at his desk and dipping pen in ink to write orders. ‘Halt them for the night. On these roads, in this weather, haste will do more harm than good.’

‘But, Lord Marshal, if we—’

‘I intend to rush, General, but not headlong into a defeat. We must not push the men too hard. They need to be ready.’

Mitterick jerked up his gloves. ‘Damn these damn roads!’ Gorst stood aside to let him and his staff file from the room, silently wishing he was ushering them through into a bottomless pit.

Kroy raised his brows as he wrote. ‘Sensible men … run away … from battles.’ His pen scratched neatly across the paper. ‘Someone will need to take this order to General Jalenhorm. To move with all haste to the Heroes and secure the hill, the town of Osrung, and any other crossings of the river that—’

Gorst stepped forwards. ‘I will take it.’ If there was to be action, Jalenhorm’s division would be first into it. *And I will be at the front of the front rank. I will not bury the ghosts of Sipani in a headquarters.*

‘There is no one I would rather entrust it to.’ Gorst grasped the order but the marshal did not release it at once. He remained looking calmly up, the folded paper a bridge between them. ‘Remember, though, that you are the king’s observer, not the king’s champion.’

I am neither. I am a glorified errand boy, here because nowhere else will have me. I am a secretary in a uniform. A filthy uniform, as it happens. I am

a dead man still twitching. Ha ha! Look at the big idiot with the silly voice! Make him dance! 'Yes, sir.'

'Observe, then, by all means. But no more heroics, if you please. Not like the other day at Barden. A war is no place for heroics. Especially not this one.'

'Yes, sir.'

Kroy let go of the order and turned back to peer at his map, measuring distances between stretched-out thumb and forefinger. 'The king would never forgive me if we were to lose you.'

The king has abandoned me here, and no one will care a stray speck of piss if I am hacked apart and my brains splattered across the North. Least of all me. 'Yes, sir.' And Gorst strode out, through the front door and back into the rain, where he was struck by lightning.

There she was, picking her way across the boggy front yard towards him. In the midst of all that sullen mud her smiling face burned like the sun, incandescent. Delight crushed him, made his skin sing and his breath catch. The months he had spent away from her had done not the slightest good. He was as desperately, hopelessly, helplessly in love as ever.

'Finree,' he whispered, voice full of awe, as in some silly story a wizard might pronounce a word of power. 'Why are you here?' Half-expecting she would fade into nothing, a figment of his overwrought imagination.

'To see my father. Is he in there?'

'Writing orders.'

'As always.' She looked down at Gorst's uniform and raised one eyebrow, darkened from brown to almost black and spiked to soft points by the rain. 'Still playing in the mud, I see.'

He could not even bring himself to be embarrassed. He was lost in her eyes. Some strands of hair were stuck across her wet face. He wished he was. *I thought nothing could be more beautiful than you used to be, but now you are more beautiful than ever.* He dared not look at her and he dared not look away. *You are the most beautiful woman in the world – no – in all of history – no – the most beautiful thing in all of history. Kill me, now, so that your face can be the last thing I see.* 'You look well,' he murmured.

She looked down at her sodden travelling coat, mud-spotted to the waist. 'I suspect you're not being entirely honest with me.'

‘I never dissemble.’ *I love you I love you I love you I love you I love you I love you I love you …*

‘And are you well, Bremer? I may call you Bremer, may I?’

You may crush my eyes out with your heels. Only say my name again. ‘Of course. I am …’ *Ill in mind and body, ruined in fortune and reputation, hating of the world and everything in it, but none of that matters, as long as you are with me.* ‘Well.’

She held out her hand and he bent to kiss it like a village priest who had been permitted to touch the hem of the Prophet’s robe—

There was a golden ring on her finger with a small, sparkling blue stone.

Gorst’s guts twisted so hard he nearly lost control of them entirely. It was only by a supreme effort that he stayed standing. He could scarcely whisper the words. ‘Is that …’

‘A marriage band, yes!’ Could she know he would rather she had dangled a butchered head in his face?

He gripped to his smile like a drowning man to the last stick of wood. He felt his mouth move, and heard his own squeak. His repugnant, womanly, pathetic little squeak. ‘Who is the gentleman?’

‘Colonel Harod dan Brock.’ A hint of pride in her voice. Of love. *What would I give to hear her say my name like that? All I have. Which is nothing but other men’s scorn.*

‘Harod dan Brock,’ he whispered, and the name was sand in his mouth. He knew the man, of course. They were distantly related, fourth cousins or some such. They had sometimes spoken years ago, when Gorst had served with the guard of his father, Lord Brock. Then Lord Brock had made his bid for the crown, and failed, and been exiled for the worst of treasons. His eldest son had been granted the king’s mercy, though. Stripped of his many lands, and his lofty titles, but left with his life. How Gorst wished the king was less merciful now.

‘He is serving on Lord Governor Meed’s staff.’

‘Yes.’ Brock was nauseatingly handsome, with an easy smile and a winning manner. *The bastard.* Well-spoken of and well-liked, in spite of his father’s disgrace. *The snake.* Had earned his place by bravery and bonhomie. *The fucker.* He was everything Gorst was not.

He clenched his right fist trembling hard, and imagined it ripping the easy-smiling jaw out of Harod dan Brock’s handsome head. ‘Yes.’

‘We are very happy,’ said Finree.

Good for you. I want to kill myself. She could not have given him sharper pain if she had crushed his cock in a vice. Could she be such a fool as to not see through him? Some part of her must have known, must have delighted in his humiliation. *Oh, how I love you. Oh, how I hate you. Oh, how I want you.*

‘My congratulations to you both,’ he murmured.

‘I will tell my husband.’

‘Yes.’ *Yes, yes, tell him to die, tell him to burn, and soon.* Gorst kept the rictus smile clinging to his face while vomit tickled at his throat. ‘Yes.’

‘I must go to my father. Perhaps we will see each other again, soon?’

Oh, yes. Very soon. Tonight, in fact, while I lie awake with my cock in my hand, pretending it’s your mouth …‘I hope so.’

She was already walking past. *For her, a forgettable encounter with an old acquaintance.* For him, as she turned away it was as if night fell. *The soil is heaped upon me, the grit of burial in my mouth.* He watched the door rattle shut behind her, and stood there for a long moment, in the rain. He wanted to weep, and weep, and weep for all his ruined hopes. He wanted to kneel in the mud and tear out the hair he still had. He wanted to murder someone, and hardly cared who. *Myself, perhaps?*

Instead he took a sharp breath, squeaking slightly in one nostril, and squelched away through the mud, into the gathering dusk.

He had a message to carry, after all. With no heroics.

Black Dow

The stable doors shut with a bang like a headsman's axe, and it took all of Calder's famous arrogance not to jump clean in the air. War meetings had never been his favourite style of gathering, especially ones full of his enemies. Three of Dow's five War Chiefs were in attendance and, as Calder's ever-worsening luck would have it, they were the three that liked him least.

Glama Golden looked the hero from his scalp to his toes, big-knuckle brawny and heavy-jaw handsome, his long hair, his bristling moustache, his eyelashes to their tips all the colour of pale gold. He wore more yellow metal than a princess on her wedding day – golden torc around his thick neck, bracelets at his thick wrists and fistfuls of rings on his thick fingers, every part of him buffed to a pretty shine with bluster and self-love.

Cairm Ironhead was a very different prospect. His scar-crossed face was a fortress of frown you could've blunted an axe on, eyes like nails under a brow like an anvil, cropped hair and beard an uncompromising black. He was shorter than Golden but wider still, a slab of a man, chain mail glinting under a cloak of black bear-fur. The rumour was he'd strangled that bear. Possibly for looking at him wrong. Neither Ironhead nor Golden had much beyond contempt for Calder, but luckily they'd always despised each other like night hates day and their feud left no hatred in the quiver for anyone else.

When it came to hatred, Brodd Tenways had a bottomless supply. He was one of those bastards who can't even breathe quietly, ugly as incest and always delighted to push it in your face, leering from the shadows like the

village pervert at a passing milkmaid. Foul-mouthed, foul-toothed, foul-smelling, and with some kind of hideous rash patching his twisted face he gave every sign of taking great pride in. He'd made a bitter enemy of Calder's father, lost to him in battle twice, and been forced to kneel and give up everything he had. Getting it back only seemed to have worsened his mood, and he'd easily shifted all his years of bile from Bethod to his sons, and Calder in particular.

Then there was the head of this mismatched family of villains, the self-styled Protector of the North, Black Dow himself. He sat easy in Skarling's Chair, one leg folded under him while the other boot tapped gently at the ground. He had something like a smile on his deep-lined, hard-scarred face but his eyes were narrowed, sly as a hungry tomcat that just now spied a pigeon. He'd taken to wearing fine clothes, the sparkling chain that Calder's father used to wear around his shoulders. But he couldn't hide what he was, and didn't want to either. A killer to the tips of his ears. Or ear, since the left one was no more than a flap of gristle.

As if Black Dow's name and his grin weren't threats enough, he'd made sure they were shored up with plenty of steel. A long, grey sword leaned against Skarling's Chair on one side, an axe on the other, notched with long use, in easy reach of his dangling fingers. Killer's fingers – scuffed, and swollen, and scarred at the knuckles from a lifetime of the dead knew what dark work.

Splitfoot stood in the gloom at Dow's shoulder. His Second, meaning his closest bodyguard and chief arse-licker, stuck to his master tight as his shadow with thumbs hooked in his silver-buckled sword-belt. Two of his Carls lurked behind, armour, and shield-rims, and drawn swords all agleam, others dotted about the walls, flanking the door. There was a smell of old hay and old horses, but far stronger was the reek of ready violence, thick as the stink in a marsh.

And as if all that wasn't enough to make Calder shit his well-tailored trousers, Shivers still loomed at his shoulder, adding his own chill threat to the recipe.

'Well, if it ain't brave Prince Calder.' Dow looked him up and down like the tomcat at the shrub it was about to piss on. 'Welcome back to the good fight, lad. You going to do as you're fucking told this time around?'

Calder swept out a bow. ‘Your most obedient servant.’ He smirked as if the very words didn’t burn his tongue. ‘Golden. Ironhead.’ He gave each a respectful nod. ‘My father always said there weren’t two stouter hearts in all the North.’ His father always said there weren’t two thicker heads in all the North, but his lies were no more use than money down a well in any case. Ironhead and Golden did nothing but glower at each other. Calder felt a burning need for someone who liked him. Or at least didn’t want him dead. ‘Where’s Scale?’

‘Your brother’s out west,’ said Dow. ‘Doing some fighting.’

‘You know what that is, do you, boy?’ Tenways turned his head and spat through the gap in his brown front teeth.

‘Is it … the thing with all the swords?’ Calder took a hopeful look around the stable but no allies had crept in, and he ended up glancing at Shivers’ ruined frown, which was even worse than Dow’s smile. However often he saw that scar, it was always more hideous than he remembered. ‘How about Reachey?’

‘Your wife’s daddy’s a day or so east,’ said Dow. ‘Putting on a weapontake.’

Golden snorted. ‘I’d be surprised if there’s a boy can grip a blade isn’t pressed already.’

‘Well, he’s scraping up what there is. Reckon we’ll need every ready hand when it comes to a battle. Yours too, maybe.’

‘Oh, you’ll have to hold me back!’ Calder slapped the hilt of his sword. ‘Can’t wait to get started!’

‘You ever even drawn the fucking thing?’ sneered Tenways, stretching his neck out to spit again.

‘Just the once. I had to trim your daughter’s hairy cunt before I could get at it.’

Dow burst out laughing. Golden chuckled. Ironhead gave the faintest of grins. Tenways choked on his spit and left a string of glistening drool down his chin, but Calder didn’t much care. He was better off scoring points with those who weren’t quite a lost cause yet. Somehow he needed to win at least one of these unpromising bastards over to his side.

‘Never thought I’d say this.’ Dow sighed and wiped one eye with a finger, ‘but I’ve missed you, Calder.’

‘Likewise. I’d much rather be trading horseshit in a stable than back at Carleon kissing my wife. What’s to do?’

‘You know.’ Dow took the pommel of his sword between finger and thumb, turning it this way and that so the silver mark near the hilt glinted. ‘War. Skirmish here, raid there. We cut off some stragglers, they burn out some villages. War. Your brother’s been hitting fast, giving the Southerners something to think about. Useful man your brother, got some sting in him.’

‘Shame your father didn’t have more’n one son,’ growled Tenways.

‘Keep talking, old man,’ said Calder, ‘I can make you look a prick all day.’

Tenways bristled but Dow waved him down. ‘Enough cock-measuring. We’ve a war to fight.’

‘And how many victories, so far?’

A brief, unhappy pause. ‘No battle,’ grunted Ironhead.

‘This Kroy,’ sneered Golden back across the stable, ‘the one in charge o’ the Union.’

‘Marshal, they call him.’

‘Whatever they call him, he’s a cautious bastard.’

‘Baby-stepping coward fuck,’ growled Tenways.

Dow shrugged. ‘Naught cowardly about stepping careful. Wouldn’t be my style with his numbers, but …’ And he turned his grin on Calder. ‘Your father always used to say, “In war it’s the winning counts. The rest is for fools to sing about.” So Kroy’s going slow, hoping to wear out our patience. We Northmen ain’t known for it, after all. He’s split his army in three parts.’

‘Three big bloody parts,’ said Ironhead.

Golden agreed, for once. ‘Might be ten thousand fighting men each, not even counting all the fetchers and carriers.’

Dow leaned forwards like a grandfather teaching a child about fish. ‘Jalenhorm to the west. Brave but sluggish and apt to blunder. Mitterick in the centre. Sharpest of the three by all accounts, but reckless. Loves his horses, I hear. Meed to the east. Not a soldier, and he hates Northmen like a pig hates butchers. Could make him short-sighted. Then Kroy’s got some Northmen of his own, spread out scouting mostly, but a fair few fighters too, and some good ones among ’em.’

‘The Dogman’s men,’ said Calder.

‘Fucking traitor that he is,’ hissed Tenways, making ready to spit.

‘Traitor?’ Dow jerked forwards in Skarling’s Chair, knuckles white on its arms. ‘You dumb old rashy *fuck*! He’s the one man in the North who’s always stuck to the same side!’ Tenways looked up, slowly swallowed whatever scum he’d been about to spit and leaned back into the shadows. Dow slid down limp again. ‘Shame it’s the wrong side, is all.’

‘Well, we’re going to have to move soon,’ said Golden. ‘Meed may be no soldier, but he’s put Ollensand under siege. Town’s got good walls but I ain’t sure how long they can—’

‘Meed broke off the siege yesterday morning,’ said Dow. ‘He’s heading back north and most o’ the Dogman’s lot are with him.’

‘Yesterday?’ Golden frowned. ‘How d’you know—’

‘I’ve got my ways.’

‘I didn’t hear anything.’

‘That’s why I give the orders and you listen to ’em.’ Ironhead smiled to see his rival cut down a peg. ‘Meed’s turned back north, and in quite the hurry. My guess is he’ll be joining up with Mitterick.’

‘Why?’ asked Calder. ‘Slow and steady all these months, then they just decide to take a rush?’

‘Maybe they got tired o’ cautious. Or maybe someone who has the say-so did. Either way, they’re coming.’

‘Might give us a chance to catch ’em off guard.’ Ironhead’s eyes were sparkling like a starving man just saw the roast brought in.

‘If they’re set on looking for a fight,’ said Dow, ‘I’d hate not to give ’em one. We got someone down at the Heroes?’

‘Curnden Craw’s there with his dozen,’ said Splitfoot.

‘Safe hands,’ muttered Calder. He almost wished he was down at the Heroes with Curnden Craw, rather than here with these bastards. No power, maybe, but a lot more laughs.

‘Had word from him an hour or two back, as it goes,’ said Ironhead. ‘He ran into some o’ the Dogman’s scouts up there and seen ’em off.’

Dow looked down at the ground for a moment, rubbing at his lips with one fingertip. ‘Shivers?’

‘Chief?’ Whispered so soft it was hardly more than a breath.

‘Ride down to the Heroes and tell Craw I want that hill held on to. Just might be one or other o’ these Union bastards try to come through that way. Cross the river at Osrung, maybe.’

‘Good ground for a fight,’ said Tenways.

Shivers paused a moment. Long enough for Calder to see he wasn’t happy playing messenger boy. Calder gave him the barest look, just a reminder of what was said in the hallway at Carleon. Just to give whatever seeds were planted a little water.

‘Right y’are, Chief.’ And Shivers slid out through the doorway.

Golden gave a shiver of his own. ‘That one gives me the worries.’

Dow only grinned the wider. ‘That’s the point of him. Ironhead?’

‘Chief.’

‘You’re leading off down the Yaws Road. Point o’ the spear.’

‘We’ll be in Yaws evening tomorrow.’

‘Make it sooner.’ That got a deeper frown from Ironhead and a matching grin from Golden. It was as if the two sat on a pair of scales. You couldn’t nudge one down without hoisting the other up. ‘Golden, you take the Brottun Road and join up with Reachey. Get him on the way soon as his weapontake’s done, that old boy sometimes needs the spur.’

‘Aye, Chief.’

‘Tenways, bring your foragers in and get your lot ready to move, you’ll be bringing up the back with me.’

‘Done.’

‘And all of you march your lads hard, but keep your eyes open. Be nice to give the Southerners a shock and not the other way around.’ Dow showed even more of his teeth. ‘If your blades ain’t sharpened already, I reckon now’s the time.’

‘Aye,’ the three of them chimed in, competing to sound the most bloodthirsty.

‘Oh, aye,’ said Calder on the end, and giving his best smirk to go with it. He might not be much with a sword, but there were few men in the North who could handle a smirk better. It was wasted this time, though. Splitfoot was leaning down to mutter something in Dow’s ear.

The Protector of the North sat back frowning. ‘Send him in, then!’

The doors were hauled open, wind sighing through and whisking loose straw across the stable floor. Calder squinted into the evening outside. Had to be some trick of the fading light, because the figure in the doorway seemed to fill it almost to the beam above. Then he took the step up. Then he straightened. It was quite the entrance, the room silent as he strode

slowly to its centre except for the floor groaning under his every step. But then it's easy to make the big entrance when you're the size of a cliff. You just walk in and stand there.

'I am Stranger-Come-Knocking.'

Calder knew the name. Stranger-Come-Knocking called himself Chief of a Hundred Tribes, called everything east of the Crinna his land and all the people who lived on it his property. Calder had heard he was a giant but hadn't taken it too seriously. The North was full of swollen men with swollen opinions of themselves and even more swollen reputations. More often than not you found the man a good deal smaller than the name. So this came as a bit of a shock.

When you said the word 'giant', Stranger-Come-Knocking was pretty much what you thought of, stepped straight out from the age of heroes and into this petty latter time. He towered over Dow and his mighty War Chiefs, head among the rafters, black hair streaked with grey hanging around his craggy, bearded face. Glama Golden looked a gaudy dwarf beside him, and Splitfoot and his Carls a set of toy soldiers.

'By the dead,' Calder whispered under his breath. 'That is a big one.'

But Black Dow showed no awe. He sprawled in Skarling's Chair easily as ever, one boot still tapping the straw, killer's hands still dangling, wolf grin still curled around his face. 'Wondered when you'd … come knocking. Didn't think you'd come all this way your own self, though.'

'An alliance should be sealed face to face, man to man, iron to iron and blood to blood.' Calder had been expecting the giant to roar every word like the monsters in children's stories, but he had a soft sort of voice. Slow, as if he was puzzling out every word.

'The personal touch,' said Dow. 'I'm all for it. We've a deal, then?'

'We have.' Stranger-Come-Knocking spread one massive hand, put the web between thumb and forefinger in his mouth and bit into it, held it up, blood starting to seep from the marks.

Dow slid his palm down his sword, leaving the edge gleaming red. Then he was out of Skarling's Chair in a flash and caught the giant's hand with his own. The two men stood there as blood streaked their forearms and started to drip from their elbows. Calder felt a little fear and a lot of contempt at the level of manliness on display.

‘Right y’are.’ Dow let go of the giant’s hand and slowly sat back in Skarling’s Chair, leaving a bloody palm-print on one arm. ‘Reckon you can bring your men over the Crinna.’

‘I already did.’

Golden and Ironhead exchanged a glance, not much caring for the idea of a lot of savages crossing the Crinna and, presumably, their land. Dow narrowed his eyes. ‘Did you, indeed?’

‘On this side of the water they can fight the Southerners.’ Stranger-Come-Knocking looked slowly about the stable, fixing each man with his black eyes. ‘I came to *fight*!’ He roared the last word, echoes ringing from the roof. A ripple of fury passed through him from his feet to his head, making his fists clench, and his chest swell, and his monstrous shoulders rise, seeming in that moment more outsize than ever.

Calder found himself wondering what fighting this bastard would feel like. How the hell would you stop him, once he was moving? Just the sheer weight of meat. What weapon would put him down? He reckoned everyone else in the room was thinking the same thing, and not much enjoying the experience.

Except Black Dow. ‘Good! That’s what I want you for.’

‘I want to fight the Union.’

‘There’s plenty to go round.’

‘I want to fight Whirrun of Bligh.’

‘Can’t promise you that, he’s on our side and has some odd notions. But I can ask if he’ll give you a bout.’

‘I want to fight the Bloody-Nine.’

The hairs on the back of Calder’s neck prickled. Strange, how that name still weighed heavy, even in company like this, even if the man was eight years dead. Dow wasn’t grinning any more.

‘You missed your chance. Ninefingers is back in the mud.’

‘I hear he is alive, and standing with the Union.’

‘You hear wrong.’

‘I hear he is alive, and I will kill him.’

‘Will you now?’

‘I am the greatest warrior in the Circle of the World.’ Stranger-Come-Knocking didn’t boast it, puffed up and pouting as Glama Golden might

have. He didn't threaten it, fists clenched and glowering as Cairm Ironhead might have. He stated the fact.

Dow scratched absently at the scar where his ear used to be. 'This is the North. Lot of hard men about. Couple of 'em in this room. So that's quite a claim you're making.'

Stranger-Come-Knocking unhooked his great fur cloak and shrugged it off, stood there stripped to the waist like a man ready to wrestle. Scars had always been almost as popular in the North as blades. Every man who reckoned himself a man had to have a couple of both. But Stranger-Come-Knocking's great expanse of body, sinew-knotted like an ancient tree, was almost more scar than skin. He was ripped, pocked, gouged with wounds, enough to make a score of champions proud.

'At Yeweald I fought the Dog Tribe and was pierced with seven arrows.' He pointed out some pink blobs scattered across his ribs with his club of a forefinger. 'But I fought on, and made a hill of their dead, and made their land my land, and their women and children my people.'

Dow sighed, as if he had a half-naked giant at most of his war meetings and was getting tired of it. 'Maybe it's time to think about a shield.'

'They are for cowards to hide behind. My wounds tell the story of my strength.' The giant jerked his thumb at a star-shaped mass that covered one shoulder, and his back, and half his left arm with flesh lumped and mottled as oak-bark. 'The dreaded witch Vanian sprayed me with a liquid fire, and I carried her into the lake and drowned her while I burned.'

Dow picked a fingernail. 'Reckon I'd have tried to put it out first.'

The giant shrugged, the pink burn across his shoulder creasing like a ploughed field. 'It went out when she died.' He pointed to a ragged pink mark that left a bald streak through the pelt of black hair on his chest and appeared to have taken a nipple off. 'The brothers Smirtu and Weorc challenged me to single combat. They said because they grew together in one womb they counted as one man.'

Dow snorted. 'You fell for that?'

'I do not look for reasons *not* to fight. I split Smirtu in half with an axe, then crushed his brother's skull in my hand.' The giant slowly closed one massive fist and squeezed the fingers white, muscle squirming in his arm like a giant sausage being stuffed.

'Messy,' said Dow.

‘In my country, men are impressed by messy deaths.’

‘Honestly, they’re much the same here. Tell you what – anyone I call my enemy you can kill when you please. Anyone I call my friend … let me know before you give ’em a messy death. I’d hate for you to slaughter Prince Calder by accident.’

Stranger-Come-Knocking looked around. ‘You are Calder?’

That awkward moment wondering whether to deny it. ‘I am.’

‘Bethod’s second son?’

‘The same.’

He slowly nodded his monstrous head, long hair swaying. ‘Bethod was a great man.’

‘A great man for getting other men to fight for him.’ Tenways sucked his rotten teeth and spat one more time. ‘Not much of a fighter himself.’

The giant’s voice had suddenly softened again. ‘Why is everyone so bloodthirsty this side of the Crinna? There is more to life than fighting.’ He leaned down and dragged up his cloak between two fingers. ‘I will be at the place agreed upon, Black Dow. Unless … any of the little men wish to wrestle?’ Golden, and Ironhead, and Tenways all took their turns to peer off into the furthest corners of the stable.

Calder was used to being scared out of his wits, though, and met the giant’s eye with a smile. ‘I would, but I make a point of never stripping unless there are women present. Which is a shame, actually, because I have an almighty spot on my back that I think would quite impress everyone.’

‘Oh, I cannot wrestle with you, son of Bethod.’ The giant might even have had a knowing smirk of his own as he turned away. ‘You are made for other things.’ And he threw his cloak over his scarred shoulder and stooped under the high lintel, the Carls swinging the doors shut on the gust of wind that blew in behind him.

‘He seems a good sort,’ said Calder, brightly. ‘Nice of him not to show off the scars on his cock.’

‘Fucking savages!’ cursed Tenways, which was rich coming from him.

‘Greatest warrior in the world,’ scoffed Golden, though he hadn’t done much scoffing while the giant was in the room.

Dow rubbed his jaw thoughtfully. ‘The dead know I’m no fucking diplomat, but I’ll take the allies I can get. And a man that size’ll stop a lot of arrows.’ Tenways and Golden had themselves an arse-licking chuckle, but

Calder saw beyond the joke. If the Bloody-Nine was still alive, maybe a man that size might stop him too. ‘You all know your tasks, eh? Let’s get to ’em.’

Ironhead and Golden gave each other a deadly glare on the way out. Tenways spat at Calder’s feet but he only grinned back, promising himself he’d get the last laugh as the ugly old bastard shambled into the evening.

Dow stood, blood still dotting the ground from the tip of his middle finger, watching the doors as they were closed. Then he gave a sigh. ‘Feuding, feuding, always bloody feuding. Why can no one just get on, eh, Calder?’

‘My father used to say, “Point three Northmen the same way, they’ll be killing each other before you can order the charge.”’

‘Hah! He was a clever bastard, Bethod, whatever else he was. Couldn’t stop the warring, though, once he’d started.’ Dow frowned at his blood-daubed palm, working the fingers. ‘Once your hands get bloody it ain’t so easy to get ’em clean. The Dogman told me that. My hands been bloody all my life.’ Calder flinched as Splitfoot tossed something into the air, but it was only a cloth. Dow snatched it out of the darkness and started winding it around his cut hand. ‘Guess it’s a bit late to clean ’em now, eh?’

‘It’ll just have to be more blood,’ said Splitfoot.

‘I reckon.’ Dow wandered into one of the empty stalls, tipped his head back, rolled his eyes to the ceiling and winced. A moment later Calder heard the sound of his piss spattering the straw. ‘There … we … go.’

If the aim was to make him feel even more insignificant, it worked. He’d been half-expecting them to murder him. Now it seemed they couldn’t be bothered, and that pricked at Calder’s pride. ‘Got any orders for me?’ he snapped.

Dow glanced over his shoulder. ‘Why? You’d only fuck ’em up or ignore ’em.’

Probably true. ‘Why send for me, then?’

‘The way your brother tells it, you’ve got the sharpest mind in the whole North. I got sick of him telling me he couldn’t do without you.’

‘I thought Scale was up near Ustred?’

‘Two days’ ride away, and soon as I learned the Union were moving I sent to him to join up with us.’

‘Not much point me going, then.’

‘Wouldn’t say so …’ The sound of pissing stopped. ‘There it is!’ And started up again.

Calder ground his teeth. ‘Maybe I’ll go see Reachey. Watch this weapontake of his.’ Or talk him into helping Calder live out the month, even better.

‘You’re a free man, ain’t you?’ They both knew the answer to that one. Free as a pigeon already plucked and in the pot. ‘Things are just like they were in your father’s day, really. Any man can do what he likes. Right, Splitfoot?’

‘Right, Chief.’

‘Just as long as it’s exactly what I fucking tell ’em to do.’ And Dow’s Carls all chuckled away like they never heard finer wit. ‘Give Reachey my regards.’

‘I will.’ Calder turned for the door.

‘And Calder!’ Dow was just tapping off the drips. ‘You ain’t going to make more trouble for me, are you?’

‘Trouble? Wouldn’t know how, Chief.’

‘’Cause what with all those Southerners to fight … and unknowable fucks like Whirrun of Bligh and this Crinna-Come-Boasting weirdness … and my own people treading all over each other … I’ve got about as much arse-ache as I need. Can’t stand for anyone playing their own games. Someone tries to dig my roots from under me at a time like this, well, I’ve got to tell you, things’ll get *fucking ugly*!’ He screamed the last two words, eyes suddenly bulging from his face, veins popping from his neck, fury boiling out of him with no warning and making every man in the room flinch. Then he was calm as a kitten again. ‘Get me?’

Calder swallowed, trying not to let his fear show even though his skin was all prickling. ‘I think I have the gist.’

‘Good lad.’ Dow worked his hips about as he finished lacing up, then grinned around like a fox grins at a chicken coop left open. ‘I’d hate to hurt your wife, she’s a pretty little thing. Not so pretty as you, o’ course.’

Calder hid his fury under another smirk. ‘Who is?’

He strode between the grinning Carls and out into the evening, all the while thinking about how he was going to kill Black Dow, and take back what was stolen from his father.

What War?

‘Beautiful, ain’t it?’ said Agrick, big grin across his freckled face.

‘Is it?’ muttered Craw. He’d been thinking about the ground, and how he might use it, and how an enemy might do the same.

An old habit. It had been the better half of Bethod’s talk, when they were on campaign. The ground, and how to make a weapon of it.

The hill the Heroes stood on was ground an idiot could’ve seen the value of. It sprouted alone from the flat valley, so much alone and so oddly smooth a shape it seemed almost a thing man-made. Two spurs swelled from it – one pushing west with a single needle of rock raised up on end which folk had named Skarling’s Finger, one to the southeast, a ring of smaller stones on top they called the Children.

The river wound through the valley’s shallow bottom, skirting golden barley fields to the west, losing itself in a bog riddled with mirror-pools, then under the crumbling bridge Scorry Tiptoe was watching which was called, with a stubborn lack of imagination, the Old Bridge. The water flowed on fast around the foot of the hill, flaring out in sparkling shallows streaked with shingle. Somewhere down there among the scraggy brush and driftwood Brack was fishing. Or, more likely, sleeping.

On the far side of the river, off to the south, Black Fell rose up. A rough-heaped mass of yellow grass and brown bracken, stained with scree and creased with white-watered gills. To the east Osrung straddled the river, a cluster of houses around a bridge and a big mill, huddled inside a high fence. Smoke drifted from chimneys, into the bright blue and off to

nowhere. All normal, and nothing to remark upon, and no sign whatever of the Union, or Hardbread, or any of the Dogman's boys.

Hard to believe there was any war at all.

But then in Craw's experience, and he'd plenty, wars were made from ninety-nine parts boredom, usually in the cold and damp, hungry and ill, often hauling a great weight of metal uphill, to one part arse-opening terror. Made him wonder yet again why the hell he ever got into the black business, and why the hell he still hadn't got out. Talent for it, or a lack of talent for aught else. Or maybe he'd just gone with the wind and the wind had blown him here. He peered up, shreds of cloud shifting across the deep sky, now one memory, now another.

'Beautiful,' said Agrick again.

'Everything looks prettier in the sun,' said Craw. 'If it was raining you'd be calling it the ugliest valley in the world.'

'Maybe.' Agrick closed his eyes and tipped his face back. 'But it ain't raining.'

That was a fact, and not necessarily a happy one. Craw had a long-established tendency to sunburn, and had spent most of yesterday edging around the tallest of the Heroes along with the shade. Only thing he liked less than the heat was the cold.

'Oh, for a roof,' he muttered. 'Damn fine invention for keeping the weather off.'

'Bit o' rain don't bother me none,' grunted Agrick.

'You're young. Wait 'til you're out in all weathers at my age.'

Agrick shrugged. 'By then I hope to have a roof, Chief.'

'Good idea,' said Craw. 'You cheeky little bastard.' He opened his battered eyeglass, the one he'd taken from a dead Union officer they found frozen in the winter, and peered towards the Old Bridge again. Nothing. Checked the shallows. Nothing. Eyed the Ollensand Road, jerked up at a moving spot there, then realised it was some tiny fly on the end of the glass and sank back. 'Guess a man can see further in fine weather, at least.'

'It's the Union we're watching for, ain't it? Those bastards couldn't creep up on a corpse. You worry too much, Chief.'

'Someone has to.' But Agrick had a point. Worrying too much or not enough is ever a fine balance, and Craw always found himself falling heavily on the worried side of it. Every hint of movement had him starting,

ripe to call for weapons. Birds flapping lazily into the sky. Sheep grazing on the slopes of the fells. Farmers' wagons creeping along the roads. A little while ago Jolly Yon had started up axe practice with Athroc, and the sudden scrape of metal had damn near made him soak his trousers. Craw worried too much, all right. Shame is, a man can't just choose not to worry.

'Why are we here, Agrick?'

'Here? Well, you know. Sit on the Heroes, watch to see if the Union come, tell Black Dow if they do. Scouting, like always.'

'I know that. It was me told it to you. I mean, *why* are we here?'

'What, like, meaning of life and that?'

'No, no.' Craw grabbed at the air as though what he meant was something he couldn't quite get a hold of. 'Why are we *here*?'

Agrick's face puckered up as he thought on it. 'Well … The Bloody-Nine killed Bethod, and took his chain, and made himself King o' the Northmen.'

'True.' Craw remembered the day well enough, Bethod's corpse sprawled out bloody in the circle, the crowd roaring Ninefingers' name, and he shivered in spite of the sun. 'And?'

'Black Dow turned on the Bloody-Nine and took the chain for his self.' Agrick realised he might have used some risky phrasing there, started covering his tracks. 'I mean, he had to do it. Who'd want a mad bastard like the Bloody-Nine for king? But the Dogman called Dow traitor, and oath-breaker, and most of the clans from down near Uffrith, they tended to his way of seeing things. The King of the Union, too, having been on some mad journey with Ninefingers and made a friend of him. So the Dogman and the Union decided to make war on Black Dow, and here we all are.' Agrick slumped back on his elbows, closing his eyes and looking quite heavily pleased with himself.

'That's a fine understanding of the politics of the current conflict.'

'Thanks, Chief.'

'Why Black Dow and the Dogman got a feud. Why the Union's taken the Dogman's side in it, though I daresay that's got more to do with who owns what than who made a friend of who.'

'All right. There you are then.'

'But why are *we* here?'

Agrick sat up again, frowning. Behind them, metal clonked on wood as his brother took a swipe at Yon's shield and got knocked over for his pains.

‘Sideways, I said, y’idiot!’ came Yon’s un-jolly growl.

‘Well …’ tried Agrick, ‘I guess we stand with Dow because Dow stands for the North, rough bastard or not.’

‘The North? What?’ Craw patted the grass beside him. ‘The hills and the forests and the rivers and that, he stands for them, does he? Why would they want armies tramping all over ’em?’

‘Well, not the land of it. The people in it, I mean. You know. The North.’

‘But there’s all kinds of people in the North, ain’t there? Lot of ’em don’t care much for Black Dow, and he certainly don’t care much for them. Most just want to keep their heads down low and scratch out a living.’

‘Aye, I suppose.’

‘So how can Black Dow be for everyone?’

‘Well …’ Agrick squirmed about a bit. ‘I don’t know. I guess, just …’ He squinted down into the valley as Wonderful walked up behind them. ‘Why are we here, then?’

She clipped him across the back of the head and made him grunt. ‘Sit on the Heroes, watch for the Union. Scouting, like always, idiot. Damn fool bloody question.’

Agrick shook his head at the injustice of it all. ‘That’s it. I’m never talking again.’

‘You promise?’ asked Wonderful.

‘Why are we bloody here …’ Agrick muttered to himself as he walked off to watch Yon and Athroc training, rubbing the back of his head.

‘I know why I’m here.’ Whirrun had slowly raised one long forefinger, stalk of grass between his teeth thrashing around as he spoke. Craw had thought he was asleep, sprawled out on his back with the hilt of his sword for a pillow. But then Whirrun always looked asleep, and he never was. ‘Because Shoglig told me a man with a bone caught in his throat would—’

‘Lead you to your destiny.’ Wonderful planted her hands on her hips. ‘Aye, we’ve heard it before.’

Craw puffed out his cheeks. ‘Like the care of eight lives weren’t a heavy enough burden, I need a madman’s destiny to weigh me down.’

Whirrun sat up and pushed his hood back. ‘I object to that, I’m not mad in the least. I just … got my own way of seeing things.’

‘A mad way,’ muttered Wonderful under her breath as Whirrun stood, slapped the arse of his stained trousers and dragged his sheathed sword up

and over his shoulder.

He frowned, shifted from one leg to the other, then rubbed at his fruits. ‘I’m needing a wee, though. Would you go in the river, or up against one o’ these stones, do you reckon?’

Craw thought about it. ‘River. Up against the stones would seem … disrespectful.’

‘You think there are Gods watching?’

‘How do you tell?’

‘True.’ Whirrun chewed his grass stalk across to the other side of his mouth and started off down the hill. ‘River it is, then. Maybe I’ll give Brack a hand with the fishing. Shoglig used to be able to just talk the fish out of the water and I’ve never quite been able to get the trick of it.’

‘You could hack ’em out with that tree-cutter of yours!’ Wonderful shouted after him.

‘Maybe I will!’ He lifted the Father of Swords high over his head, not much shorter’n a man from pommel to point. ‘High time I killed something!’

Craw wouldn’t have complained if he held off for a spell. Leaving the valley with nothing dead was the sum of his hopes, right then. Which was an odd ambition for a soldier, when you thought about it. Him and Wonderful stood there silent for a while, side by side. Behind them steel squealed as Yon brushed Athroc away and sent him stumbling. ‘Put some effort in, you limp-wristed fuck!’

Craw found himself coming over nostalgic, like he did more and more these days. ‘Colwen loved the sunshine.’

‘That so?’ asked Wonderful, lifting one brow at him.

‘Always mocked at me about sticking to the shade.’

‘That so?’

‘I should’ve married her,’ he muttered.

‘Aye, you should’ve. Why didn’t you?’

‘You told me not to, apart from aught else.’

‘True. She had a sharp old tongue on her. But you don’t usually have trouble ignoring me.’

‘Fair point. Guess I was just too coward to ask.’ And he couldn’t wait to leave. Win a big name with high deeds. He hardly even knew the man

who'd thought that way. 'Didn't really know what I wanted back then, just thought I didn't have it, and I could get it with a sword.'

'Think about her, at all?' asked Wonderful.

'Not often.'

'Liar.'

Craw grinned. She knew him too bloody well. 'Call it half a lie. I don't think about her, really. Can't hardly remember her face half the time. But I think about what my life might've been, if I'd taken that path 'stead o' this.' Sitting with his pipe, under his porch, smiling at the sunset on the water. He gave a sigh. 'But, you know, choices made, eh? What about your husband?'

Wonderful took a long breath. 'Probably he's getting ready to bring the harvest in about now. The children too.'

'Wish you were with 'em?'

'Sometimes.'

'Liar. How often you been back this year? Twice, is it?'

Wonderful frowned down into the still valley. 'I go when I can. They know that. They know what I am.'

'And they still put up with you?'

She was silent a moment, then shrugged. 'Choices made, eh?'

'Chief!' Agrick was hurrying over from the other side of the Heroes. 'Drofd's back! And he ain't alone.'

'No?' Craw winced as he worked some movement into his dodgy knee. 'Who's he got with him?'

Agrick had a face like a man sat on a thistle. 'Looked like Caul Shivers.'

'Shivers?' growled Yon, head snapping sideways. Athroc seized his moment, stepped around Yon's drooping shield and kneed him in the fruits. 'Awwww, you little bastard …' And Yon went down, eyes bulging.

Craw might've laughed half his teeth out any other time, but Shivers' name had chased the fun right out of him. He strode across the circle of grass, hoping all the way Agrick might've got it wrong but knowing it wasn't likely. Craw's hopes had a habit of coming out bloodstained, and Caul Shivers was a difficult man to mistake.

Up he came towards the Heroes now, riding up that steep track on the north side of the hill. Craw watched him all the way, feeling like a shepherd watching a storm-cloud blow in.

'Shit,' muttered Wonderful.

‘Aye,’ said Craw. ‘Shit.’

Shivers left Drofd to hobble their horses down at the drystone wall and came the rest of the way on foot. He looked at Craw, and Wonderful, and Jolly Yon too, half-ruined face slack as a hanged man’s, the left side not much more’n a great line of burn through that metal eye. A spookier-looking bastard you never did see.

‘Craw.’ Said in his whispery croak.

‘Shivers. What brings you down here?’

‘Dow sent me.’

‘That much I guessed. It’s the why I’m after.’

‘He says you’re to keep hold o’ this hill and watch for the Union.’

‘He told me that already.’ Bit more snappish than Craw had meant. There was a pause. ‘So why send you here?’

Shivers shrugged. ‘To make sure you do it.’

‘Many thanks for the support.’

‘Thank Dow.’

‘I will.’

‘He’ll like that. Have you seen the Union?’

‘Not since Hardbread was up here, four nights ago.’

‘I know Hardbread. Stubborn old prick. He might come back.’

‘If he does there’s only three ways across the river, far as I know.’ Craw pointed ’em out. ‘The Old Bridge over west near the bogs, the new bridge in Osrung and the shallows at the bottom of the hill there. We got eyes on all of ’em, and the valley’s open. We could see a sheep cross the river from here.’

‘Don’t reckon we need to tell Black Dow about a sheep.’ Shivers brought the ruined side of his face close. ‘But we better if the Union come. Maybe we can sing some songs, while we wait?’

‘Can you carry a tune?’ asked Wonderful.

‘Shit, no. Don’t stop me trying, though.’ And he strolled off across the circle of grass, Athroc and Agrick backing away to give him room. Craw couldn’t blame ’em. Shivers was one of those men seemed to have a space around him where you’d better not be.

Craw turned slowly to Drofd. ‘Great.’

The lad held his hands up. ‘What was I supposed to do? Tell him I didn’t want the company? Least you didn’t have to spend two days riding with

him, and two nights sleeping next to him at the fire. He never closes that eye, you know. It's like he's looking at you all night long. I swear I haven't slept a wink since we set out.'

'He can't see out of it, fool,' said Yon, 'any more'n I can see out your belt buckle.'

'I know that, but still.' Drofd looked around at them all, voice dropping. 'Do you really reckon the Union are coming this way?'

'No,' said Wonderful. 'I don't.' She gave Drofd one of her looks, and his shoulders slumped, and he walked away muttering to himself on the theme of what else he could've done. Then she came up beside Craw, and leaned close. 'Do you really reckon the Union are coming this way?'

'Doubt it. But I've got a bad feeling.' He frowned across at Shivers' black outline, leaning against one of the Heroes, the valley drenched in sunlight beyond, and he put one hand on his stomach. 'And I've learned to listen to my gut.'

Wonderful snorted. 'Hard to ignore something so bloody big, I guess.'

Old Hands

‘Tunny.’

‘Uh?’ He opened one eye and the sun stabbed him directly in the brains. ‘Uh!’ He snapped it shut again, wormed his tongue around his sore mouth. It tasted like slow death and old rot. ‘Uh.’ He tried his other eye, just a crack, trained it on the dark shape hovering above him. It loomed closer, sun making glittering daggers down its edges.

‘Tunny!’

‘I hear you, damn it!’ He tried to sit and the world tossed like a ship in a storm. ‘Gah!’ He became aware he was in a hammock. He tried to rip his feet clear, got them tangled in the netting, almost tipped himself over in his efforts to get free, somehow ended up somewhere near sitting, swallowing the overwhelming urge to vomit. ‘First Sergeant Forest. What a delight. What time is it?’

‘Past time you were working. Where did you get those boots?’

Tunny peered down, puzzled. He was wearing a pair of superbly polished black cavalry boots with gilded accoutrements. The reflection of the sun in the toes was so bright it was painful to look at. ‘Ah.’ He grinned through the agony, some of the details of last night starting to leak from the shadowy crannies of his mind. ‘Won ’em … from an officer … called …’ He squinted up into the branches of the tree his hammock was tied to. ‘No. It’s gone.’

Forest shook his head in amazement. ‘There’s still someone in the division stupid enough to play cards with you?’

‘Well, this is one of the many fine things about wartime, Sergeant. Lots of folks leaving the division.’ Their regiment had left two score in sick tents over the last couple of weeks alone. ‘That means lots of new card-players arriving, don’t it?’

‘Yes it does, Tunny, yes it does.’ Forest had that mocking little grin on his scarred face.

‘Oh no,’ said Tunny.

‘Oh yes.’

‘No, no, no!’

‘Yes. Up you come, lads!’

And up they came indeed. Four of them. New recruits, fresh off the boat from Midderland by their looks. Seen off at the docks with kisses from Mummy or sweetheart or both. New uniforms pressed, straps polished, buckles gleaming and ready for the noble soldiering life, indeed. Forest gestured towards Tunny like a showman towards his freak, and trotted out that same little address he always gave.

‘Boys, this here is the famous Corporal Tunny, one of the longest serving non-commissioned officers in General Jalenhorm’s division. A veteran of the Starikland Rebellion, the Gurkish War, the last Northern War, the Siege of Adua, this current unpleasantness and a quantity of peacetime soldiering that would have bored a keener mind to death. He has survived the runs, the rot, the grip, the autumn shudders, the caresses of Northern winds, the buffets of Southern women, thousands of miles of marching, many years of his Majesty’s rations and even a tiny bit of actual fighting to stand – or sit – before you now. He has four times been Sergeant Tunny, once even Colour Sergeant Tunny, but always, like a homing pigeon to its humble cage, returned to his current station. He now holds the exalted post of standard-bearer of his August Majesty’s indomitable First Regiment of cavalry. That gives him responsibility—’ Tunny groaned at the mere mention of the word ‘—for the regimental riders, tasked with carrying messages to and from our much admired commanding officer, Colonel Vallimir. Which is where you boys come in.’

‘Oh, bloody hell, Forest.’

‘Oh, bloody hell, Tunny. Why don’t you introduce yourselves to the corporal?’

‘Klige.’ Chubby-faced, with a big sty that had closed one eye and his strapping on the wrong way round.

‘Previous profession, Klige?’ asked Forest.

‘Was going to be a weaver, sir. But I hadn’t been ’prenticed more than a month before my master sold me out to the recruiter.’

Tunny gave a further grimace. The replacements they were getting lately were an insult to the bottom of the barrel.

‘Worth.’ The next was gaunt and bony with an ill-looking grey sheen to his skin. ‘I was in the militia and they disbanded the company, so we all got drafted.’

‘Lederlingen.’ A tall, rangy specimen with big hands and a worried look. ‘I was a cobbler.’ He offered no further detail on the mechanics of his entry into the King’s Own and Tunny’s head was hurting too much for him to pry. The man was here now, unfortunately for everyone involved.

‘Yolk.’ A short lad with a lot of freckles, dwarfed by his pack. He glanced guiltily about. ‘They called me a thief but I never done it. Judge said it was this or five year in prison.’

‘I rather think we may all come to regret that choice,’ grunted Tunny, though probably as a thief he was the only one with transferrable skills. ‘Why’s your name Yolk?’

‘Er … don’t know. Was my father’s name … I guess.’

‘Think you’re the best part of the egg, do you, Yolk?’

‘Well …’ He looked doubtfully at his neighbours. ‘Not really.’

Tunny squinted up at him. ‘I’ll be watching you, boy.’ Yolk’s bottom lip almost trembled at the injustice.

‘You lads stick close to Corporal Tunny here. He’ll keep you out of danger.’ Forest had a smile that was tough to define. ‘If there was ever a soldier for staying clear of danger, it’s Corporal Tunny. Just don’t play cards with him!’ he shouted over his shoulder as he made off through the shambles of ill-kempt canvas that was their camp.

Tunny took a deep breath, and stood. The recruits snapped to ill-coordinated attention. Or three of them did. Yolk followed up a moment later. Tunny waved them down. ‘For pity’s sake don’t salute. I might be sick on you.’

‘Sorry, sir.’

‘I’m not sir, I’m Corporal Tunny.’

‘Sorry, Corporal Tunny.’

‘Now look. I don’t want you here and you don’t want to be here—’

‘I want to be here,’ said Lederlingen.

‘You do?’

‘Volunteered.’ A trace of pride in his voice.

‘Vol … un … teered?’ Tunny wrestled with the word as if it belonged to a foreign language. ‘So they do exist. Just make damn sure you don’t volunteer me for anything while you’re here. Anyway …’ He drew the lads into a conspiratorial huddle with a crooked finger. ‘You boys have landed right on your feet. I’ve done all kind of jobs in his Majesty’s army and this right here,’ and he pointed an affectionate finger at the standard of the First, rolled up safe under his hammock in its canvas cover, ‘this is a sweet detail. Now I may be in charge, that’s true. But I want you lads to think of me as, let’s say … your kindly uncle. Anything you need. Anything *extra.* Anything to make this army life of ours worth living.’ He leaned in closer and gave the suggestive eyebrows. *‘Anything.* You can come to me.’ Lederlingen held up a hesitant finger. ‘Yes?’

‘We’re cavalrymen, aren’t we?’

‘Yes, trooper, we are.’

‘Shouldn’t we have horses?’

‘That’s an excellent question and a keen grasp of tactics. Due to an administrative error, our horses are currently with the Fifth, attached to Mitterick’s division, which, as a regiment of infantry, is not in a position to make best use of them. I’m told they’ll be catching up with us any day, though they’ve been telling me that a while. For the time being we are a regiment of … horseless horse.’

‘Foot?’ offered Yolk.

‘You might say that, except we still …’ and Tunny tapped his skull, ‘think like cavalry. Other than horses, which is a deficiency common to every man in the unit, is there anything else you need?’

Klige was next to lift his arm. ‘Well, sir, Corporal Tunny, that is … I’d really like something to eat.’

Tunny grinned. ‘Well, that’s definitely extra.’

‘Don’t we get food?’ asked Yolk, horrified.

‘Of course his Majesty provides his loyal soldiers with rations, Yolk, of course he does. But nothing anyone would actually *want* to eat. You get sick

of eating things you don't want to eat, well, you come to me.'

'At a price, I suppose.' Lederlingen, sour of face.

'A *reasonable* price. Union coin, Northern coin, Styrian coin, Gurkish coin. Any kind of coin, in fact. But if you're short of currency I'm prepared to consider all manner of things in trade. Arms salvaged from dead Northmen, for example, are popular at present. Or perhaps we can work on the basis of favours. Everyone has something to trade, and we can always come to some—'

'Corporal?' An odd, high, strained voice, almost like a woman's, but it wasn't a woman who stood behind Tunny when he turned, to his great disappointment if not surprise. It was a very large man, black uniform mud-spotted from hard riding, colonel's markings at the sleeves, long and short steels of a businesslike design at his belt. His hair was shaved to stubble, dusted with grey at the ears and close to bald on top. Heavy-browed, broad-nosed and slab-jawed like a prizefighter, dark eyes fixed on Tunny. Perhaps it was his notable lack of neck, or the way the big knuckles stuck white from his clenched fists, or that his uniform looked as if it was stretched tight over rock, but even standing still he gave the impression of fearsome strength.

Tunny could salute with the very best when it seemed a wise idea, and now he snapped to vibrating attention. 'Sir! Corporal Tunny, sir, standard-bearer of his Majesty's First Regiment!'

'General Jalenhorm's headquarters?' The newcomer's eyes flicked over the recruits, as if daring them to laugh at his piping voice.

Tunny knew when to laugh, and now was not the moment. He pointed across the rubbish and tent-strewn meadow towards the farmhouse, smudges of smoke rising from the chimney and staining the bright sky. 'You'll find the general just there, sir! In the house, sir! Probably still in bed, sir!'

The officer nodded once then strode off, head down, in a way that suggested he'd simply walk through anything and anyone in his way.

'Who was that?' muttered one of the lads.

'I believe that …' Tunny let it hang in the air for a moment, 'was Bremer dan Gorst.'

'The one who fenced with the king?'

‘That’s right, and was his bodyguard until that mess in Sipani. Still has the king’s ear, some say.’ Not a good thing, that such a notable personage should be here. Never stand near anyone notable.

‘What’s he doing here?’

‘Couldn’t say for sure. But I hear he’s a hell of a *fighter.’* And Tunny gave his front teeth a worried sucking.

‘Ain’t that a good thing in a soldier?’ asked Yolk.

‘Bloody hell, no! Take it from me, who’s lived through more than one melee, wars are hard enough work without people *fighting* in the middle of ’em.’ Gorst stalked into the front yard of the house, pulling something from his jacket. A folded paper. An order, by the look of it. He saluted the guards and went in. Tunny rubbed at his rebelling stomach. Something didn’t feel right, and not just last night’s wine.

‘Sir?’

‘Corporal Tunny.’

‘I … I …’ It was the one called Worth, and he was in a fix. Tunny knew the signs, of course. The shifting from one leg to another, the pale features, the slightly dewy eyes. No time to spare.

He jerked his thumb towards the latrine pits. ‘Go!’ The lad took off like a scared rabbit, hopping bow-legged through the mud. ‘But make sure you crap in the proper place!’ Tunny turned to wag one lecturing finger at the rest of the litter. *‘Always* crap in the proper place. This is a principle of soldiering of far greater importance than any rubbish about marching, or weapons, or ground.’ Even at this distance Worth’s long groan could be heard, followed by some explosive farting. ‘Trooper Worth is fighting his first engagement with our real enemy out here. An implacable, merciless, liquid foe.’ He slapped a hand down on the shoulder of the nearest trooper. Yolk, as it happened, who nearly collapsed under the added weight. ‘Sooner or later, I’ve no doubt, you will all be called upon to fight your own battle of the latrines. Courage, boys, courage. Now, while we wait for Worth to force out the enemy or die bravely in the attempt, would any of you boys care for a friendly game of cards?’ He produced the deck from nowhere, fanning it out under the recruits’ surprised eyes, or eye in Klige’s case, the mesmerising effect only mildly damaged by Trooper Worth’s ongoing arse music. ‘We’ll just play for honour. To begin with. Nothing you can’t afford to lose, eh? Nothing you can’t … Uh-oh.’

General Jalenhorm had emerged from his headquarters, jacket wide open, hair in disarray, face flushed beetroot red, and shouting. He was always shouting, but this time he appeared, for once, to have a purpose. Gorst came after him, hunched and silent.

'Uh-oh.' Jalenhorm stomped one way, seemed to think better of it, swivelled, roared at nobody, struggled with a button, slapped an assisting hand angrily away. Staff officers began to scatter from the house in all directions like birds whacked from the brush, chaos spreading rapidly from the general and infecting the entire camp.

'Damn it,' muttered Tunny, shouldering his way into his bracers. 'We'd best get ready to move.'

'We just got here, Corporal,' grumbled Yolk, pack half way off.

Tunny took hold of the strap and tugged it back over Yolk's shoulder, turned him by it to face towards the general. Jalenhorm was trying to shake his fist at a well-presented officer and button his own jacket at the same time, and failing. 'You have before you a perfect demonstration of the workings of the army – the chain of command, trooper, each man shitting on the head of the man below. The much-loved leader of our regiment, Colonel Vallimir, is just getting shat on by General Jalenhorm. Colonel Vallimir will shit on his own officers, and it won't take long to roll downhill, believe me. Within a minute or two, First Sergeant Forest will arrive to position his bared buttocks above my undeserving head. Guess what that means for you lot?' The lads stayed silent for a moment, then Klige raised a tentative hand. 'The question was meant to be rhetorical, numbskull.' He carefully lowered it again. 'For that you get to carry my pack.'

Klige's shoulders slumped.

'You. Ladderlugger.'

'Lederlingen, Corporal Tunny.'

'Whatever. Since you love volunteering so much, you just volunteered to take my other pack. Yolk?'

'Sir?' Plain to see he could hardly stand under the weight of his own gear.

Tunny sighed. 'You carry the hammock.'

New Hands

Beck raised the axe high and snarled as he brought it down, split that log in two and pretended all the while it was some Union soldier's head. Pretended there was blood spraying from it rather'n splinters. Pretended the babbling of the brook was the sound of men cheering for him and the leaves across the grass were women swooning at his feet. Pretended he was a great hero, like his father had been, won himself a high name on the battlefield and a high place at the fire and in the songs. He was the hardest bastard in the whole damn North, no doubt. Far as pretending went.

He tossed the split wood onto the pile, stooped down to drag up another log. Wiped his forehead on his sleeve and frowned across the valley, humming to himself from the Lay of Ripnir. Somewhere out there beyond the hills, Black Dow's army was fighting. Out there beyond the hills high deeds were being done and tomorrow's songs written. He spat into his palms, rough from wood-axe, and plough, and scythe, and shovel, and washboard even. He hated this valley and the people in it. Hated this farm and the work he did on it.

He was made to fight, not chop logs.

He heard footsteps slapping, saw his brother struggling up the steep path from the house, bent over. Back from the village already, and it looked like he'd run the whole way. Beck's axe went up into the bright sky and came down, and one more Southerner's skull was laid to waste. Festen made it to the top of the path and stood there, bent over, shaking hands on his wobbly knees, round cheeks blotchy pink, struggling for breath.

'What's the hurry?' asked Beck, bending for more wood.

‘There’s … there’s …’ Festen fought to talk and breathe and stand up all at once. ‘There’s men in the village!’ he got out in a rush.

‘What sort o’ men?’

‘Carls! Reachey’s Carls!’

‘What?’ The axe hovered over Beck’s head, forgotten.

‘Aye. And they got a weapontake on!’

Beck stood there for a moment longer, then tossed the axe down on the pile of split logs and strode for the house. Strode fast and hard, his skin all singing. So fast Festen had to trot along to keep up, asking, ‘What you going to do?’ over and over and getting no reply.

Past the pen and the staring goats and the five big tree stumps all hacked and scarred from years of Beck’s blade practice every morning. Into the smoke-smelling darkness of the house, slashes of sunlight through the ill-fitting shutters, across bare boards and bald old furs. Wood creaked under his boots as he strode to his chest, knelt, pushed back the lid, tore his clothes out of the way with small patience. Lifted it with fingers tender as a lover’s. The only thing he cared for.

Gold glimmered in the gloom and he wrapped his fingers around the hilt, feeling the perfect balance of it, slid a foot-length of steel from the scabbard. Smiled at that sound, that scraping, singing sound that set his already jangling nerves to thrill. How often had he smiled down like this, polishing, sharpening, polishing, dreaming of this day, and now it was come. He slapped the sword back in its sheath, turned … and froze.

His mother stood in the doorway, watching. A black shadow with the white sky behind.

‘I’m taking my father’s sword,’ he snapped, shaking the hilt at her.

‘He was killed with that sword.’

‘It’s mine to take!’

‘It is.’

‘You can’t make me stay here no more.’ He stuffed a few things in the pack he kept ready. ‘You said this summer!’

‘I did.’

‘You can’t stop me going!’

‘Do you see me trying?’

‘By my age Shubal the Wheel had been seven years on campaign!’

‘Lucky him.’

‘It’s time. It’s past time!’

‘I know.’ She watched as he took his bow down, unstrung and wrapped up with a few shafts. ‘It’ll be cold nights, next month or two. Best take my good cloak with you.’

That caught him off guard. ‘I … no, you should keep it.’

‘I’d be happier knowing you had it.’

He didn’t want to argue in case he lost his nerve. Off all big and bold to face down a thousand thousand Southerners but scared of the one woman who’d birthed him. So he snatched her good green-dyed cloak down from the peg and over his shoulder as he stalked for the door. Treated it like nothing even though he knew it was the best thing she had.

Festen was standing outside, nervous, not really understanding what was happening. Beck ruffled his red hair for him. ‘You’re the man here, now. Get them logs chopped and I’ll bring you something back from the wars.’

‘They’ve got nothing there we need,’ said his mother, eyeing him from the shadows. Not angry, like she used to be. Just sad. He’d hardly realised ’til that moment how much bigger’n her he was now. The top of her head hardly came up to his neck, even.

‘We’ll see.’ He took the two steps down to the ground outside, under the mossy eaves of the house, couldn’t help turning back. ‘Well, then.’

‘One last thing, Beck.’ She leaned down, and kissed him on his forehead. The softest of kisses, gentle as the rain. She touched his cheek, and she smiled. ‘My son.’

He felt the tightness of tears in his throat, and he was guilty for what he’d said, and joyful to get his way at last, and angry for all the months he hadn’t, and sad to go, and afraid, and excited all at once. He could hardly make his face show one thing or another for all the different ways it was pulled. He touched the back of her hand quickly, and he turned before he started weeping and strode away down the path, and off to war.

Strode the way he thought his father might’ve.

The weapontake weren’t quite what Beck had hoped for.

Rain flitted down, not enough to make anyone wet, really, but enough to make everyone squint and hunch, to damp down the feel of the whole business. And the feel was pretty damn soggy already. Folk who’d come to

join up, or been made to come, more likely, stood in things that might've started off as rows but had melted into squelching, jostling, grumbling tangles. Most of 'em were young lads, too young for this by Beck's reckoning. Lads who might never have seen the next valley let alone a battle. Most of the rest were grey with age. A few cripples of one kind or another rounded out the numbers. At the edge of the crowd some of Reachey's Carls stood leaning on spears or sat mounted, looking every bit as unimpressed by the new recruits as Beck was. All in all, it was a long, low way from the noble band of brothers he'd been hoping to play a hero's part in.

He shook his head, one fist holding his mother's cloak tight at his neck, the other underneath it, gripping the warm hilt of his father's sword. He didn't belong with this lot. Maybe Skarling Hoodless had started out with an unpromising crowd, and made an army of 'em that beat the Union, but Beck couldn't see anyone telling high tales about this gathering of the hopeless. At one point he'd seen a new-made crew shambling by and two little lads at the front only had one spear between 'em. A weapontake without enough weapons to go round, you don't hear much about that in the songs.

For some reason, most likely on account of daydreaming it so often, he'd been half-expecting old Caul Reachey himself to be looking on, a man who'd fought in every battle since whenever, a man who did everything the old way. Maybe catching Beck's eye or giving him a slap on the back. Here's the kind o' lad we need! Everyone look at this lad! Let's find us some more like him! But there was no sign of Reachey. Or anyone else who knew what they were doing. For a moment he looked at the muddy way he'd come, and gave some hard thought to heading back to the farm. He could be home before dawn—

'Come to join up?' A short man but heavy in the shoulder, hair and stubble full of grey, a mace at his belt looked like it had seen some action. He stood with his weight all on one leg, like the other might not take it.

Beck weren't about to look the fool. He packed away any thoughts of quitting. 'I've come to fight.'

'Good for you. My name's Flood, and I'll be taking charge o' this little crew when it's mustered.' He pointed out an unpromising row of boys, some with worn bows or hatchets, most with nothing but the clothes they

stood in and those in a sorry state. ‘You want to do more’n talk about fighting, get in line.’

‘Reckon I will.’ Flood looked like he might know a sword from a sow at least, and one line looked pretty much as bad as another. So Beck swaggered up, chest out, and pushed his way in among the lads at the back. He fair towered over ’em, young as they were. ‘I’m Beck,’ he said.

‘Colving,’ muttered one. Couldn’t have been more’n thirteen and tubby with it, staring about wide-eyed, looking scared of everything.

‘Stodder,’ mumbled around a mouthful of some rotten-looking meat by a hangdog lad with a fat lower lip, wet and dangling like he was touched in the head.

‘I’m Brait,’ piped a boy even smaller’n Colving, ragged as a beggar, dirty toes showing through the end of one split boot. Beck was getting ready to feel sorry for him until he realised how bad he smelled. Brait offered his skinny hand but Beck didn’t take it. He was busy sizing up the last of the group, older’n the others with a bow over his shoulder and a scar through one dark eyebrow. Probably just fell off a wall, but it made him look more dangerous than he’d any right to. Beck wished he had a scar.

‘What about you?’

‘Reft.’ He’d this knowing little grin on his face Beck didn’t much like the look of. Felt right away like he was being laughed at.

‘Something funny?’

Reft waved a hand at the muddle all around ’em. ‘Something not funny?’

‘You laughing at me?’

‘Not everything’s about you, friend.’

Beck weren’t sure if this lad was making him look a fool, or if he was doing it to himself, or if he was just hacked off ’cause none of this matched his hopes, but he was getting angry, and fast. ‘You might want to watch your fucking—’

But Reft weren’t listening. He was looking over Beck’s shoulder, and so were the rest of the lads. Beck turned to see what at, got a shock to find a rider looming over him on a high horse. A good horse with an even better saddle, metal on the harness polished to a neat twinkle. A man of maybe thirty years, by Beck’s guess, clear-skinned and sharp-eyed. He wore a fine cloak with a stitched edge and a rich fur collar, might’ve made Beck

shamed of the one his mother had given him if most of the others in the row hadn't been wearing little better'n rags.

'Evening.' The rider's voice was soft and smooth, the word hardly even sounding like Northern.

'Evening,' said Reft.

'Evening,' said Beck, no chance he was going to let Reft play at being leader.

The rider smiled down from his fancy saddle, just like they were all old mates together. 'I don't suppose you lads could point me to Reachey's fire?'

Reft stuck a finger into the gathering gloom. 'Over yonder, I reckon, on that rise there, lee o' them trees.' Black outlines against the evening sky, branches lit underneath by firelight.

'Much obliged to you.' The man nodded to each of them, even Brait and Colving, then clicked his tongue and nudged his horse through the press, smirk still at the corner of his mouth. Like he'd said something funny. Beck didn't see what.

'Who was that bastard?' he snapped, once the rider was well out of earshot.

'Don't know,' whispered Colving.

Beck curled his lip at the lad. ''Course you don't. Weren't asking you, was I?'

'Sorry.' He flinched like he was expecting a slap. 'Just saying …'

'Reckon that was the great Prince Calder,' said Reft.

Beck's lip curled further. 'What, Bethod's son? Ain't a prince no more, then, is he?'

'Reckon he thinks he is.'

'Married to Reachey's daughter, ain't he?' said Brait in his high little voice. 'Come to pay respects to his wife's father, maybe.'

'Come to try and lie his way back into his father's chair, judging on his reputation,' said Reft.

Beck snorted. 'Don't reckon he'll get much change out o' Black Dow.'

'Get the bloody cross cut in him for the effort, more'n likely,' grunted Stodder, licking his fingers as he finished eating.

'Get hung and burned, I reckon,' piped up Colving. 'That's what he does, Black Dow, wi' cowards and schemers.'

‘Aye,’ said Brait, as though he was the great expert. ‘Puts the flame to ’em himself and watches ’em dance.’

‘Can’t say I’ll weep any.’ Beck threw a dark glance after Calder, still easing through the press, high above everyone else in his saddle. If there was an opposite of a straight edge it was that bastard. ‘He don’t look much of a fighter.’

‘So?’ Reft’s grin dropped down to the hem of Beck’s cloak where the blunt end of the sword’s sheath showed. ‘You do look a fighter. Don’t necessarily make it so.’

Beck weren’t having that. He twitched his mother’s cloak back over his shoulder to give him room, fists clenched. ‘You calling me a fucking coward?’ Stodder slid carefully out of his way. Colving turned his scared eyes to the ground. Brait just had this helpless little smile.

Reft shrugged, not quite rising to it, but not quite backing down either. ‘Don’t know you well enough to say what y’are. Stood in the line, have you, in battle?’

‘Not in the line,’ snapped Beck, hoping they might think he’d fought a few skirmishes when in fact aside from some bare-handed tussles with boys in the village he’d only fought trees.

‘Then you don’t know yourself, do you? Never can tell what a man’ll do once the blades are drawn, shoulder to shoulder, waiting for the charge to come. Maybe you’ll stand and fight like Skarling his self. Or maybe you’ll run. Maybe you only talk a good fight.’

‘I’ll show you a fight, you fucker!’ Beck stepped forwards, one fist going up. Colving gave a whimper, covered his face like he was the one might get hit. Reft took a pace back, pulling his coat open with one hand. Beck saw the handle of a long knife there, and he realised when he pushed the cloak back he’d showed the hilt of his father’s sword, and it was right by his hand, and it came to him of a sudden how high the stakes had climbed all out of nothing. It came to him in a flash this might not end up a tussle between boys in the village, and he saw the fear in Reft’s eyes, and the willingness, and the guts dropped out of him, and he faltered for a moment, not knowing how he got here or what he should do—

‘Oy!’ Flood lurched out of the crowd, dragging his bad leg behind him. ‘Enough o’ that!’ Beck slowly let his fist drop, mightily glad of the interruption if he was honest. ‘Good to see you’ve some fire in you, but

there'll be plenty of fight to go round with the Southerners, don't you worry about that. We got marching to do on the morrow, and you'll march better without smashed mouths.' Flood held his big fist up between Beck and Reft, grey hairs on the back, knuckles scuffed from a hundred old scrapes. 'And that's what you'll be getting 'less you behave yourselves, understand?'

'Aye, Chief,' growled Beck, giving Reft the eye though his heart was going so hard in his ears he thought it might pop 'em right off.

'Aye, 'course,' said Reft, letting his coat fall closed.

'First thing a fighter has to learn is when not to fight. Now get up there, the pair o' you.'

Beck realised the row of lads had melted away in front of him and there was just a stretch of trampled mud between him and a table, an awning of dripping canvas over it to keep the rain off. An old greybeard sat there waiting for him, and looking somewhat sour about it. He'd lost an arm, coat-sleeve folded up and stitched across his chest. In the other hand he'd got a pen. Seemed they were taking each man's name and marking it down in a big book. New ways of doing things, with writing and what have you. Beck didn't reckon his father would've cared much for that, and neither did he. What was the purpose to fighting the Southerners if you took their ways yourselves? He trudged up through the slop, frowning.

'Name?'

'My name?'

'Who the bloody hell else's?'

'Beck.'

The greybeard scratched it on his paper. 'From?'

'A farm just up the valley there.'

'Age?'

'Seventeen year.'

The man frowned up at him. 'And a big one too. You're a few summers late, lad. Where you been at?'

'Helping my mother on the farm.' Someone behind snorted and Beck whipped around to give him a proper glare. Brait's sorry little grin wilted, and he looked down at his knackered shoes. 'She's two little 'uns to care for, so I stayed to help her. That's man's work too.'

'Guess you're here now, anyway.'

'That's right.'

‘Your father’s name?’

‘Shama Heartless.’

His head jerked right back up at that. ‘Don’t poke me, lad!’

‘I won’t, old man. Shama Heartless was my father. This here is his sword.’ And Beck drew it, metal hissing, the weight in his hand putting heart right back in him, and stood it point-down on the table.

The one-armed old man looked it up and down for a moment, gold glinting with the sunset, mirror-brightness of good steel. ‘Well, there’s a turn-up. Let’s hope you’re forged from the same iron as your father.’

‘I am.’

‘Reckon we’ll see. Here’s your first staple, lad.’ And he pressed a tiny silver coin into Beck’s palm and took up his pen again. ‘Next man.’

And there you go, farmer no more. Joined up with Caul Reachey and ready to fight for Black Dow against the Union. Beck sheathed his sword and stood frowning in the thickening rain, in the gathering darkness. A girl with red hair turned brown by the damp was pouring out grog for those who’d given their names and Beck took his own measure and threw it burning down his gullet. He tossed the cup aside, watching Reft, and Colving, and Stodder give their answers, thinking how it didn’t matter a shit what these fools thought. He’d win his name. He’d show ’em who was the coward.

And who was the hero.

Reachey

‘If it ain’t my daughter’s husband!’ called out Reachey, firelight shining on a gap-toothed grin. ‘No need to tiptoe, lad.’

‘Muddy going,’ said Calder.

‘And you always did like to keep your boots clean.’

‘Styrian leather, shipped in from Talins.’ And he planted one on a stone by the fire so Reachey’s old Named Men could get a better look.

‘Shipping in boots,’ grumbled Reachey, as if bemoaning the loss of all that was good in the world. ‘By the dead. How did a clever girl like my daughter fall for a tailor’s dummy like you?’

‘How did a butcher’s block like you father such a beauty as my wife?’

Reachey grinned, so his men did too, the rustling flames picking out every crease and crinkle on their leathery faces. ‘I’ve always wondered at it myself. Less’n you, though. I knew her mother.’ A couple of the older lads grunted, faraway looks in their eyes. ‘And I was quite the beauty myself before life’s buffets wore down my looks.’ The self-same older lads chuckled. Old men’s jokes, all about how fine things used to be.

‘Buffets,’ said one, shaking his head.

‘Could I have a word?’ asked Calder.

‘Anything for my son. Lads.’ Reachey’s closest stood, some with evident effort, and made their way grunting off into the dark. Calder picked a spot by the fire and squatted down, hands out to the flames.

‘You want the pipe?’ Reachey offered it, smoke curling from the bowl.

‘No, thanks.’ Calder had to keep a straight head, even among supposed friends. It was a damn narrow path he was always treading these days, and

he couldn't afford to weave about. There was a long drop on both sides of it and nothing soft at the bottom.

Reachey took a suck himself, sent up a couple of little brown smoke rings and watched them drift apart. 'How's my daughter?'

'She's the best woman in the world.' And he didn't even have to lie.

'You always know what to say, don't you, Calder? I won't disagree. And my grandson?'

'Still a little small to help out against the Union this time around, but he's swelling. You can feel him kick.'

'Can't believe it.' Reachey looked into the flames and slowly shook his head, scrubbing at his white stubble with his fingernails. 'Me, a grandfather. Hah! Seems like just yesterday I was a child myself. Just this morning I was watching Seff kick at her mother's belly. It all slips by so fast. Slips by and you hardly notice, like leaves on the water. Savour the little moments, son, that's my advice. They're what life is. All the things that happen while you're waiting for something else. I've heard Black Dow wants you dead.'

Calder tried not to show he'd been thrown by the shift of subject and failed. 'Who says?'

'Black Dow.'

No great surprise, but hearing it laid out stark as that didn't help Calder's shredded spirits. 'I reckon he'd know.'

'I think he's brought you back out here so he can find an easy way to kill you, or so someone else can in hopes of earning favours from him. I think he thinks you'll start scheming, and turning men against him, and trying to steal his chair. Then he'll find out about it, and be able to hang you fair, and no one can complain over much.'

'He thinks if he hands me the knife I'll stab myself.'

'Something like that.'

'Maybe I'm quicker fingered than he reckons.'

'I hope y'are. All I'm saying is, if you're planning on hatching a scheme or two, be aware he's aware, and he's waiting for you to miss a step. Providing he don't tire of tiptoeing around the issue and tell Caul Shivers to sharpen his axe on your brains.'

'There'd be a few folk unhappy about that.'

'True, and half the North's unhappy as it is. Too much war. Too much tax. War's got a fine tradition round these parts, o' course, but tax has never

been popular. Dow needs to tread careful on folks' feelings these days, and he knows it. But it'd be a fool presumed too far on Black Dow's patience. He ain't a man made for treading carefully.'

'But I suppose I am?'

'There's no shame in a soft footfall, lad. We like big, stupid men in the North, men who wade about in blood and so on. We sing songs about 'em. But those men get nothing done alone, and that's a fact. We need the other kind. Thinkers. Like you. Like your father. And we don't make half way enough of 'em. You want my advice?'

Reachey could stick his advice up his arse as far as Calder was concerned. He'd come for men, and swords, and cold hearts ready to do treachery. But he'd long ago learned that most men love nothing better than to be listened to. Especially powerful men. And Reachey was one of Dow's five War Chiefs, about as powerful as it got these days. So Calder did what he was best at, and lied. 'It's your advice I came for.'

'Then leave things be. 'Stead o' swimming out against a fierce current, risking it all in the cold deep, sit on the beach awhile, take your ease. Who knows? Maybe in good time the sea'll just wash up what you want.'

'You reckon?' As far as Calder could tell, the sea had been washing up nothing but shit ever since his father died.

Reachey shuffled a little closer, speaking low. 'Black Dow ain't sat too firmly in Skarling's Chair, for all he carts it around with him. He's the best bet for most, still, but outside o' that rotten old fuck Tenways he ain't got much loyalty. Lot less than your father had, and men these days, the likes of Ironhead and Golden? Pah!' And he snorted his contempt into the fire. 'They're fickle as the wind. Folk fear Black Dow, but that only works long as you're fearsome, and if things keep dragging on, and he don't fight … folk got better things to do than sit around here going hungry and shitting in holes. I've lost as many men wandering off home to the harvest the last month as I'll pick up at this weapontake here. Dow has to fight, and soon, and if he don't, or if he loses, well, everything could spin around in an instant.' And Reachey took a long, self-satisfied suck at his pipe.

'And what if he fights the Union and wins?'

'Well …' The old man squinted up at the stars as he finished blowing out his latest plume. 'That is a point you've got there. If he wins he'll be everyone's hero.'

‘Not mine, I daresay.’ It was Calder’s turn to lean close and whisper. ‘And in the meantime, we’re not on the beach. What if Dow tries to murder me, or gives me some task I can’t but fail at, or puts me in the line somewhere I’m good as dead? Will I have any friends at my back?’

‘You’re my daughter’s husband, better or worse. Me and your father agreed to it when you and Seff weren’t much more’n babies. I was proud to take you when you had the world at your feet. What kind of a man would I be if I turned my back now you’ve got the world on your shoulders? No. You’re family.’ And he showed that missing tooth again, slapping his heavy hand down on Calder’s shoulder. ‘I do things the old way.’

‘Straight edge, eh?’

‘That’s right.’

‘So you’d draw your sword for me?’

‘Shit, no.’ And he gave Calder’s shoulder a parting squeeze and took his hand away. ‘I’m just saying I won’t draw it against you. If I have to burn, I’ll burn, but I ain’t setting myself on fire.’ About what Calder had expected, but still a disappointment. However many life gives you, each new one still stings. ‘Where you going, lad?’

‘I think I’ll meet up with Scale, help him with what’s left of my father’s men.’

‘Good idea. Strong as a bull, your brother, and brave as one with it but, well, might be he’s got a bull’s brain, too.’

‘Might be.’

‘Word’s come from Dow, he’s calling the army together. We’re all marching for Osrung tomorrow morning. Heading for the Heroes.’

‘Guess I’ll catch up with Scale there, then.’

‘And a warming reunion, I don’t doubt.’ Reachey waved a gnarled paw at him. ‘Watch your back, Calder.’

‘That I will,’ he muttered under his breath.

‘And Calder?’

Everyone always had just one more thing to say, and it never seemed to be something nice. ‘Aye?’

‘You get yourself killed, that’s one thing. But my daughter’s stood hostage for you. Done it willingly. I don’t want you doing anything that’s going to bring harm to her or to her child. I won’t stand for that. I’ve told Black Dow and I’m telling you. I won’t stand for it.’

‘You think I will?’ Calder snapped back, with a heat he hadn’t expected. ‘I’m not quite the bastard they say I am.’

‘I know you’re not.’ And Reachey gave him a pointed look from under his craggy brows. ‘Not quite.’

Calder left the fire with worry weighing on his shoulders like a coat of double mail. When the best you can get from your wife’s father is that he won’t help to kill you, it doesn’t take a clever man to see you’re in shit to your chin.

Music was coming from somewhere, old songs badly sung about men long dead and the men they’d killed. Drunken laughter too, figures around the fire-pits, drinking to nothing. A hammer rang from the darkness and Calder caught the shape of the smith, frozen against the sparks of his forge. They’d be working all night arming up Reachey’s new recruits. Blades, axes, arrowheads. The business of destruction. He winced at the shriek of a whetstone. Something about that sound had always set his teeth on edge. He’d never understood what men saw in weapons. Probably a weapontake wasn’t the best place for him, when you thought about it. He stopped, peering into the darkness. Somewhere around here he’d tied his horse—

A boot squelched and he frowned over his shoulder. The shapes of two men, shaggy in the dark, a hint of a stubbly face. Somehow, right away he knew. And right away he took off running.

‘Shit!’

‘Stop him!’

He pounded to nowhere, not thinking about anything, which was a strange relief for a moment, and then, as the first flush of action faded and he realised they were going to kill him … not.

‘Help!’ he screamed at no one. ‘Help me!’

Three men about a fire looked over, part-curious, part-annoyed at being disturbed. None of them so much as reached for weapons. They didn’t care a shit. People don’t, on the whole. They didn’t know who he was, and even if they had he was widely hated, and even if he’d been widely loved, still, on the whole, no one cares a shit.

He left them behind, scared breath starting to burn, slithered down a bank and up another, crashed through a patch of bushes, twigs snatching at him, not caring much about the state of his Styrian boots now as the fear clawed up his throat. He saw a shape looming out of the murk, a pale face, startled.

‘Help!’ he screeched. ‘Help!’

Someone squatting, pinching off a turd. ‘What?’

And Calder was past, thumping through the mud, leaving the fires of Reachey’s camp behind. He snatched a glance over his shoulder, couldn’t see a thing beyond the wobbling black outline of the land. But he could hear them still, too close behind. Far too close. He caught water glimmering at the bottom of a slope, then his lovely Styrian boot toe caught something and he was in the air.

He came down mouth first, crumpled, tumbled, head filled with his own despairing whimpers as the earth battered at him. Slid to what might’ve been a stop though it felt like he was still going. Struggled up, arms clutching at him.

‘Off me, bastards!’ It was his own cloak, heavy with mud. He floundered a half-step, realised he was going up the bank as the killers came down it. He tried to turn and flopped over in the stream, gasping for air, cold water gripping him.

‘Some runner, ain’t he?’ The voice boomed through the surging blood in Calder’s head, a nasty kind of chuckle on the end. Why do they always have to laugh?

‘Oh, aye. Come here.’ That scraping sound as one drew a blade. Calder remembered he had a sword himself, fished numbly for it, trying to struggle up out of the freezing water. He only got as far as his knees. The nearest killer came at him, then fell over sideways.

‘What you doing?’ said the other. Calder wondered if he’d drawn and stabbed him, then realised his sword was still all tangled up with his cloak. He couldn’t have got it free even if he had the strength to move his arm – which, at that moment, he didn’t.

‘What?’ His tongue felt twice its normal size.

A shape flashed from nowhere. Calder gave a kind of squeal, arms jerking pointlessly to cover his face. He felt the wind of something passing, it crashed into the second killer and he went down on his back. The first was trying to crawl away up the bank, making a wet groan. The outline of a man walked down to him, slinging a bow over his shoulder and drawing a sword, and stabbed him through the back without breaking stride. He strolled up close and stood there, a blacker shape in the darkness. Calder

stared at him through the spread-out fingers over his face, cold water bubbling at his knees. Thinking of Seff. Waiting for his death.

'If it ain't Prince Calder. Wouldn't expect to chance on you in such surroundings.'

Calder slowly prised his trembling hands away from his face. He knew that voice. 'Foss Deep?'

'Yes.'

Relief spouted up in Calder like a fountain, so much he almost wanted to laugh. Laugh or be sick. 'My brother sent you?'

'No.'

'Scale's busy… busy… busy these days,' grunted Shallow, still stabbing the second killer, blade squelching in and out.

'Very busy.' Deep watched his brother as if he was watching a man dig a ditch. 'Fighting and so forth. War. The old swords-and-marching game. Loves him some war, Scale, can't get enough. If that's not dead yet, by the way, ain't never going to be.'

'True.' Shallow stabbed his man once more then rocked back on his haunches, his blade, and his hand, and his arm to the elbow all sticky black with blood in the moonlight.

Calder made himself not look at it, trying to keep his mind off his rising gorge. 'Where the hell did you come from?'

Deep offered a hand and Calder took it. 'We heard you were returned from exile and – aware what a popular boy you are – thought we'd come and stand lookout. Case someone tried something. And whatever do you know …'

Calder held Deep's forearm a moment longer as the dark world started to steady. 'Good thing you came when you did. Moment longer I'd have had to kill those bastards myself.' He stood, the blood rushed to his head, and he doubled up and puked all over his Styrian boots.

'Things were about to get ugly, all right,' said Deep solemnly.

'If you could just've got your sword free from your fancy-arsed cloak you'd have cut those bastards up every which way.' Shallow was coming down the slope and dragging something after him. 'We caught this one. He was holding their horses.' And he shoved a shape down in the mud in front of Calder. A young lad, pale face dirt-speckled in the half-light.

‘That’s some good work.’ Calder wiped his sour mouth on the back of his sleeve. ‘My father always said you were two of the best men he knew.’

‘Funny.’ He could see Shallow’s teeth as he grinned. ‘He used to tell us we were the worst.’

‘Either way, don’t know how I’ll thank you.’

‘Gold,’ said Shallow.

‘Aye,’ said Deep. ‘Gold will go most of the way.’

‘You’ll have it.’

‘I know we will. That’s why we love you, Calder.’

‘Well, that and the winning sense of humour,’ said Shallow.

‘And that beautiful face, and those beautiful clothes, and the smirk that makes you want to punch it.’

‘And the bottomless respect we had for your father.’ Shallow gave a little bow. ‘But, yes, mostly it’s the old goldy-woldy.’

‘What rites for the dead?’ asked Deep, poking one of the corpses with the toe of his boot.

Now that Calder’s head was settling, the surging of blood in his ears was quieting, the pounding in his face was dulling to a throb, he was starting to think. To wonder what could be gained. He could show these boys to Reachey, try and get him riled up. Murdering his daughter’s husband in his own camp, it was an insult. Especially to an honourable man. Or he could have them dragged before Black Dow, fling them at his feet and demand justice. But both options held risks, especially when he didn’t know for a fact who was behind it. When you’re planning what to do, always think of doing nothing first, see where that gets you. It was better to let these bastards wash away, pretend it never happened, and keep his enemies guessing.

‘In the river,’ he said.

‘And this one?’ Shallow waved his knife at the lad.

Calder stood over him, lips pursed. ‘Who sent you?’

‘I just mind the horses,’ whispered the boy.

‘Come on, now,’ said Deep, ‘we don’t want to cut you up.’

‘I don’t mind,’ said Shallow.

‘No?’

‘Not bothered.’ He grabbed the boy around the throat and stuck his knife up his nose.

‘No! No!’ he squeaked. ‘Tenways, they said! They said Brodd Tenways!’ Shallow let him drop back in the mud, and Calder gave a sigh.

‘That flaking old fuck.’ How toweringly unsurprising. Maybe Dow had asked him to get it done, or maybe he’d taken his own initiative. Either way, this lad wouldn’t know enough to help.

Shallow spun his knife around, blade flashing moonlight as it turned. ‘And for young master I-just-mind-the-horsey-boy?’

Calder’s instinct was just to say, ‘Kill him,’ and be done. Quicker, simpler, safer. But these days, he tried always to think about mercy. A long time ago when he’d been a young idiot, or perhaps a younger idiot, he’d ordered a man killed on a whim. Because he’d thought it would make him look strong. Because he’d thought it might make his father proud. It hadn’t. ‘Before you make a man into mud,’ his father had told him afterwards in his disappointed voice, ‘make sure he’s no use to you alive. Some men will smash a thing just because they can. They’re too stupid to see that nothing shows more power than mercy.’

The lad swallowed as he looked up, eyes big and hopeless, gleaming in the darkness with maybe a sorry tear or two. Power was what Calder wanted most, and so he thought about mercy. Thought all about it. Then he pressed his tongue into his split lip, and it really hurt a lot.

‘Kill him,’ he said, and turned away, heard the lad make a surprised yelp, quickly cut off. It always catches people by surprise, the moment of their death, even when they should see it coming. They always think they’re special, somehow expect a reprieve. But no one’s special. He heard the splash as Shallow rolled the lad’s body into the water, and that was that. He struggled back up the slope, cursing at his soaked-through, clinging cloak, and his mud-caked boots, and his battered mouth. Calder wondered if he’d be surprised, when his moment came. Probably.

The Right Thing

‘Is it true?’ asked Drofd.

‘Eh?’

‘Is it true?’ The lad nodded towards Skarling’s Finger, standing proud on its own tump of hill, casting no more’n a stub of shadow since it was close to midday. ‘That Skarling Hoodless is buried under there?’

‘Doubt it,’ said Craw. ‘Why would he be?’

‘Ain’t that why they call it Skarling’s Finger, though?’

‘What else would they call it?’ asked Wonderful. ‘Skarling’s Cock?’

Brack raised his thick brows. ‘Now you mention it, it does look a bit like a—’

Drofd cut him off. ‘No, I mean, why call it that if he ain’t buried there?’

Wonderful looked at him like he was the biggest idiot in the North. He might’ve been in the running. ‘There’s a stream near my husband’s farm – my farm – they call ‘Skarling’s Beck. There’s probably fifty others in the North. Most likely there’s a legend he wet his manly thirst in their clear waters before some speech or charge or noble stand from the songs. Daresay he did no more’n piss in most of ’em if he ever even came within a day’s ride. That’s what it is to be a hero. Everyone wants a little bit of you.’ She nodded at Whirrun, kneeling before the Father of Swords with hands clasped and eyes closed. ‘In fifty years there’ll more’n likely be a dozen Whirrun’s Becks scattered across farms he never went to, and numbskulls will point at ’em, all dewy-eyed, and ask – “‘Is it true Whirrun of Bligh’s buried under that stream?”’ She walked off, shaking her cropped head.

Drofd's shoulders slumped. 'I only bloody asked, didn't I? I thought that was why they called 'em the Heroes, 'cause there are heroes buried under 'em.'

'Who cares who's buried where?' muttered Craw, thinking about all the men he'd seen buried. 'Once a man's in the ground he's just mud. Mud and stories. And the stories and the men don't often have much in common.'

Brack nodded. 'Less with every time the story's told.'

'Eh?'

'Bethod, let's say,' said Craw. 'You'd think to hear the tales he was the most evil bastard ever set foot in the North.'

'Weren't he?'

'All depends on who you ask. His enemies weren't keen on him, and the dead know he made a lot o' the bastards. But look at all he did. More'n Skarling Hoodless ever managed. Bound the North together. Built the roads we march on, half the towns. Put an end to the warring between the clans.'

'By starting wars with the Southerners.'

'Well, true. There's two sides to every coin, but there's my very point. People like simple stories.' Craw frowned at the pink marks down the edges of his nails. 'But people ain't simple.'

Brack slapped Drofd on the back and near made him fall. 'Except for you, eh, boy?'

'Craw!' Wonderful's voice had that note in it made everyone turn. Craw sprang up, or as close as he got to springing these days, and hurried over to her, wincing as his knee crunched like breaking twigs, sending stings right up into his back.

'What am I looking at?' He squinted at the Old Bridge, at the fields and pastures and hedgerows, at the river and the fells beyond, struggling to shield his watery eyes from the wind and make the blurry valley come sharp.

'Down there, at the ford.'

Now he saw them and his guts hollowed out. Little more'n dots to his eyes, but men for sure. Wading through the shallows, picking their way over the shingle, dragging themselves up onto the bank. The north bank. Craw's bank.

'Shit,' he said. Not enough of 'em to be Union men, but coming from the south, which meant they were the Dogman's boys. Which meant more'n

likely—

'Hardbread's back.' Shivers' whisper was the last thing Craw needed behind him. 'And he's found himself some friends.'

'Weapons!' shouted Wonderful.

'Eh?' Agrick stood staring with a cookpot in his hands.

'Weapons, idiot!'

'Shit!' Agrick and his brother started running around, shouting at each other, dragging their packs open and spilling gear about the trampled grass.

'How many do you count?' Craw patted his pocket but his eyeglass was missing. 'Where the bloody hell—'

Brack had it pressed to his face. 'Twenty-two,' he grunted.

'You sure?'

'I'm sure.'

Wonderful rubbed at the long scar down her scalp. 'Twenty-two. *Twenty-two.* Twenty … *two.'*

The more she said it the worse it sounded. A particularly shitty number. Too many to beat without taking a terrible chance, but few enough that – with the ground on their side and a happy fall of the runes – it might be done. Too few to just run away from, without having to tell Black Dow why. And fighting outnumbered might be the lighter risk than telling Black Dow why.

'Shit.' Craw glanced across at Shivers and caught his good eye looking back. Knew he'd juggled the same sum and come up with the same answer, but that he didn't care how much blood got spilled along the way, how many of Craw's dozen went back to the mud for this hill. Craw did care. Maybe too much, these days. Hardbread and his boys were out of the river now, last of 'em disappearing into the browning apple trees between the shallows and the foot of the hill, heading for the Children.

Yon appeared between two of the Heroes, bundle of sticks in his arms, puffing away from the climb. 'Took a while, but I found some— What?'

'Weapons!' bellowed Brack at him.

'Hardbread's back!' added Athroc.

'Shit!' Yon let his sticks fall in a tangle, near tripped over them as he ran for his gear.

It was a bastard of a call and Craw couldn't dither on it. But that's what it is to be Chief. If he'd wanted easy choices he could've stayed a carpenter,

where you might on occasion have to toss out a botched joint but rarely risk a friend's life.

He'd stuck all his days to the notion there's a right way to do things, even as it seemed to be going out of fashion. You pick your Chief, you pick your side, you pick your crew and then you stand by 'em, whatever the wind blows up. He'd stood by Threetrees 'til he lost to the Bloody-Nine. Stood by Bethod 'til the end. Now he stood with Black Dow and, whatever the rights and wrongs of it, Black Dow said hold this hill. They were fighters by trade. Time comes a fighter has to toss the runes and fight. It was the right thing to do.

'The right thing,' he hissed to himself. Or maybe it was just that, deep under his worries and his grumbles and his blather about sunsets, there was still a jagged little splinter left in him of that man he'd been years ago. That dagger-eyed fucker who would've bled all the blood in the North before he backed down a stride. The one who stuck himself in everyone's craw.

'Weapons,' he growled. 'Full gear! Battle gear!' Hardly needed saying, really, but a good Chief should shout a lot. Yon was delving into the packhorse's bags for the mail, dragging Brack's big coat rattling free. Scorry pulling his spear from the other side, jerking the oilskin from the bright blade, humming to himself while he did it. Wonderful stringing her bow with quick hands, making it sing its own note as she tested it. All the while Whirrun knelt still, eyes closed, hands clasped before the Father of Swords.

'Chief.' Scorry tossed Craw's blade over, stained belt wrapped around it.

'Thanks.' Though he didn't feel too thankful as he snatched it out of the air. Started to buckle it on, memories of other bright, fierce times he'd done it flashing by. Memories of other company, long gone back to the mud. By the dead, but he was getting old.

Drofd stared around for a moment, hands opening and closing. Wonderful gave him a slap on the side of the head as she passed and he came round, started loosening the shafts in his quiver with twitchy fingers.

'Chief.' She handed Craw his shield and he slid it onto his arm, strap fitting into his clenched fist snug as a foot into an old boot.

'Thanks.' Craw looked over at Shivers, standing still with his arms folded, watching the dozen make ready. 'How about you, lad? Front rank?'

Shivers tipped his face back, little grin on the side that wasn't stiff with scar. 'Front and middle,' he croaked. Then he ambled off towards the ashes of the fire.

'We could kill him,' Wonderful muttered in Craw's ear. 'Don't care how hard he is, arrow in the neck, job done.'

'He's just passing the message.'

'Shooting the messenger ain't always a bad idea.' Joking, but only half. 'Stops him taking messages back.'

'Whether or not he's here we've the same job. Keep hold o' the Heroes. We're meant to be fighters. A little fight shouldn't get us shitting ourselves.' He almost choked on the words, since he was mostly shitting himself from morning to night, and especially in fights.

'A little fight?' she muttered, loosening her sword in its sheath. 'Near three to one? Do we really need this hill?'

'Closer to two to one.' As if that made it good odds. 'If the Union do come, this hill's the key to the whole valley.' Giving himself reasons as much as her. 'Better to fight for it now while we're up here than give it away so we can fight our way up it later. That and it's the right thing to do.' She opened her mouth like she was going to argue. 'The right thing!' snapped Craw, and held his hand out, not wanting to give her the chance to talk him round.

She took a breath. 'All right.' She gave his hand a squeeze, almost painful. 'We fight.' And she walked away, pulling her archery guard on with her teeth. 'Arm up, you bastards! We fight!'

Athroc and Agrick were ready, helmets on, bashing their shields together and grunting in each other's faces, working themselves up to it. Scorry was holding his spear just under the blade, using it to shave bits of Shudder Root off a lump and into his mouth. Whirrun had finally stood up and now he was smiling into the blue sky with his eyes closed, sun on his face. His preparations didn't go much beyond taking his coat off.

'No armour.' Yon was helping Brack into his mail, shaking his head as he frowned over at Whirrun. 'What kind of a bloody hero don't wear bloody armour?'

'Armour …' mused Whirrun, licking a finger and scrubbing some speck of dirt from the pommel of his sword, 'is part of a state of mind … in which you admit the possibility … of being hit.'

‘What the *fuck*?’ Yon tugged hard at the straps and made Brack grunt. ‘What does that even mean?’

Wonderful clapped her hand down on Whirrun’s shoulder and leaned against him, one foot propped on its boot-toe. ‘How many years and you’re still expecting sense out o’ this article? He’s mad.’

‘We’re all fucking mad, woman!’ Brack was red in the face from holding his breath out while Yon struggled to get the buckles closed at his back. ‘Why else would we be fighting for a hill and some old rocks?’

‘War and madness have a lot in common.’ Scorry, not very helpfully, talking around his cheekful of mush.

Yon finally got the last buckle shut and held his arms out so Brack could start getting him into his mail. ‘Being mad don’t stop you wearing bloody armour, though, does it?’

Hardbread’s crew had made it through the orchards, and two sets of three split from the rest – one heading west around the base of the hill, the other north. Getting around their flanks. Drofd’s eyes were wide as he watched ’em moving, then the others getting their gear ready. ‘How can they make jokes? How can they make bloody jokes?’

‘Because every man finds courage his own way.’ Craw didn’t admit that giving advice was his. There’s nothing better for a dose of terror than standing by someone even more terrified than yourself. He clasped Drofd’s hand and gave it a squeeze. ‘Just breathe, lad.’

Drofd took a shuddering breath in and forced it out. ‘Right y’are, Chief. Breathe.’

Craw turned to face the rest of the crew. ‘Right, then! They’ve two parties of three trying to get on our flanks, then a few less than a score coming up front.’ He rushed through the numbers, maybe hoping no one would notice the odds. Maybe hoping he wouldn’t. ‘Athroc, Agrick, Wonderful to skirmish, Drofd too, give ’em arrows while they climb, spread ’em out on the slope. When they get in close to the stones … we charge.’ He saw Drofd swallow, not much taken with the idea of charging. The dead knew Craw could think of other ways to spend an afternoon himself. ‘There aren’t enough of ’em to get all around us, and we’ve got the ground. We can pick where we hit ’em, and hit ’em hard. Any luck we’ll break ’em before they get set, then if the other six have a mind to fight we can mop up.’

‘Hit ’em hard!’ growled Yon, clasping hands with the others one after another.

‘Just wait for my word, and move together.’

‘Together.’ Wonderful slapped her right hand into Scorry’s and punched him on the arm with her left.

‘Me, Shivers, Brack, Yon, we’re front and centre.’

‘Aye, Chief,’ said Brack, still struggling with Yon’s mail.

‘Fucking aye!’ Yon took a practice swipe with his axe and jerked the buckles out of Brack’s hands.

Shivers grinned and stuck his tongue out, not especially reassuring.

‘Athroc and Agrick fall back to the wings.’

‘Aye,’ they chimed in together.

‘Scorry, anyone tries to get around the side early on, give ’em a poke. Once we close up, you’re the back rank.’

Scorry just hummed to himself, but he’d heard.

‘Whirrun. You’re the nut in the shell.’

‘No.’ Whirrun took the Father of Swords from its place against the stone and lifted it high, pommel glinting with the sunlight. ‘This is. Which makes me … I guess … that kind of… flaky bit between the nut and the shell.’

‘You’re flaky all right,’ muttered Wonderful, under her breath.

‘You can be whatever bit of the nut you like,’ said Craw, ‘long as you’re there when it cracks.’

‘Oh, I’m going nowhere until you show me my destiny.’ Whirrun pushed back his hood and scrubbed a hand through his flattened hair. ‘Just like Shoglig promised me you would.’

Craw sighed. ‘Can’t wait. Questions?’ No sound except the wind fumbling across the grass, the clapping of palms as they all finished shaking hands, the grunt and jingle as Brack finally got Yon’s armour buckled. ‘All right. ’Case I don’t have the chance to say it again, been an honour fighting with you all. Or an honour slogging across the North in all weathers, anyway. Just keep in mind what Rudd Threetrees once told me. Let’s us get them killed, and not the other way round.’

Wonderful grinned. ‘Best damn advice about war I ever heard.’

The rest of Hardbread’s lads were coming now. The big group. Coming slowly, taking time, up the long slope towards the Children. More than dots now. A lot more’n dots. Men, with a purpose, the odd glint of sunlight on

sharp metal. A heavy hand thumped down on his shoulder and Craw jumped, but it was only Yon behind him.

'A word, Chief?'

'What's to do?' Though he knew already.

'The usual. If I'm killed—'

Craw nodded, keen to cut it short. 'I'll find your sons, and give 'em your share.'

'And?'

'I'll tell 'em what you were.'

'All of it.'

'All of it.'

'Good. And don't dress it up any, you old bastard.'

Craw waved a hand at his stained coat. 'When did you last see me dress anything up?'

Yon might've had a trace of a smile as they clasped hands. 'Not lately, Chief, that's sure.' Left Craw wondering who'd need telling when he went back to the mud. His family were all here.

'Talking time,' said Wonderful.

Hardbread had left his men behind at the Children and was climbing the grassy slope with empty hands and open grin turned up towards the Heroes. Craw drew his sword, felt the frightening, reassuring weight of it in his hand. Knew the sharpness of it, worked at with whetstone every day for a dozen years. Life and death in a length of metal.

'Makes you feel big, don't it?' Shivers spun his own axe around in one fist. A brutal-looking article, studs through the heavy wooden shaft, bearded head notched and gleaming. 'A man should always be armed. If only for the feel of it.'

'An unarmed man is like an unroofed house,' muttered Yon.

'They'll both end up leaking,' Brack finished for him.

Hardbread stopped well within bowshot, long grass brushing at his calves. 'Hey, hey, Craw! Still up there, then?'

'Sadly, yes.'

'Sleeping well?'

'I'd rather have a feather pillow. You brought me one?'

'Wish I had one spare. That Caul Shivers up there with you?'

‘Aye. And he brought two dozen Carls with him.’ It was worth a stab, but Hardbread only grinned.

‘Good try. No he didn’t. Haven’t seen you in a while, Caul. How are things?’

Shivers gave the smallest shrug. Nothing more.

Hardbread raised his brows. ‘Like that, is it?’

Another shrug. Like the sky could fall in and it’d make no difference to him.

‘Have it your way. How about it, then, Craw? Can I have my hill back?’

Craw worked his hand around the grip of his sword, raw skin at the corners of his chewed fingernails burning. ‘I’ve a mind to sit here a few days more.’

Hardbread frowned. Not the answer he’d been hoping for. ‘Look, Craw, you gave me a chance the other night, so I’m giving you one. There’s a right way o’ doing things, and fair’s fair. But you might’ve noticed I had some friends come up this morning.’ And he jerked his thumb over his shoulder towards the Children. ‘So I’ll ask one more time. Can I have my hill back?’

Last chance. Craw gave a long sigh, and shouted it into the wind. ‘’Fraid not, Hardbread! ’Fraid you’ll have to come up here and take it off me!’

‘How many you got up there? Nine? Against my two dozen?’

‘We’ve faced down worse odds!’ Though he couldn’t remember ever picking ’em willingly.

‘Good for fucking you, I wouldn’t fancy it!’ Hardbread brought his voice back down from angry to reasonable. ‘Look, there ain’t no need for this to get out of hand—’

‘’Cept we’re in a *war*!’ And Craw found he’d roared the last word with a sight more venom than he’d planned on.

Far as he could tell over the distance, Hardbread had lost his grin. ‘Right y’are. Thought I’d give you the chance you gave me is all.’

‘That’s good o’ you. Appreciate it. Just can’t move.’

‘That’s a shame all round.’

‘Aye. But there ’tis.’

Hardbread took a breath, like he was about to speak, but he didn’t. He just stood still. So did Craw. So did all his crew behind him, looking down. So did all Hardbread’s too, looking up. Silent on the Heroes, except for the wind sighing, a bird or two warbling somewhere, a few bees buzzing in the

warm, tending to the flowers. A peaceful moment. Considering they had a war to be about.

Then Hardbread snapped his mouth shut, turned around and walked back down the steep slope towards the Children.

'I could shoot him,' muttered Wonderful.

'I know you could,' said Craw. 'And you know you can't.'

'I know. Just saying.'

'Maybe he'll think it over, and decide against.' But Brack didn't sound all that hopeful.

'No. He don't like this any more'n us, but he backed down once already. His odds are too good to do it again.' Craw almost whispered the last words. 'Wouldn't be right.' Hardbread reached the Children and vanished among the stones. 'Everyone without a bow, back inside the Heroes and wait for the moment.'

The quiet stretched out. Niggling pain in Craw's knee as he shifted his weight. Raised voices behind, Yon and Brack arguing about nothing as they got their stub of a line ready. More quiet. War's ninety-nine parts boredom and, now and then, one part arse-opening terror. Craw had a powerful sense one of those was about to drop on him from a height.

Agrick had planted a few arrows in the earth, flights fluttering like the seed heads on the long grass. Now he rocked back on his heels, rubbing at his jaw. 'Might be he'll wait for dark.'

'No. If he's been sent more men, it's 'cause the Dogman wants this hill. The Union wants this hill. He won't risk us getting help by tonight.'

'Then …' muttered Drofd.

'Aye. I reckon they'll be coming now.'

By some unhappy chance, as Craw said the word 'now', men started to ease out from the shadows of the Children. They formed up in an orderly row, at a steady pace. A shield wall perhaps a dozen men wide, spear-points of a second row glittering behind, archers on the flanks, staying in the cover of the shields.

'Old style,' said Wonderful, nocking an arrow.

'Wouldn't expect nothing else from Hardbread. He's old style himself.' A bit like Craw. Two old leftover fools lasted longer than they'd any right to, setting to knock chunks out of each other. The right way, at least. They'd do it the right bloody way. He looked to the sides, straining for some sign of

the two little groups who'd broken off. Couldn't see no one. Crawling in the long grass, maybe, or just biding their time.

Agrick drew his bowstring back to his frown. 'When d'you want me to shoot?'

'Soon as you can hit something.'

'Anyone in particular?'

Craw scraped his tongue over his front teeth. 'Anyone you can put down.' Say it straight, why not, he ought to have the bones to say it, at least. 'Anyone you can kill.'

'I'll do my best.'

'Do your worst and I'll be happier.'

'Right y'are.' Agrick let fly, just a ranging shot, flitting over the heads of Hardbread's lot and making 'em duck. Wonderful's first arrow stuck humming into a shield and the man behind it dropped back, dragging the shield wall apart. It was starting to break up anyway, for all Hardbread's shouting. Some men moving quicker, some tiring faster on that bastard of a slope.

Drofd shot too, his arrow going way high, lost somewhere short of the Children. 'Shit!' he cursed, snatching at another arrow with a trembling hand.

'Easy, Drofd, easy. Breathe.' But Craw was finding easy breathing a bit of a challenge himself. He'd never cared for arrows. 'Specially, it hardly needed saying, when they were falling out of the sky at him. They didn't look much but they could have your death on the end, all right. He remembered seeing the shower of 'em dropping down towards their line at Ineward, like a flock of angry birds. Nowhere to run to. Just had to hope.

One sailed up now and he stepped sideways, behind the nearest Hero, crouching in the cover of his shield. Not much fun watching that shaft spin down, wondering whether the wind would snatch it at the last moment and put it right through him. It glanced off the stone and spun harmlessly away. Not a lot of air between your death and an arrow in the grass.

The man who'd shot it paused on one knee, fiddling with his quiver as the safety of the shields crept up the slope away from him. Athroc's shaft took him in the stomach. Craw saw his mouth open wide, his own arrow flying from his hand, his scream coming a moment later, sputtering out into a long-drawn wail. Maybe it was the sound of their odds getting that little bit

better, but Craw still didn't much like hearing it. Didn't like the notion that he might be making a sound like that himself before the hour was out.

The end of the shield wall got ragged as men looked over at the howling archer, wondering whether to help or press on, or just wondering whether they'd be next. Hardbread barked orders, straightened up his line, but Wonderful's next arrow flitted close over their heads and bent 'em out of shape again. Craw's people had the height as an ally, could shoot fast and flat. Hardbread's had to shoot high, where the wind was sure to drag their shafts around. Still, there was no call to take chances. They wouldn't be settling this with arrows.

Craw let Drofd loose one more, then grabbed his arm. 'Back to the others.'

The lad jerked around, looking like he was about to scream. Battle lust on him, maybe. You never could tell who'd get it. Mad fear and mad courage are two leaves on one nettle all right, and you wouldn't want to grab a hold of either one. Craw dug his fingers into the lad's shoulder and dragged him close. 'Back to the others, I said!'

Drofd swallowed, Craw's hand squeezing the sense back into him. 'Chief.' And he stumbled back between the stones, bent double.

'Fall back when you have to!' Craw shouted at Wonderful. 'Take no chances!'

'Too fucking right!' she hissed over her shoulder, nocking another shaft.

Craw crept backwards, keeping an eye out for arrows until he was past the stones, then hurrying across the circle of grass, stupidly happy to get another couple of moments safe and feeling a coward because of it. 'They're on the— Gah!'

Something caught his foot and he twisted his ankle, pain stabbing up his leg. Limped the rest of the way, teeth bared, and fell into line in the centre.

'Evil, those rabbit holes,' whispered Shivers.

Before Craw could gather the wits to answer, Wonderful came running between two of the Heroes, waving her bow. 'They're past the wall! Got one more o' the bastards!'

Agrick was at her heels, swinging his shield off his back, an arrow looping over from behind and sticking into the turf by his boots as he ran. 'The rest are coming!'

Craw could hear their shouting from down below, still the faint scream of the stuck archer, all turned strange by the wind. ‘Get back ’ere!’ he heard Hardbread bellow, short on breath. Sounded like they were still losing shape on the run up, some eager, some the opposite, not used to fighting together. That favoured Craw’s crew, most of ’em been together for what felt like centuries.

He stole a glance over his shoulder and Scorry winked back, chewing away. Old friends, old brothers. Whirrun had his sword out of its sheath, great length of dull grey metal with hardly a gleam to its edge even in the sun. Like the runes had said, there was going to be blood. The only question was whose. It passed between ’em as their eyes met, no words spoken and none needed.

Wonderful knelt at the end of their little line in the shadow of Athroc’s shield, nocked an arrow, and Craw’s dozen were ready as they’d ever get.

Someone crept around one of the stones. His shield might’ve had something painted on it once but so scuffed by war and weather there was no telling what. Sword bright in his hand, helmet on, but he hardly looked like anyone’s enemy. He looked knackered, mouth hanging open, panting from the long climb.

He stood staring at ’em, and they stared back. Craw felt Yon straining next to him, bursting to go, heard Shivers’ breath crackling through gritted teeth, heard Brack growling deep in his throat, everyone’s jangling nerves setting everyone else’s jangling even worse.

‘Steady,’ Craw hissed, ‘steady.’ Knew the hardest thing at a time like that was just to stand. Men ain’t made for it. You need to charge or you need to flee, but either way you’re desperate to move, to run, to scream. Had to wait, though. Finding the right moment was everything.

Another of Hardbread’s crew showed themselves, knees bent low, peering over his shield. It had a fish painted on it, and badly. Craw wondered if his name was Fishy, felt a stupid urge to laugh, quickly gone.

They had to go soon. Use the ground. Catch ’em on the slope. Break ’em fast. It was up to him to feel the moment. Like he knew. Time was stretched out, full of details. Breath in his sore throat. Breeze tickling the back of his hand. Blades of grass shifting with the wind. His mouth so dry he wasn’t sure he’d be able to say the word even if he thought the time was right.

Drofd loosed an arrow and the two men ducked down. But the sound of the string loosed something in Craw and, before he'd even thought whether it was the right moment or not, he'd given a great roar. Hardly even a word but his crew got the gist, and like a pack of dogs suddenly slipped the leash, they were away. Too late now. Maybe one moment's good as another anyway.

Feet pounding the ground, jolting his teeth, jolting his sore knee. Wondering if he'd hit another rabbit hole, go sprawling. Wondering where the six men were who'd gone around 'em. Wondering whether they should've backed off. What those two idiots, three now, they were charging at were thinking. What lies he'd tell Yon's sons.

The others matched him step for step, rims of their shields scraping against his, jostling at his shoulders. Jolly Yon on one side and Caul Shivers on the other. Men who knew how to hold a line. It occurred to Craw he was probably the weak link in here. Then that he thought too much.

Hardbread's boys skipped and wobbled with each footfall, more of 'em up now, trying to get some shape between the stones. Yon let go his war cry, high and shrill, then Athroc and his brother too, then they were all giving it the screech and wail, boots hammering the old sod of the Heroes. Ground where men prayed once, maybe, long ago. Prayed for better times.

Craw felt the terror and joy of battle burning in his chest, burning up his throat, Hardbread's men a buckled line of shields, blurred weapons between, blades swaying, twinkling.

They were between the stones, they were on 'em.

'Break!' roared Craw.

Him and Yon went left, Shivers and Brack went right, and Whirrun came out of the gap they left, howling his devil shriek. Craw caught a glimpse of the nearest face, jaw dropping, eyes wide. Men ain't just brave or not. It all depends on how things stand. Who stands beside 'em. Whether they've just had to run up a great big fucking hill with arrows falling on 'em. He seemed to shrink, this lad, trying to get his whole body behind his shield as the Father of Swords fell on him like a mountain. A mountain sharpened to a razor-edge.

Metal screamed, wood and flesh burst apart. Blood roaring and men roaring in Craw's ears. He twisted himself sideways, missed a spear-thrust, crashed on, blade rattling off wood, turning him, went into someone shield-

first with a bone-jarring crunch and sent him over backwards, sliding down the hillside.

He saw Hardbread, long grey hair tangled around his face. His sword went up quick but Whirrun was quicker, arm snaking out and ramming the pommel of the Father of Swords into Hardbread's mouth, snapping his head back and sending him toppling. Craw had other worries. Crushed against a snarling cave of a face, sour breath blasting him. Dragging at his snagged sword, trying to get space to swing. He shoved with his shield, had the slope on his side, drove his man back enough to make room.

Athroc whacked a shield with his axe, got his whacked in reply. Craw chopped, his elbow caught on the shaft of a spear, tangled with it, his sword just tapped someone with the flat. A friendly pat on the shoulder.

Whirrun was in the midst of 'em, Father of Swords making blurred circles, scattering men squealing. Someone got in the way. Hardbread's nephew. 'Oh—' And he fell in half. His arm flew in the air, body turning over and around, legs toppling. The long blade pinged like ice shifting as the weather warms, spots of blood showering off it. Craw gasped as they pit-pattered on his face, hacked away at a shield, teeth squeezed together so hard seemed they'd crack. Still snarling something through 'em, didn't know what, splinters in his face. Movement at the corner of his eye, shield up on an instinct and something thudded into it, cracking the rim into his jaw, making him stumble sideways, arm numbed.

He saw a weapon black against bright sky, caught it on his own as it came down. Blades clashing, scraping, grunting in someone's face, looked like Jutlan but Jutlan was years in the ground. Staggering around, offbalance on the slope, fingers clutching. His knee burned, his lungs burned. Gleam of Shivers' eye, battle smile creasing his ruined face. His axe split Jutlan's head open wide, dark pulp smeared down Craw's shield. Shoved him off, corpse tumbling through the grass. Father of Swords ripped armour beside him, bent mail rings flying, stinging the back of Craw's hand.

Clash and clatter, scrape and rattle, scream and hiss, thump, crack, men swearing and bellowing like animals at the slaughterhouse. Was Scorry singing? Something across Craw's cheek, in his eye, snatched his head away. Blood, blade, dirt, no way of knowing, lurched sideways as something came at him and he slid onto his elbow. Spear, snarling face with a birth-mark behind, spear jabbing, flapped it away clumsily with his shield,

trying to scramble up. Scorry stuck the man in the shoulder and he fumbled his spear, wound welling.

Wonderful with blood all over her face. Hers or someone else's or both. Shivers laughing, smashing the metal rim of his shield into someone's mouth as they lay. Crunch, crunch, die, die. Yon shouting, axe going up and clattering down. Drofd stumbling, holding his bloody arm, broken wreck of his bow all tangled around his back.

Someone jumped after him with a spear and Craw stepped in his way, head buzzing with his own hoarse roar, sword lashing across. Grip jolted in his fist, cloth and leather flapped, split, bloody. Man's spear dropping, mouth open, long shriek drooling out of it. Craw hacked him down on the backswing, body spinning as it fell, severed arm flopping in his sleeve, black blood frozen in white cloud.

Someone was running away down the hill. Arrow flitted past, missed. Craw leaped at him, missed. Tangled with Agrick's elbow. Slid and fell hard, dug himself with his sword hilt, left himself open. But the runner didn't care, bounding off, flinging his shield away bouncing on its edge.

Craw tore his sword up along with a handful of grass. Nearly swung at someone, stopped himself. Scorry, gripping to his spear. All of Hardbread's lot were running. The ones that were alive. When men break they break all at once, like a wall falling, like a cliff splitting off into the sea. Broken. Thought he saw Hardbread stumbling after, bloody-mouthed. Half wanted the old bastard to get away, half wanted to charge on and kill him.

'Behind! Behind!' He tottered around, fear dragging at his guts, saw men among the stones. There was no shape left to any of it. Sun twinkling bright, blinding. He heard screams, clashing metal. He was running back, back between the stones, shield clattering against rock, arm numb. Breath wheezing now, aching. Coughing and running on.

The packhorse was dead beside the fire, arrow poking from its ribs. Shield with a red bird on it, blade rising and falling. Wonderful loosed a shaft, missed. Redcrow turned and ran, a bowman behind shooting an arrow and it looped over towards Wonderful. Craw stepped in front of it, eyes rooted to it, caught it on his shield and it glanced away into the tall grass.

And they were gone.

Agrick was looking down at something, not far from the fire. Staring down, axe in one hand, helmet in the other. Craw didn't want to know what

he was looking at, but he already knew.

One of Hardbread's lot was crawling away, making the grass thrash as he dragged bloody legs behind him. Shivers walked up and split his head with the back of his axe. Not that hard, but hard enough. Neat. Like a practised miner testing the ground. Someone was still screaming, somewhere. Or maybe it was just in Craw's head. Maybe just the sighing breath in his throat. He blinked around. Why the hell had they stayed? He shook his head like it might shake the answer out. Just made his jaw ache worse.

'The leg move?' Scorry was asking, squatting down over Brack, sitting on the ground gripping a bloody hand to one big thigh.

'Aye, it fucking moves! It just fucking hurts to fucking move it!'

Craw was sticky with sweat, scratchy, burning hot. His jaw was throbbing where his shield had cracked it, arm throbbing too. Dodgy knee and ankle doing their usual whining, but he didn't seem hurt. Not really. Not sure how he'd come out of that not hurt. The hot glow of battle was fading fast, his aching legs shaky as a new-born calf's, his sight swimming. Like he'd borrowed all the strength he'd used and had to pay it back with interest. He took a few steps towards the burned-out fire and the dead packhorse. No sign of the saddle horses. Run off or dead. He dropped down on his arse in the middle of the Heroes.

'You all right?' Whirrun was leaning over him, great long sword held below the crosspiece in one fist, blade all spattered and dashed. Blooded, the way it had to be. Once the Father of Swords is drawn, it has to be blooded. 'You all right?'

'I reckon.' Craw's fingers were so tight around the strap of his shield he could hardly remember how to make them unclench. Finally forced 'em open, let the shield drop into the grass, its face showing a few fresh gouges to go with a hundred old wounds, a new dent in the dull boss.

Wonderful's stubbly hair was matted with blood. 'What happened?' Rubbing her eyes on the back of her arm. 'Am I cut?'

'Scratch,' Scorry said, prodding at her scalp with his thumbs.

Drofd was kneeling beside her, rocking back and forward, gripping tight to his arm, blood streaked to his fingertips.

The sun flashed in Craw's eyes, made his lids flicker. He could hear Yon screaming, over by the stones, roaring after Hardbread and his lads. 'Come back 'ere, you fuckers! Come on you bastard cowards!' Couldn't make no

difference. Every man's a coward. A coward and a hero, depending how things stand. They weren't coming back. Looked like they'd left eight corpses behind. They weren't coming back. Craw prayed to the old dead Gods of this place they weren't coming back.

Scorry was singing, soft and low and sad as he took needle and thread from his pouch to start the stitching. You get no happy songs after a battle. The jaunty tunes come beforehand and they usually do some injury to the truth.

Craw caught himself thinking they'd come out of it well. Very well. Just the one dead. Then he looked at Athroc's silly-slack face, eyes all crossed, jerkin all ripped up by Redcrow's axe and turned sloppy red with his insides, and was sick with himself for thinking it. He knew this would stay with him, along with all the others. We all got our weights to heft.

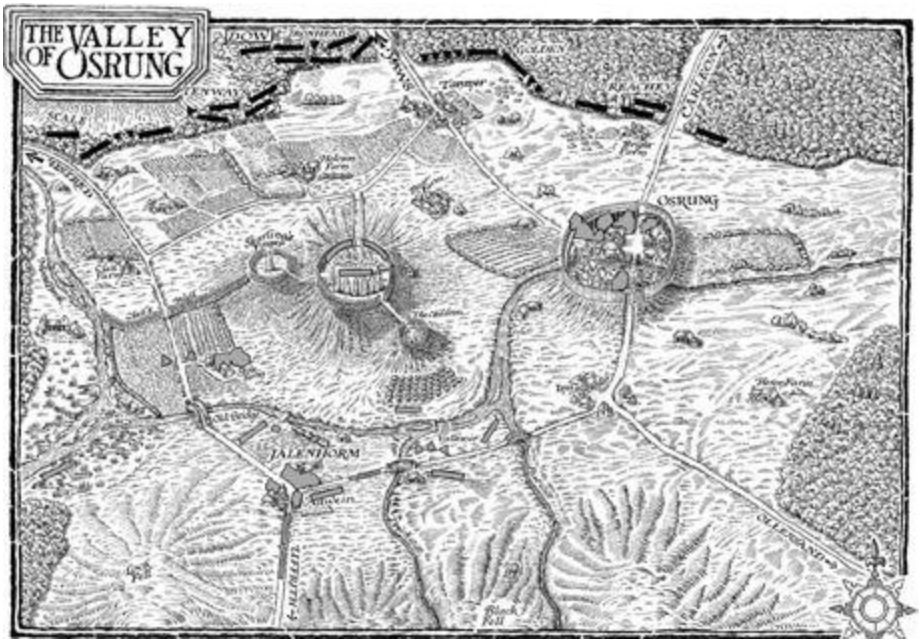
He lay back in the grass and watched the clouds move, shift. Now one memory, now another. A good leader can't dwell on the choices he's made, Threetrees used to tell him, and a good leader can't help dwelling on 'em.

He'd done the right thing. Maybe. Or maybe there's no such thing.

DAY ONE

‘A rational army would run away’

Montesquieu



Silence

Your August Majesty,

Lord Bayaz, the First of the Magi, has conveyed to Marshal Kroy your urgent desire that the campaign be brought to a swift conclusion. The marshal has therefore devised a plan to bring Black Dow to a decisive battle with all despatch, and the entire army hums with gainful activity.

General Jalenhorm's division leads the way, marching from first light to last and with the vanguard of General Mitterick's but a few hours behind. One could almost say there is a friendly rivalry between the two to be first to grapple with the enemy. Lord Governor Meed, meanwhile, has been recalled from Ollensand. The three divisions will converge near a town called Osrung, then, united, drive north towards Carleon itself, and victory.

I accompany General Jalenhorm's staff, at the very spear-point of the army. We are somewhat hampered by the poor roads and changeable weather, which switches with little warning from sunshine to sharp downpours. The general is not a man to be stopped, however, either by the actions of the skies or the enemy. If we do come into contact with the Northmen I will, of course, observe, and immediately inform your Majesty of the outcome.

I remain your Majesty's most faithful and unworthy servant,

Bremer dan Gorst, Royal Observer of the Northern War

You could barely have called it dawn. That funeral-grey light before the sun crawls up that has no colour in it. Few faces abroad, and those that were

made ghosts. The empty country turned into the land of the dead. Gorst's favourite time of the day. *One could almost pretend no one will ever talk again.*

He had already been running for the best part of an hour, feet battering the rutted mud. Long slits of cartwheel puddle reflected the black tree branches and the washed-out sky. Happy mirror-worlds in which he had all he deserved, smashed apart as his heavy boots came down, spraying his steel-cased calves with dirty water.

It would have been madness to run in full armour, so Gorst wore only the essentials. Breast and back-plates with fauld to the hip and greaves at the shin. On the right arm, vambrace and fencing glove only to allow free movement of the sword. On the left, full-jointed steel of the thickest gauge, encasing the parrying arm from fingertips to weighty shoulder-plate. A padded jacket beneath, and thick leather trousers reinforced with metal strips, his wobbling window on the world the narrow slot in the visor of his sallet.

A piebald dog yapped wheezily at his heels for a while, its belly grotesquely bloated, but abandoned him to root through a great heap of refuse beside the track. *Is our rubbish the only lasting mark we will leave upon this country? Our rubbish and our graves?* He pounded through the camp of Jalenhorm's division, a sprawling maze of canvas all in blissful, sleeping silence. Fog clung to the flattened grass, wreathed the closest tents, turned distant ones to phantoms. A row of horses watched him glumly over their nosebags. A lone sentry stood with pale hands stretched out to a brazier, a bloom of crimson colour in the gloom, orange sparks drifting about him. He stared open-mouthed at Gorst as he laboured past, and away.

His servants were waiting for him in the clearing outside his tent. Rurgen brought a bucket and he drank deep, cold water running down his burning neck. Younger brought the case, straining under the weight, and Gorst slid his practice blades from inside. Great, blunt lengths of battered metal, their pommels big as half-bricks to lend some semblance of balance, three times the weight of his battle steels which were already of a particularly heavy design.

In wonderful silence they came for him, Rurgen with shield and stick, Younger jabbing away with the pole, Gorst struggling to parry with his unwieldy iron. They gave him no time and no chances, no mercy and no

respect. He wanted none. He had been given chances before Sipani, and allowed himself to grow soft. To grow blunt. When the moment came he was found wanting. Never again. If another moment came, it would find him forged from steel, sharpened to a merciless, murderous razor's edge. And so, every morning for the last four years, every morning since Sipani, every morning without fail, in rain or heat or snow – this.

The clonk and scrape of wood on metal. The occasional thud and grunt as sticks bounced off armour or found their marks between. The rhythm of his ripping breath, his pounding heart, his savage effort. The sweat soaking his jacket, tickling his scalp, flying in drops from his visor. The burning in every muscle, worse and worse, better and better, as if he could burn away his disgrace and live again.

He stood there, mouth gaping, eyes closed, while they unbuckled his armour. When they lifted the breastplate off it felt as if he was floating away. Off into the sky never to come down. *What is that up there, above the army? Why, none other than famous scapegoat Bremer dan Gorst, freed from the clutching earth at last!*

He peeled off his clothes, soaked through and reeking, arms so swollen he could hardly bend them. He stood naked in the chill morning, blotched all over with chafe-marks, steaming like a pudding from the oven. He gasped with shock when they doused him with icy water, fresh from the stream. Younger tossed him a cloth and he rubbed himself dry, Rurgen brought fresh clothes and he dressed while they scrubbed his armour to its usual workmanlike dull sheen.

The sun was creeping over the ragged horizon, and through the gap in the trees Gorst could see the troopers of the King's Own First Regiment wriggling from their tents, breath smoking in the chilly dawn. Buckling on their own armour, poking hopefully at the embers of dead fires, preparing for the morning's march. One group had been drawn yawning up to see one of their fellows whipped for some infringement, the lash leaving faint red lines across his stripped back, its sharp crack reaching Gorst's ear a moment later followed by the soldier's whimper. *He does not realise his luck. If only my punishment had been so short, so sharp, and so deserved.*

Gorst's battle steels had been made by Calvez, greatest swordsmith of Styria. Gifts from the king, for saving his life at the Battle of Adua. Rurgen drew the long steel from the scabbard and displayed both sides,

immaculately polished metal flashing with the dawn. Gorst nodded. His servant showed him the short steel next, edges coldly glittering. Gorst nodded, took the harness and buckled it on. Then he rested one hand on Younger's shoulder, one on Rurgen's, gave them a gentle squeeze and smiled.

Rurgen spoke softly, respecting the silence. 'General Jalenhorm asked that you join him at the head of the column, sir, as soon as the division begins to march.'

Younger squinted up into the brightening sky. 'Only six miles from Osrung, sir. Do you think there'll be a battle today?'

'I hope not.' *But by the Fates, I hope there is. Oh please, oh please, oh please, I beg you only for this one thing. Send me a battle.*

Ambition

‘Fin?’

‘Mmmm?’

He propped himself up on his elbow, grinning down at her. ‘I love you.’

‘Mmmm.’

A pause. She had long ago stopped expecting love to fall upon her like a bolt of lightning. Some people are prone to love of that kind. Others are harder-headed.

‘Fin?’

‘Mmmm?’

‘Really. I love you.’

She did love him, even if she somehow found it hard to say the words. Something very close to love. He looked magnificent in a uniform and even better without one, sometimes surprised her by making her laugh, and there was definite fire when they kissed. He was honourable, generous, diligent, respectful, good-smelling … no towering intellect, true, but probably that was just as well. There is rarely room for two of those in one marriage.

‘Good boy,’ she murmured, patting him on his cheek. She had great affection for him, and only occasionally a little contempt, which was better than she could say for most men. They were well matched. Optimist and pessimist, idealist and pragmatist, dreamer and cynic. Not to mention his noble blood and her burning ambition.

He gave a disappointed sigh. ‘I swear every man in the whole damn army loves you.’

‘Your commanding officer, Lord Governor Meed?’

‘Well … no, probably not him, but I expect even he’d warm to you if you stopped making such a bloody fool of him.’

‘If I stopped he’d only do it to himself.’

‘Probably, but men have a higher tolerance for that.’

‘There’s only one officer whose opinion I give a damn about, anyway.’

He smiled as he traced her ribs with a fingertip. ‘Really?’

‘Captain Hardrick.’ She clicked her tongue. ‘I think it’s those very, very tight cavalry trousers of his. I like to drop things so he’ll pick them up for me. Ooops.’ She touched her finger to her lip, fluttering her lashes. ‘Curse my clumsiness, I’ve let fall my fan again! You couldn’t just reach for it, could you, Captain? You’ve almost got it. Only bend a little lower, Captain. Only bend … a little … *lower*.

‘Shameless. I don’t think Hardrick would suit you at all, though. The man’s dull as a plank. You’d be bored in minutes.’

Finree puffed out her cheeks. ‘You’re probably right. A good arse only goes so far. Something most men never realise. Maybe …’ She thought through her acquaintance for the most ridiculous lover, smiled as she lighted on the perfect candidate. ‘Bremer dan Gorst, then? Can’t really say he’s got the looks … or the wit … or the standing, but I’ve a feeling there’s a deep well of emotion beneath that lumpen exterior. The voice would take some getting used to, of course, if one could coax out more than two words together, but if you like the strong and silent type, I’d say he scores stupendously high on both counts— What?’ Hal wasn’t smiling any more. ‘I’m joking. I’ve known him for years. He’s harmless.’

‘Harmless? Have you ever seen him fight?’

‘I’ve seen him fence.’

‘Not quite the same.’

There was something in the way he was holding back that made her want to know more. ‘Have you seen him fight?’

‘Yes.’ ‘And?’

‘And … I’m glad he’s on our side.’

She brushed the tip of his nose with a finger. ‘Oh, my poor baby. Are you scared of him?’

He rolled away from her, onto his back. ‘A little. Everyone should be at least a little scared of Bremer dan Gorst.’ That surprised her. She hadn’t

thought Hal was afraid of anything. They lay there, for a moment, the canvas above them flapping gently with the wind outside.

Now she felt guilty. She did love Hal. She had marked down all the points the day he proposed. Considered all the pros and cons and categorically proved it to herself. He was a good man. One of the best. Excellent teeth. Honest, brave, loyal to a fault. But those things are not always enough. That was why he needed someone more practical to steer him through the rapids. That was why he needed her.

'Hal.'

'Yes?'

She rolled towards him, pressing herself against his warm side, and whispered in his ear. 'I love you.'

She had to admit to enjoying the power she had over him. That was all it took to make him beam with happiness. 'Good girl,' he whispered, and he kissed her, and she kissed him back, tangling her fingers in his hair. What is love anyway, but finding someone who suits you? Someone who makes up for your shortcomings?

Someone you can work with. Work on.

Aliz dan Brint was pretty enough, clever enough and well-born enough not to constitute an embarrassment, but neither pretty enough, clever enough nor well-born enough to pose any threat. A comparatively narrow band in which Finree felt it was safe to cultivate a friend without danger of being overshadowed. She had never liked being overshadowed.

'I find it something of a difficult adjustment,' murmured Aliz, glancing at the column of marching soldiers beside them from beneath her blonde lashes. 'Being surrounded by men takes some getting used to—'

'I wouldn't know. The army has always been my home. My mother died when I was very young, and my father raised me.'

'I'm … I'm sorry.'

'Why? My father misses her, I think, but how can I? I never knew her.'

An awkward silence, hardly surprising since, Finree realised, that had been the conversational equivalent of a mace to the head. 'Your parents?'

'Both dead.'

‘Oh.’ That made Finree feel worse. She seemed to spend most conversations see-sawing between impatience and guilt. She resolved to be more tolerant, though she did that often and it never worked. Perhaps she should have resolved simply to keep her mouth shut, but she did that often too, with even more negligible results. Hooves clapped at the track, tramping boots rumbled in unison, punctuated by the occasional calls of officers annoyed by some break in the rhythm.

‘We are heading … north?’ asked Aliz.

‘Yes, towards the town of Osrung to rendezvous with the other two divisions, under Generals Jalenhorm and Mitterick. They might be as little as ten miles from us now, on the other side of those hills,’ and she gestured towards the lowering fells on their left with her riding crop.

‘What sort of men are they?’

‘General Jalenhorm is …’ Tact, tact. ‘A brave and honest man, an old friend of the king.’ And promoted far beyond his limited ability as a result. ‘Mitterick is a competent and experienced soldier.’ As well as a disobedient blowhard with his eyes firmly on her father’s position.

‘And each commanding as many men as our own Lord Governor Meed?’

‘Seven regiments apiece, two of cavalry and five of foot.’ Finree could have reeled off their numbers, titles and senior officers, but Aliz looked as though she was reaching the limits of comprehension as it was. The limits of her comprehension never seemed to be far off, but Finree was determined to make a friend of her even so. Her husband, Colonel Brint, was said to be close to the king himself, which made him a very useful man to know. That was why she always made a point of laughing at his tiresome jokes.

‘So many people,’ said Aliz. ‘Your father certainly carries a great responsibility.’

‘He does.’ The last time Finree had seen her father she had been shocked by how worn down he seemed. She had always thought of him as cast in iron, and the realisation that he might be soft in the middle was most disconcerting. Perhaps that was the moment you grew up, when you learned your parents were just as fallible as everyone else.

‘How many soldiers on the other side?’

‘The line between soldier and citizen is not sharply drawn in the North. They have a few thousand Carls, perhaps – professional fighters with their own mail and weapons, bred to a life of warfare, who form the spear-point

of the charge and the front rank in the shield wall. But for each Carl there will be several Thralls – farmers or tradesmen pressed or paid to fight and labour, usually lightly armed with spear or bow but often hardened warriors even so. Then there are Named Men, veterans who have won a celebrated place through deeds on the battlefield and serve as officers, bodyguards or scouts in small groups called dozens. Like them.' She pointed out a shabby set of the Dogman's men, shadowing the column on the ridge-line to their right. 'I'm not sure anyone knows how many Black Dow has, altogether. Probably not even Black Dow does.'

Aliz blinked. 'You're so knowledgeable …'

Finree very much wanted to say, 'yes, I am' but settled for a careless shrug. There was no magic to it. She simply listened, observed, and made sure she never spoke until she knew what she was speaking of. Knowledge is the root of power, after all.

Aliz sighed. 'War is terrible, isn't it?'

'It blights the landscape, throttles commerce and industry, kills the innocent and rewards the guilty, thrusts honest men into poverty and lines the pockets of profiteers, and in the end produces nothing but corpses, monuments and tall tales.' Finree neglected to mention that it also offered enormous opportunities, however.

'So many men injured,' said Aliz. 'So many dead.'

'An awful thing.' Though dead men leave spaces into which the nimble-footed can swiftly step. Or into which nimble wives can swiftly manoeuvre their husbands …

'And all these people. Losing their homes. Losing everything.' Aliz was gazing moist-eyed at a miserable procession coming the other way, forced from the track by the soldiers and obliged to toil through their choking dust.

They were mostly women, though it was not easy to tell, they were so ragged. Some old men, and some children along with them. Northern, certainly. Poor, undoubtedly. Beyond poor, for they had virtually nothing, their faces pinched with hunger, jaws dangling with exhaustion, clutching at heartbreakingly meagre possessions. They did not look at the Union soldiers tramping the other way with hatred, or even with fear. They looked too desperate to register emotion of any kind.

Finree did not know who they were running from exactly, or where they were going. What horror had set them in motion or what others they might

still face. Shaken from their homes by the blind tremors of war. Looking at them, Finree felt shamefully secure, revoltingly lucky. It is easy to forget how much you have, when your eyes are always fixed on what you have not.

'Something should be done,' murmured Aliz, wistfully.

Finree clenched her teeth. 'You're right.' She gave her horse the spurs, possibly flicking a few specks of mud over Aliz' white dress, covered the ground in no time and slid her mount into the knot of officers that was the frequently misfiring brain of the division.

They spoke the language of war up here. Timing and supply. Weather and morale. Rates of march and orders of battle. It was no foreign tongue to Finree, and even as she slipped her horse between them she noticed mistakes, oversights, inefficiencies. She had been brought up in barracks, and mess halls, and headquarters, had spent longer in the army than most of the officers here and knew as much about strategy, tactics and logistics as any of them. Certainly a great deal more than Lord Governor Meed, who until last year had never presided over anything more dangerous than a formal banquet.

He rode at the very centre of the press, under a standard bearing the crossed hammers of Angland, and wearing a magnificent azure uniform rigged with gold braid, better suited to an actor in a tawdry production than a general on campaign. Despite all that money wasted on tailoring, his splendid collars never seemed quite to fit and his sinewy neck always stuck from them like a turtle's from its shell.

He had lost his three nephews years ago at the Battle of Black Well and his brother, the previous lord governor, not long after. He had nursed an insurmountable hatred for Northmen ever since and been such a keen advocate of war he had outfitted half his division at his own expense. Hatred of the enemy was no qualification for command, however. Quite the reverse.

'Lady Brock, how wonderful that you could join us,' he said, with mild disdain.

'I was simply taking part in the advance and you all got in my way.' The officers chuckled with, in Hal's case, a slightly desperate note. He gave her a pointed look sideways, and she gave him one back. 'I and some of the

other ladies noticed the refugees on our left. We were hoping you could be prevailed upon to spare them some food?'

Meed turned his watery eyes on the miserable file with the scorn one might have for a trail of ants. 'I am afraid the welfare of my soldiers must come first.'

'Surely these strapping fellows could afford to miss a meal in a good cause?' She thumped Colonel Brint's breastplate and made him give a nervous laugh.

'I have assured Marshal Kroy that we will be in position outside Osrung by midnight. We cannot stop.'

'It could be done in—'

Meed turned rudely away from her. 'Ladies and their charitable projects, mmm?' he tossed to his officers, provoking a round of sycophantic laughter.

Finree cut through it with a shrill titter of her own. 'Men and their playing at war, mmm?' She slapped Captain Hardrick on the shoulder with her gloves, hard enough to make him wince. 'What *silly, womanly nonsense,* to try to save a life or two. Now I see it! We should be letting them drop like flies by the roadside, spreading fire and pestilence wherever possible and leaving their country a blasted wasteland. That will teach them the proper respect for the Union and its ways, I am sure! *There's* soldiering!' She looked around at the officers, eyebrows raised. At least they had stopped laughing. Meed, in particular, had never looked more humourless, which took some doing.

'Colonel Brock,' he forced through tight lips. 'I think your wife might be more comfortable riding with the other ladies.'

'I was about to suggest it,' said Hal, pulling his horse in front of hers and bringing them both to a sharp halt while Meed's party carried on up the track. 'What the *hell* are you doing?' he hissed under his breath.

'The man's a callous idiot! A farmer playing at soldiers!'

'We have to work with what we have, Fin! Please, don't bait him. For me! My bloody nerves won't stand it!'

'I'm sorry.' Impatience back to guilt, yet again. Not for Meed, of course, but for Hal, who had to be twice as good, twice as brave and twice as hardworking as anyone else simply to stay free of his father's suffocating shadow. 'But I hate to see things done badly on account of some old fool's pride when they could just as easily be done well.'

‘Did you consider that it’s bad enough having an amateur general without having one who’s a bloody laughing stock besides? Maybe with some support he’d do better.’

‘Maybe,’ she muttered, unconvinced.

‘Can’t you stay with the other wives?’ he wheedled. ‘Please, just for now?’

‘That prattling coven?’ She screwed up her face. ‘All they talk about is who’s barren, who’s unfaithful, and what the queen’s wearing. They’re idiots.’

‘Have you ever noticed that everyone’s an idiot but you?’

She opened her eyes wide. ‘You see it too?’

Hal took a hard breath. ‘I love you. You know I do. But think about who you’re actually helping. You could have fed those people if you’d trodden softly.’ He rubbed at the bridge of his nose. ‘I’ll talk to the quartermaster, try to arrange something.’

‘Aren’t you a hero.’

‘I try, but bloody hell, you don’t make it easy. Next time, for me, please, think about saying something bland. Talk about the weather, maybe!’ As he rode off back towards the head of the column.

‘Shit on the weather,’ she muttered at his back, ‘and Meed too.’ She had to admit Hal had a point, though. She wasn’t doing herself, or her husband, or the Union cause, or even the refugees any good by irritating Lord Governor Meed.

She had to destroy him.

Give and Take

‘Up you get, old man.’

Craw was half in a dream still. At home, wherever that was. A young man, or retired. Was it Colwen smiling at him from the corner? Turning wood on the lathe, curled shavings scattering, crunching under his feet. He grunted, rolled over, pain flaring up his side, stinging him with panic. He tried to rip back his blanket.

‘What’s the—’

‘It’s all right.’ Wonderful had a hand on his shoulder. ‘Thought I’d let you sleep in.’ She had a long scab down the other side of her head now, stubble hair clumped with dried blood. ‘Thought you could use it.’

‘I could use a few hours yet.’ Craw gritted his teeth against ten different aches as he tried to sit up, first fast then very, very slow. ‘Bloody hell, but war’s a young man’s business.’

‘What’s to do?’

‘Not much.’ She handed him a flask and he sluiced water around his foul mouth and spat. ‘No sign of Hardbread. We buried Athroc.’ He paused, flask half way to his mouth, slowly let it drop. There was a heap of fresh dirt at the foot of one of the stones on the far side of the Heroes. Brack and Scorry stood in front of it, shovels in their hands. Agrick was between the two, looking down.

‘You say the words yet?’ asked Craw, knowing they wouldn’t have but still hoping.

‘Waiting for you.’

‘Good,’ he lied, and clambered up, gripping to her forearm. It was a grey morning with a nip in the wind, low clouds pawing at the craggy summits of the fells, mist still clinging to the creases in their sides, shrouding the bogs down in the valley’s bottom.

Craw limped to the grave, shifting his hips, trying to wriggle away from the pain in his joints. He’d rather have gone anywhere else, but there are some things you can’t wriggle away from. They were all drifting over there, gathering in a half-circle. All sad and quiet. Drofd trying to cram down a whole crust of bread at once, wiping his hands on his shirt. Whirrun with hood drawn up, cuddling the Father of Swords like a man might cuddle his sick child. Yon with a face even grimmer’n usual, which took some doing. Craw found his place at the foot of the grave, between Agrick and Brack. The hillman’s face had lost its usual ruddy glow, the bandage on his leg showing a big fresh stain.

‘That leg all right?’ he asked.

‘Scratch,’ said Brack.

‘Bleeding a lot for a scratch, ain’t it?’

Brack smiled at him, tattoos on his face shifting. ‘Call that a lot?’

‘Guess not.’ Not compared to Hardbread’s nephew when Whirrun cut him in half, anyway. Craw glanced over his shoulder, towards where they’d piled the corpses in the lee of the crumbling wall. Out of sight, maybe, but not forgotten. The dead. Always the dead. Craw looked at the black earth, wondering what to say. Looked at the black earth like it had answers in it. But there’s nothing in the earth but darkness.

‘Strange thing.’ His voice came out a croak, he had to cough to clear it. ‘The other day Drofd was asking me whether they call these stones the Heroes ’cause there are Heroes buried here. I said not. But maybe there’s one buried here now.’ Craw winced saying it, not out of sadness but ’cause he knew he was talking shit. Stupid shit wouldn’t have fooled a child. But the dozen all nodded, Agrick with a tear-track down his cheek.

‘Aye,’ said Yon.

You can say things at a grave would get you laughed out of a tavern, and be treated like you’re brimming over with wisdom. Craw felt every word was a knife he had to stick in himself, but there was no stopping.

‘Hadn’t been with us long, Athroc, but he made his mark. Won’t be forgot.’ Craw thought on all the other lads he’d buried, faces and names

worn away by the years, and couldn't even guess the number of 'em. 'He stood with his crew. Fought well.' Died badly, hacked with an axe, on ground that meant nothing. 'Did the right thing. All you can ask of a man, I reckon. If there's any—'

'Craw!' Shivers was standing maybe thirty strides away on the south side of the circle.

'Not now!' he hissed back.

'Aye,' said Shivers. 'Now.'

Craw hurried over, the grey valley opening up between two of the stones. 'What am I looking— Uh.' Beyond the river, at the foot of Black Fell, there were horsemen on the brown strip of the Uffrith Road. Riding fast towards Osrung, smudges of dust rising behind. Could've been forty. Could've been more.

'And there.'

'Shit.' Another couple of score coming the other way, towards the Old Bridge. Taking the crossings. Getting around both sides of the Heroes. The surge of worry was almost a pain in Craw's chest. 'Where's Scorry at?' Staring about like he'd put something down and couldn't remember where. Scorry was right behind him, holding up one finger. Craw breathed out slow, patting him on the shoulder. 'There you are. There you are.'

'Chief,' muttered Drofd.

Craw followed his pointing finger. The road south from Adwein, sloping down into the valley from the fold between two fells, was busy with movement. He snapped his eyeglass open and peered towards it. 'It's the Union.'

'How many, d'you reckon?'

The wind swept some mist away and, for just a moment, Craw could see the column stretching back between the hills, men and metal, spears prickling and flags waving above. Stretching back far as he could see.

'Looks like all of 'em,' breathed Wonderful.

Brack leaned over. 'Tell me we ain't fighting this time.'

Craw lowered his eyeglass. 'Sometimes the right thing to do is run like fuck. Pack up!' he bellowed. 'Right now! We're moving out!'

His crew always kept most of their gear stowed and they were busy packing the rest quick sharp, Scorry with a jaunty marching tune on the go. Jolly Yon was stomping the little fire out with one boot while Whirrun

watched, already packed since all he owned was the Father of Swords and he had it in one hand.

'Why put it out?' asked Whirrun.

'I ain't leaving those bastards my fire,' grunted Yon.

'Don't reckon they'll all be able to fit around it, do you?'

'Even so.'

'We can't even all fit around it.'

'Still.'

'Who knows? You leave it, maybe one of those Union fellows burns himself and they all get scared and go home.'

Yon looked up for a moment, then ground the last embers out under his boot. 'I ain't leaving those bastards my fire.'

'That's it then?' asked Agrick. Craw found it hard to look in his eye. There was something desperate in it. 'That's all the words he gets?'

'We can say more later, maybe, but for now there's the living to think on.'

'We're giving it up.' Agrick glared at Shivers, fists clenched, like he was the one killed his brother. 'He died for nothing. For a fucking hill we ain't even holding on to! If we hadn't fought he'd still be alive! You hear that!' He took a step, might've gone for Shivers if Brack hadn't grabbed him from behind, Craw from in front, holding him tight.

'I hear it.' Shivers shrugged, bored. 'And it ain't the first time. If I hadn't gone to Styria I'd still have both my eyes. I went. One eye. We fought. He died. Life only rolls one way and it ain't always the way we'd like. There it is.' He turned and strolled off towards the north, axe over his shoulder.

'Forget about him,' muttered Craw in Agrick's ear. He knew what it was to lose a brother. He'd buried all three of his in one morning. 'You need a man to blame, blame me. I chose to fight.'

'There was no choice,' said Brack. 'It was the right thing to do.'

'Where'd Drofd get to?' asked Wonderful, slinging her bow over her shoulder as she walked past. 'Drofd?'

'Over here! Just packing up!' He was down near the wall, where they'd left the bodies of Hardbread's lot. When Craw got there he was kneeling by one of 'em, going through his pockets. He grinned around, holding out a few coins. 'Chief, this one had some …' He trailed off when he saw Craw's frown. 'I was going to share it out—'

'Put it back.'

Drofd blinked at him. ‘But it’s no good to him now—’

‘Ain’t yours is it? Leave it there with Hardbread’s lad and when Hardbread comes back he’ll decide who gets it.’

‘More’n likely it’ll be Hardbread gets it,’ muttered Yon, coming up behind with his mail draped over his shoulder.

‘Maybe it will be. But it won’t be any of us. There’s a right way of doing things.’

That got a couple of sharp breaths and something close to a groan. ‘No one thinks that way these days, Chief,’ said Scorry, leaning on his spear.

‘Look how rich some no-mark like Sutt Brittle’s made himself,’ said Brack.

‘While we scrape by on a piss-pot staple and the odd gild,’ growled Yon.

‘That’s what you’re due, and I’ll see you get a gild for yesterday’s work. But you’ll leave the bodies be. You want to be Sutt Brittle you can beg a place with Glama Golden’s lot and rob folk all day long.’ Craw wasn’t sure what was making him so prickly. He’d let it pass before. Helped himself more’n once when he was younger. Even Threetrees used to overlook his boys picking a corpse or two. But prickly he was, and now he’d chosen to stand on it he couldn’t back down. ‘What’re we?’ he snapped, ‘Named Men or pickers and thieves?’

‘Poor is what we are, Chief,’ said Yon, ‘and starting to—’

‘What the *fuck?*’ Wonderful slapped the coins from Drofd’s hand and sent ’em scattering into the grass. ‘When you’re Chief, Jolly Yon Cumber, you can do it your way. ’Til then, we’ll do it Craw’s. We’re Named Men. Or I am, at least – I ain’t convinced about the rest of you. Now move your fat arses before you end up bitching to the Union about your poverty.’

‘We ain’t in this for the coin,’ said Whirrun, ambling past with the Father of Swords over his shoulder.

Yon gave him a dark look. ‘You might not be, Cracknut. Some of us wouldn’t mind a little from time to time.’ But he walked off shaking his head, mail jingling, and Brack and Scorry shrugged at each other, then followed.

Wonderful leaned close to Craw. ‘Sometimes I think the more other folk don’t care a shit the more you think you’ve got to.’

‘Your point?’

‘Can’t make the world a certain way all on your own.’

‘There’s a right way of doing things,’ he snapped.

‘You sure the right way isn’t just trying to keep everyone happy and alive?’

The worst thing was that she had a point. ‘Is that where we’ve come to now?’

‘I thought that’s about where we’ve always been.’

Craw raised a brow at her. ‘You know what? That husband o’ yours really should teach you some respect.’

‘That bitch? He’s almost as scared o’ me as you lot. Let’s go!’ She pulled Drofd up by his elbow, and the dozen made their way through the gap in the wall, moving fast. Or as fast as Craw’s knees would go. They headed north down the ragged track the way they’d come and left the Heroes to the Union.

Craw worked his way through the trees, chewing at the fingernails of his sword hand. He’d already gnawed his shield hand down to his knuckles, more or less. Damn things never grew back fast enough. He’d felt less scared on the way up the Heroes at night than he did going to tell Black Dow he’d lost a hill. Can’t be right when you’re less scared of the enemy than your own Chief, can it? He wished he had some friendly company, but if there was going to be blame he wanted to shoulder it alone. He’d made the choices.

The woods were crawling with men thick as ants in the grass. Black Dow’s own Carls – veterans, cold-headed and cold-hearted and with lots of cold steel to share out. Some had plate armour like the Union wore, others strange weapons, beaked, picked and hooked for punching through steel, all manner of savage inventions new to the world that the world was more’n likely better off without. He doubted any of these would be thinking twice before robbing a few coins off the dead, or the living either.

Craw had been most of his life a fighting man, but crowds of ’em still somehow made him nervous, and the older he got the less he felt he fit. Any day now they’d spot him for a fraud. Realise that keeping his threadbare courage stitched together was harder work every morning. He winced as his teeth bit into the quick and jerked his nails away.

‘Can’t be right,’ he muttered to himself, ‘for a Named Man to be scared all the time.’

‘What?’ Craw had almost forgotten Shivers was there, he moved so silent.

‘You get scared, Shivers?’

A pause, that eye of his glinting as the sun peeped through the branches. ‘Used to. All the time.’

‘What changed?’

‘Got my eye burned out o’ my head.’

So much for calming small talk. ‘Reckon that could change your outlook.’

‘Halves it.’

Some sheep were bleating away beside the track, pressed tight into a pen much too small. Foraged, no doubt, meaning stolen, some unlucky shepherd’s livelihood vanished down the gullets and out the arses of Black Dow’s army. Behind a screen of hides, not two strides from the flock, a woman was slaughtering ’em and three more doing the skinning and gutting and hanging the carcasses, all soaked to the armpits in blood and not caring much about it either.

Two lads, probably just reached fighting age, were watching. Laughing at how stupid the sheep were, not to guess what was happening behind those hides. They didn’t see that they were in the pen, and behind a screen of songs and stories and young men’s dreams, war was waiting, soaked to the armpits and not caring. Craw saw it all well enough. So why was he still sitting meek in his pen? Might be old sheep can’t jump new fences either.

The black standard of the Protector of the North was dug into the earth outside some ivy-wrapped ruin, long ago conquered by the forest. More men busy in the clearing before it, and stirring horses tethered in long rows. A grindstone being pedalled, metal shrieking, sparks spraying. A woman hammering at a cartwheel. A smith working at a hauberk with pincers and a mouthful of mail rings. Children hurrying about with armfuls of shafts, slopping buckets on yokes, sacks of the dead knew what. A complicated business, violence, once the scale gets big enough.

A man sprawled on a stone slab, oddly at ease in the midst of all this work that made nothing, on his elbows, head tipped back, eyes closed. Body all in shadow but a chink of sun from between the branches coming down across his smirk so it was bathed in double brightness.

‘By the dead.’ Craw walked to him and stood looking down. ‘If it ain’t the prince o’ nothing much. Those women’s boots you’re wearing?’

‘Styrian leather.’ Calder’s lids drifted open a slit, that curl to his lip he’d had since a boy. ‘Curnden Craw. You still alive, you old shit?’

‘Bit of a cough, as it goes.’ He hawked up and spat phlegm onto the old stone between Calder’s fancy foot-leather. ‘Reckon I’ll survive, though. Who made the mistake o’ letting you crawl back from exile?’

Calder swung his legs off the slab. ‘None other than the great Protector himself. Guess he couldn’t beat the Union without my mighty sword-arm.’

‘What’s his plan? Cut it off and throw it at ’em?’

Calder spread his arms out wide. ‘How would I hold you then?’ And they folded each other tight. ‘Good to see you, you stupid old fool.’

‘Likewise, you lying little fuck.’

Shivers frowned from the shadows all the while. ‘You two seem tight,’ he muttered.

‘Why, I practically raised this little bastard!’ Craw scrubbed Calder’s hair with his knuckles. ‘Fed him milk from a squeezed cloth, I did.’

‘Closest thing I ever had to a mother,’ said Calder.

Shivers nodded slowly. ‘Explains a lot.’

‘We should talk.’ Calder gave Craw’s arm a squeeze. ‘I miss our talks.’

‘And me.’ Craw took a careful step back as a horse reared nearby, knocked its cart sideways and sent a tangle of spears clattering to the ground. ‘Almost as much as I miss a decent bed. Today might not be the day, though.’

‘Maybe not. I hear there’s some sort of battle about to happen?’ Calder backed off, throwing up his hands. ‘It’s going to kill my whole afternoon!’

He passed a cage as he went, a couple of filthy Northmen squatting naked inside, one sticking an arm out through the bars in hopes of water, or mercy, or just so some part of him could be free. Deserters would’ve been hanged already which made these thieves or murderers. Waiting on Black Dow’s pleasure, which was more’n likely going to be to hang ’em anyway, and probably burn ’em into the bargain. Strange, to lock men up for thieving when the whole army lived on robbery. To dangle men for murder when they were all at the business of killing. What makes a crime in a time when men take what they please from who they please?

‘Dow wants you.’ Splitfoot stood frowning in the ruin’s archway. He’d always been a dour bastard but he looked ’specially put upon today. ‘In there.’

‘You want my sword?’ Craw was already sliding it out.

‘No need.’

‘No? When did Black Dow start trusting people?’

‘Not people. Just you.’

Craw wasn’t sure if that was a good sign. ‘All right, then.’

Shivers made to follow but Splitfoot held him back with one hand. ‘Dow didn’t ask for you.’

Craw caught Shivers’ narrowed eye for a moment, and shrugged, and ducked through the ivy-choked archway, feeling like he was sticking his head in a wolf’s mouth and wondering when he’d hear the teeth snap. Down a passage hung with cobweb, echoing with dripping water. Into a wide stretch of brambly dirt, broken pillars scattered around its edge, some still holding up a crumbling vault, but the roof long gone and the clouds above starting to show some bright blue between. Dow sat in Skarling’s Chair at the far end of the ruined hall, toying with the pommel of his sword. Caul Reachey sat near him, scratching at his white stubble.

‘When I give the word,’ Dow was saying, ‘you’ll lead off alone. Move on Osrung with everything you’ve got. They’re weak there.’

‘How d’you know that?’

Dow winked. ‘I’ve got my ways. They’ve too many men and not enough road, and they rushed to get here so they’re stretched out thin. Just some horsemen in the town, and a few o’ the Dogman’s lads. Might’ve got some foot up there by the time we go, but not enough to stop you if you take a proper swing at it.’

‘Oh, I’ll swing at it,’ said Reachey. ‘Don’t worry on that score.’

‘I’m not. That’s why you’re leading off. I want your lads to carry my standard, nice and clear up at the front. And Golden’s, and Ironhead’s, and yours. Where everyone can see.’

‘Make ’em think it’s our big effort.’

‘Any luck they’ll pull some men off from the Heroes, leave the stones weaker held. Once they’re in the open fields between hill and town, I’ll let slip Golden’s boys and he’ll tear their arses out. Meantime me, and Ironhead, and Tenways’ll make the proper effort on the Heroes.’

‘How d’you plan to work it?’

Dow flashed that hungry grin of his. ‘Run up that hill and kill everything living.’

‘They’ll have had time to get set, and that’s some tough ground to charge. It’s where they’ll be strongest. We could go around—’

‘Strongest here.’ Dow dug his sword into the ground in front of Skarling’s Chair. ‘Weakest here.’ And he tapped at his chest with a finger. ‘We’ve been going around the sides for months, they won’t be expecting us front on. We break ’em at the Heroes, we break ’em here,’ and he thumped his chest again, ‘and the rest all crumbles. Then Golden can follow up, chase ’em right across the fords if need be. All the way to Adwein. Scale should be ready on the right by then, can take the Old Bridge. With you in Osrung in weight, when the rest o’ the Union turn up tomorrow all the best ground’ll be ours.’

Reachey slowly stood. ‘Right y’are, Chief. We’ll make it a red day. A day for the songs.’

‘Shit on the songs,’ said Dow, standing himself. ‘I’ll take just victory.’

They clasped hands a moment, then Reachey moved for the entrance, saw Craw and gave a big gap-toothed smile.

‘Old Caul Reachey.’ And Craw held out his hand.

‘Curnden Craw, as I live and breathe.’ Reachey folded it in one of his then slapped the other down on top. ‘Ain’t enough of us good men left.’

‘Those are the times.’

‘How’s the knee?’

‘You know. It is how it is.’

‘Mine too. Yon Cumber?’

‘Always with a joke ready. How’s Flood getting on?’

Reachey grinned. ‘Got him looking after some new recruits. Right shower o’ piss-water, in the main.’

‘Maybe they’ll shape up.’

‘They better had, and fast. I hear we got a battle coming.’ Reachey clapped him on the arm as he passed. ‘Be waiting for your order, Chief!’ And he left Craw and Black Dow watching each other over a few strides of rubble-strewn, weed-sprouting, nettle-waving old mud. Birds twittered, leaves rustled, the hint of distant metal serving notice there was bloody business due.

‘Chief.’ Craw licked his lips, no idea how this was going to go.

Dow took a long breath in and screamed at the top of his voice. ‘Didn’t I tell you to hold on to that *fucking* hill!’

Craw went cold as the echoes rang from the crumbling walls. Looked like it might not go well at all. He wondered if he might find himself stripped in a cage before sundown. ‘Well, I was holding on to it all right … until the Union showed up …’

Dow came closer, sheathed sword still in one fist, and Craw had to make himself not back off. Dow leaned forwards and Craw had to make himself not flinch. Dow raised one hand and put it gently down on Craw’s sore shoulder, and he had to make himself not shudder. ‘Sorry ’bout this,’ said Dow quietly, ‘but I’ve a reputation to look to.’

A wave of giddy relief. ‘’Course, Chief. Let rip.’ He narrowed his eyes as Dow took another breath.

‘You *useless* old limping *fuck*!’ Spraying Craw with spit, then patting the bruised side of his face, none too gently. ‘You made a fight of it, then?’

‘Aye. With Hardbread and a few of his lads.’

‘I remember that old bastard. How many did he have?’

‘Twenty-two.’

Dow bared his teeth somewhere between smile and scowl. ‘And you, what, ten?’

‘Aye, with Shivers.’

‘And you saw ’em off?’

‘Well—’

‘Wish I’d fucking been there!’ Dow twitched with violence, eyes fixed on nothing like he could see Hardbread and his boys coming up that slope and they couldn’t come fast enough for him. *‘Wish* I’d been there!’ And he lashed out with the pommel of his sheathed sword and struck splinters from the nearest pillar, making Craw take a careful step back. ‘’Stead of sitting back here fucking *talking*. Talking, talking, fucking talking!’ Dow spat, and took a breath, then seemed to remember Craw was there, eyes sliding back towards him. ‘You saw the Union come up?’

‘At least a thousand on the road to Adwein and I got the feeling there were more behind.’

‘Jalenhorm’s division,’ said Dow.

‘How d’you know that?’

‘He has his ways.’

‘By the—’ Craw took a startled pace, got his feet caught in a bramble and nearly fell. There was a woman lying on one of the highest walls. Draped over it like a wet cloth, one arm and one leg dangling, head hanging over the side like she was resting on some garden bench ’stead of a tottering heap of masonry six strides above the dirt.

‘Friend o’ mine.’ Dow didn’t even look up. ‘Well – when I say friend—’

‘Enemy’s enemy.’ She rolled off the back of the wall. Craw stared, waiting for the sound of her hitting the ground. ‘I am Ishri.’ The voice whispered in his ear.

This time he went right on his arse in the dirt. She stood over him, skin black, and smooth, and perfect, like the glazing on a good pot. She wore a long coat, tails dragging on the dirt, hanging open, body all bound in white bandages underneath. If anyone ever looked like a witch, she was it. Not that there was much more evidence of witchery needed past vanishing from one place and stepping out of another.

Dow barked with laughter. ‘You never can tell where she’ll spring from. I’m always worried she’ll pop out o’ nowhere while I’m … you know.’ And he mimed a wanking action with one fist.

‘You wish,’ said Ishri, looking down at Craw with eyes blacker than black, unblinking, like a jackdaw staring at a maggot.

‘Where did you come from?’ muttered Craw as he scrambled up, hopping a little on account of his stiff knee.

‘South,’ she said, though that much was clear enough from her skin. ‘Or do you mean, why did I come?’

‘I’ll take why.’

‘To do the right thing.’ There was a faint smile on her face, at that. ‘To fight against evil. To strike mighty blows for righteousness. Or … do you mean who sent me?’

‘All right, who sent you?’

‘God.’ Her eyes rolled to the sky, framed by jutting weeds and saplings. ‘And how could it be otherwise? God puts us all where he wants us.’

Craw rubbed at his knee. ‘Got a shitty sense o’ humour, don’t he?’

‘You do not know the half of it. I came to fight against the Union, is that enough?’

‘It’s enough for me,’ said Dow.

Ishri's black eyes flicked away to him, and Craw felt greatly relieved. 'They are moving onto the hill in numbers.'

'Jalenhorm's lot?'

'I believe so.' She stretched up tall, wriggling all over the place like she had no bones in her. Reminded Craw of the eels they used to catch from the lake near his workshop, spilling from the net, squirming in the children's hands and making them squeal. 'You fat pink men all look the same to me.'

'What about Mitterick?' asked Dow.

Her bony shoulders drifted up and down. 'Some way behind, chomping at the bit, furious that Jalenhorm is in his way.'

'Meed?'

'Where is the fun in knowing everything?' She pranced past Craw, up on her toes, almost brushing against him so he had to nervously step back and nearly trip again. 'God must be so *bored.'* She wedged one foot into a crack in the wall too narrow for a cat to squeeze through, twisting her leg, somehow working it in up to the hip. 'To it, then, my heroes!' She writhed like a worm cut in half, wriggling into the ruined masonry, her coat dragging up the mossy stonework behind her. 'Do you not have a battle to fight?' Her skull somehow slid into the gap, then her arms, she clapped her bandaged hands once and just a finger was left sticking from the crack. Dow walked over to it, reached out, and snapped it off. It wasn't a finger at all, just a dead bit of twig.

'Magic,' muttered Craw. 'Can't say I care for the stuff.' In his experience it did more harm than good. 'I daresay a sorcerer's got their uses and all but, I mean, do they always have to act so bloody *strange?'*

Dow flicked the twig away with a wrinkled lip. 'It's a war. I care for whatever gets the job done. Best not mention my black-skinned friend to anyone else though, eh? Folks might get the wrong idea.'

'What's the right idea?'

'Whatever I fucking say it is!' snarled Dow, and he didn't look like he was faking the anger this time.

Craw held up his open hands. 'You're the Chief.'

'Damn right!' Dow frowned at that crack. 'I'm the Chief.' Almost like it was himself he was trying to convince. Just for a moment Craw wondered whether Black Dow ever felt like a fraud. Whether Black Dow's courage needed stitching together every morning.

He didn’t like that thought much. ‘We’re fighting, then?’

Dow’s eyes swivelled sideways and his killing smile broke out fresh, no trace of doubt in it, or fear neither. ‘High fucking time, no? You hear what I was telling Reachey?’

‘Most of it. He’ll try and draw ’em off towards Osrung, then you’ll go straight at the Heroes.’

‘Straight at ’em!’ barked Dow, like he could make it work by shouting it. ‘The way Threetrees would’ve done it, eh?’

‘Would he?’

Dow opened his mouth, then paused. ‘What does it matter? Threetrees is seven winters in the mud.’

‘True. Where do you want me and my dozen?’

‘Right beside me when I charge up to the Heroes, o’ course. Expect there’s nothing in the world you’d like more’n to take that hill back from those Union bastards.’

Craw gave a long sigh, wondering what his dozen would have to say about that. ‘Oh, aye. It’s top o’ my list.’

The Very Model

‘An officer should command from horseback, eh, Gorst? The proper place for a headquarters is the saddle!’ General Jalenhorm affectionately patted the neck of his magnificent grey, then leaned over without waiting for an answer to roar at a spotty-faced courier. ‘Tell the captain that he must simply clear the road by whatever means necessary! Clear the road and move them up! Haste, all haste, lad, Marshal Kroy wants the division moving north!’ He swivelled to bellow over the other shoulder. ‘Speed, gentlemen, speed! Towards Carleon, and victory!’

Jalenhorm certainly looked a conquering hero. Fantastically young to command a division and with a smile that said he was prepared for anything, dressed with an admirable lack of pretension in a dusty trooper’s uniform and as comfortable in the saddle as a favourite armchair. If he had been half as fine a tactician as he was a horseman, they would long ago have had Black Dow in chains and on public display in Adua. *But he is not, and we do not.*

A constantly shifting body of staff officers, adjutants, liaisons and even a scarcely pubescent bugler trailed eagerly along in the general’s wake like wasps after a rotten apple, fighting to attract his fickle attention by snapping, jostling and shouting over one another with small dignity. Meanwhile Jalenhorm himself barked out a volley of confusing and contradictory replies, questions, orders and occasional musings on life.

‘On the right, on the right, of course!’ to one officer. ‘Tell him not to worry, worrying solves nothing!’ to another. ‘Move them up, Marshal Kroy wants them all up by lunch!’ A large body of infantry were obliged to

shuffle exhausted from the road, watch the officers pass, then chew on their dust. ‘Beef, then,’ bellowed Jalenhorm with a regal wave, ‘or mutton, whichever, we have more important business! Will you come up the hill with me, Colonel Gorst? Apparently one gets quite the view from the Heroes. You are his Majesty’s observer, are you not?’

I am his Majesty’s fool. Almost as much his Majesty’s fool as you are.

‘Yes, General.’

Jalenhorm had already whisked his mount from the road and down the shingle towards the shallows, pebbles scattering. His hangers-on strained to follow, splashing out into the water and heedlessly showering a company of heavily loaded foot who were struggling across, up to their waists in the river. The hill rose out of the fields on the far side, a great green cone so regular as to seem artificial. The circle of standing stones that the Northmen called the Heroes jutted from its flat top, a much smaller circle on a spur to the right, a single tall needle of rock on another to the left.

Orchards grew on the far bank, the twisted trees heavy with reddening apples, thin grass underneath patched with shade and covered in halfrotten windfalls. Jalenhorm leaned out to pluck one from a low-hanging branch and happily bit into it. ‘Yuck.’ He shuddered and spat it out. ‘Cookers, I suppose.’

‘General Jalenhorm, sir!’ A breathless messenger whipping his horse down one row of trees towards them.

‘Speak, man!’ Without slowing from a trot.

‘Major Kalf is at the Old Bridge, sir, with two companies of the Fourteenth. He wonders whether he should push forward to a nearby farm and establish a perimeter—’

‘Absolutely! Forward. We need to make room! Where are the rest of his companies?’ The messenger had already saluted and galloped off westwards. Jalenhorm frowned around at his staff. ‘Major Kalf’s other companies? Where’s the rest of the Fourteenth?’

Dappled sunlight slid over baffled faces. An officer opened his mouth but said nothing. Another shrugged. ‘Perhaps held up in Adwein, sir, there is considerable confusion on the narrow roads—’

He was interrupted by another messenger, bringing a well-lathered horse from the opposite direction. ‘Sir! Colonel Vinkler wishes to know whether he should turn the residents of Osrung out of their houses and garrison—’

‘No, no, turn them out? No!’

‘Sir!’ The young man pulled his horse about.

‘Wait! Yes, turn them out. Garrison the houses. Wait! No. No. Hearts and minds, eh, Colonel Gorst? Hearts and mind, don’t you think? What do you think?’

I think your close friendship with the king has caused you to be promoted far beyond the rank at which you were most effective. I think you would have made an excellent lieutenant, a passable captain, a mediocre major and a dismal colonel, but as a general you are a liability. I think you know this, and have no confidence, which makes you behave, paradoxically, as if you have far too much. I think you make decisions with little thought, abandon some with none and stick furiously to others against all argument, thinking that to change your mind would be to show weakness. I think you fuss with details better left to subordinates, fearing to tackle the larger issues, and that makes your subordinates smother you with decisions on every trifle, which you then bungle. I think you are a decent, honest, courageous man. And I think you are a fool. ‘Hearts and minds,’ said Gorst.

Jalenhorm beamed. The messenger tore off, presumably to win the people of Osrung to the Union cause by allowing them keep their own houses. The rest of the officers emerged from the shade of the apple trees and into the sun, the grassy slope stretching away above them.

‘With me, boys, with me!’ Jalenhorm urged his charger uphill, maintaining an effortless balance in the saddle while his retainers struggled to keep up, one balding captain almost torn from his seat as a low branch clubbed him in the head.

An old drystone wall ringed the hill not far from the top, sprouting with seeding weeds, no higher than a stride or two even on its outside face. One of the more impetuous young ensigns tried to show off by jumping it, but his horse shied and nearly dumped him. *A fitting metaphor for the Union involvement in the North so far – a lot of vainglory but it all ends in embarrassment.*

Jalenhorm and his officers passed in file through a narrow gap, the ancient stones on the summit looming larger with every hoofbeat, then rearing over Gorst and the rest as they crested the hill’s flat top.

It was close to midday, the sun was high and hot, the morning mists were all burned off and, aside from some towers of white cloud casting

ponderous shadows over the forests to the north, the valley was bathed in golden sunlight. The wind made waves through the crops, the shallows glittered, a Union flag snapped proudly over the tallest tower in the town of Osrung. To the south of the river the roads were obscured by the dust of thousands of marching men, the occasional twinkle of metal showing where bodies of soldiers moved: infantry, cavalry, supplies, rolling sluggishly from the south. Jalenhorm had drawn his horse up to take in the view, and with some displeasure.

'We aren't moving fast enough, damn it. Major!'

'Sir?'

'I want you to ride down to Adwein and see if you can hurry them along there! We need to get more men on this hill. More men into Osrung. We need to move them up!'

'Sir!'

'And Major?'

'Sir?'

Jalenhorm sat, open-mouthed, for a moment. 'Never mind. Go!'

The man set off in the wrong direction, realised his error and was gone down the hill the way they had come.

Confusion reigned in the wide circle of grass within the Heroes. Horses had been tethered to two of the stones but one had got loose and was making a deafening racket, scaring the others and kicking out alarmingly while several terrified grooms tried desperately to snatch its bridle. The standard of the King's Own Sixth Regiment hung limp in the centre of the circle beside a burned out fire where, utterly dwarfed by the sullen slabs of rock that surrounded it on every side, it did little for morale. *Although, let us face the facts, my morale is beyond help.*

Two small wagons that had somehow been dragged up the hill had been turned over onto their sides and their eclectic contents – from tents to pans to smithing instruments to a shining new washboard – scattered across the grass while soldiers rooted through the remainder like plunderers after a rout.

'What the hell are you about, Sergeant?' demanded Jalenhorm, spurring his horse over.

The man looked up guiltily to see the attention of a general and two dozen staff officers all suddenly focused upon him, and swallowed. 'Well, sir,

we're a little short of flatbow bolts, General, sir.'

'And?'

'It seems ammunition was considered very important by those that packed the supplies.'

'Naturally.'

'So it was packed first.'

'First.'

'Yes, sir. Meaning, on the bottom, sir.'

'The bottom?'

'Sir!' A man with a pristine uniform hastened over, chin high, giving Jalenhorm a salute so sharp that the snapping of his well-polished heels was almost painful to the ear.

The general swung from his saddle and shook him by the hand. 'Colonel Wetterlant, good to see you! How do things stand?'

'Well enough, sir, most of the Sixth is up here now, though lacking a good deal of our equipment.' Wetterlant led them across the grass, soldiers doing the best they could to make room amid the chaos. 'One battalion of the Rostod Regiment too, though what happened to their commanding officer is anyone's guess.'

'Laid up with the gout, I believe—' someone muttered.

'Is that a grave?' asked Jalenhorm, pointing out a patch of fresh-turned earth in the shadow of one of the stones, trampled with boot-prints.

The colonel frowned at it. 'Well, I suppose—'

'Any sign of the Northmen?'

'A few of my men have seen movement in the woods to the north but nothing we could say for certain was the enemy. More likely than not it's sheep.' Wetterlant led them between two of the towering stones. 'Other than that, not a sniff of the buggers. Apart from what they left behind, that is.'

'Ugh,' said one of the staff officers, looking sharply away. Several bloodstained bodies were laid out in a row. One of them had been sliced in half and had lost his lower arm besides, flies busy on his exposed innards.

'Was there combat?' asked Jalenhorm, frowning at the corpses.

'No, those are yesterday's. And they were ours. Some of the Dogman's scouts, apparently.' The colonel pointed out a small group of Northmen, a tall one with a red bird on his shield and a heavy set old man conspicuous among them, busy digging graves.

‘What about the horse?’ It lay on its side, an arrow poking from its bloated belly.

‘I really couldn’t say.’

Gorst took in the defences, which were already considerable. Spearmen were manning the drystone wall on this side of the hill, packed shoulder to shoulder at a gap where a patchy track passed down the hillside. Behind them, higher up the slope, a wide double curve of archers fussed with bolts and flatbows or simply lazed about, chewing disconsolately at dried rations, a couple apparently arguing over winnings at dice.

‘Good,’ said Jalenhorm, ‘good,’ without specifying exactly what met his approval. He frowned out across the patchwork of field and pasture, over the few farms and towards the woods that blanketed the north side of the valley. Thick forest, of the kind that covered so much of the country, the monotony of trees only relieved by the vague stripes of two roads leading north between the fells. One of them, presumably, to Carleon. *And victory.*

‘There could be ten Northmen out there or ten thousand,’ muttered Jalenhorm. ‘We must be careful. Mustn’t underestimate Black Dow. I was at the Cumnur, you know, Gorst, where Prince Ladisla was killed. Well, the day before the battle, in fact, but I was there. A dark day for Union arms. Can’t be having another of those, eh?’

I strongly suggest that you resign your commission, then, and allow someone with better credentials to take command. ‘No, sir.’

Jalenhorm had already turned away to speak to Wetterlant. Gorst could hardly blame him. *When did I last say anything worth hearing? Bland agreements and non-committal splutterings. The bleating of a goat would serve the same purpose.* He turned his back on the knot of staff officers and wandered over to where the Northmen were digging graves. The grey-haired one watched him come, leaning on his spade.

‘My name is Gorst.’

The older man raised his brows. *Surprise that a Union man should speak Northern, or surprise that a big man should speak like a little girl?* ‘Hard-bread’s mine. I fight for the Dogman.’ His words slightly mangled in a badly battered mouth.

Gorst nodded to the corpses. ‘These are your men?’

‘Aye.’

‘You fought up here?’

‘Against a dozen led by a man called Curnden Craw.’ He rubbed at his bruised jaw. ‘We had the numbers but we lost.’

Gorst frowned around the circle of stones. ‘They had the ground.’

‘That and Whirrun of Bligh.’

‘Who?’

‘Some fucking hero,’ scoffed the one with a red bird on his shield.

‘From way up north in the valleys,’ said Hardbread, ‘where it snows every bloody day.’

‘Mad bastard,’ grunted one of Hardbread’s men, nursing a bandaged arm. ‘They say he drinks his own piss.’

‘I heard he eats children.’

‘He has this sword they say fell out of the sky.’ Hardbread wiped his forehead on the back of one thick forearm. ‘They worship it, up there in the snows.’

‘They worship a sword?’ asked Gorst.

‘They think God dropped it or something. Who knows what they think up there? Either way, Cracknut Whirrun is one dangerous bastard.’ Hard-bread licked at a gap in his teeth, and from his grimace it was a new one. ‘I can tell you that from my own experience.’

Gorst frowned towards the forest, trees shining dark green in the sun. ‘Do you think Black Dow’s men are near?’

‘I reckon they are.’

‘Why?’

‘Because Craw fought against the odds, and he ain’t a man to fight over nothing. Black Dow wanted this hill.’ Hardbread shrugged as he bent back to his task. ‘We’re burying these poor bastards then we’re going down. I’ll be leaving a tooth back there on the slope and a nephew in the mud and I don’t plan on leaving aught else in this bloody place.’

‘Thank you.’ Gorst turned back towards Jalenhorm and his staff, now engaged in a heated debate about whether the latest company to arrive should be placed behind or in front of the ruined wall. ‘General!’ he called. ‘The scouts think Black Dow might be nearby!’

‘I hope he is!’ shot back Jalenhorm, though it was obvious he was scarcely listening. ‘The crossings are in our hands! Take control of all three crossings, that’s our first objective!’

‘I thought there were four crossings.’ It was said quietly, one man murmuring to another, but the hubbub dropped away at that moment. Everyone turned to see a pale young lieutenant, somewhat surprised to have become the centre of attention.

‘Four?’ Jalenhorm rounded on the man. ‘There is the Old Bridge, to the west.’ He flung out one arm, almost knocking down a portly major. ‘The bridge in Osrung, to the east. And the shallows where we made the passage. Three crossings.’ The general waved three big fingers in the lieutenant’s face. ‘All in our hands!’

The young man flushed. ‘One of the scouts told me there is a path through the bogs, sir, further west of the Old Bridge.’

‘A path through the bogs?’ Jalenhorm squinted off to the west. ‘A secret way? I mean to say, Northmen could use that path and get right around us! Damn good work, boy!’

‘Well, thank you, sir—’

The general spun one way, then back the other, heel twisting up the sod, casting around as though the right strategy was always just behind him. ‘Who hasn’t crossed the river yet?’

His officers milled about in their efforts to stay in his line of sight.

‘Are the Eighth up?’

‘I thought the rest of the Thirteenth—’

‘Colonel Vallimir’s first cavalry are still deploying there!’

‘I believe they have one battalion in order, just reunited with their horses—’

‘Excellent! Send to Colonel Vallimir and ask him to take that battalion through the bogs.’

A couple of officers grumbled their approval. Others glanced somewhat nervously at each other. ‘A whole battalion?’ one muttered. ‘Is this path suitable for—’

Jalenhorm swatted them away. ‘Colonel Gorst! Would you ride back across the river and convey my wishes to Colonel Vallimir, make sure the enemy can’t give us an unpleasant surprise.’

Gorst paused for a moment. ‘General, I would prefer to remain where I can—’

‘I understand entirely. You wish to be close to the action. But the king asked specifically in his last letter that I do everything possible to keep you

out of danger. Don’t worry, the front line will hold perfectly well without you. We friends of the king must stick together, mustn’t we?’

All the king’s fools, capering along in military motley to the same mad bugle music! Make the one with the silly voice turn another cartwheel, my sides are splitting! ‘Of course, sir.’ And Gorst trudged back towards his horse.

Scale

Calder nudged his horse down a path so vague he wasn't even sure it was one, smirk clamped tight to his face. If Deep and Shallow were keeping an eye on him – and since he was their best source of money it was a certainty – he couldn't tell. Admittedly, there wasn't much point to men like Deep and Shallow if a man like Calder could tell where they were, but by the dead he would've liked some company. Like a starving man tossed a crust, seeing Curnden Craw had only whetted Calder's appetite for friendly faces.

He'd ridden through Ironhead's men, soaking up their scorn, and Tenways', soaking up their hostility, and now he was getting into the woods at the west end of the valley, where Scale's men were gathered. His brother's men. His men, he supposed, though they didn't feel much like his. Tough-looking bastards, ragged from hard marching, bandaged from hard fighting. Worn down from being far from Black Dow's favour where they did the toughest jobs for the leanest rewards. They didn't look in a mood to celebrate anything, and for damn sure not the arrival of their Chief's coward brother.

It didn't help that he'd struggled into his chain mail shirt, hoping to at least look like a warrior prince for the occasion. It had been a gift from his father, years ago, made from Styrian steel, lighter than most Northern mixtures but still heavy as an anvil and hot as a sheepskin. Calder had no notion how men could wear these damn things for days at a time. Run in them. Sleep in them. Fight in them. Mad business, fighting in this. Mad business, fighting. He'd never understood what men saw in it.

And few men saw more in it than his own brother, Scale.

He was squatting in a clearing with a map spread out in front of him. Pale-as-Snow was at his left elbow and White-Eye Hansul at his right, old comrades of Calder's father from the time when he ruled the best part of the North. Men who'd fallen a long way when the Bloody-Nine threw Calder's father from his battlements. Almost as far as Calder had fallen himself.

Him and Scale were born to different mothers, and the joke always was that Scale's must've been a bull. He looked like a bull, and a particularly mean and muscular one at that. He was Calder's opposite in almost every way – blond where Calder was dark, blunt-featured where Calder was sharp, quick to anger and slow to think. Nothing like their father. Calder was the one who'd taken after Bethod, and everyone knew it. One reason why they hated him. That and he'd spent so much of his life acting like a prick.

Scale looked up when he heard the hooves of Calder's horse, gave a great smile as he strode over, still carrying that trace of a limp the Bloody-Nine had given him. He wore his chain mail lightly as a maiden wears a shift even so, a heavy black-forged double coat of it, plates of black steel strapped on top, all scratched and dented. 'Always be armed,' their father had told them, and Scale had taken it literally. He was criss-crossed with belting and bristling with weapons, two swords and a great mace at his belt, three knives in plain sight and probably others out of it. He had a bandage around his head stained brown on one side, and a new nick through his eyebrow to add to a rapidly growing collection of scars. It looked as if Calder's frequent attempts to persuade Scale to stay out of battle had been as wasted as Scale's frequent attempts to persuade Calder to charge into it.

Calder swung from his saddle, finding it a straining effort in his mail and trying to make it look like he was only stiff from a hard ride. 'Scale, you thick bastard, how've you—'

Scale caught him in a crushing hug, lifted his feet clear of the ground and gave him a slobbery kiss on the forehead. Calder hugged him back the best he could with all the breath squeezed out of his body and a sword hilt poking him in the gut, so suddenly, pathetically happy to have someone on his side he wanted to cry.

'Get off!' he wheezed, hammering at Scale's back with the heel of his hand like a wrestler submitting. 'Off!'

‘Just good to see you back!’ And Scale spun him helplessly around like a husband with his new bride, gave him a fleeting view of Pale-as-Snow and White-Eye Hansul. Neither of them looked like hugging Calder any time soon. The eyes on him from the Named Men scattered about the clearing were no more enthusiastic. Men he recognised from way back, kneeling to his father or sitting at the long table or cheering victory in the good old days. No doubt they were wondering whether they’d have to take Calder’s orders now, and not much caring for the idea. Why would they? Scale was all those things warriors admire – loyal, strong and brave beyond the point of stupidity. Calder was none of them, and everyone knew it.

‘What happened to your head?’ he asked, once Scale had let his feet touch earth again.

‘This? Bah. Nothing.’ Scale tore the bandage off and tossed it away. It didn’t look like nothing, his yellow hair matted brown with dry blood on one side. ‘Seems you’ve a wound of your own though.’ Patting Calder’s bruised lip none too gently. ‘Some woman bite you?’

‘If only. Brodd Tenways tried to have me killed.’

‘What?’

‘Really. He sent three men after me to Caul Reachey’s camp. Luckily Deep and Shallow were looking out and … you know …’

Scale was moving fast from bafflement to fury, his two favourite emotions and never much of a gap between the two, little eyes opening wider and wider until the whites showed all the way around. ‘I’ll kill the rotten old bastard!’ He started to draw a sword, as if he was going to charge off through the woods to the ruin where Black Dow had their father’s chair and slaughter Brodd Tenways on the spot.

‘No, no, no!’ Calder grabbed his wrist with both hands, managed to stop him getting his sword from the sheath and was nearly dragged off his feet doing it.

‘Fuck him!’ Scale shrugged Calder off, punched the nearest tree trunk with one gauntleted fist and tore a chunk of bark off it. ‘Fuck the shit out of him! Let’s kill him! Let’s just *kill* him!’ He punched it again and brought a shower of seeds fluttering down. White-Eye Hansul looked on warily, Pale-as-Snow looked on wearily, both giving the strong impression this wasn’t the first rage they’d had to deal with.

‘We can’t run around killing important people,’ coaxed Calder, palms up.

‘He tried to kill you, didn’t he?’

‘I’m a special case. Half the North wants me dead.’ That was a lie, it was closer to three-quarters. ‘And we’ve no proof.’ Calder put his hand on Scale’s shoulder and spoke softly, the way their father used to. ‘It’s politics, brother. Remember? It’s a delicate balance.’

‘Fuck politics and shit on the balance!’ But the rage had flickered down now. Far enough that there was no danger of Scale’s eyes popping out of his head. He rammed his sword back, hilt snapping against the scabbard. ‘Can’t we just fight?’

Calder took a long breath. How could this unreasoning thug be his father’s son? And his father’s heir, besides? ‘There’ll be a time to fight, but for now we need to tread carefully. We’re short on allies, Scale. I spoke to Reachey, and he won’t move against me but he won’t move for.’

‘Creeping bloody coward!’ Scale raised his fist to punch the tree again and Calder pushed it gently down with one finger.

‘Just worried for his daughter.’ And he wasn’t the only one. ‘Then there’s Ironhead and Golden, neither too well disposed to us. If it weren’t for their feud with each other I daresay they’d have been begging Dow for the chance to kill me.’

Scale frowned. ‘You think Dow was behind it?’

‘How could he not be?’ Calder had to squeeze down his frustration and his voice with it. He’d forgotten how much talking to his brother could be like talking to a tree stump. ‘And anyway, Reachey had it from Dow’s own mouth that he wants me dead.’

Scale shook his head, worried. ‘I hadn’t heard that.’

‘He’s not likely to tell you, is he?’

‘But he had you hostage.’ Scale’s brow was wrinkled with the effort of thinking it out. ‘Why let you come back?’

‘Because he’s hoping I’ll start plotting, and then he’ll be able to bring it all out and hang me nice and fair.’

‘Don’t plot, then, you should be right enough with everyone.’

‘Don’t be an *idiot.’* A couple of Carls looked up from their water cups, and he pushed his voice back down. Scale could afford to lose his temper, Calder couldn’t. ‘We need to protect ourselves. We have enemies everywhere.’

‘True, and there’s one you haven’t talked about at all. Most dangerous of the lot, far as I can tell.’ Calder froze for a moment, wondering who he might have left out of his calculations. ‘The fucking Union!’ Scale pointed through the trees towards the south with one thick finger. ‘Kroy, and the Dogman, and their forty thousand soldiers! The ones we’ve been fighting a war against! I’ve been, anyway.’

‘That’s Black Dow’s war, not mine.’

Scale slowly shook his head. ‘Did you ever think it might be the easier, cheaper, safer path just to do what you’re told?’

‘Thought about it, decided against. What we need—’

‘Listen to me.’ Scale came close, looking him right in the eye. ‘There’s a battle coming, and we have to fight. Do you understand? This is the North. We have to fight.’

‘Scale—’

‘You’re the clever one. Far cleverer than me, everyone knows it. The dead know I know it.’ He leaned closer still. ‘But the men won’t follow cleverness. Not without strength. You have to earn their respect.’

‘Huh.’ Calder glanced around at the hard eyes in the trees. ‘Can’t I just borrow it from you?’

‘One day I might not be here, and you’ll need some respect of your own. You don’t have to wade in blood. You just have to share the hardships and share the danger.’

Calder gave a watery smile. ‘It’s the danger that scares me.’ He wasn’t over keen on the hardships either, if the truth be known.

‘Fear is good.’ Easy for him to say whose skull was so thick fear couldn’t get in. ‘Our father was scared every day of his life. Kept him sharp.’ Scale took Calder’s shoulder in a grip that wasn’t to be resisted and turned him to face south. Between the trunks of the trees at the edge of the woods he could see a long expanse of fields, gold, and green, and fallow brown. The western spur of the Heroes loomed up on the left, Skarling’s finger sticking from the top, the grey streak of a road through the crops at its foot. ‘That track leads to the Old Bridge. Dow wants us to take it.’

‘Wants *you* to take it.’

‘Us. It’s barely defended. Do you have a shield?’

‘No.’ Nor the slightest wish to go where he might need one.

‘Pale-as-Snow, lend me your shield there.’

The waxy-faced old warrior handed it over to Calder. Painted white, appropriately enough. It had been a long time since he'd handled one, battered about a courtyard at sword practice, and he'd forgotten how much the damn things weighed. The feel of it on his arm brought back ugly memories of old humiliations, most of them at his brother's hands. But they'd probably be eclipsed by new ones before the day was out. If he lived through it.

Scale patted Calder on his sore cheek again. Unpleasantly firm, again. 'Stay close to me and keep your shield up, you'll get through all right.' He jerked his head towards the men scattered in the trees. 'And they'll think more of you just for seeing you up front.'

'Right.' Calder hefted the shield with scant enthusiasm.

'Who knows?' His brother slapped him on the back and nearly knocked him over. 'Maybe you will too.'

Ours Not to Reason Why

‘You just love that bloody horse, don’t you, Tunny?’

‘She makes better conversation than you, Forest, that’s for sure, and she’s a damn sight better than walking. Aren’t you, my darling?’ He nuzzled at her long face and fed her an extra handful of grain. ‘My favourite animal in the whole bloody army.’

He felt a tap on his arm. ‘Corporal?’ It was Yolk, looking off towards the hill.

‘No, Yolk, I’m afraid to say you’re nowhere near. In fact you need to work hard at not being my least favourite animal—’

‘No, Corporal. Ain’t that that Gurts?’

Tunny frowned. ‘Gorst.’ The neckless swordsman was riding across the river from the direction of the orchards on the far bank, horse’s hooves dashing up spray, armour glinting dully in what had turned out to be bright sunlight. He spurred up the bank and into the midst of the regiment’s officers, almost knocking one young lieutenant down. Tunny might have been amused, except there was something about Gorst that drained all the laughs from the world. He swung from the saddle, nimbly for all his bulk, lumbered straight up to Colonel Vallimir and gave a stiff salute.

Tunny tossed his brush down and took a few steps towards them, watching closely. Long years in the military had given him a razor-keen sense of when he was about to get fucked, and he was having a painful premonition right now. Gorst spoke for a few moments, face a blank slab. Vallimir shook an arm at the hill, then off to the west. Gorst spoke again.

Tunny edged closer, trying to catch the details. Vallimir flung up his hands in frustration, then stalked over, shouting.

'First Sergeant Forest!

'Sir.'

'Apparently there's a path through those bogs to our west.'

'Sir?'

'General Jalenhorm wants us to send the First Battalion through it. Make sure the Northmen can't use it against us.'

'The bog beyond the Old Bridge?'

'Yes.'

'We won't be able to get horses through that—'

'I know.'

'We only just got them back, sir.'

'I know.'

'But … what will we do with them in the meantime?'

'You'll just have to bloody well leave them here!' snapped Vallimir. 'Do you think I like sending half my regiment across a bloody bog without their horses? Do you?'

Forest worked his jaw, scar down his cheek shifting. 'No, sir.'

Vallimir strode away, beckoning over some of the officers. Forest stood a moment, rubbing fiercely at the back of his head.

'Corporal?' whispered Yolk, in a small voice.

'Yes?'

'Is this another example of everyone shitting on the head of the man below?'

'Very good, Yolk. We may make a soldier of you yet.'

Forest stopped in front of them, hands on hips, frowning off upriver. 'Seems the First Battalion have a mission.'

'Marvellous,' said Tunny.

'We'll be leaving our horses here and heading west to cross that bog.' A chorus of groans greeted him. 'You think I like it? Get packed and get moving!' And Forest stomped off to break the happy news elsewhere.

'How many men in the battalion?' muttered Lederlingen.

Tunny took a long breath. 'About five hundred when we left Adua. Currently four hundred, give or take a recruit or two.'

'Four hundred men?' said Klige. 'Across a bog?'

‘What sort of a bog is it?’ muttered Worth.

‘A bog!’ Yolk squealed, like a tiny, angry dog yapping at a bigger one. ‘A bloody bog! A massive load of mud! What other sort of bog would it be?’

‘But …’ Lederlingen stared after Forest, and then at his horse, onto which he’d just loaded most of his gear and some of Tunny’s. ‘This is stupid.’

Tunny rubbed at his tired eyes with finger and thumb. How often had he had to explain this to a set of recruits? ‘Look. You think how stupid people are most of the time. Old men drunk. Women at a village fair. Boys throwing stones at birds. Life. The foolishness and the vanity, the selfishness and the waste. The *pettiness,* the *silliness.* You think in a war it must be different. Must be better. With death around the corner, men united against hardship, the cunning of the enemy, people must think harder, faster, be … better. Be *heroic.’*

He started to heave his packages down from his horse’s saddle. ‘Only it’s just the same. In fact, do you know, because of all that pressure, and worry, and fear, it’s worse. There aren’t many men who think clearest when the stakes are highest. So people are even stupider in a war than the rest of the time. Thinking about how they’ll dodge the blame, or grab the glory, or save their skins, rather than about what will actually *work.* There’s no job that forgives stupidity more than soldiering. No job that encourages it more.’

He looked at his recruits and found they were all staring back, horrified. Except for an oblivious Yolk, straining on tiptoe to get his spear down from his horse, perhaps the largest in the regiment. ‘Never mind,’ he snapped. ‘This bog won’t cross itself.’ He turned his back on them, patted his horse gently on the neck and sighed. ‘Oh well, old girl. Guess you’ll have to manage a little longer without me.’

Cry Havoc and …

Scorry was cutting hair when Craw got back to his dozen, or the seven who were left, leastways. Eight including him. He wondered if there'd ever been a dozen that actually had the full twelve. Sure as hell his never had. Agrick sat on a fallen tree trunk all coated with ivy, frowning into nowhere as the shears snip-snipped around his face.

Whirrun was leaning against a tree, the Father of Swords stood up on its point and the hilt cradled in his folded arms. He'd stripped his shirt off for some reason and stood there in a leather vest, a big grey stain of old sweat down the front and his long, sinewy arms sticking out. Seemed as if the more dangerous things got the more clothes he liked to lose. Probably have his arse out by the time they were finished with this valley.

'Craw!' he shouted, lifting his sword and shaking it around.

'Hey, Chief.' Drofd sitting on a branch above with back against trunk. Whittling a stick for an arrow shaft, shavings fluttering down.

'Black Dow didn't kill you, then?' asked Wonderful.

'Not right on the spot, anyway.'

'Did he tell you what's to do?' Yon nodded towards the men crowding the woods all around. He had a lot less hair than when Craw left and it made him look older somehow, creases around his eyes and grey in his brows Craw never noticed before. 'I get the feeling Dow's planning to go.'

'That he is.' Craw winced as he squatted down in the brush, peering south. Seemed a different world out there beyond the treeline. All dark and comforting under the leaves. Quiet, like being sunk in cool water. All bathed in harsh sunlight outside. Yellow-brown barley under the blue sky,

the Heroes bulging up vivid green from the valley, the old stones on top, still standing their pointless watch.

Craw pointed over to their left, towards Osrung, the town no more'n a hint of a high fence and a couple of grey towers over the crops. 'Reachey's going to move first, make a charge on Osrung.' He found he was whispering, even though the Union were a good few hundred strides away on top of a hill and could hardly have heard him if he screamed. 'He'll be carrying all the standards, make it look like that's the big push. Hope to draw some men down off the Heroes.'

'Reckon they'll fall for that?' asked Yon. 'Pretty thin, ain't it?'

Craw shrugged. 'Any trick looks thin to them who know it's coming.'

'Don't make too much difference whether they go or not, though.' Whirrun was stretching now, hanging from a tree branch, sword slung over his back. 'We still got the same hill to climb.'

'Might help if there's half as many Union at the top when we get there,' Drofd tossed down from his own perch.

'Let's hope they fall for it then, eh?' Craw moved his hand to the right, towards the field and pasture between Osrung and the Heroes. 'If they do send men down from the hill, that's when Golden's going with his horse. Catch those boys trousers down in the open and spill 'em all the way back to the river.'

'Drown those fuckers,' grunted Agrick, with rare bloodthirstiness.

'Meantime Dow's going to make the main effort. Straight at the Heroes, Ironhead and Tenways alongside with all their lads.'

'How's he going to work it?' asked Wonderful, rubbing at her new scar.

Craw gave her a look. 'Black Dow, ain't it? He's going to run up there head on and make mud of everything ain't mud already.'

'And us?'

Craw swallowed. 'Aye. We'll be along.'

'Front and centre, eh?'

'Up that bloody hill again?' growled Yon.

'Almost makes you wish we'd fought the Union for it last time,' said Whirrun, swinging from one branch to another.

Craw pointed to their right. 'Scale's over there in the woods under Salt Fell. Once Dow's made his move, he's going to charge his horsemen down the Ustred Road and snatch the Old Bridge. Him and Calder.'

Amazing how much Yon could disapprove with just a shake of his head. ‘Your old mate Calder, eh?’

‘That’s right.’ Craw looked straight at him. ‘My old mate Calder.’

‘Then this lovely valley and all its nothing much shall be ours!’ sang Whirrun. ‘Again.’

‘Dow’s, at any rate,’ said Wonderful.

Drofd was counting the names off on his fingers. ‘Reachey, Golden, Ironhead, Tenways, Scale and Dow himself … that’s a lot o’ men.’

Craw nodded. ‘Might be the most ever fought for the North in one spot.’

‘There’s going to be quite a battle here,’ said Yon. ‘Quite the hell of a battle.’

‘One for the songs!’ Whirrun had hooked his legs over the branch and was hanging upside down now, for some reason best known to his self.

‘We’re going to make a right mess o’ those Southerners.’ Drofd didn’t sound entirely convinced, though.

‘By the dead, I hope so,’ mouthed Craw.

Yon edged forwards. ‘Did you get our gild, Chief?’

Craw winced. ‘Dow weren’t in the mood to bring it up.’ There was a round of groans at that, just like he’d known there would be. ‘I’ll get it later, don’t worry. It’s owed and you’ll get it. I’ll talk to Splitfoot.’

Wonderful sucked her teeth. ‘You’d be better trying to get sense from Whirrun than coin out o’ Splitfoot.’

‘I heard that!’ called Whirrun.

‘Think on this,’ said Craw, slapping Yon’s chest with the back of his hand. ‘You get up that hill you’ll be owed another gild. Two at once. Ain’t going to be time to spend it now anyway, is there? We got a battle to fight.’

That much no one could argue with. Men were moving through the woods now, all geared-up and ready. Rustling and rattling, whispering and clattering, forming a kneeling line stretching off both ways between the tree trunks. Sunlight came ragged through the branches, patching on frowning faces, glinting on helmet and drawn sword.

‘When were we last in a proper battle, anyway?’ muttered Wonderful.

‘There was that skirmish down near Ollensand,’ said Craw.

Yon spat. ‘Don’t hardly call that proper.’

‘Up in the High Places,’ said Scorry, finishing the cutting and brushing the hair from Agrick’s shoulders. ‘Trying to prise Ninefingers out of that

bloody crack of a valley.'

'Seven years ago, was it? Eight?' Craw shuddered at the memory of that nightmare, scores of fighters crowded into a gap in the rock so tight no one could hardly breathe, so tight no one could swing, just prick at each other, knee at each other, bite at each other. Never thought he'd come through that little slice of horror alive. Why the hell would a man choose to risk it again?

He looked at that shallow bowl of crop-filled country between the woods and the Heroes. Looked a bloody long way for an old man with more'n one dodgy leg to run. Glorious charges came up a lot in the songs, but there was one advantage to the defensive no one could deny – the enemy come to you. He shifted from one leg to the other, trying to find the best spot for his knee, and his ankle, and his hip, but a variety of agony was the best he could manage. He snorted to himself. True of life in general, that was.

He looked around to check his dozen were all ready. Got quite the shock to see Black Dow himself down on one knee in the ferns not ten strides distant, axe in one hand, sword in the other, Splitfoot and Shivers and his closest Carls at his back. He'd put aside his furs and finery and looked about like any other man in the line. Except for his fierce grin, like he was looking forward to this as much as Craw was wondering if there was a way free of it.

'Nobody get killed, aye?' He looked around 'em all as he pressed Scorry's hand. They all shook their heads, gave frowns or nervous grins, said 'no', or 'aye', or 'not me'. All except Brack, sat staring out towards the trees like he was on his own, sweat beading his big, pale face.

'Don't get killed, eh, Brack?'

The hillman looked at Craw as if he'd only just realised he was there. 'What?'

'You all right?'

'Aye.' Taking Craw's hand and giving it a clammy press. ''Course.'

'That leg good to run on?'

'I've had more pain taking a shit.'

Craw raised his brows. 'Well, a good shit can be quite punishing, can't it?'

'Chief.' Drofd nodded over towards the light beyond the trees and Craw hunched a little lower. There were men moving out there. Mounted men,

though only their heads and shoulders showed from where Craw was crouching.

'Union scouts,' whispered Wonderful in his ear. Dogman's lads, maybe, worked their way through the fields and the farmhouses and were casting out towards the treeline. The forest the whole length of the valley was crawling with armed and armoured Northmen. It was a wonder they weren't seen yet.

Dow knew it, 'course. He coolly waved his axe over to the east, like he was asking for some beer to be brought over. 'Best tell Reachey to go, 'fore they spoil our surprise.' The word went out, that same gesture of Dow's arm copied down the line in a wave.

'Here we bloody go again, then,' grunted Craw between chewing on his nails.

'Here we go,' Wonderful forced through tight lips, sword drawn in her hand.

'I'm too old for this shit.'

'Yep.'

'Should've married Colwen.'

'Aye.'

'High time I retired.'

'True.'

'Could you stop fucking agreeing with me?'

'Ain't that the point of a Second? Support the Chief, no matter what! So I agree. You're too old and you should've married Colwen and retired.'

Craw sighed as he offered his hand. 'My thanks for your support.'

She gave it a squeeze. 'Always.'

The deep, low blast of Reachey's horn throbbed out from the east. Seemed to make the earth buzz, tickle at the roots of Craw's hair. More horns, then came the feet, like distant thunder mixed with metal. He strained forwards, peering between the black tree trunks, trying to get a glimpse of Reachey's men. Could hardly see more than a few of Osrung's roofs across the sun-drenched fields. Then the war cries started, floating out over the valley, echoing through the trees like ghosts. Craw felt his skin tingling, part fear at what was coming and part wanting to spring up and add his own voice to the clamour.

‘Soon enough,’ he whispered, licking his lips as he stood, hardly noticing the pain in his leg no more.

‘I’d say so.’ Whirrun came up beside him, Father of Swords drawn and held under the crosspiece, his other hand pointing towards the Heroes. ‘Do you see that, Craw?’ Looked like there might be men moving at the top of the green slopes. Gathering around a standard, maybe. ‘They’re coming down. Going to be a happy meeting with Golden’s lads out in those fields, ain’t it?’ He gave his soft, high chuckle. ‘A happy meeting.’

Craw slowly shook his head. ‘Ain’t you worried at all?’

‘Why? Didn’t I say? Shoglig told me the time and place of my death, and —’

‘It’s not here and it’s not now, aye, only about ten thousand bloody times.’ Craw leaned in to whisper. ‘Did she tell you whether you’d get both your legs cut off here, though?’

‘No, that she didn’t,’ Whirrun had to admit. ‘But what difference would that make to my life, will you tell me? You can still sit around a fire and talk shit with no legs.’

‘Maybe they’ll cut your arms off too.’

‘True. If that happens … I’ll have to at least consider retirement. You’re a good man, Curnden Craw.’ And Whirrun poked him in the ribs. ‘Maybe I’ll pass the Father of Swords on to you, if you’re still breathing when I cross to the distant shore.’

Craw snorted. ‘I ain’t carrying that bastard thing around.’

‘You think I *chose* to carry it? Daguf Col picked me out for the task, on his death-pyre after the Shanka tore out his innards. Purplish.’

‘What?’

‘His innards. It has to go to someone, Craw. Ain’t you the one always saying there’s a right way to do things? Has to go to someone.’

They stood in silence for a moment longer, peering into the brightness beyond the trees, the wind stirring the leaves and making them rustle, shaking a few dry bits of green down onto the spears, and helmets, and shoulders of all those men kneeling in the brush. Birds chirping in the branches, tweet bloody tweet, and even quieter the distant screaming of Reachey’s charge.

Men were moving on the eastern flank of the Heroes. Union men, coming down. Craw rubbed his sweaty palms together, and drew his sword.

‘Whirrun.’

‘Aye?’

‘You ever wonder if Shoglig might’ve been wrong?’

‘Every bloody fight I get into.’

Devoutly to be Wished

Your August Majesty,

General Jalenhorm's division has reached the town of Osrung, seized the crossings of the river with the usual focused competence, and the Sixth and Rostod Regiments have taken up a strong position on a hill the Northmen call the Heroes. From its summit one receives a commanding view of the country for miles around, including the all-important road north to Carleon, but, aside from a dead fire, we have seen no sign of the enemy.

The roads continue to be our most stubborn antagonists. The leading elements of General Mitterick's division have reached the valley, but become thoroughly entangled with the rearmost units of Jalenhorm's, making—

Gorst looked up sharply. He had caught the faintest hint of voices on the wind, and though he could not make out the words there was no mistaking a note of frantic excitement.

Probably deluding myself. I have a talent for it. There was no sign of excitement here behind the river. Men were scattered about the south bank, lazing in the sun while their horses grazed contentedly around them. One coughed on a chagga pipe. Another group were singing quietly as they passed around a flask. Not far away their commander, Colonel Vallimir, was arguing with a messenger over the precise meaning of General Jalenhorm's latest order.

'I see that, but the general asks you to hold your current position.'

‘Hold, by all means, but on the road? Did he not mean for us to cross the river? Or at least arrange ourselves on the bank? I have lost one battalion across a bog and now the other is in everyone’s way!’ Vallimir pointed out a dust-covered captain whose company was stalled in grumbling column further down the road. Possibly one of the companies the regiments on the hill were missing. *Or not.* The captain was not offering the information and no one was seeking it out. ‘The general cannot have meant for us to sit *here,* surely you see that!’

‘I do see that,’ droned the messenger, ‘but the general asks you to hold your current position.’

Only the usual random incompetence. A team of bearded diggers tramped past in perfect unison, shovels shouldered and faces stern. *The most organised body of men I’ve seen today, and probably his Majesty’s most valuable soldiers too.* The army’s appetite for holes was insatiable. Fire-pits, grave-pits, latrine-pits, dugouts and dig-ins, ramparts and revetments, ditches and trenches of every shape, depth and purpose imaginable and some that would never come to you in a month of thinking. *Truly the spade is mightier than the sword. Perhaps, instead of blades, generals should wear gilded trowels as the badge of their vocation. So much for excitement.*

Gorst turned his attention back to his letter, wrinkled his lip as he realised he had made an unsightly inkblot and crumpled it angrily in his fist.

Then the wind wafted up again and carried more shouts to his ear. *Do I truly hear it? Or do I only want to so badly that I am imagining it?* But a few of the troopers around him were frowning up towards the hill as well. Gorst’s heart was suddenly thumping, his mouth dry. He stood and walked towards the water like a man under a spell, eyes fixed on the Heroes. He thought he could see men moving there now, tiny figures on the hill’s grassy flank.

He crunched down the shingle to where Vallimir was standing, still arguing pointlessly over which side of the river his men should be doing nothing on. *I suspect that might soon be irrelevant.* He prayed it would be.

‘… But surely the general does not—’

‘Colonel Vallimir.’

‘What?’

‘You should ready your men.’

‘I should?’

Gorst did not for a moment take his eyes from the Heroes. From the silhouettes of soldiers on the eastern slope. A considerable body of them. No messengers had crossed the shallows from Marshal Kroy. Which meant the only reason he could see for so many men to be leaving the hill was … *an attack by the Northmen elsewhere. An attack, an attack, an attack …*

He realised he was still gripping his half-finished letter white-knuckle hard. He let the crumpled paper flutter down into the river, to be carried spinning away by the current. More voices came, even more shrill than before, no question now that they were real.

'That sounds like shouting,' said Vallimir.

A fierce joy had begun to creep up Gorst's throat and made his voice rise higher than ever. He did not care. 'Get them ready now.'

'To do what?'

Gorst was already striding towards his horse. 'Fight.'

Casualties

Captain Lasmark thrashed through the barley at something between a brisk walk and a jog, the Ninth Company of the Rostod Regiment toiling after him as best they could, despatched towards Osrung with the ill-defined order to ‘get at the enemy!’ still ringing in their ears.

The enemy were before them now, all right. Lasmark could see scaling ladders against the mossy logs of the town’s fence. He could see missiles flitting up and down. He could see standards flapping in the breeze, a ragged black one over all the rest, the standard of Black Dow himself, the Northern scouts had said. That was when General Jalenhorm had given the order to advance, and made it abundantly clear nothing would change his mind.

Lasmark turned, hoping he wouldn’t trip and catch a mouthful of barley, and urged his men forward with what was intended to be a soldierly jerk of the hand.

‘On! On! To the town!’

It was no secret General Jalenhorm was prone to poorly considered orders, but saying so would have been terrible form. Usually officers quietly ignored him where possible and creatively interpreted him where not. But there was no room for interpretation in a direct order to attack.

‘Steady, men, keep even!’

They kept even to no noticeable degree, indeed in the main they appeared rather ragged and reluctant, and Lasmark could hardly blame them. He didn’t much care for charging unsupported into an empty mass of barley himself, especially since a good part of the regiment was still clogged up in the shambles of men and equipment on the bad roads south of the river. But

an officer has his duty. He had made representations to Major Popol, and the major had made representations to Colonel Wetterlant of the Sixth, who was ranking officer on the hill. The colonel had appeared too busy to take much notice. The battlefield was no place for independent thought, Lasmark supposed, and perhaps his superiors simply knew better than he did.

Alas, experience did not support that conclusion.

'Careful! Watch the treeline!'

The treeline was some distance away to the north and seemed to Lasmark particularly gloomy and threatening. He did not care to imagine how many men could be concealed in its shadows. But then he thought that whenever he saw woods, and the North was bloody full of them. It was unclear what good watching them would do. Besides, there was no turning back now. On their right, Captain Vorna was urging his company ahead of the rest of the regiment, desperate to get into the action, as ever, so he could go home with a chestful of medals and spend the balance of his life boasting.

'That fool Vorna's going to pull us all out of formation,' growled Sergeant Lock.

'The captain is simply obeying orders!' snapped Lasmark and then, under his breath, 'The arsehole. Forward, men, at the double!' If the Northmen did come, the worst thing of all would be to leave gaps in the line.

They upped the pace, all tiring, men occasionally catching a boot and sprawling in the crops, their order fraying with every stride. They might have been half way between the hill and the town now, Major Popol in the lead on horseback, waving his sabre and bellowing inaudible encouragements.

'Sir!' roared Lock. 'Sir!'

'I bloody know,' gasped Lasmark, no breath to spare for moaning now, 'I can't hear a word he's … oh.'

He saw what Lock was desperately stabbing towards with his drawn sword and felt a horrible wave of cold surprise. There is a gulf of difference, after all, between expecting the worst and seeing it happen. Northmen had broken from the woods and were rushing across the pastures towards them. It was hard to tell how many from this angle – the dipping ground was cut up by ditches and patchy hedgerows – but Lasmark felt himself go colder yet as his eyes registered the width of their front, the glimmer of metal, the dots of colour that were their painted shields.

The Rostod Regiment was outnumbered. Several companies were still following Popol blithely off towards Osrung where even more Northmen waited. Others had stopped, aware of the approaching threat on their left and seeking desperately to form lines. The Rostod Regiment was heavily outnumbered, and out of formation, and caught unsupported in the open.

'Halt!' he screamed, rushing into the barley ahead of his company, spinning about and throwing his arms up at his men. 'Form line! Facing north!' That was the best thing to do, wasn't it? What else could they do? His soldiers began to perform a shambolic mockery of a wheel, some faces purposeful, others panicked as they scrambled into position.

Lasmark drew his sword. He'd picked it up cheap, an antique, really, the hilt was prone to rattle. He'd paid less for it than he had for his dress hat. That seemed a foolish decision now. But then one sword looked much like another and Major Popol had been very particular about the appearance of his officers on parade. They were not on parade now, more the pity. Lasmark glanced over his shoulder, found he was chewing so hard at his lip he could taste blood. The Northmen were closing swiftly. 'Archers, ready your bows, spearmen to the—'

The words froze in his throat. Cavalry had emerged from behind a village even further to their left. A considerable body of cavalry, bearing down on their flank, hooves threshing up a pall of dust. He heard the gasps of alarm, felt the mood shift from worried resolve to horror.

'Steady!' he shouted, but his own voice quavered. When he turned, many of his men were already running. Even though there was nowhere to run to. Even though their chances running were even worse than they were fighting. A calm assessment of the odds was evidently not foremost in their minds. He saw the other companies falling apart, scattering. He caught a glimpse of Major Popol bouncing in his saddle as he rode full tilt for the river, no longer interested in presentation. Perhaps if captains had horses Lasmark would have been right beside him. But captains didn't get horses. Not in the Rostod Regiment. He really should have joined a regiment where the captains got horses, but then he could never have afforded one. He'd had to borrow the money to purchase his captaincy at an outrageous interest and had nothing to spare …

The Northmen were already horrifyingly close, breaking through the nearest hedgerow. He could pick out faces across their line. Snarling,

screaming, grinning faces. Like animals, weapons raised high as they bounded on through the barley. Lasmark took a few steps backwards without thinking. Sergeant Lock stood beside him, his jaw muscles clenched.

'Shit, sir,' he said.

Lasmark could only swallow and ready himself as his men flung down their weapons around him. As they turned and ran for the river or the hill, too far, far too far away. As the makeshift line of his company and the company beside them dissolved leaving only a few knots of the most stunned and hard-bitten to face the Northmen. He could see how many there were, now. Hundreds of them. Hundreds upon hundreds. A flung spear impaled a man beside him with a thud, and he fell screaming. Lasmark stared at him for a moment. Stelt. He'd been a baker.

He looked up at the tide of howling men, open-mouthed. You hear about this kind of thing, of course, but you assume it won't happen to you. You assume you're more important than that. He'd done none of the things he'd promised himself he'd do by the time he was thirty. He wanted to drop his sword and sit down. Caught sight of his ring and lifted his hand to look at it. Emlin's face carved into the stone. Didn't look likely he'd be coming back for her now. Probably she'd marry that cousin of hers after all. Marrying cousins, a deplorable business.

Sergeant Lock charged forward, wasted bravery, hacked a lump from the edge of a shield. The shield had a bridge painted on it. He chopped at it again, just as another Northman ran up and hit him with an axe. He was knocked sideways, then back the other way by a sword that left a long scratch across his helmet and a deep cut across his face. He spun, arms up like a dancer, then was barged over in the rush and lost in the barley.

Lasmark sprang at the shield with the bridge, for some reason barely taking note of the man behind it. Perhaps he wanted to pretend there was no man behind it. His sword instructor would have been livid with him. Before he got there a spear caught his breastplate, sent him stumbling. The point scraped past and he swung at the man who thrust it, an ugly-looking fellow with a badly broken nose. The sword split his skull open and brains flew out. It was surprisingly easy to do. Swords are heavy and sharp, he supposed, even cheap ones.

There was a clicking sound and everything turned over, mud thumped and barley tangled him. One of his eyes was dark. There was a ringing, stupidly loud, as if his head was the clapper in a great bell. He tried to get up but the world was spinning. None of the things he'd promised to do by the time he was thirty. Oh. Except join the army.

The Southerner tried to push himself up and Lightsleep knocked him on the back of the head with his mace and bonked his helmet in. One boot kicked a little and he was done.

'Lovely.' The rest of the Union men were all surrounded and going down fast or scattering like a flock o' starlings, just like Golden said they would. Lightsleep knelt, tucked his mace under his arm and started trying to twist a nice-looking ring off the dead Southerner's finger. Couple of other lads were claiming their prizes, one was screaming with blood running down his face, but, you know, it's a battle, ain't it? If everyone came out smiling there'd be no point. Away south Golden's riders were mopping up, driving the fleeing Southerners to the river.

'Turn for the hill!' Scabna was bellowing, pointing at it with his axe, the smug arse. 'To the hill, you bastards!'

'You turn for the hill,' grunted Lightsleep, legs still sore from all that running, throat sore from all that screaming besides. 'Hah!' Finally got the Union lad's ring off. Held it up to the light and frowned. Just some polished rock with a face cut into it, but he guessed it might fetch a couple of silvers. Tucked it into his jerkin. Took the lad's sword for good measure and stuck it through his belt, though it was a light little toothpick of a thing and the hilt rattled.

'Get on!' Scabna dragged one scavenger up and booted him in the arse to set him going. 'Bloody get on!'

'All right, all right!' Lightsleep jogged on after the others, towards the hill. Upset at not getting the chance to go through the Southerners' pockets, maybe get his boots off. It'd all be swept by the pickers and the women following after now. Beggar bastards too cowardly to fight, turning a profit out of other men's work. A disgrace, but he guessed there was no stopping it. Facts of life, like flies and bad weather.

There were Union men up on the Heroes, he could see metal glinting round the drystone wall near the top, spears pricking the sky. He kept his shield up, peering over the rim. Didn't want to get stuck with one of those evil little arrows they used. Get stuck with one o' those, you won't never get yourself unstuck.

'Will you look at that,' Scabna grunted.

Now they'd climbed a little higher they could see all the way to the woods up north, and the land between was full of men. Black Dow's Carls, and Tenways', and Ironhead's too. Thralls surging after. Thousands of 'em, all streaming across towards the Heroes. Lightsleep had never seen so many fighters in one place, not even when he fought with Bethod's army. Not at the Cumnur, or Dunbrec, or in the High Places. He'd half a mind to let 'em take the Heroes while he hung back, maybe pleading a twisted ankle, but he weren't going to raise a sharp dowry for his daughters on a cheap ring and a little sword, now, was he?

They hopped over a ditch patched with brown puddles and were out of the trampled crops at the foot of the slope. 'Up the hill, you bastards!' screeched Scabna, waving his axe.

Lightsleep had swallowed about enough of that fool's carping, only Chief 'cause he was some friend to one of Golden's sons. He twisted sideways, snarling, 'You get up the fucking hill, you—'

There was a thud and an arrowhead stuck out of his jerkin. He spent a silent moment just staring at it, then he took a great whooping breath in and screamed. 'Ah, *fuck!'* He whimpered, shuddered, pain stabbing into his armpit as he tried to breathe again, coughed blood down his front, dropped on his knees.

Scabna stared at him, shield up to cover them both. 'Lightsleep, what the hell?'

'Bloody … I'm stuck right … through.' He had to spit blood out, gurgling with every word. He couldn't kneel any more, it was hurting him too much. He slumped over on his side. Seemed a shitty way to go back to the mud, but maybe they all are. Boots hammered around him as men started thumping up that hill, spraying spots of dirt in his face.

Scabna knelt, started to unbutton Lightsleep's jerkin. 'Let's have a look here.'

Lightsleep couldn't move hardly. Everything was going blurry. 'By the … dead, it … hurts.'

'Bet it does. Where did you put that ring?'

*

Gaunt lowered his bow, watched a few Northmen in the crowd topple over as the rest of the volley flickered down into them. From this height, the bolts from a heavy flatbow could split their shields and punch through chain mail easily as a lady's gown. One of them threw his weapons down and ran off hooting, clutching his stomach, left a gently curving trail through the crops. Gaunt had no way of knowing if his own bolt had found a mark or not, but it hardly mattered. It was all about quantity. Crank, load, level, shoot, crank, load …

'Come on, lads!' he shouted at the men around him. 'Shoot! Shoot!'

'By the Fates,' he heard Rose whisper, voice all choked off, pointing a wavering forefinger towards the north. The enemy were still pouring from the trees in fearsome numbers. The fields were crawling with them already, surging south towards the hill in a dully twinkling tide. But it took more than a pack of angry apes to make Sergeant Gaunt nervy. He'd watched the numberless Gurkish charge their little hill at Bishak and he'd cranked his flatbow just as hard as he could for the best part of an hour and in the end he'd watched them all run back again. Apart from those they left peppered in heaps. He grabbed Rose by the shoulder and steered him back to the wall.

'Never mind about that. The next bolt is all that matters.'

'Sergeant.' And Rose bent over his bow again, pale but set to his task.

'Crank, lads, crank!' Gaunt turned his own at a nice, measured pace, all oiled and clean and working smoothly. Not too fast, not too slow, making sure he did the job right. He fished out another bolt, frowning to himself. No more than ten left in his quiver. 'What happened to that ammunition?' he roared over his shoulder, and then at his own people, 'Pick your targets, nice and careful!' And he stood, levelled his bow, stock pressing into his shoulder.

The sight below gave a moment's pause, even to a man of his experience. The foremost Northmen had reached the hill and were charging up, slowing on the grassy slope but showing no sign of stopping. Their war cry got

worryingly louder as he came up from behind the wall, the vague keening becoming a shrill howl.

He gritted his teeth, aiming low. Squeezed the trigger, felt the jolt, string humming. He saw where this one went, thudding straight into a shield and knocking the man who held it over backwards. Rattle and pop as a dozen or more bows went on his left, two or three Northmen dropping, one shot in the face, going over backwards and his axe spinning into the blue sky.

'That's the recipe, lads, keep shooting! Just load and—' There was a loud click beside him. Gaunt felt a searing pain in his neck, and all the strength went out of his legs.

*

It was an accident. Rose had been tinkering with the trigger of his flatbow for a week or longer, trying to stop it wobbling, worried it might go off at the wrong moment, but he'd never been any good with machines. Why they'd made him a bowman he'd no clue. Would have been better off with a spear. Sergeant Gaunt would have been a lot better off if they'd given Rose a spear, that was a fact most definite. It just went off as he was lifting it, the point of the metal lath leaving a long scratch down his arm. As he was cursing at that, he looked sideways, and Gaunt had the bolt through his neck.

They stared at each other for a moment, then Gaunt's eyes rolled down, crossed, towards the flights, and he dropped his own bow and reached up to his neck. His quivering fingers came away bloody. 'Gurgh,' he said. 'Bwuthers.' And his lids flickered, and he dropped all of a sudden, his skull smacking against the wall and knocking his helmet skewed across his face.

'Gaunt? Sergeant Gaunt?' Rose slapped his cheek as though trying to wake him from an unauthorised nap, smeared blood across his face. There was more and more blood welling out of him all the time. Out of his nose, out of the neat slit where the bolt entered his neck. Oily dark, almost black, and his skin so white.

'He's dead!' Rose felt himself dragged towards the wall. Someone shoved his empty flatbow back into his bloody hands. 'Shoot, damn you! Shoot!' A young officer, one of the new ones, Rose couldn't remember his name. Could hardly remember his own name.

‘What?’

‘Shoot!’

Rose started cranking, aware of other men around him doing the same. Sweating, struggling, cursing, leaning over the wall to shoot. He could hear wounded men screaming, and above that a strange howl. He fumbled a bolt from his quiver, slotted it into the groove, cursing to himself at his trembling fingers, all smeared pink from Gaunt’s blood.

He was crying. There were tears streaming down his face. His hands felt very cold, though it wasn’t cold. His teeth were chattering. The man beside him threw down his bow and ran towards the top of the hill. There were a lot of men running, ignoring the desperate bellows of their officers.

Arrows flitted down. One went spinning from a steel cap just beside him. Others stuck into the hillside behind the wall. Silent, still, as if they’d suddenly sprung from the ground by magic rather than dropped from the sky. Someone else turned to run, but before he got a step the officer cut him down with his sword.

‘For the king!’ he squealed, his eyes gone all mad. ‘For the king!’

Rose had never seen the king. A Northman jumped up on the wall just to his left. He was stabbed with two spears right away, screamed and fell back. The man beside Rose stood, cursing as he raised his flatbow. The top of his head came off and he stumbled, shot his bolt high into the sky. A Northman sprang over the wall into the gap he left, young-looking, face all twisted up with rage. A devil, screaming like a devil. A Union man came at him with a spear but he turned it away with his shield, swung as he dropped from the wall, axe blade thudding into the man’s shoulder and sending blood flying in dark streaks. Northmen were coming over the wall all around. The gap to their left was choked with straining bodies, a tangle of spears, slipping boots ripping at the muddy grass.

Rose’s head was full of mad noise, clash and clatter of weapons and armour, war cries and garbled orders and howls of pain all mingled with his own terrified, whimpering breath. He was just staring, bow forgotten. The young Northerner blocked the officer’s sword and hit him in the side, twisted him up, chopped into his arm on the next blow, hand flying up bonelessly in its embroidered sleeve. The Northman kicked the officer’s legs away and hacked at him on the ground, grin speckled with blood.

Another was clambering over the wall beside him, a big face with a black and grey beard, shouting something in a gravelly voice.

A great tall one with long bare arms leaped clean over the jumble of stones, boots flicking at the grass that sprouted from the top, the biggest sword Rose had ever seen raised high. He didn't see how a man could swing a sword so big. The dull blade took an archer in the side, folded him up and sent him tumbling across the hillside in a mist of blood. It was as if Rose's limbs came suddenly unstuck and he turned and ran, was jostled by someone else doing the same, slipped, ankle twisting. He scrambled up, took one lurching stride, and was hit so hard on the back of his head he bit his tongue off.

Agrick hacked the archer between the shoulder-blades to make sure, haft jolting in his raw hand, sticky with blood. He saw Whirrun struggling with a big Union man, hit him in the back of the leg with his axe, made a mess of it and only caught him with the flat, still hard enough to bring him down where Scorry could spear him as he slipped over the wall.

Agrick never saw Union men in numbers before, and they all looked the same, like copies o' one man with the same armour, the same jackets, the same weapons. It was like killing one man over and over. Hardly like killing real people at all. They were running, now, up the slope, scattering from the wall, and he ran after like a wolf after sheep.

'Slow down Agrick, you mad bastard!' Jolly Yon, wheezing at his back, but Agrick couldn't stop. The charge was a great wave and all he could do was be carried along by it, forwards, upwards, get at them who'd killed his brother. On up the hill, Whirrun at the wall behind, the Father of Swords cutting into a knot of Southerners still standing, hacking 'em apart, armour or not. Brack near him, roaring as he swung his hammer.

'On! Fucking on!' Black Dow himself, lips curled from bloody teeth, shaking his axe at the summit, blade flashing red and steel in the sun. Lit a fire in Agrick knowing his leader was there, fighting beside him in the front rank. He came up level with a stumbling Union man, clawing at the slope, hit him in the face with his axe and knocked him shrieking back.

He burst between two of the great stones, head spinning like he was drunk. Blood-drunk, and needing more. Lots of corpses in the circle of

grass inside the Heroes. Union men hacked in the back, Northmen stuck with arrows.

Someone shouted, and flatbows clattered, and a few dropped around him but Agrick ran right on, towards a flag in the middle of the Union line, voice hoarse from screaming. He chopped an archer down, broken bow tumbling. Swung at the big Southerner carrying the standard. He caught Agrick's first blow with the flagstaff, got it tangled with the blade. Agrick let go, pulled out his knife and stabbed the standard-bearer overhand though the open face of his helmet. He dropped like a hammered cow, mouth yawning all twisted and silent. Agrick tried to drag the standard from his dead-gripping fists, one hand on the pole, the other on the flag itself.

He heard himself make a weird whoop, sounded like someone else's voice. A half-bald man with grey hair round his ears pulled his arm back and his sword slid out of Agrick's side, scraping the bottom rim of his shield. It had been in him right to the hilt, the blade came out all bloody. Agrick tried to swing his axe but he'd dropped it just before and his knife was stuck in the standard-bearer's face, he just flapped his empty hand around. Something hit him in the shoulder and the world reeled.

He was lying in some dirt. A pile of trampled dirt, in the shadow of one of the stones. He had the torn flag in one hand.

He wriggled, but he couldn't get comfortable.

All numb.

Colonel Wetterlant was still having trouble believing it, but it appeared the King's Own Sixth Regiment was in a great deal of difficulty. The wall, he thought, was lost. Knots of resistance but basically overrun, and Northmen were flooding into the circle of stones from the north. Where else would Northmen come from? It had all happened so damnably fast.

'We have to withdraw!' screamed Major Culfer over the din of combat. 'There are too many of them!'

'No! General Jalenhorm will bring reinforcements! He promised us—'

'Then where the hell is he?' Culfer's eyes were bulging. Wetterlant would never have had him down as the panicky type. 'He's left us here to die, he's —'

Wetterlant simply turned away. ‘We stand! We stand and fight!’ He was a proud man of a proud family, and he would stand. He would stand until the bitter end, if necessary, and die fighting with sword in hand, as his grandfather was said to have done. He would die under the regimental colours. Well, he wouldn’t, in fact, because that boy he ran through had torn them from the pole when he fell. But Wetterlant would stand, there was no question. He had often told himself so. Usually while admiring his reflection in the mirror after dressing for one official function or another. Straightening his sash.

These were very different circumstances, however, it had to be admitted. No one was wearing a sash, not even him. And there was the blood, the corpses, the spreading panic. The unearthly wailing of the Northmen, who were flooding through the gaps between the stones and into the trampled circle of grass at their centre. Virtually a constant press of them now, as far as Wetterlant could see. The difficulty with a ring of standing stones as a defensive position is undoubtedly the gaps between them. The Union line, if you could use the phrase about an improvised clump of soldiers and officers fighting desperately wherever they stood, was bulging back under the pressure, in imminent danger of dissolving all together, and with nowhere defensible to dissolve back to.

Orders. He was in command, and had to give orders. ‘Er!’ he shouted, brandishing his sword. ‘Er …’ It had all happened so very, very fast. What orders would Lord Marshal Varuz have given at a time like this? He had always admired Varuz. Unflappable.

Culfer gave a thin scream. A narrow split had appeared in his shoulder, right down to his chest, splinters of white bone showing through it. Wetterlant wanted to tell him not to scream in a manner so unbefitting of an officer in the King’s Own. A scream like that might be good enough for one of the levy regiments, but in the Sixth he expected a manly roar. Culfer almost gracefully subsided to the ground, blood bubbling from the wound, and a large Northman stepped up with an axe in his fist and began to cleave him into pieces.

Wetterlant was vaguely conscious that he should have jumped to the aid of his second-in-command. But he found himself unable to move, fascinated by the Northman’s expression of businesslike calm. As if he was a bricklayer getting a difficult stretch of wall to meet his high standards.

Eventually satisfied by the number of pieces he had made of Culfer – who still, impossibly, seemed to be making a quiet squealing sound – the Northman turned to look at Wetterlant.

The far side of his face was crossed by a giant scar, a bright ball of dead metal in his eye socket.

Wetterlant ran. There was not the slightest thought involved. His mind was turned off like a candle snuffed out. He ran faster than he had in thirty years or more, faster than he thought a man of his years possibly could. He sprang between two of the ancient stones and jolted down the hillside, boots thrashing at the grass, vaguely conscious of other men running all around him, of screams and hisses and threats, of arrows whipping through the air about his head, shoulders itching with the inevitability of death at his back.

He passed the Children, then a column of dumbstruck soldiers who had been on their way up the hill and were just now scattering back down it. His foot found a small depression and the shock made his knee buckle. He bit his tongue, flew headlong, hit the ground and tumbled over and over, no way of stopping himself. He slid into shadow, finally coming to an ungainly stop in a shower of leaves, twigs, dirt.

He rolled stiffly over, groaning. His sword was gone, his right hand red raw. Twisted from his grip as he fell. The blade his father had given him the day he received his commission in the King's Own. So proud. He wondered if his father would have been proud now. He was in among trees. The orchard? He had abandoned his regiment. Or had they abandoned him? The rules of military behaviour, so unshakeable a foundation until a few moments ago, had vanished like smoke in a breeze. It had happened so fast.

His wonderful Sixth Regiment, his life's work, built out of copious polish, and rigorous drill, and unflinching discipline, utterly shattered in a few insane moments. If any survived it would be those who had chosen to run first. The rawest recruits and most craven cowards. And he was one of them. His first instinct was to ask Major Culfer for his opinion. He almost opened his mouth to do it, then realised the man had been butchered by a lunatic with a metal eye.

He heard voices, the sounds of men crashing through the trees, shrank against the nearest trunk, peering around it like a scared child over their bedclothes. Union soldiers. He shuddered with relief, stumbled from his hiding place, waving one arm.

‘You! Men!’

They snapped around, but not at attention. In fact they stared at him as if he was a ghost risen from a grave. He thought he knew their faces, but it seemed they had turned suddenly from the most disciplined of soldiers into trembling, mud-smeared animals. Wetterlant had never been afraid of his own men before, had taken their obedience entirely for granted, but he had no choice but to blather on, his voice shrill with fear and exhaustion.

‘Men of the Sixth! We must hold here! We must—’

‘Hold?’ one of them screeched, and hit Wetterlant with his sword. Not a full-blooded blow, only a jarring knock in the arm that sent him sliding onto his side, gasping more from shock than pain. He cringed as the soldier half-raised the sword again. Then one of the others squealed and scrambled away, and soon they were all running. Wetterlant looked over his shoulder, saw shapes moving through the trees. Heard shouting. A deep voice, and the words were in Northern.

Fear clutched him again and he whimpered, floundered through the slick of twigs and fallen leaves, the slime of rotten fruit smeared up his trouser leg, his own terrified breath echoing in his ears. He paused at the edge of the trees, the back of one sleeve pressed to his mouth. There was blood on his dangling hand. Seeing the torn cloth on his arm made him want to be sick. Was it torn cloth, or torn flesh?

He could not stay here. He would never make it to the river. But he could not stay here. It had to be now. He broke from the undergrowth, running for the shallows. There were other runners everywhere, most of them without weapons. Mad, desperate faces, eyes rolling. Wetterlant saw the cause of their terror. Horsemen. Spread out across the fields, converging on the shallows, herding the fleeing Union soldiers southwards. Cutting them down, trampling them, their howls echoing across the valley. He ran on, ran on, stumbling forwards, snatched another look. A rider was bearing down on him, he could see the curve of his teeth in a tangled beard.

Wetterlant tried to run faster but he was so tired. Lungs burning, heart burning, breath whooping, the land jerking and see-sawing wildly with every step, the glittering hint of the shallows getting gradually closer, the thunder of hooves behind him—

And he was suddenly on his side, in the mud, an unspeakable agony burning out from his back. A crushing pressure on his chest as if there were

rocks piled on it. He managed to move his head to look down. There was something glinting there. Something shining on his jacket in the midst of the dirt. Like a medal. But he hardly deserved a medal for running away.

'How silly,' he wheezed, and the words tasted like blood. He found to his surprise, and then to his mounting horror, that he could not breathe. It had all happened so very, very fast.

Sutt Brittle tossed the splintered shaft of his spear away. The rest was stuck in the back of that running fool. He'd run fast, for an old man, but not near as fast as Sutt's horse, which was no surprise. He hauled the old sword out, keeping the reins in his shield hand, and dug in his heels. Golden had promised a hundred gold coins to the first of his Named Men across the river, and Brittle wanted that money. Golden had showed it, in an iron box. Let 'em feel it, even, everyone's eyes on fire with looking at it. Strange coins, a head stamped on each side. Came from the desert, far away, someone had said. Sutt didn't know how Glama Golden came by desert coins, but he couldn't say he much cared either.

Gold was gold.

And this was almost too easy. The Union ran – knackered, stumbling, crying, and Sutt just leaned from the saddle and chopped 'em down, one side then t'other, whack, whack, whack. It was this Sutt got into the business for, not the skulking around and scouting they'd been doing, the pulling back over and over, trying to find the right spot and never getting there. He hadn't joined the grumblers, though, not him. He'd said Black Dow would bring 'em a red day afore too long, and here it was.

All the killing was slowing him down, though. Frowning over into the wind on his left he saw he weren't quite at the front of the pack no more. Feathers had pulled ahead, bent low over his saddle, not bothering about the work and just riding straight through the rabbiting Southerners and down the bank into the shallows.

Sutt was damned if he was going to let a liar like Hengul Feathers steal his hundred coins. He dug his heels harder, wind and mane whipping at his eyes, tongue wedged into the big gap in his teeth. He plunged down into the river, water showering, Union men flailing up to their hips around him. He

urged his horse on, eyes for nothing but Feathers' back as he trotted up onto the shingle and—

Went flying out of his saddle, war whoop cut off in a spray of blood.

Brittle weren't sure whether to be pleased or not as Feathers' corpse flopped over and over into the water. On the sunny side it looked like he was at the front of Golden's whole crew now. On the shady, there was a strange-looking bastard bearing down on him, well armoured and well horsed, short sword and the reins in one hand, long sword ready in the other, catching the sun and glistening with Feathers' blood. He had a plain round helmet with a slot in the front to see through and nothing but a big mouthful of gritted teeth showing below it. Riding at Golden's cavalry all on his own while the rest of the Union fled the other way.

In the midst of all Sutt's greed and bloodlust he felt this niggling moment of doubt made him check his horse to the right, get his shield between him and this steel-headed bastard. Just as well, 'cause a twinkling later his sword crashed into Sutt's shield and nearly ripped it off his arm. The shorter one came stabbing at him before the noise had faded, would've stuck him right in the chest if his own sword hadn't got in the way by blind chance.

By the dead he was fast, this bastard. Sutt couldn't believe how fast he was in all that armour. The swords came flickering out of nowhere. Sutt managed to block the short blade, the force of it near dumping him from the saddle. Tried to swing himself as he rocked back, screaming at the top of his lungs. 'Die, you fucking— Uh?' His right hand wasn't there. He stared at the stump, blood squirting out of it. How had that happened? He saw something at the corner of his eye, felt a great crunching in his chest, and his howl of pain was cut off in a squawk of his own.

He was flung straight out of his saddle, no breath in him, and splashed down in the cold water where there was nothing but bubbles gurgling around his face.

Even before the gap-toothed Northman had toppled from his horse, Gorst had twisted in his saddle and brought his long steel blurring down on the other side. The next one had a patchy fur across his shoulders, managed to raise his axe to parry, but it was wasted effort. Gorst's blow splintered the haft and drove the pick on the back deep into him below the collarbone, the

point of Gorst's long steel opening a gaping red wound in his neck. *A touch to me.*

The man was just opening his mouth, presumably to scream, when Gorst stabbed him through the side of the head with his short steel so the point came out of his cheek. *And another.* Gorst wrenched it free in time to deflect a sword with his buckler, shrug the blade harmlessly off his armoured shoulder. Someone clutched at him. Gorst smashed his nose apart with the pommel of his long steel. Smashed it again and drove it deep into his head.

They were all around him. The world was a strip of brightness through the slot in his helmet filled with plunging horses, and flailing men, and flashing weapons, his own swords darting by instinct to block, chop, stab, jerking the reins at the same time and dragging his panicked mount about in mindless circles. He swatted another man from his saddle, twisted chain mail rings flying like dust from a beaten carpet. He parried a sword and the tip glanced from his helmet and made his ears ring. Before its owner could swing again he was cut across the back and fell shrieking forward. Gorst caught him in a hug and bundled him down among the thrashing hooves.

Union cavalry were splashing through the shallows around him, meeting the Northmen as they charged in from the north bank and mingling in a clattering, shattering melee. Vallimir's men. *How nice that you could join us!* The river became a mass of stomping hooves and spray, flying metal and blood, and Gorst hacked his way through it, teeth ground together in a frozen smile. *I am home.*

He lost his short steel in the madness, stuck in someone's back and wrenched from his hand. It might have been a Union man. He was a long way from caring. He could scarcely hear a thing apart from his own breath, his own grunts, his own girlish squeaks as he swung, and swung, and swung, denting armour, smashing bone, splitting flesh, every jolting impact up his arm a burning thrill. Every blow like a swallow to a drunkard, better, and better, but never enough.

He chopped a horse's head half-off. The Northman riding it had a look of comical surprise, a clown in a cheap stage show, still pulling at the reins as his flopping mount collapsed under him. A rider squealed, hands full of his own guts. Gorst backhanded him across the head with his buckler and it tore

from his fist with a crash of steel and flew into the air in a fountain of blood and bits of teeth, spinning like a flipped coin. *Heads or tails? Anyone?*

A big Northman sat on a black horse in the midst of the river, chopping around him with an axe. His horned helmet, his armour, his shield, all chased with whorls of gold. Gorst spurred straight through the combat at him, hacking a Northman across the back as he went and dumping another from the saddle by chopping into his horse's hind leg. His long steel was bright red with blood. Slathered with it, like an axle with grease.

It caught the golden shield with a shattering impact, left a deep dent through all that pretty craftsmanship. Gorst chopped at it again and crossed the one scar with another, sent the golden man lurching in his saddle. Gorst lifted his long steel for a finishing blow then felt it suddenly twisted from his hand.

A Northman with a shaggy red beard had knocked it away with a mace and now swung it at Gorst's head. *Bloody rude.* Gorst caught the shaft in one hand, pulled out his dagger in the other and rammed it up under the Northman's jaw to the crosspiece, left it stuck there as he toppled backwards. *Manners, manners.* The golden man had his balance back, standing in the stirrups with his axe raised high.

Gorst clutched hold of him, dragged him into an ungainly embrace between their two jostling horses. The axe came down but the shaft caught Gorst's shoulder and the blade only scraped harmlessly against his backplate. Gorst caught one of the absurd horns on the man's gilded helmet and twisted it, twisted it, twisting his head with it until it was pressed against Gorst's breastplate. The golden man snarled and spluttered, most of the way out of his saddle, one leg caught in his stirrup. He tried to drop his axe and wrestle but it was on a loop around his wrist, snagged on Gorst's armour, his other arm trapped by his battered shield.

Gorst bared his teeth, raised his fist and started punching the man in the face, his gauntlet crunching against one side of the golden helmet. Up and down, up and down, his fist was a hammer and gradually it marked, then dented, then twisted the helmet out of shape until one side of it dug into the man's face. *Even better than the sword.* Crunch, crunch, and it bent further, cutting into his cheek. *More personal.* No need for discussion or justification, for introductions or etiquette, for guilt or excuses. Only the incredible release of violence. So powerful that he felt this golden-armoured

man must be his best friend in all the world. *I love you. I love you, and that is why I must smash your head apart.* He was laughing as he pounded his gauntleted knuckles into the man's bloody-blond moustache again. Laughing and crying at once.

Then something hit him in the backplate with a dull clang, his head snapped back and he was out of the saddle, jostled upside down between their two horses, gripped by cold and his helmet full of bubbling river. He came up coughing, water sprayed in his face by thrashing hooves.

The man in the golden armour had floundered to a riderless horse and was dragging himself drunkenly into the saddle. There were corpses everywhere: horses and men, Union and Northman, sprawled on the shingle, bobbing in the ford, carried gently by the soft current. He hardly saw any Union cavalry left. Only Northmen, weapons raised, nudging their horses cautiously towards him.

Gorst fumbled with the buckle on his helmet and dragged it off, the wind shockingly cold on his face. He clambered to his feet, armour leaden with river water. He held his arms out, as if to embrace a dear friend, and smiled as the nearest Northman raised his sword.

'I am ready,' he whispered.

'Shoot!' There was a volley of clicks and rattles behind him. The Northman toppled from his saddle, stuck through with flatbow bolts. Another shrieked, axe tumbling as he clapped his hand to a bolt in his cheek. Gorst turned, stupidly, to look over his shoulder. The south bank of the shallows was one long row of kneeling flatbowmen. Another rank stepped between them as they started to reload, knelt and levelled their bows with mechanical precision.

A big man sat on a large grey at the far end of the line. General Jalenhorm. 'Second rank!' he roared, slashing his hand down. 'Shoot!' Gorst ducked on an instinct, head whipping around as he followed the bolts flickering overhead and into the Northmen, already turning their horses to flee, men and beasts screaming and snorting as they dropped in the shallows.

'Third rank! Shoot!' The hiss and twitter of another volley. A few more fell peppered, one horse rearing and going over backwards, crushing its rider. But most of the rest had made it up the bank and were away into the

barley on the other side, tearing off to the north as quickly as they had arrived.

Gorst slowly let his arms drop as the sound of hooves faded and left, aside from the chattering of the water and the moaning of the wounded, an uncanny silence.

Apparently the engagement was over, and he was still alive.

How strangely disappointing.

The Better Part of Valour

By the time Calder pulled up his horse some fifty paces from the Old Bridge, the fighting was over. Not that he was shedding too many tears for having missed his part in it. That had been the point of hanging back.

The sun was starting to sink in the west and the shadows were stretching out towards the Heroes, insects floating lazily above the crops. Calder could almost have convinced himself he was out for an easy ride in the old days, son of the King of the Northmen and master of all he saw. Except for the few corpses of men and horses scattered on the track, one Union soldier spreadeagled on his face with a spear sticking straight up from his back, the dust underneath him stained dark.

It looked like the Old Bridge – a moss-crusted double span of ancient stone that looked as if it was about to collapse under its own weight – had been only lightly held, and when the Union men saw their fellows fleeing from the Heroes they'd pulled back to the other bank just as quickly as ever they could. Calder couldn't say he blamed them.

Pale-as-Snow had found a big rock to sit on, spear dug point first into the ground beside him, his grey horse nibbling at the grass and the grey fur around his shoulders blowing in the breeze. Whatever the weather, he never seemed warm. It took Calder a moment to find the end of his scabbard with the point of his sword – not usually a problem of his – before he sheathed it and sat down beside the old warrior.

'You took your time getting here,' said Pale-as-Snow, without looking up.

'I think my horse might be lame.'

‘Something’s lame, all right. You know your brother was right about one thing.’ He nodded towards Scale, striding about in the open ground at the north end of the bridge, shouting and waving his mace around. He still had his shield in the other fist, a flatbow bolt lodged near the rim. ‘Northmen won’t follow a man reckoned a coward.’

‘What’s that to me?’

‘Oh, nothing.’ Pale-as-Snow’s grey eyes showed no sign he was joking. ‘You’re everyone’s hero.’

White-Eye Hansul was trying to argue with Scale, open hands up for calm. Scale shoved him over onto his back with an ill-tempered flick of his arm and started bellowing again. It looked as though there hadn’t been enough fighting for his taste, and he was for pushing on across the river right away to find some more. It looked as though no one else thought that was a very good idea.

Pale-as-Snow gave a resigned sort of sigh, as if this had been happening a lot. ‘By the dead, but once your brother gets the fire under him it can be hard work putting it out. Maybe you can play at the voice of reason?’

Calder shrugged. ‘I’ve played at worse. Here’s your shield back.’ And he tossed it at Pale-as-Snow’s stomach so he almost fell off his rock catching it. ‘Oy! Pinhead!’ Calder swaggered towards Scale with hands on his hips. ‘Pinhead Scale! Brave as a bull, strong as a bull, thick as a bull’s arse.’ Scale’s eyes bulged right out of his livid face as they followed him. So did everyone else’s, but Calder didn’t mind that. He liked nothing better than an audience.

‘Good old stupid Scale! Great fighter but, you know … nothing but shit in his head.’ Calder tapped at his skull as he said it, then slowly stretched out his arm to point up towards the Heroes. ‘That’s what they say about you.’ Scale’s expression grew a touch less furious and a touch more thoughtful, but only a touch. ‘Up there, at Dow’s little wank-parties. Tenways, and Golden, and Ironhead, and the rest. They think you’re a fucking idiot.’ Calder didn’t entirely disagree, if it came to that. He leaned in close to Scale, well within punching range, he was painfully aware. ‘Why don’t you ride on over that bridge, and prove them all right?’

‘Fuck them!’ barked Scale. ‘We could get over that bridge and into Adwein. Get astride the Uffrith Road! Cut those Union bastards off at the roots. Get in behind ’em!’ He was punching at the air with his shield, trying

to stoke his rage up again, but the moment he'd started talking instead of doing he'd lost and Calder had won. Calder knew it, and had to smother his contempt. That was no challenge, though. He'd been hiding contempt around his brother for years.

'Astride the Uffrith Road? Might be half the Union army coming up that road before sunset.' Calder looked at Scale's horsemen, no more than ten score and most of their horses ridden out, the foot still hurrying through the fields far behind or stopped at a long wall that reached almost all the way to Skarling's Finger. 'No offence to the valour of our father's proud Named Men here, but are you really going to take on countless thousands with this lot?'

Scale gave them a look himself, jaw muscles squirming in the side of his head as he ground his teeth. White-Eye Hansul, who'd picked himself up and was dusting his dented armour down, shrugged his shoulders. Scale flung his mace on the ground. 'Shit!'

Calder risked a calming hand on his shoulder. 'We were told to take the bridge. We took the bridge. If the Union want it back, they can cross over and fight us for it. On our ground. And we'll be waiting for them. Ready and rested, dug in and close to supplies. Honestly, brother, if Black Dow doesn't kill the pair of us through pure meanness you'll more than likely do it through pure rashness.'

Scale took a long breath, and blew it out. He didn't look at all happy. But he didn't look like he was about to tear anyone's head off. 'All right, damn it!' He frowned across the river, then back at Calder, then shook off his hand. 'I swear, sometimes talking to you is like talking to our father.'

'Thanks,' said Calder. He wasn't sure it was meant as a compliment, but he took it as one anyway. One of their father's sons had to keep his temper.

Paths of Glory

Corporal Tunny tried to hop from one patch of yellow weed to another, the regimental standard held high above the filth in his left hand, his right already spattered to the shoulder from slips into the scum. The bog was pretty much what Tunny had been expecting. And that wasn't a good thing.

The place was a maze of sluggish channels of brown water, streaked on the surface with multicoloured oil, with rotten leaves, with smelly froth, ill-looking rushes scattered at random. If you put down your foot and it only squelched in to the ankle, you counted yourself lucky. Here and there some species of hell-tree had wormed its leathery roots deep enough to stay upright and hang out a few lank leaves, festooned with beards of brown creeper and sprouting with outsize mushrooms. There was a persistent croaking that seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere. Some cursed variety of bird, or frog, or insect, but Tunny couldn't see any of the three. Maybe it was just the bog itself, laughing at them.

'Forest of the fucking damned,' he whispered. Getting a battalion across this was like driving a herd of sheep through a sewer. And, as usual, for reasons he could never understand, him and the four rawest recruits in the Union army were playing vanguard.

'Which way, Corporal Tunny?' asked Worth, doubled up around his guts.

'Stick to the grassy bits, the guide said!' Though there wasn't much around that an honest man could've called grass. Not that there were many honest men around either. 'Have you got a rope, boy?' he asked Yolk, struggling through the mulch beside him, a long smear of mud down his freckled cheek.

‘Left ’em with the horses, Corporal.’

‘Of course. Of course we bloody did.’ By the Fates, how Tunny wished he’d been left with the horses. He took one step and cold water rushed over the top of his boot like a clammy hand clamping around his foot. He was just setting up to have a proper curse at that when a shrill cry came from behind.

‘Ah! My boot!’

Tunny spun round. ‘Keep quiet, idiot!’ Totally failing to keep quiet himself. ‘The Northmen’ll hear us in bloody Carleon!’

But Klige wasn’t listening. He’d strayed well away from the rushes and left one of his boots behind, sucked off by the bog. He was wading out to get it, sliding in up to his thighs. Yolk snickered at him as he started delving into the slime.

‘Leave it, Klige, you fool!’ snapped Tunny, floundering back towards him.

‘Got it!’ The bog made a squelching suck as Klige dragged his boot free, looking like it was caked in black porridge. ‘Whoa!’ He lurched one way, then the other. ‘Whoa!’ And he was in up to his waist, face flipped from triumph to panic in an instant. Yolk snickered again, then suddenly realised what was happening.

‘Who’s got a rope?’ shouted Lederlingen. ‘Someone get a rope!’ He floundered out towards Klige, grabbing hold of the nearest piece of tree, a leafless twig thrust out over the mire. ‘Take my hand! Take my hand!’

But Klige was panicking, thrashing around and only working himself deeper. He went down with shocking speed, face tipped back, only just above the level of the filth, a big black leaf stuck across one cheek.

‘Help me!’ he squealed, stretching fingers still a good stride short of Lederlingen’s. Tunny slopped up, shoving the flagstaff out towards Klige. ‘Help murghhh—’ His bulging eyes rolled towards Tunny, then they were lost, his floating hair vanished, a few bubbles broke on the foetid surface, and that was it. Tunny poked at the mush uselessly, but Klige was gone. Aside from his rescued boot, floating slowly away, no trace he’d ever existed.

They struggled the rest of the way in silence, the other recruits looking stunned, Tunny with his jaw furiously clenched, all sticking to the tumps of yellow weed as close as new foals to their mothers. Soon enough the ground started to rise, the trees turned from twisted swamp monsters to firs and

oaks. Tunny leaned the filthy standard against a trunk and stood, hands on hips. His magnificent boots were ruined.

'Shit!' he snarled. 'Fucking *shit!'*

Yolk sank down in the muck, staring into nowhere, white hands trembling. Lederlingen licked his pale lips, breathing hard and saying nothing. Worth was nowhere to be seen, though Tunny thought he could hear someone groaning in the undergrowth. Even the drowning of a comrade couldn't delay the working of that lad's troublesome bowels. If anything it had made them accelerate. Forest walked up, caked to the knees in black mud. They all were caked, daubed, spattered with it, and Tunny in particular.

'I hear we lost one of our recruits.' Forest had said it often enough that he could say it deadpan. That he had to.

'Klige,' Tunny squeezed between gritted teeth. 'Was going to be a weaver. We lost a man in a fucking *bog*. Why are we here, even?' The bottom half of his coat was heavy with oily filth and he peeled it off and flung it down.

'You did the best you could.'

'I know,' snapped Tunny.

'Nothing more you—'

'He had some of my bloody gear in his pack! Eight good bottles of brandy! You know how much that could've made me?'

There was a pause.

'Eight bottles.' Forest slowly nodded. 'Well, you're a piece of work, Corporal Tunny, you know that? Twenty-six years in his Majesty's army but you can always find a way to surprise me. I tell you what, you can get up that rise and find out where in the pit of hell we are while I try and get the rest of the battalion across without sinking any more bottles. Maybe that'll take your mind off the depth of your loss.' And he stalked away, hissing to some men who were trying to heave a trembling mule out of the knee-deep muck.

Tunny stood fuming a moment longer, but fuming was going to do no good. 'Yolk, Latherlister, Worth, get over here!'

Yolk stood up, wide-eyed. 'Worth … Worth—'

'Still squirting,' said Lederlingen, busy rooting through his pack and hanging various sodden items up on branches to dry.

‘’Course he is. What else would he be doing? You wait for him, then. Yolk, follow me and try not to bloody die.’ He stalked off up the slope, sodden trousers chafing horribly, kicking bits of fallen wood out of his way.

‘Shouldn’t we be keeping quiet?’ whispered Yolk. ‘What if we run into the enemy?’

‘Enemy!’ snorted Tunny. ‘Probably we’ll run into the other bloody battalion, just trotted over the Old Bridge and up a path and got there ahead of us all nice and dry. That’ll make a fine bloody picture, won’t it?’

‘Couldn’t say, sir,’ muttered Yolk, dragging himself up the muddy slope almost on all fours.

‘Corporal Tunny! And I wasn’t soliciting an opinion. Some big bloody grins they’ll have when they see the state of us. Some laugh they’ll all have!’ They were coming to the edge of the trees. Beyond the branches he could see the faint outline of the distant hill, the stones sticking from the top. ‘At least we’re in the right bloody place,’ and then, under his breath, ‘to get wet, sore, hungry and poor, that is. General fucking Jalenhorm, I swear, a soldier expects to get shat on, but this …’

Beyond the trees the ground sloped down, studded with old stumps and new saplings where some woodcutters had once been busy, their slumping sheds abandoned and already rotting back to the earth. Beyond them a gentle river babbled, hardly more than a stream, really, flowing south to empty into the nightmare of swamp they’d just crossed. There was an earthy overhang on the far bank, then a grassy upslope on which some boundary-conscious farmer seemed to have built an irregular drystone wall. Above the wall Tunny saw movement. Spears, their tips glinting in the fading light. So he’d been right. The other battalion were there ahead of them. He just couldn’t work out why they were on the north side of the wall …

‘What is it, Corporal—’

‘Didn’t I tell you to stay bloody quiet?’ Tunny dragged Yolk down into the bushes and pulled out his eyeglass, a good three-part brass one he won in a game of squares with an officer from the Sixth. He edged forwards, finding a gap in the undergrowth. The ground rose sharply on the other side of the stream then dipped away, but there were spears behind the whole length of wall that he could see. He glimpsed helmets too. Some smoke, perhaps from a cook-fire. Then he saw a man wading out into the stream, waving a fishing rod made from a spear and some twine, wild-haired and stripped to

the waist, and very definitely not a Union soldier. Perhaps only two hundred strides from where they were squatting in the brush.

'Uh-oh,' he breathed.

'Are those Northmen?' whispered Yolk.

'Those are a lot of bloody Northmen. And we're right on their flank.' Tunny handed his eyeglass over, half-expecting the lad to look through the wrong end.

'Where did they come from?'

'I'd guess the North, wouldn't you?' He snatched back his eyeglass. 'Someone's going to have to go back. Let someone higher up the dunghill know the bother we're in here.'

'They must know already, though. They'll have run into the Northmen themselves, won't they?' Yolk's voice, never particularly calm, had taken on a slightly hysterical note. 'I mean, they must've! They must know!'

'Who knows what who knows, Yolk? It's a battle.' As he said the words, Tunny realised with mounting worry they were true. If there were Northmen behind that wall, there must have been fighting. It was a battle, all right. Maybe the start of a big one. The Northman in the river had landed something, a flashing sliver of a fish flapping on the end of his line. Some of his mates stood up on the wall, shouting and waving. All bloody smiles. If there had been fighting, it looked pretty damn clear they won.

'Tunny!' Forest was creeping up through the brush behind them, bent double. 'There are Northmen on the other side of that stream!'

'And fishing, would you believe. That wall's crawling with the bastards.'

'One of the lads shinned up a tree. Said he could see horsemen at the Old Bridge.'

'They took the bridge?' Tunny was starting to think that if he left this valley with no greater losses than eight bottles of brandy he might count himself lucky. 'They cross it, we'll be cut off!'

'I'm aware of that, Tunny. I'm very bloody well aware of that. We need to take a message back to General Jalenhorm. Pick someone out. And stay out of bloody sight!' And he crawled away through the undergrowth.

'Someone's got to go back through the bog?' whispered Yolk.

'Unless you can fly there.'

'Me?' The lad's face was grey. 'I can't do it, Corporal Tunny, not after Klige … I just can't do it!'

Tunny shrugged. ‘Someone has to go. You made it across, you can make it back. Just stick to the grassy bits.’

‘Corporal!’ Yolk had grabbed Tunny’s dirty sleeve and come close, freckled face uncomfortably near. He let his voice drop down quiet. That intimate, urgent little tone that Tunny always liked to hear. The tone in which deals were made. ‘You told me, if I ever needed anything …’ His wet eyes darted left and right, checking they were unobserved. He reached into his jacket and slid out a pewter flask, pressed it into Tunny’s hand. Tunny raised a brow, unscrewed the cap, took a sniff, replaced the cap and slipped it into his own jacket. Then he nodded. Hardly made a dent in what he’d lost in the bog, but it was something.

‘Leatherlicker!’ he hissed as he crept back through the brush. ‘I need a volunteer!’

The Day's Work

'By the dead,' grunted Craw, and there were enough of 'em.

They were scattered up the north slope of the hill as he limped past, a fair few wounded too, howling and whimpering as the wounded do, a sound that set Craw's teeth on edge more with every passing year. Made him want to scream at the poor bastards to shut up, then made him guilty that he wanted to, knowing he'd done plenty of his own squealing one time or another, and probably wasn't done with it yet.

Lots more dead around the drystone wall. Enough almost to climb the bloody hill without once stepping on the mangled grass. Ended men from both sides, all on the same side now – the pale and gaping, cold far side of the great divide. One young Union lad seemed to have died on his face, arse in the air, staring sideways at Craw with a look of baffled upset, like he was about to ask if someone could lay him out in a fashion more dignified.

Craw didn't bother. Dignity ain't much use to the living, it's none to the dead.

The slopes were just a build-up to the carnage inside the Heroes, though. The Great Leveller was a joker today, wending his long way up to the punchline. Craw wasn't sure he ever saw so many dead men all squeezed into one space. Heaps of 'em, all tangled up in the old grave-pit embrace. Hungry birds danced over the stones, waiting their chance. Flies already busy at the open mouths, open eyes, open wounds. Where do all the flies come from, on a sudden? The place had that hero's smell already. All those bodies bloating in the evening sun, emptying out their innards.

Should've been a sight to get anyone pondering his own mortality, but the dozens of Thralls picking over the wreckage seemed no more concerned than if they'd been picking daisies. Stripping off clothes and armour, stacking up weapons and shields good enough to be used. If they were upset it was 'cause the Carls who'd led the charge had snaffled the best booty.

'Too old for this shit,' muttered Craw, leaning down to grip at his sore knee, a cold cord of pain running through it from ankle to hip.

'If it ain't Curnden Craw, at last!' Whirrun had been sitting against one of the Heroes and now he stood, brushing dirt from his arse. 'I'd almost given up on waiting.' He swung the Father of Swords up onto one shoulder, sheathed again, and pointed into the valley with it, the way they'd come. 'Thought maybe you'd decided to settle down in one of those farms on the way over here.'

'I wish I had.'

'Aw, but then who'd show me my destiny?'

'Did you fight?'

'I did, yes, as it happens. Stuck into the midst of it. I'm quite a one for fighting, according to the songs. Lots of fighting here.' Not that he had a scratch on him. Craw had never seen Whirrun come out of a fight with a single mark. He frowned around the circle of butchery, scrubbing at his hair, and the wind chose that moment to freshen, stirring the tattered clothes of the corpses. 'Lot of dead men, ain't there.'

'Aye,' said Craw.

'Heaps and heaps.'

'Aye.'

'Union mostly, though.'

'Aye.'

Whirrun shrugged his sword off his shoulder and stood it on its tip, hilt in both hands, leaning forward so his chin rested on the pommel. 'Still, even when it's enemies, a sight like this, well … makes you wonder whether war's really such a good thing after all.'

'You joking?'

Whirrun paused, turning the hilt round and round so the end of the stained scabbard twisted into the stained grass. 'I don't really know any more. Agrick's dead.' Craw looked up, mouth open. 'He charged off right at the head. Got killed in the circle. Stabbed, I think, with a sword, just about

here,' and he poked at his side, 'under the ribs and went right through, probably—'

'Don't matter exactly how, does it?' snapped Craw.

'I guess not. Mud is mud. He had the shadow over him since his brother died, though. You could see it on him. I could, anyway. The boy wasn't going to last.'

Some consolation, that. 'The rest?'

'Jolly Yon got a nick or two. Brack's leg's still bothering him, though he won't say so. Other than that, they're all good. Good as before, leastways. Wonderful thought we could try and bury Agrick next to his brother.'

'Aye.'

'Let's get a hole dug, then, shall we, 'fore someone else digs there?'

Craw took a long breath as he looked around them. 'If you can find a spare shovel. I'll come say the words.' A fitting end to the day that'd be. Before he got more'n a couple of steps, though, he found Caul Shivers in his way.

'Dow wants you,' he said, and with his whisper, and his scar, and his careless frown, he might've been the Great Leveller his self.

'Right.' Craw fought the urge to start chewing his nails again. 'Tell 'em I'll be back soon. I'll be back soon, will I?'

Shivers shrugged.

Craw might not much have cared for what they'd done with the place, but Black Dow looked happy enough with the day's work, leaning against one of the stones with a mostly eaten apple in one hand. 'Craw, you old bastard!' As he turned, Craw saw one side of his grinning face was all dashed and speckled with blood. 'Where the hell did you get to?'

'All honesty, limping along at the back.' Splitfoot and a few of his Carls were scattered about, swords drawn and eyes peeled. A lot of bare steel, considering they'd won a victory.

'Thought maybe you got yourself killed,' said Dow.

Craw winced as he worked his burning foot around, thinking there was still time. 'I wish I could run fast enough to get myself killed. I'll stand wherever you tell me, but this charging business is a young man's game.'

'I managed to keep up.'

'Don't all have your taste for blood, Chief.'

‘It’s been the making of me. Don’t reckon I’ve done a better day’s work than this, though.’ Dow put a hand on Craw’s shoulder and drew him out between the stones, out to the edge of the hill where they could get a look south across the valley. The very spot Craw had stood when they first saw the Union come. Things had changed a lot in a few hours.

The tumbledown wall bristled with weapons, shining dully in the fading light. Men on the slope below as well, digging pits, whittling stakes, making the Heroes a fortress. Below them the south side of the hill was littered with bodies, all the way down to the orchards. Scavengers flitted from one to another, first men then crows, feathered undertakers croaking a happy chorus. Thralls were starting to drag the stripped shapes into heaps for burying. Strange constructions in which one corpse couldn’t be told from another. When a man dies in peacetime it’s all tears and processions, friends and neighbours offering each other comfort. A man dies in war and he’s lucky to get enough mud on top to stop him stinking.

Dow crooked a finger. ‘Shivers.’

‘Chief.’

‘I hear tell they got a choice prisoner down in Osrung. A Union officer or some such. Why don’t you bring him up here, see if we can prick anything out of him worth hearing?’

Shivers’ eye twinkled orange with the setting sun each time he nodded. ‘Right.’ And he strode off, stepping over corpses as careless as autumn leaves.

Dow frowned after him. ‘Some men you have to keep busy, eh, Craw?’

‘I guess.’ Wondering what the hell Dow planned to keep him busy with.

‘Quite the day’s work.’ He tossed his apple core away and patted his stomach like a man who’d had the best meal of his life and a few hundred dead men were the leftovers.

‘Aye,’ muttered Craw. Probably he should’ve been celebrating himself. Doing a little jig. A one-legged one, anyway. Singing and clashing ale cups and all the rest. But he just felt sore. Sore and he wanted to go to sleep, and wake up in that house of his by the water, and never see another battlefield. Then he wouldn’t have to say the lies over Agrick’s mud.

‘Pushed ’em back to the river. All across the line.’ Dow waved at the valley, blood dried black into the skin around his fingernails. ‘Reachey got over the fence and kicked the Union out of Osrung. Scale got a hold o’ the

Old Bridge. Golden drove this lot clean across the shallows. He got stopped there but … I'd worry if I started getting everything my way.' Black Dow winked at him, and Craw wondered if he was about to get stabbed in the back. 'Guess folk won't be carping that I ain't the fighter they thought I was, eh?'

'Guess not.' As if that was all that mattered. 'Shivers said you needed me for something.'

'Can't a pair of old fighters have a chat after a battle?'

That gave Craw a much bigger surprise than the blade in the back might've. 'I reckon they can. Just didn't reckon you'd be one of 'em.'

Dow seemed to think about that for a moment. 'Neither did I. Guess we're both surprised.'

'Aye,' said Craw, no idea what else to say.

'We can let the Union come to us tomorrow,' said Dow. 'Spare your old legs.'

'You reckon they'll come on? After this?'

Dow's grin was wider'n ever. 'We gave Jalenhorm a hell of a beating, but half his men never even got across the river. And that's only one division out of three.' He pointed over towards Adwein, lights starting to twinkle in the dusk, bright dots marking the path of the road as marching men got torches lit. 'And Mitterick's just bringing his men up over there. Fresh and ready. Meed on the other side, I hear.' And his finger moved over to the left, towards the Ollensand Road. Craw picked out lights there too, further back, his heart sinking all the time. 'There's still heaps more work here, don't worry about that.' Dow leaned close, fingers squeezing at Craw's shoulder. 'We're just getting started.'

The Defeated

Your August Majesty,

I regret to inform you that today your army and interests in the North suffered a most serious reverse. The foremost elements of General Jalenhorm's division reached the town of Osrung this morning and took up a powerful position on a hill surmounted by a ring of ancient stones called the Heroes. Reinforcements were held up on the bad roads, however, and before they could move across the river the Northmen attacked in great numbers. Although they fought with the greatest courage, the Sixth and Rostod Regiments were overwhelmed. The standard of the Sixth was lost. Casualties may well be close to a thousand dead, perhaps the same number of wounded, and many more in the hands of the enemy.

It was only by a valiant action of your Majesty's First Cavalry that further disaster was averted. The Northmen are now well entrenched around the Heroes. One can see the lights of their campfires on the slopes. One can almost hear their singing when the wind shifts northerly. But we yet hold the ground south of the river, and the divisions of General Mitterick on the western flank, and Lord Governor Meed on the eastern, have begun to arrive and are preparing to attack at first light.

Tomorrow, the Northmen will not be singing.

I remain your Majesty's most faithful and unworthy servant,

Bremer dan Gorst, Royal Observer of the Northern War

The gathering darkness was full of shouts, clanks and squeals, sharp with the tang of woodsmoke, the even sharper sting of defeat. Fires rustled in the wind and torches sputtered in pale hands, illuminating faces haggard from a day of marching, waiting, worrying. *And perhaps, in a few cases, even fighting.*

The road up from Uffrith was an endless parade of overloaded wagons, mounted officers, marching men. Mitterick's division grinding through, seeing the wounded and the beaten, catching the contagion of fear before they even caught a whiff of the enemy. Things that might have been just objects before the rout on the Heroes had assumed a crushing significance. A dead mule, lamplight shining in its goggling eyes. A cart with a broken axle tipped off the road and stripped down for firewood. An abandoned tent, blown from its moorings, the yellow sun of the Union stitched into the trampled canvas. *All become emblems of doom.*

Fear had been a rarity over the past few months, as Gorst took his morning runs through the camps of one regiment or another. Boredom, exhaustion, hunger, illness, hopelessness and homesickness, all commonplace. *But not fear of the enemy.* Now it was everywhere, and the stink of it only grew stronger as the clouds rolled steadily in and the sun sank below the fells.

If victory makes men brave, defeat renders them cowards.

Progress through the village of Adwein had been entirely stalled by several enormous wagons, each drawn by a team of eight horses. An officer was bellowing red-faced at an old man huddled on the seat of the foremost one.

'I am Saurizin, Adeptus Chemical of the University of Adua!' he shouted back, waving a document smudged by the first spots of rain. 'This equipment must be allowed through, by order of Lord Bayaz!'

Gorst left them arguing, strode past a quartermaster hammering on doors, searching for billets. A Northern woman stood in the street with three children pressed against her legs, staring at a handful of coins as the drizzle grew heavier. *Kicked out of their shack to make way for some sneering lieutenant, who'll be elbowed off to make way for some preening captain, who'll be shuffled on to make way for some bloated major. Where will this woman and her children be by then? Will they slumber peacefully in my tent*

while I doss heroically on the damp sod outside? I need only reach out my hand … Instead he put his head down and trudged by them in silence.

Most of the village's mean buildings were already crowded with wounded, the less serious cases spilling out onto the doorsteps. They looked up at him, pain-twisted, dirt-smeared or bandaged faces slack, and Gorst looked back in silence. *My skills are for making casualties, not comforting them.* But he pulled the stopper from his canteen and offered it out, and each in turn they took a mouthful until it was empty. Apart from one who gripped his hand for a moment they did not thank him and he did not care.

A surgeon in a smeared apron appeared at a doorway, blowing out a long sigh. 'General Jalenhorm?' Gorst asked. He was pointed down a rutted side-track and after a few strides heard the voice. That same voice he'd heard blathering orders for the last few days. Its tone was different now.

'Lay them down here, lay them here! Clear a space! You, bring bandages!' Jalenhorm was kneeling in the mud, clasping the hand of a man on a stretcher. He seemed to have shaken off his huge staff, finally, if he had not left them dead on the hill. 'Don't worry, you'll have the best of care. You're a hero. You're all heroes!' His knees squelched into the muck beside the next man. 'You did everything that could have been asked. Mine was the fault, my friends, mine were the mistakes.' He squeezed the casualty's shoulder then stood, slowly, staring down. 'Mine is the guilt.'

Defeat, it seems, brings out the best in some men.

'General Jalenhorm.'

He looked up, face tipping into the torchlight, looking suddenly very old for a man so young. 'Colonel Gorst, how are you—'

'Marshal Kroy is here.' The general visibly deflated, like a pillow with half the stuffing pulled out.

'Of course he is.' He straightened his dirt-smudged jacket, twisted his sword-belt into the correct position. 'How do I look?' Gorst opened his mouth to speak, but Jalenhorm cut him off. 'Don't bother to humour me. I look defeated.' *True.* 'Please don't deny it.' *I didn't.* 'That's what I am.' *It is.*

Gorst led the way back down the crowded alleys, through the steam of the army's kitchens and the glow from the stalls of enterprising pedlars, hoping for silence. He was disappointed. *As so very often.*

'Colonel Gorst, I need to thank you. That charge of yours saved my division.'

Perhaps it will also have saved my career. Your division can all drown if I can be the king's First Guard again. 'My motives were not selfless.'

'Whose are? It's the results that go down in history. Our reasons are written in smoke. And the fact is I nearly destroyed my division. *My* division.' Jalenhorm snorted bitterly. 'The one the king had most foolishly lent me. I tried to turn it down, you know.' *It seems you did not try hard enough.* 'But you know the king.' *All too well.* 'He has romantic notions about his old friends.' *He has romantic notions about everything.* 'No doubt I will be laughed at when I return home. Humiliated. Shunned.' *Welcome to my life.* 'Probably I deserve it.' *Probably you do. I don't.*

And yet, as Gorst frowned sideways at Jalenhorm's hanging head, hair plastered to his skull, a drop of rain clinging to the point of his nose, as thorough a picture of dejection as he could find without a mirror, he was swept up by a surprising wave of sympathy.

He found he had put his hand on the general's shoulder. 'You did what you could,' he said. 'You should not blame yourself.' *If my experience is anything to go by, there will soon be legions of self-righteous scum queuing up to do it for you.* 'You must not blame yourself.'

'Who should I blame, then?' Jalenhorm whispered into the rain. 'Who?'

If Lord Marshal Kroy was infected by fear he showed no symptoms, and nor did anyone else in range of his iron frown. Within his sight soldiers marched in perfect step, officers spoke clearly but did not shout, and the wounded bit down on their howls and remained stoically silent. Within a circle perhaps fifty strides across, with Kroy bolt upright in his saddle at its centre, there was no lag in morale, there was no lapse in discipline, and there had certainly been no defeat.

Jalenhorm's bearing noticeably stiffened as he strode up and gave a rigid salute. 'Lord Marshal Kroy.'

'General Jalenhorm.' The marshal glared down from on high. 'I understand there was an engagement.'

'There was. The Northmen came in very great numbers. Very great, and very quickly. A well-coordinated assault. They made a feint for Osrung and I sent a regiment to reinforce the town. I went to find more but, by that time … it was too late to do anything but try to keep them on the far side of the river. Too late to—'

'The condition of your division, General.'

Jalenhorm paused. In one sense the condition of his division was painfully obvious. ‘Two of my five regiments of foot were held up on the bad roads and have yet to see action. The Thirteenth were holding Osrung and withdrew in good order when the Northmen breached the gate. Some casualties.’ Jalenhorm recited the butcher’s bill in a dull monotone. ‘The majority of the Rostod Regiment, some nine companies, I believe, were caught in the open and routed. The Sixth were holding the hill when the Northmen attacked. They were comprehensively broken. Ridden down in the fields. The Sixth has …’ Jalenhorm’s mouth twitched silently. ‘Ceased to exist.’

‘Colonel Wetterlant?’

‘Presumed among the dead on the far side of the river. There are very many dead there. Many wounded we cannot reach. You can hear them crying for water. They always want water, for some reason.’ Jalenhorm gave a horrifically inappropriate snort of nervous laughter. ‘I’d have thought they might want … spirits, or something.’

Kroy kept his silence. Gorst was unlikely to break it.

Jalenhorm droned on, as if he could not bear the quiet. ‘One regiment of cavalry took losses near the Old Bridge and withdrew, but held the south bank. The First is split in two. One battalion made their way through the marshes to a position in the woods on our left flank.’

‘That could be useful. The other?’

‘Fought valiantly alongside Colonel Gorst in the shallows, and turned back the enemy at great cost on both sides. Our one truly successful action of the day.’

Kroy turned his frown on Gorst. ‘More heroics, eh, Colonel?’

Only the bare minimum of action necessary to prevent disaster turning into catastrophe. ‘Some action, sir. No heroics.’

‘I was mindful, Lord Marshal,’ cut in Jalenhorm, ‘of the urgency. You wrote to me of some urgency.’

‘I did.’

‘I was mindful that the king wished for quick results. And so I seized the chance to get at the enemy. Seized it … much too ardently. I made a terrible mistake. A most terrible mistake, and I alone bear the full responsibility.’

‘No.’ Kroy gave a heavy sigh. ‘You share it with me. And with others. The roads. The nature of the battlefield. The undue haste.’

‘Nonetheless, I have failed.’ Jalenhorm drew his sword and offered it up. ‘I humbly request that I be removed from command.’

‘The king would not hear of it. Neither will I.’

Jalenhorm’s sword drooped, the point scraping against the mud. ‘Of course, Lord Marshal. I should have scouted the trees more thoroughly—’

‘You should have. But your orders were to push north and find the enemy.’ Kroy looked slowly around the torchlit chaos of the village. ‘You found the enemy. This is a war. Mistakes happen, and when they do … the stakes are high. But we are not finished. We have barely even begun. You will spend tonight and tomorrow behind the shallows where Colonel Gorst fought his unheroic action this afternoon. Regrouping in the centre, re-equipping your division, looking to the welfare of the wounded, restoring morale and,’ glowering balefully around at the decidedly unmilitary state of the place, ‘imposing *discipline.’*

‘Yes, Lord Marshal.’

‘I will be making my headquarters on the slopes of Black Fell, where there should be a good view of the battlefield tomorrow. Defeat is always painful, but I have a feeling you will get another chance to be involved in this particular battle.’

Jalenhorm drew himself up, something of his old snap returning at being given a straightforward goal. ‘My division will be ready for action the day after tomorrow, you may depend upon it, Lord Marshal!’

‘Good.’ And Kroy rode off, his indomitable aura fading into the night along with his staff. Jalenhorm stood frozen in a parting salute as the marshal clattered away, but Gorst looked back, when he had made it a few steps further down the road.

The general still stood beside the track, alone, hunched over as the rain grew heavier, white streaks through the fizzing torchlight.

Fair Treatment

At a pace no faster'n Flood's limping, which weren't that fast at all, they made their way down the road towards Osrung, in the flitting rain. They'd only the light of Reft's one guttering torch to see by, which showed just a few strides of rutted mud ahead, some flattened crops on either side, the scared little-boy faces of Brait and Colving and the clueless gawp of Stodder. All staring off towards the town, a cluster of lights up ahead in the black country, touching the weighty clouds above with the faintest glow. All holding tight to what passed for weapons in their little crew of beggars. As if they were going to be fighting now. Today's fighting was all long done with, and they'd missed it.

'Why the hell were we left at the back?' grumbled Beck.

'Because of my dodgy leg and your lack o' practice, fool,' snapped Flood over his shoulder.

'How we going to get practice left at the back?'

'You'll get practice at not getting killed, which is a damn fine thing to have plenty o' practice at, if you're asking me.'

Beck hadn't been asking. His respect for Flood was waning with every mile they marched together. All the old prick seemed to care about was keeping the lads he led out of the fight and set to idiot's tasks like digging, and carrying, and lighting fires. That and keeping his leg warm. If Beck had wanted to do women's work he could've stayed on the farm and spared his self a few nights out in the wind. He'd come to fight, and win a name, and do business fit for the singing of. He was about to say so too, when Brait tugged at his sleeve, pointing up ahead.

‘There’s someone there!’ he squeaked. Beck saw shapes moving in the dark, felt a stab of nerves, hand fumbling for his sword. The torchlight fell across three somethings hanging from a tree by chains. All blackened up by fire, branch creaking gently as they turned.

‘Deserters,’ said Flood, hardly breaking his limping stride. ‘Hanged and burned.’

Beck stared at ’em as he passed. Didn’t hardly look like men at all, just charred wood. The one in the middle might’ve had a sign hanging round his neck, but it was all scorched off and Beck couldn’t read anyway.

‘Why burn ’em?’ asked Stodder.

‘’Cause Black Dow got a taste for the smell o’ men cooking long time ago and it hasn’t worn off.’

‘It’s a warning,’ Reft whispered.

‘Warning what?’

‘Don’t desert,’ said Flood.

‘Y’idiot,’ added Beck, though mostly ’cause looking at those strange man-shaped ashes was making him all kinds of jumpy. ‘No better’n a coward deserves, if you’re asking—’ Another squeak, Colving this time, and Beck went for his sword again.

‘Just townsfolk.’ Reft lifted his torch higher and picked out a handful of worried faces.

‘We ain’t got nothing!’ An old man at the front, waving bony hands. ‘We ain’t got nothing!’

‘We don’t want nothing.’ Flood jerked his thumb over his shoulder. ‘Go your ways.’

They trudged on past. Mostly old men, a few women too, a couple of children. Children even younger than Brait, which meant barely talking yet. They were all weighed down by packs and gear, one or two pushing creaking barrows of junk. Bald furs and old tools and cookpots. Just like the stuff might’ve come out of Beck’s mother’s house.

‘Clearing out,’ piped Colving.

‘They know what’s coming,’ said Reft.

Osrung slunk out of the night, a fence of mossy logs whittled to points, a high stone tower looming up by the empty gateway with lights at slitted windows. Sullen men with spears kept watch, eyes narrowed against the

rain. Some young lads were digging a big pit, working away in the light of a few guttering torches on poles, all streaked with mud in the drizzle.

'Shit,' whispered Colving.

'By the dead,' squeaked Brait.

'They's the dead all right.' Stodder, his fat lip dangling.

Beck found he'd nothing to say. What he'd taken without thinking for some pile of pale clay or something was actually a pile of corpses. He'd seen Gelda from up the valley laid out waiting to be buried after he drowned in the river and not thought much about it, counted himself hard-blooded, but this was different. They looked all strange, stripped naked and thrown together, face up and face down, slippery with the rain. Men, these, he had to tell himself, and the thought made him dizzy. He could see faces in the mess, or bits of faces. Hands, arms, feet, mixed up like they was all one monstrous creature. He didn't want to guess at how many were there. He saw a leg sticking out, a wound in the thigh yawning black like a big mouth. Didn't look real. One of the lads doing the digging stopped a moment, shovel clutched in white hands as they trudged past. His mouth was all twisted like he was about to cry.

'Come on,' snapped Flood, leading them in through the archway, broken doors leaning against the fence inside. A great tree trunk lay near, branches hacked off to easily held lengths, the heavy end filed to a point and capped with rough-forged black iron, covered with shiny scratches.

'You reckon that was the ram?' whispered Colving.

'I reckon,' said Reft.

The town felt strange. Edgy. Some houses were shut up tight, others had windows and doorways wide and full of darkness. A set of bearded men sat in front of one, mean-eyed, passing round a flask. Some children hid in an alley mouth, eyes gleaming in the shadows as the torch passed 'em by. Odd sounds came from everywhere. Crashing and tinkling. Thumping and shouting. Groups of men darted between the buildings, torches in hands, blades glinting, all moving at a hungry half-jog.

'What's going on?' asked Stodder, in that stodgy-stupid voice of his.

'They're at a bit of sacking.'

'But … ain't this our town?'

Flood shrugged. 'They fought for it. Some of 'em died for it. They ain't leaving empty-handed.'

A Carl with a long moustache sat under dripping eaves with a bottle in his hand, sneering as he watched 'em walk past. Beside him a corpse lay in the doorway, half-in, half-out, the back of its head a glistening mass. Beck couldn't tell if it was someone who'd lived in the house or someone who'd been fighting in it. Whether it was a man or a woman, even.

'You're quiet all of a sudden,' said Reft.

Beck wanted to think of something sharp, but all he could manage was, 'Aye.'

'Wait here.' And Flood limped up to a man in a red cloak, pointing Carls off this way and that. Some figures sat slumped in an alleyway nearby, hands tied, shoulders hunched against the drizzle.

'Prisoners,' said Reft.

'They don't look much different than our lot,' said Colving.

'They ain't.' Reft frowned at 'em. 'Some o' the Dogman's boys, I guess.'

'Apart from him,' said Beck. 'That's a Union man.' He had a bandage round his head and a funny Union jacket, one red sleeve ripped and the skin underneath covered in grazes, the other with some kind of fancy gold thread all around the cuff.

'Right,' said Flood as he walked back over. 'You're going to look to these prisoners while I find out what the work'll be tomorrow. Just make sure none o' them, and none o' you, end up dead!' he shouted as he made off up the street.

'Looking to prisoners,' grumbled Beck, some of his bitterness bubbling back as he looked down at their hangdog faces.

'Reckon you deserve better work, do you?' The one who spoke had a crazy look to him, a big bandage around his belly, stained through brown with some fresh red in the middle, ankles tied as well as wrists. 'Bunch o' fucking boys, don't even have their Names yet!'

'Shut up, Crossfeet,' grunted one of the other prisoners, not hardly looking up.

'You shut up, y'arsehole!' Crossfeet gave him a look like he might tear him with his teeth. 'Whatever happens tonight, the Union'll be here tomorrow. More o' those bastards than ants in a hill. The Dogman too, and you know who the Dogman's got with him?' He grinned, eyes going huge as he whispered the name. 'The Bloody-Nine.' Beck felt his face go hot.

The Bloody-Nine had killed his father. Killed him in a duel with his own sword. The one he had sheathed beside him now.

'That's a lie,' squeaked Brait, looking scared to his bones even though they had weapons and the prisoners were trussed up tight. 'Black Dow killed Ninefingers, years ago!'

Crossfeet kept giving him that crazy grin. 'We'll see. Tomorrow, you little bastard. We'll—'

'Let him alone,' said Beck.

'Oh aye? And what's your name?'

Beck stepped up and booted Crossfeet in the fruits. 'That's my name!' He kept on kicking him as he folded up, all his anger boiling out. 'That's my name! That's my fucking name, you heard it enough?'

'Hate to interrupt.'

'What?' snarled Beck, spinning round with his fists clenched.

A big man stood behind him, a half-head taller'n Beck, maybe, fur on his shoulders glistening with the rain. All across one side of his face, the biggest and most hideous scar Beck had ever seen, the eye on that side not an eye at all but a ball of dead metal.

'Name's Caul Shivers,' voice a ground-down whisper.

'Aye,' croaked Beck. He'd heard stories. Everyone had. They said Shivers did tasks for Black Dow too black for his own hands. They said he'd fought at Black Well, and the Cumnur, and Dunbrec, and the High Places, fought beside old Rudd Threetrees, and the Dogman. The Bloody-Nine too. They said he'd gone south across the sea and learned sorcery. That he'd traded his eye willingly for that silver one, and that a witch had made it, and through it he could see what a man was thinking.

'Black Dow sent me.'

'Aye,' whispered Beck, all his hairs standing up on end.

'To get one o' these. A Union officer.'

'Reckon that's this one.' Colving used his toe to poke at the man with the tattered sleeve and made him grunt.

'If it ain't Black Dow's bitch!' Crossfeet was smiling up, teeth shining red, bandages round him reddened too. 'Why don't you bark, eh, Shivers? Bark, you bastard!' Beck could hardly believe it. None of 'em could. Maybe he knew that wound in his gut was death, and it'd sent him mad.

‘Huh.’ Shivers jerked his trousers up so it was easy for him to squat down, boots grinding the dirt as he did it. When he got there he had a knife in his hand. Just a little one, blade no longer’n a man’s finger, glinting red and orange and yellow. ‘You know who I am, then?’

‘Caul Shivers, and I ain’t fucking scared of a dog!’

Shivers raised one brow, the one above his good eye. The one above his metal eye didn’t shift much. ‘Well, ain’t you the hero?’ And he poked Crossfeet in the calf with the blade. Not much weight behind it. Like Beck might’ve poked his brother with a finger to wake him up of a frosty morning. The knife stuck into his leg, silent, and back out, and Crossfeet snarled and wriggled.

‘Black Dow’s bitch, am I?’ Shivers poked him in the other leg, knife going deeper into his thigh. ‘It’s true I get some shitty jobs.’ Poked him again, somewhere around his hip. ‘Dog can’t hold a knife, though, can it?’ He didn’t sound angry. Didn’t look angry. Bored, almost. ‘I can.’ Poke, poke.

‘Gah!’ Crossfeet twisted and spat. ‘If I had a blade—’

‘If?’ Shivers poked him in the side, where his bandages were. ‘You don’t, so there’s the end o’ that.’ Crossfeet had twisted over, so Shivers poked him in the back. ‘I’ve got one, though. Look.’ Poke, poke, poke. ‘Look at that, hero.’ Poked him in the backs of his legs, poked him in the arse, poked him all over, blood spreading out into his trousers in dark rings.

Crossfeet moaned and shuddered, and Shivers puffed out his cheeks, and wiped his knife on the Union man’s sleeve, making the gold thread glint red. ‘Right, then.’ He made the Union man grunt as he jerked him to his feet, carefully sheathed his little knife somewhere at his belt. ‘I’ll take this one off.’

‘What should we do with him?’ Beck found he’d asked in a reedy little voice, pointing at Crossfeet, moaning softly in the mud, torn clothes all glistening sticky black.

Shivers looked straight at Beck, and it felt like he was looking into him. Right into his thoughts, like they said he could. ‘Do nothing. You can manage that, no?’ He shrugged as he turned to go. ‘Let him bleed.’

Tactics

The valley was spread out below them, a galaxy of twinkling points of orange light. The torches and campfires of both sides, occasionally smudged as a new curtain of drizzle swept across the hillside. One cluster must have been the village of Adwein, another the hill they called the Heroes, a third the town of Osrung.

Meed had made his headquarters at an abandoned inn south of the town and left his leading regiment digging in just out of bowshot of its fence, Hal with them, nobly wrestling to stamp some order on the darkness. More than half the division was still slogging up, ill-tempered and ill-disciplined, along a road that had begun the day as an uneven strip of dust and ended it churned to a river of mud. The rearmost elements would probably still not have arrived at first light tomorrow.

'I wanted to thank you,' said Colonel Brint, rain dripping from the peak of his hat.

'Me?' asked Finree, all innocence. 'Whatever for?'

'For looking after Aliz these past few days. I know she's not terribly worldly—'

'It's been my pleasure,' she lied. 'You've been such a good friend to Hal, after all.' Just a gentle reminder that she damn well expected him to carry on being one.

'Hal's an easy man to like.'

'Isn't he, though?'

They rode past a picket, four Union soldiers swaddled in sodden cloaks, spear-points glistening in the light of the lanterns of Meed's officers. There

were more men beyond, unloading rain-spoiled gear from packhorses, struggling to pitch tents, wet canvas flapping in their faces. An unhappy queue of them were hunched beside a dripping awning clutching an assortment of tins, cups and boxes while rations were weighed out.

'There's no bread?' one was asking.

'Regulations say flour's an acceptable substitute,' replied the quartermaster, measuring out a tiny quantity on his scales with frowning precision.

'Acceptable to who? What are we going to bake it on?'

'You can bake it on your fat arse far as I'm— Oh, begging your pardon, my lady,' tugging his forelock as Finree rode past. As though seeing men go hungry for no good reason could cause no offence but the word 'arse' might overcome her delicate sensibilities.

What looked at first to be a hump in the steep hillside turned out to be an ancient building, covered with wind-lashed creeper, somewhere between a cottage and a barn and probably serving as both. Meed dismounted with all the pomp of a queen at her coronation and led his staff in file through the narrow doorway, leaving Colonel Brint to hold back the queue so Finree could slip through near the front.

The bare-raftered room beyond smelled of damp and wool, wet-haired officers squeezed in tight. The briefing had the charged air of a royal funeral, every man vying to look the most solemn while they wondered eagerly whether there might be anything for them in the will. General Mitterick stood against one rough stone wall, frowning mightily into his moustache with one hand thrust between two buttons of his uniform, thumb sticking up, as if he was posing for a portrait, and an insufferably pretentious one at that. Not far from him Finree picked out Bremer dan Gorst's impassive slab of a face in the shadows, and smiled in acknowledgement. He scarcely tipped his head in return.

Finree's father stood before a great map, pointing out positions with expressive movements of one hand. She felt the warm glow of pride she always did when she saw her father at work. He was the very definition of a commander. When he saw them enter, he came over to shake Meed's hand, catching Finree's eye and giving her the slightest smile.

'Lord Governor Meed, I must thank you for moving north with such speed.' Though if it had been left to his Grace to navigate they would still

have been wondering which way was north.

'Lord Marshal Kroy,' grated the governor, with little enthusiasm. Their relationship was a prickly one. In his own province of Angland, Meed was pre-eminent, but as a lord marshal carrying the king's commission, in time of war Finree's father outranked him.

'I realise it must have been a wrench to abandon Ollensand, but we need you here.'

'So I see,' said Meed, with characteristic bad grace. 'I understand there was a serious—'

'Gentlemen!' The press of officers near the door parted to let someone through. 'I must apologise for my late arrival, the roads are quite clogged.' A stocky bald man emerged from the crowd, flapping the lapels of a travel-stained coat and heedlessly spraying water over everyone around him. He was attended by only one servant, a curly-haired fellow with a basket in one hand, but Finree had made it her business to know every person in his Majesty's government, every member of the Open Council and the Closed and the exact degrees of their influence, and the lack of pomp did not fool her for a moment. Put simply, whether he was said to be retired or not, Bayaz, the First of the Magi, outranked everyone.

'Lord Bayaz.' Finree's father made the introductions. 'This is Lord Governor Meed, of Angland, commanding his Majesty's third division.'

The First of the Magi somehow managed to press his hand and ignore him simultaneously. 'I knew your brother. A good man, much missed.' Meed attempted to speak but Bayaz was distracted by his servant, who at that moment produced a cup from his basket. 'Ah! Tea! Nothing seems quite so terrible once there is a cup of tea in your hand, eh? Would anyone else care for some?' There were no takers. Tea was generally considered an unpatriotic Gurkish fashion, synonymous with moustache-twiddling treachery. 'Nobody?'

'I would love a cup.' Finree slipped smoothly in front of the lord governor, obliging him to take a spluttering step back. 'The perfect thing in this weather.' She despised tea, but would happily have drunk an ocean of it for the chance to exchange words with one of the most powerful men in the Union.

Bayaz' eyes flickered briefly over her face like a pawnshop owner's asked for an estimate on some gaudy heirloom. Finree's father cleared his throat,

somewhat reluctantly. ‘This is my daughter—’

‘Finree dan Brock, of course. My congratulations on your marriage.’

She smothered her surprise. ‘You are very well informed, Lord Bayaz. I would have thought myself beneath notice.’ She ignored a cough of agreement from Meed’s direction.

‘Nothing can be beneath the notice of a careful man,’ said the Magus. ‘Knowledge is the root of power, after all. Your husband must be a fine fellow indeed to outshine the shadow of his family’s treason.’

‘He is,’ she said, unabashed. ‘He in no way takes after his father.’

‘Good.’ Bayaz still smiled, but his eyes were hard as flints. ‘I would hate to bring you pain by seeing him hanged.’

An awkward silence. She glanced at Colonel Brint, then at Lord Governor Meed, wondering if either of them might offer some support for Hal in reward for his unstinting loyalty. Brint at least had the decency to look guilty. Meed looked positively delighted. ‘You will find no more loyal man in his Majesty’s whole army,’ she managed to grate out.

‘I am all delight. Loyalty is a fine thing in an army. Victory is another.’ Bayaz frowned about at the assembled officers. ‘Not the best of days, gentlemen. A long way from the best of days.’

‘General Jalenhorm overreached himself,’ said Mitterick, out of turn and with little empathy, behaviour entirely characteristic of the man. ‘He should never have been so damn spread out—’

‘General Jalenhorm acted under my orders,’ snapped Marshal Kroy, leaving Mitterick to subside into a grumpy silence. ‘We overreached, yes, and the Northmen surprised us …’

Your tea.’ A cup was insinuated into Finree’s hand and the eyes of Bayaz’ servant met hers. Odd-coloured eyes, one blue, one green. ‘I am sure your husband is as loyal, honest and hard-working as ever a man could be,’ he murmured, a most unservile curl to the corner of his mouth, as if they shared some private joke. She did not see what, but the man had already oozed back, pot in hand, to charge Bayaz’ cup. Finree wrinkled her lip, checked she was unobserved and furtively tossed the contents of hers down the wall.

‘…our choices were most limited,’ her father was saying, ‘given the great need for haste impressed upon us by the Closed Council—’

Bayaz cut him off. ‘The need for haste is a fact of our situation, Marshal Kroy, a fact no less compelling for being a political imperative rather than a physical.’ He slurped tea through pursed lips, but the room was held so silent for the duration one could have heard a flea jump. Finree wished she understood the trick, and could rely on her every facile utterance being given rapt attention, rather than endlessly chewing on her usual diet of sidelinings, humourings and brushings-off. ‘If a mason builds a wall upon a slope and it collapses, he can hardly complain that it would have stood a thousand years if only he had been given level ground to work with.’ Bayaz slurped again, again in utter silence. ‘In war, the ground is never level.’

Finree felt an almost physical pressure to jump to her father’s defence, as if there was a wasp down her back that had to be smashed, but she bit her tongue. Taunting Meed was one thing. Taunting the First of the Magi quite another.

‘It was not my intention to offer excuses,’ said her father stiffly. ‘For the failure I take all the responsibility, for the losses I take all the blame.’

‘Your willingness to shoulder the blame does you much credit but us little good.’ Bayaz sighed as if reproving a naughty grandson. ‘But let us learn the lessons, gentlemen. Let us put yesterday’s defeats behind us, and look to tomorrow’s victories.’ Everyone nodded as though they had never heard anything so profound, even Finree’s father. Here was power.

She could not remember ever coming to dislike anyone so much, or admire anyone so much, in so short a time.

Dow’s meet was held around a big fire-pit in the centre of the Heroes, shimmering with heat, hissing and fizzing with the drizzle. There was an edgy feel about the gathering, somewhere between a wedding and a hanging. Firelight and shadow make men look like devils, and Craw had seen ’em make men act like devils more’n once. They all were there – Reachey, Tenways, Scale and Calder, Ironhead, Splitfoot and a couple score Named Men besides. The biggest names and the hardest faces in the North, less a few up in the hills and a few more with the other side.

Looked like Glama Golden had got in the fight. Looked like someone had used his face for an anvil. His left cheek was one big welt, mouth split and bloated, blooms of bruise already spreading. Ironhead smirked across the

ring of leering faces like he'd never seen a thing so pretty as Golden's broken nose. They had bad blood between 'em, those two, so bad it poisoned everything around.

'What the hell are you doing here, old man?' murmured Calder as Craw jostled into place beside him.

'Damned if I know. My eyes ain't all they used to be.' Craw took a hold on his belt buckle and squinted around. 'Ain't this where we go to shit?'

Calder snorted. 'It's where we go to talk it. Though if you want to drop your trousers and give Brodd Tenways some polish for his boots I won't complain.'

Now Black Dow strolled out of the shadows, around the side of Skarling's Chair, chewing at a bone. The chatter quieted then died altogether, leaving only the crackle and crunch of sagging embers, faint snatches of song floating from outside the circle. Dow stripped his bone to nothing and tossed it into the fire, licking his fingers one by one while he took in every shadow-pitted face. Drew out the silence. Made 'em all wait. Left no doubts who was the biggest bastard on the hill.

'So,' he said in the end. 'Good day's work, no?' And a great clatter went up, men shaking their sword hilts, thumping shields with gauntlets, beating their armour with their fists. Scale joined in, banging his helmet on one scratched thigh-plate. Craw rattled his sword in its sheath, somewhat guiltily, since he hadn't run fast enough to draw it. Calder stayed quiet, he noticed, just sourly sucked his teeth as the clamour of victory faded.

'A good day!' Tenways leered around the fire.

'Aye, a good day,' said Reachey.

'Might've been better yet,' said Ironhead, curling his lip at Golden, 'if we'd only made it across the shallows.'

Golden's eyes burned in their bruised sockets, jaw muscles squirming on the side of his head, but he kept his peace. Probably 'cause talking hurt too much.

'Men are always telling me the world ain't what it was.' Dow held up his sword, grinning so the sharp point of his tongue stuck out between his teeth. 'Some things don't change, eh?' Another clattering chorus of approval, so much steel thrust up it was a wonder no one got stabbed by accident. 'For them who said the clans o' the North can't fight as one …' Dow curled his tongue and blew spit hissing into the fire. 'For them who said the Union are

too many to beat …' He sent another gob sailing neatly into the flames. Then he looked up, eyes shining orange. 'And for them who say I'm not the man to do it …' And he rammed his sword point-first into the fire with a snarl, sparks whirling up around the hilt.

A hammering of approval loud as a busy smithy, loud enough to make Craw wince. 'Dow!' shrieked Tenways, smashing the pommel of his sword with one scabby hand. 'Black Dow!'

Others joined in, and found a rhythm with his name and with their fists on metal. 'Black! Dow! Black! Dow!' Ironhead with it, and Golden mumbling through his battered mouth, and Reachey too. Craw kept his silence. Take victory quiet and careful, Rudd Threetrees used to say, 'cause you might soon be called on to take defeat the same way. Across the fire, Craw caught the glint of Shivers' eye in the shadows. He wasn't chanting neither.

Dow settled back in Skarling's Chair just the way Bethod used to, basking in the love like a lizard in the sun then halting it with a kingly wave. 'All right. We've got all the best ground in the valley. They've got to back off or come at us, and there ain't many places they can do it. So there's no need for anything clever. Clever'd be wasted on the likes o' you lot, anyway.' A range of chuckles. 'So I'll take blood, and bones, and steel, like today.' More cheering. 'Reachey?'

'Aye, Chief.' The old warrior stepped into the firelight, mouth pressed into a hard line.

'I want your boys to hold Osrung. They'll come at you hard tomorrow, I reckon.'

Reachey shrugged. 'Only fair. We came at 'em pretty damn hard today.'

'Don't let 'em get across that bridge, Reachey. Ironhead?'

'Aye, Chief.'

'I'm giving you the shallows to mind. I want men in the orchard, I want men holding the Children, I want men ready to die but happier to kill. It's the one place they could come across in numbers, so if they try it we got to step on 'em hard.'

'That's what I do.' Ironhead sent a mocking look across the fire. 'Won't nobody be turning me back.'

'Whassat mean?' snarled Golden.

'You'll all get a stab at glory,' said Dow, bringing the pair of 'em to heel. 'Golden, you fought hard today so you'll be hanging back. Cover the

ground between Ironhead and Reachey, ready to lend help to either one if they get pressed more'n they're comfortable with.'

'Aye.' Licking at his bloated lip with the point of his bloated tongue.

'Scale?'

'Chief.'

'You took the Old Bridge. Hold the Old Bridge.'

'Done.'

'If you have to fall back—'

'I won't,' said Scale, with all the confidence of youth and limited brains.

'—it'd be worth having a second line at that old wall. What do they call it?'

'Clail's Wall,' said Splitfoot. 'Some mad farmer built it.'

'Might be a good thing for us he did,' said Dow. 'You won't be able to use all you've got in the space behind that bridge anyway, so plant some further back.'

'I will,' said Scale.

'Tenways?'

'Made for glory, Chief!'

'You've got the slope o' the Heroes and Skarling's Finger to look to, which means you shouldn't get into any scrapes right off. Scale or Ironhead need your help, maybe you can find 'em some.'

Tenways sneered across the fire at Scale and Calder and, hopefully just 'cause he was standing with 'em, Craw. 'I'll see what I can root out.'

Dow leaned forward. 'Splitfoot and me will be up here at the top, behind the drystone wall. Reckon I'll lead from the back tomorrow, like our friends in the Union do.' Another round of harsh laughter. 'So there it is. Anyone got any better ideas?' Dow slowly worked the gathering over with his grin. Craw had never felt less like speaking in his life, and it didn't seem likely anyone else would want to make a spectacle of themselves—

'I have.' Calder held up a finger, always wanting to make a spectacle of himself.

Dow's eyes narrowed. 'What a surprise. And what's your strategy, Prince Calder?'

'Put our backs to the Union and run?' asked Ironhead, a wave of chuckling following after.

‘Put our backs to the Union and bend over?’ asked Tenways, followed by another. Calder only smiled through it, and waited for the laughter to fade, and leave things silent.

‘Peace,’ he said.

Craw winced. It was like getting up on a table and calling for chastity in a brothel. He felt a strong urge to step away, like you might from a man doused in oil when there are a lot of naked flames about. But what kind of man steps away from a friend just ’cause he isn’t popular? Even if he is in danger of becoming a fireball. So Craw stayed shoulder to shoulder with him, wondering what the hell his game was, since sure as sure Calder always had some game in mind. The disbelieving silence stretched out long enough for a sudden gust to whip up, make cloaks flap and torch flames dance, throwing wild light across that circle of frowns.

‘Why, you bastard fucking *coward*!’ Brodd Tenways’ rashy face was so twisted up with scorn it looked like it might split.

‘Call my brother a coward?’ snarled Scale, eyes bulging. ‘I’ll twist your flaky fucking neck!’

‘Now, now,’ said Dow. ‘If any necks need twisting I’ll do the picking out. Prince Calder’s known to have a way with words. I brought him out here to hear what he has to say, didn’t I? So let’s hear it, Calder. Why peace?’

‘Careful, Calder,’ muttered Craw, trying not to move his lips. ‘Careful.’

If Calder heard the warning, he chose to piss all over it. ‘Because war’s a waste of men’s time, and money, and lives.’

‘Fucking *coward!’* barked Tenways again, and this time even Scale didn’t disagree, just stood staring at his brother. There was a chorus of disgust, and cursing, and spitting, almost as loud as the chorus of approval for Dow. But the louder it got the more Calder smiled. Like he thrived on their hatred like a flower on shit.

‘War’s a way of getting things,’ he said. ‘If it gets you nothing, what’s the point? How long have we been marching around out here?’

‘You’ve had a trip back home, bastard,’ someone called.

‘Aye, and it was talk o’ peace landed you there,’ said Ironhead.

‘All right, how long have *you* been out here, then?’ Pointing right in Ironhead’s face. ‘Or you?’ At Golden. ‘Or him?’ Jerking a thumb sideways at Craw. Craw frowned, wishing he’d been left out of it. ‘Months? Years? Marching, and riding, and fearing, and lying out under the stars with your

sickness and your wounds. In the wind, in the cold, while your fields, and your herds, and your workshops, and your wives go untended. For what? Eh? What plunder? What glory? If there are ten-score men in all this host who are richer because o' this I'll eat my own cock.'

'Coward's fucking talk!' snarled Tenways, turning away,' I won't hear it!'

'Cowards run away from things. Scared of words, are you, Tenways? What a hero.' Calder even got a ragged scatter of laughter for that. Made Tenways stop and turn back, bristling. 'We won a victory here today! Legends, every man!' And Calder slapped at his sword hilt. 'But it was just a little one.' He jerked his head towards the south, where everyone knew the campfires of the enemy were lighting up the whole valley. 'There's plenty more Union. There'll be harder fighting on the morrow, and heavier losses. Far heavier. And if we win it's to end up in the same spot, just with more dead men for company. No?' Some were still shaking their heads, but more were listening, thinking it over. 'As for those who said the clans of the North can't fight as one, or the Union are too many to beat, well, I don't reckon those questions are quite settled yet.' Calder curled his tongue, and sent a bit of his own spittle spinning into Dow's fire. 'And any man can spit.'

'Peace,' snorted Tenways, who'd stuck around to listen after all. 'We all know what a lover o' peace your father was! Didn't he take us to war with the Union in the first place?'

Didn't slow Calder down a step. 'He did, and it was the end of him. Might be I learned from his mistake. Have you, is my question?' Looking every man in the eye. ''Cause if you ask me, it'd be a damn fool who risked his life for what he could get just by the asking.' There was silence for a while. A grudging, guilty silence. The wind flapped clothes some more, whipped sparks from the fire-pit in showers. Dow leaned forward, propping himself up on his sword.

'Well, you've done quite the job o' pissing on my cookfire, ain't you, Prince Calder?' Harsh chuckles all round, and the thoughtful moment was gone. 'How about you, Scale? You want peace?'

The brothers eyed each other for a moment, while Craw tried to ease back gently from between the two. 'No,' said Scale. 'I'm for fighting.'

Dow clicked his tongue. 'There we go. Seems you didn't even convince your own brother.' More chuckling, and Calder laughed with the rest, if

somewhat sickly. ‘Still, you’ve got quite the way with words, all right, Calder. Maybe the time’ll come we need to talk peace with the Union. Then I’ll be sure to give you the call.’ He showed his teeth. ‘Won’t be tonight, though.’

Calder swept out a fancy bow. ‘As you command, Protector of the North. You’re the Chief.’

‘That’s right,’ growled Dow, and most nodded along with him. ‘That’s right.’ But Craw noticed a few had more thoughtful looks on their faces as they started to drift away into the night. Pondering their untilled fields, maybe, or their untilled wives. Could be Calder weren’t so mad as he seemed. Northmen love battle, sure, but they love beer too. And like beer, there’s only so much battle most can stomach.

‘We suffered a reverse today. But tomorrow will be different.’ Marshal Kroy’s manner did not allow for the possibility of disagreement. It was stated as fact. ‘Tomorrow we will take the fight to our enemy, and we will be victorious.’ The room rustled, starched collars shifting as men nodded in unison.

‘Victory,’ someone murmured.

‘By tomorrow morning all three divisions will be in position.’ *Though one is ruined and the others will have marched all night.* ‘We have the weight of numbers.’ *We will crush them under our corpses!* ‘We have right on our side.’ *Good for you. I have a huge bruise on mine.* But the rest of the officers seemed cheered by the platitudes. *As idiots often are.*

Kroy turned to the map, pointing out the south bank of the shallows. The spot where Gorst had fought that very morning. ‘General Jalenhorm’s division needs time to regroup, so they will stay out of action in the centre, demonstrating towards the shallows but not crossing them. We will attack instead on both flanks.’ He strode purposefully to the right side of the map, pushing his hand up the Ollensand Road towards Osrung. ‘Lord Governor Meed, you are our right fist. Your division will attack Osrung at first light, carry the palisade, occupy the southern half of the town, then aim to take the bridge. The northern half is the more built up, and the Northmen have had time to strengthen their positions there.’

Meed's gaunt face was blotchy with intensity, eyes bright at the prospect of grappling with his hated enemy at last. 'We will flush them out and put every one of them to the sword.'

'Good. Be cautious, though, the woods to the east have not been thoroughly scouted. General Mitterick, you are the left hook. Your objective is to force your way across the Old Bridge and establish a presence on the far side.'

'Oh, my men will take the bridge, don't concern yourself about that, Lord Marshal. We'll take the bridge and drive them all the way to bloody Carleon —'

'Taking the bridge will be adequate, for today.'

'A battalion of the First Cavalry are being attached to your command.' Felnigg glared down his beak of a nose as if he thought attaching anything to Mitterick deeply ill-advised. 'They found a route through the marshes and a position in the woods beyond the enemy's right flank.'

Mitterick did not deign even to look at Kroy's chief of staff. 'I've asked for volunteers to lead the assault on the bridge, and my men have already built a number of sturdy rafts.'

Felnigg's glare intensified. 'I understand the current is strong.'

'It's worth a try, isn't it?' snapped Mitterick. 'They could hold us up all morning on that bridge!'

'Very well, but remember we are seeking victory, not glory.' Kroy looked sternly around the room. 'I will be sending written orders to each one of you. Are there any questions?'

'I have one, sir.' Colonel Brint held up a finger. 'Is it possible for Colonel Gorst to refrain from his heroics long enough for the rest of us to contribute?' There was a scattering of chuckles, utterly disproportionate to the humour displayed, the soldiers seizing on a rare chance to laugh. Gorst had been entirely occupied staring across the room at Finree and pretending not to. Now he found to his extreme discomfort that everyone was grinning at him. Someone started to clap. Soon there was a modest round of applause. He would have vastly preferred it if they had jeered at him. *That at least I could have joined in with.*

'I will observe,' he grunted.

'As will I,' said Bayaz, 'and perhaps conduct my little experiment on the south bank.'

The marshal bowed. ‘We stand entirely at your disposal, Lord Bayaz.’

The First of the Magi slapped his thighs as he rose, his servant leaning forward to whisper something in his ear and, as though that was a call for the advance, the room began quickly to empty, officers hurrying back to their units to make preparations for the morning’s attacks. *Make sure to pack plenty of coffins, you—*

‘I hear you saved the army today.’

He spun about with all the dignity of a startled baboon and found himself staring into Finree’s face at paralysingly close quarters. News of her marriage should have allowed him to finally bury his feelings for her as he had buried all the others worth having. But it seemed they were stronger than ever. A vice in his guts clamped down whenever he saw her, screwed tighter the longer they spoke. If you could call it speaking.

‘Er,’ he muttered. *I floundered around in a stream and killed seven men that I am sure of, but without doubt maimed several more. I hacked them apart in the hope that our fickle monarch would hear of it, and commute my undeserved sentence of undeath. I made myself guilty of mass murder so I could be proclaimed innocent of incompetence. Sometimes they hang men for this type of thing, and sometimes they applaud.* ‘I am … lucky to be alive.’

She came closer and he felt a dizzy rush of blood, a lightness in his head not unlike serious illness. ‘I have a feeling we are all lucky you are alive.’

I have a feeling in my trousers. If I was truly lucky you would put your hand down them. Is that too much to ask? After saving the army, and so on? ‘I…’ *I’m so sorry. I love you. Why am I sorry? I didn’t say anything. Does a man need to feel sorry for what he thinks? Probably.*

She had already walked off to speak to her father, and he could hardly blame her. *If I was her, I wouldn’t even look at me, let alone listen to me squeak my halting way through half a line of insipid drivel. And yet it hurts. It hurts so much when she goes.* He trudged for the door.

Fuck, I’m pathetic.

Calder slipped out of Dow’s meet before he had to explain himself to his brother and hurried away between the fires, ignoring grumbled curses from the men gathered around them. He found a path between two of the torchlit

Heroes, saw gold glinting on the slope and caught up with its owner as he strode angrily downhill.

'Golden! Golden, I need to talk to you!'

Glama Golden frowned over his shoulder. Perhaps the intention was fearsome fury, but the swellings on his cheek made him look like he was worried at the taste of something he was eating. Calder had to bite back a giggle. That smashed-up face was an opportunity for him, one he could ill afford to miss.

'What would I have to thay to you, Calder?' he snarled, three of his Named Men bristling behind him, hands tickling their many weapons.

'Quietly, we're watched!' Calder came close, huddling as though he had secrets to share. An attitude he'd noticed tended to make men do the same, however little they were inclined to. 'I thought we could help each other, since we find ourselves in the same position—'

'The thame?' Golden's bloated, blotched and bloodied face loomed close. Calder shrank back, all fear and surprise, while on the inside he was a fisherman who feels the tug on his line. Talk was his battlefield, and most of these fools were as useless on it as he was on a real one. 'How are we the thame, *peathemaker?'*

'Black Dow has his favourites, doesn't he? And the rest of us have to struggle over the scraps.'

'Favourith?' Golden's battered mouth was giving him a trace of a lisp and every time he slurred a word he looked even more enraged.

'You led the charge today, while *others* lagged at the back. You put your life in the balance, were wounded fighting Dow's battle. And now *others* are getting the place of honour, in the front line, while you sit at the rear? Wait, in case you're needed?' He leaned even closer. 'My father always admired you. Always told me you were a clever man, a righteous man, the kind who could be relied on.' It's amazing how well the most pathetic flattery can work. On enormously vain people especially. Calder knew that well enough. He used to be one.

'He never told me,' muttered Golden, though it was plain he wanted to believe it.

'How could he?' wheedled Calder. 'He was King of the Northmen. He didn't have the luxury of telling men what he really thought.' Which was just as well, because he'd thought Golden was a puffed-up halfhead, just as

Calder did. ‘But I can.’ He just chose not to. ‘There’s no reason you and I need to stand on different sides. That’s what Dow wants, to divide us. So he can share all the power, and the gold, and the glory with the likes of Splitfoot, and Tenways … and Ironhead.’ Golden twitched at the name as if it was a hook tugging at his battered face. Their feud was so big he couldn’t see around it, the idiot. ‘We don’t need to let that happen.’ Almost a lover’s whisper, and Calder risked slipping his hand gently onto Golden’s shoulder. ‘Together, you and I could do great things—’

‘Enough!’ mumbled Golden through his split lips, slapping away Calder’s hand. ‘Peddle your lieth elthewhere!’ But Calder could smell the doubt as Golden turned away, and a little doubt was all he was after. If you can’t make your enemies trust you, you can at least make them mistrust each other. Patience, his father would have told him, patience. He allowed himself a smirk as Golden and his men stomped off into the night. He was just sowing seeds. Time would bring the harvest. If he lived long enough to swing the scythe.

Lord Governor Meed gave Finree one last disapproving frown before leaving her alone with her father. He clearly could not stand anyone being in a position of power over him, especially a woman. But if he supposed she would give him a lacklustre report behind his back, he had profoundly underestimated her.

‘Meed is a primping dunce,’ she shot over her shoulder. ‘He’ll be as much use on a battlefield as a two-copper whore.’ She thought about it a moment. ‘Actually, I’m not being fair. The whore at least might improve morale. Meed is about as inspiring as a mouldy flannel. Just as well for him you called off the siege of Ollensand before it turned into a complete fiasco.’

She was surprised to see her father had dropped into a chair behind a travelling desk, head in his hands. He looked suddenly like a different man. Shrunken, and tired, and old. ‘I lost a thousand men today, Fin. And a thousand more wounded.’

‘Jalenhorm lost them.’

‘Every man in this army is my responsibility. I lost them. A *thousand* of them. A number, easily said. Now rank them up. Ten, by ten, by ten. See how many there are?’ He grimaced into the corner as though it was stacked

high with bodies. ‘Every one a father, a husband, a brother, a son. Every life lost a hole I can never fill, a debt I can never repay.’ He stared through his spread fingers at her with red-rimmed eyes. ‘Finree, I lost a thousand men.’

She took a step or two closer to him. ‘Jalenhorm lost them.’

‘Jalenhorm is a good man.’

‘That’s not enough.’

‘It’s something.’

‘You should replace him.’

‘You have to put some trust in your officers, or they’ll never be worthy of it.’

‘Is it possible for that advice to be as lame as it sounds?’

They frowned at each other for a moment, then her father waved it away. ‘Jalenhorm is an old friend of the king, and the king is most particular about his old friends. Only the Closed Council can replace him.’

She was by no means out of suggestions. ‘Replace Meed, then. The man’s a danger to everyone in the army and a good few who aren’t. Leave him in charge for long and today’s disaster will soon be forgotten. Buried under one much worse.’

Her father sighed. ‘And who would I put in his place?’

‘I have the perfect man in mind. A very fine young officer.’

‘Good teeth?’

‘As it happens, and high born to a fault, and vigorous, brave, loyal and diligent.’

‘Such men often come with fearsomely ambitious wives.’

‘Especially this one.’

He rubbed his eyes. ‘Finree, Finree, I’ve already done everything possible in getting him the position he has. In case you’ve forgotten, his father—’

‘Hal is not his father. Some of us surpass our parents.’

He let that go, though it looked as if it took some effort. ‘Be realistic, Fin. The Closed Council don’t trust the nobility, and his family was the first among them, a heartbeat from the crown. Be patient.’

‘Huh,’ she snorted, at realism and patience both.

‘If you want a higher place for your husband—’ She opened her mouth but he raised his voice and talked over her. ‘—you’ll need a more powerful patron than me. But if you want my advice – I know you don’t, but still – you’ll do without. I’ve sat on the Closed Council, at the very heart of

government, and I can tell you power is a bloody mirage. The closer you seem to get the further away it is. So many demands to balance. So many pressures to endure. All the consequences of every decision weighing on you … small wonder the king never makes any. I never thought I would look forward to retirement, but perhaps without any power I can actually get something done.'

She was not ready to retire. 'Do we really have to wait for Meed to cause some catastrophe?'

He frowned up at her. 'Yes. Really. And then for the Closed Council to write to me demanding his replacement and telling me who it will be. Providing they don't replace me first, of course.'

'Who would they find to replace you?'

'I imagine General Mitterick would not turn down the appointment.'

'Mitterick is a vainglorious backbiter with the loyalty of a cuckoo.'

'He should suit the Closed Council perfectly, then.'

'I don't know how you can stand him.'

'I used to think I had all the answers myself, in my younger days. I maintain a guilty sympathy with those who still labour under the illusion.' He gave her a significant look. 'They are not few in number.'

'And I suppose it's a woman's place to simper on the sidelines and cheer as idiots rack up the casualties?'

'We all find ourselves cheering for idiots from time to time, that's a fact of life. There really is no point heaping scorn on my subordinates. If a person is worthy of contempt, they'll bury themselves soon enough without help.'

'Very well.' She did not plan to wait that long, but it was plain she would do no more good here. Her father had enough to worry about, and she was supposed to be lifting his spirits rather than weighing them down. Her eye fell on the squares board, still set out in the midst of their last game.

'You still have the board set?'

'Of course.'

'Then …' She had been planning her move ever since she last saw him, but made it as if it had only just occurred to her, brushing the piece forward with a shrug.

Her father looked up in that indulgent way he used to when she was a girl. 'Are you entirely sure about that?'

She sighed. ‘It’s as good as another.’

He reached for a piece, and paused. His eyes darted around the board, hand hovering. His smile faded. He slowly withdrew the hand, touched one finger to his bottom lip. Then he started to smile. ‘Why, you—’

‘Something to take your mind off the casualties.’

‘I have Black Dow for that. Not to mention the First of the Magi and his colleagues.’ He sourly shook his head. ‘Are you staying here tonight? I could find you a—’

‘I should be with Hal.’

‘Of course. Of course you should.’ She bent and kissed him on the forehead, and he closed his eyes, held her shoulder for a moment. ‘Be careful tomorrow. I’d sooner lose ten thousand than lose you.’

‘You won’t shake me off that easily.’ She headed for the door. ‘I mean to live to see you get out of that move!’

The rain had stopped for the time being and the officers had drifted back to their units. All except one.

It looked as if Bremer dan Gorst had been caught between leaning nonchalantly against the rail their horses were tied to or standing proudly straight, and had ended up posed awkwardly in no-man’s-land between the two.

Even so, Finree could not think of him as quite the harmless figure she once had, when they used to share brief and laughably formal conversations in the sunny gardens of the Agriont. Only a graze down the side of his face gave any indication that he had been in action at all that day, and yet she had it from Captain Hardrick that he had charged alone into a legion of Northmen and killed six. When she heard the story from Colonel Brint it had become ten. Who knew what story the enlisted men were telling by now? The pommel of his steel glinted faintly as he straightened, and she realised with an odd cold thrill that he had killed men with that sword, only a few hours before. Several men, whichever story you believed. It should not have raised him in her estimation in the least, and yet it did, very considerably. He had acquired the glamour of violence.

‘Bremer. Are you waiting for my father?’

‘I thought …’ in that strangely incongruous, piping voice of his, and then, slightly lower, ‘you might need an escort.’

She smiled. ‘So there are still some heroes left in the world? Lead the way.’

Calder sat in the damp darkness, a long spit from the shit-pits, listening to other men celebrate Black Dow’s victory. He didn’t like admitting it, but he missed Seff. He missed the warmth and safety of her bed. He certainly missed the scent of her as the breeze picked up and wafted the smell of dung under his nose. But in all this chaos of campfires, drunken singing, drunken boasting, drunken wrestling, there was only one place he could think of where you could be sure of catching a man alone. And treachery needs privacy.

He heard heavy footsteps thumping towards the pit. Their maker was no more than a black outline with orange firelight down the edges, the very faintest grey planes of a face, but even so Calder recognised him. There were few men, even in this company, who were quite so wide. Calder stood, stretching out his stiff legs, and walked up to the edge of the pit beside the newcomer, wrinkling his nose. Pits full of shit, and pits full of corpses. That’s all war left behind, as far as he could see.

‘Cairm Ironhead,’ he said quietly. ‘What are the chances?’

‘My, my.’ The sound of spittle sucked from the back of a mouth, then sent spinning into the hole. ‘Prince Calder, this is an honour. Thought you were camped over to the west with your brother.’

‘I am.’

‘My pits smell sweeter than his, do they?’

‘Not much.’

‘Come to measure cocks with me, then? It ain’t how much you’ve got, you know, but what you do with it.’

‘You could say the same about strength.’

‘Or guile.’ Nothing else but silence. Calder didn’t like a silent man. A boastful man like Golden, an angry man like Tenways, even a savage man like Black Dow, they give you something to work with. A quiet man like Ironhead gives nothing. Especially in the dark, where Calder couldn’t even guess at his thoughts.

‘I need your help,’ he tried.

‘Think of running water.’

‘Not with that.’

‘With what, then?’

‘I’ve heard it said Black Dow wants me dead.’

‘More’n I know. But if it’s true, what’s my interest? We don’t all love you as much as you love yourself, Calder.’

‘You’ll have need of allies of your own before too long, and you well know it.’

‘Do I?’

Calder snorted. ‘No fool gets where you are, Ironhead. Black Dow scarcely has more liking for you than me, I think.’

‘No liking? Has he not put me in the place of honour? Front and middle, boy!’

Calder got the unpleasant feeling there was a trace of mocking laughter in Ironhead’s voice. But it was some kind of opening and he had no choice but to charge in with his most scornful chuckle. ‘The place of *honour?* Black Dow? He turned on the man who spared his life, and stole my father’s chain for himself. The place of *honour*? He’s done what I’d do to the man I fear most. Put you where you’ll take the brunt of the enemy’s fury. My father always said you were the toughest fighter in the North, and Black Dow knows it. Knows you’ll never back down. He’s put you where your own strength will work against you. And who’s to benefit? Who’s been left out of the fight? Tenways and Golden.’ He’d been hoping for that name to work some magic, but Ironhead didn’t move so much as a hair. ‘They hang back while you, and my brother, and my wife’s father do the fighting. I hope your honour can stop a knife in the back, when it comes.’

There was a grunt. ‘Finally.’

‘Finally what?’

The sound of piss spattering below them. ‘That. You know, Calder, you said it yourself.’

‘Said what?’

‘No fool gets where I am. I’m a long way from convinced Black Dow’s set on my doom or even on yours. But if he is, what help can you offer me? Your father’s praise? That lost most of its worth when he got bested in the High Places, and all the rest when the Bloody-Nine smashed his skull to porridge. Oops.’ Calder felt piss spattering over his boots. ‘Sorry ’bout that.

Guess we're not all as nimble with our cocks as you are. Reckon I'll stick with Dow, touched though I am by your offer of alliance.'

'Black Dow's got nothing to offer but war and the fear men have of him. If he dies there's nothing left.' Silence, while Calder wondered if he'd gone a step too far.

'Huh.' There was a jingling as Ironhead fastened his belt. 'Kill him, then. But until you do, find other ears for your lies. Find another piss-pit too, you wouldn't want to drown in this one.' Calder was slapped on the back, hard enough to leave him teetering at the brink, waving his arms for balance. When he found it, Ironhead was gone.

Calder stood there for a moment. If talk sows seeds, he wasn't sure at all what harvest he could expect from this. But that didn't have to be a bad thing. He'd learned Cairm Ironhead was a subtler man than he appeared. That alone was worth some piss on his boots.

'One day I'll sit in Skarling's Chair,' Calder whispered into the darkness. 'And I'll make you eat my shit, and you'll tell me nothing ever tasted so sweet.' That made him feel a little better.

He shook the wet from his boots as best he could, and strutted off into the night.

Rest and Recreation

Finree did not make much noise. Neither did Gorst. But that suited him well enough. Knobs of backbone showed through pale skin, thin muscles in her hunched shoulders tensing and relaxing, an unsightly ripple going through her arse with every thrust of his hips. He closed his eyes. In his head it was prettier.

They were in her husband's tent. *Or no.* That wasn't working. *My quarters in the palace.* The ones he used to have when he was the king's First Guard. *Yes.* That was better. Nice feel, they'd had. *Airy.* Or maybe her father's headquarters? *On his desk? In front of the other officers at a briefing?* Hell, no. *Urgh.* His quarters in the palace were easiest, familiar from a thousand well-worn fantasies in which the Closed Council had never stripped him of his position.

I love you, I love you, I love you. It hardly felt like love, though. It hardly felt like much of anything. Certainly nothing beautiful. A mechanical action. *Like winding a clock or peeling a carrot or milking a cow.* How long had he been at it now? His hips were aching, his stomach was aching, his back and his shoulder were bruised as a trampled apple from the fight in the shallows. Slap, slap, slap, skin on skin. He bared his teeth, gripping hard at her hips, forcing himself back to his airy quarters at the palace …

Getting there, getting there, getting there—

'Are you nearly done?'

Gorst stopped dead, snatched to reality with an icy shock. Nothing like Finree's voice. The side of her face turned towards him, gleaming damply in the light of the one candle, the dimple of an old acne scar inadequately

covered by thick powder. Nothing like Finree's face. All his thrusting seemed to have made little impression. She might have been a baker asking his apprentice if the pies were done.

His rasping breath echoed back from the canvas. 'I thought I told you not to talk.'

'I've a queue.'

So much for nearly there. His cock was already wilting. He struggled to his feet, sore head brushing against the ceiling of the tent. She was one of the cleaner ones, but still the air had a cloying feel. Too much sweat and breath, and other things, inadequately smothered by cheap flower-water. He wondered how many other men had already been through here tonight, how many more would come through. He wondered if they pretended they were somewhere else, she was someone else. *Does she pretend that we are someone else? Does she care? Does she hate us? Or are we a procession of clocks to be wound, carrots to be peeled, cows to be milked?*

She had her back to him, shrugging her dress on so she could shrug it off again. He felt as if he was suffocating. He dragged his trousers up and fumbled his belt shut. He tossed coins on a wooden box without counting, tore his way out through the flap into the night and stood there, eyes closed, breathing the damp air and swearing never to do this again. *Again.*

One of the pimps stood outside, apparently unbothered by the water gently dripping from the brim of his hat, with that knowing and slightly threatening smile they have to wear like uniforms. 'Everything to your liking?'

My liking? I seem unable even to come in the allotted time. Most men are capable of that level of social interaction, at least, if no other, are they not? What am I, that I must debase and ruin even the one decent emotion I have? If one can call an entirely unhealthy obsession with another man's wife decent. I don't suppose one can. Well, probably he could.

Gorst looked at the man. Really looked, right in his eyes. Through that empty smile to the greed, and ruthlessness, and limitless boredom behind.

My liking? Shall I guffaw, and hug you like a brother? Hug you and hug you and twist your head all the way around, and your stupid fucking hat with it? If I beat your face until it has no bones in it, if I crush your scrawny throat with my hands, will that be a loss to the world, do you think? Will anyone even notice? Would I even notice? Would it be an evil deed, or a

good? One less worm to get fat burrowing through the shit of the king's glorious army?

Gorst's mask must have slipped for a moment, or perhaps the man was more attuned by years of practice to hints of violence in a face than the cultured members of Jalenhorm's staff and Kroy's headquarters. His eyes narrowed and he took a cautious step back, one hand straying towards his belt.

Gorst found himself hoping the man would pull out a blade, excitement flaring briefly at the thought of seeing steel. *Is that all that excites me now? Death? Facing it and causing it?* Did he even feel the slightest renewed stirring in his sore groin at the possibility of violence? But the pimp only stood there, watching.

'Everything is fine.' And Gorst trudged past, boots squelching in the muck, away between the tents and into the mad carnival that sprang up behind the lines, as if by magic, whenever the army stopped for more than a couple of hours together. As full of bustle and variety as any market of the Thousand Isles, as full of blinding colour and choking fragrance as any Dagoskan bazaar, every need, taste or whim catered for a dozen times over.

Fawning merchants held swatches of bright cloth against officers too drunk to stand. Armourers battered out a shattering anvil music while salesmen demonstrated the strength, sharpness or beauty of wares nimbly replaced with trash when the money was handed over. A major with a bristling moustache sat frozen in double-chinned belligerence while a painter dashed off a shoddy representation by candlelight. Joyless laughter and meaningless babble hammered at Gorst's aching head. Everything the best, the finest, the bespoke and renowned.

'The new self-sharpening sheath!' someone roared. 'Self-sharpening!'

'Advances to officers! Loans at first-rate rates!'

'Suljuk girls here! Best fuckery you'll ever get!'

'Flowers!' in a voice somewhere between song and scream. 'For your wife! For your daughter! For your lover! For your whore!'

'For pet or pot!' a woman shrieked, thrusting up a bemused puppy. 'For pet or pot!'

Children old long before their time darted through the crowd offering polishing or prophecy, sharpening or shaving, grooming or gravedigging. Offering anything and everything that could be bought or paid for. A girl

whose age could not be reckoned slipped all around Gorst in a capering dance, bare feet mud-caked to the knee. Suljuk, Gurkish, Styrian, who knew of what mongrel derivation. ‘Like this?’ she cooed, gesturing at a stick upon which samples of gold braid were stapled.

Gorst felt a sudden choking need to weep, and gave her a sad smile, and shook his head. She spat at his feet, and was gone. A pair of elderly ladies stood at the flap of a dripping tent, handing out printed papers extolling the virtues of temperance and sobriety to illiterate soldiers who had already left them trampled in the mud for a half-mile in every direction, worthy lessons gently erased by the rain.

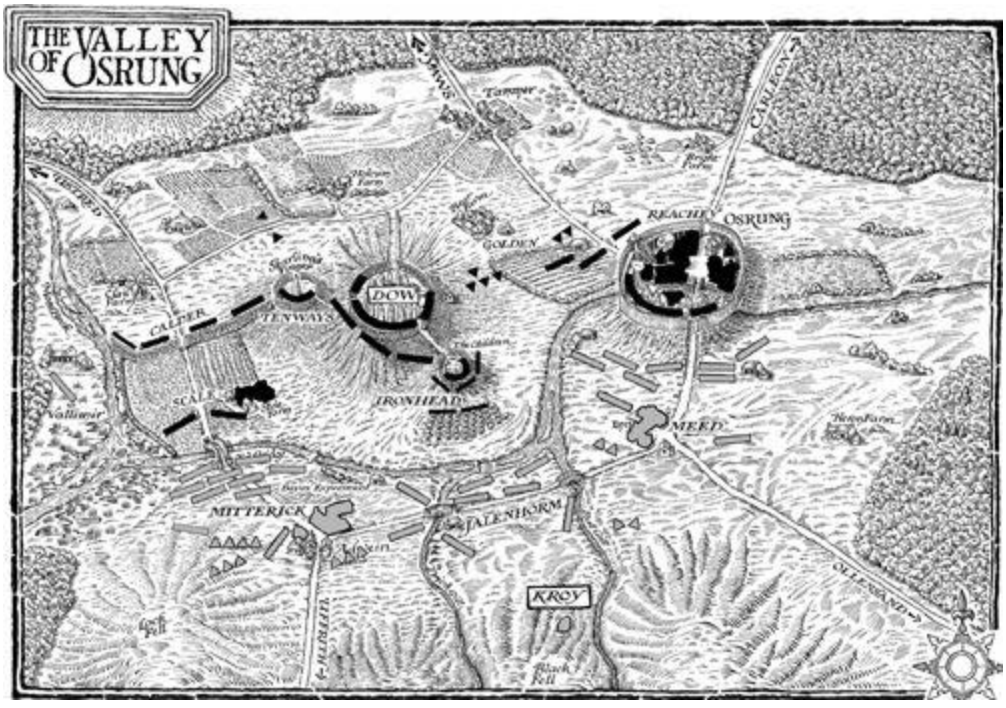
A few more steps, each an unimaginable effort, and Gorst stopped in the track, alone in the midst of all that crowd. Cursing soldiers slopped through the mud around him, all stranded like him with their petty despairs, all shopping like him for what cannot be bought. He looked up, open-mouthed, rain tickling his tongue. Hoping for guidance, perhaps, but the stars were shrouded in cloud. *They light the happy way for better men. Harod dan Brock, and his like.* Shoulders and elbows knocked and jostled him. *Someone help me, please.*

But who?

DAY TWO

**‘You can’t say that civilisation don’t advance,
however, for in every war they kill you in a new way’**

Will Rogers



Dawn

When Craw dragged himself from his bed, cold and clammy as a drowned man's grave, the sun was no more'n a smear of mud-brown in the blackness of the eastern sky. He fumbled his sword through the clasp at his belt then stretched, creaked and grunted through his morning routine of working out exactly how much everything hurt. His aching jaw he could blame on Hardbread and his lads, his aching legs on a lengthy jog across some fields and up a hill followed by a night huddled in the wind, but the bastard of a headache he'd have to take the blame for himself. He'd had a drink or two or even a few more last night, softening the loss of the fallen, toasting the luck of the living.

Most of the dozen were already gathered about the pile of damp wood that on a happier day would've been a fire. Drofd was bent over it, cursing softly while he failed to get it lit. Cold breakfast, then.

'Oh, for a roof,' whispered Craw as he limped over.

'I slice the bread thin, d'you see?' Whirrun had the Father of Swords gripped between his knees with a hand's length drawn, and now he was rubbing loaf against blade with ludicrous care, like a carpenter chiselling at a vital joint.

'Sliced bread?' Wonderful turned away from the black valley to watch him. 'Can't see it catching on, can you?'

Yon spat over his shoulder. 'Either way, could you bloody get on with it? I'm hungry.'

Whirrun ignored 'em. 'Then, when I've got two cut,' and he dropped a pale slab of cheese on one slice then slapped the other on top like he was

catching a fly, ‘I trap the cheese between them, and there you have it!’

‘Bread and cheese.’ Yon weighed the half-loaf in one hand and the cheese in the other. ‘Just the same as I’ve got.’ And he bit a lump off the cheese and tossed it to Scorry.

Whirrun sighed. ‘Have none of you no *vision?’* He held up his masterpiece to such light as there was, which was almost none. ‘This is no more bread and cheese than a fine axe is wood and iron, or a live person is meat and hair.’

‘What is it, then?’ asked Drofd, rocking back from his wet wood and tossing the flint aside in disgust.

‘A whole new thing. A forging of the humble parts of bread and cheese into a greater whole. I call it … a cheese-trap.’ Whirrun took a dainty nibble from one corner. ‘Oh, yes, my friends. This tastes like … progress. Works with ham, too. Works with anything.’

‘You should try it with a turd,’ said Wonderful.

Drofd laughed up snot but Whirrun hardly seemed to notice. ‘This is the thing about war. Forces men to do new things with what they have. Forces them to think new ways. No war, no progress.’ He leaned back on one elbow. ‘War, d’you see, is like the plough that keeps the earth rich, like the fire that clears the fields, like—’

‘The shit that makes the flowers grow?’ asked Wonderful.

‘Exactly!’ Whirrun pointed at her sharply with his whole new thing and the cheese fell out into the unlit fire. Wonderful near fell over from laughing. Yon snorted so hard he blew bread out of his nose. Even Scorry stopped his singing to have a high chuckle. Craw laughed along, and it felt good. Felt like too long since the last time. Whirrun frowned at his two flapping slices of bread. ‘Don’t think I trapped it tight enough.’ And he shoved ’em in his mouth all at once and started rooting through the damp twigs for the cheese.

‘Union showed any sign of moving?’ asked Craw.

‘None that we’ve seen.’ Yon squinted up at the stains of brightness in the east. ‘Dawn’s on the march, though. Reckon we’ll see more soon.’

‘Best get Brack up,’ said Craw. ‘He’ll be pissy all day if he misses breakfast.’

‘Aye, Chief.’ And Drofd trotted off to where the hillman was sleeping.

Craw pointed down at the Father of Swords, short stretch of grey blade drawn. ‘Don’t it have to be blooded now?’

‘Maybe crumbs count,’ said Wonderful.

‘Alas, they don’t.’ Whirrun brushed the heel of his hand against its edge, then wiped it with his last bit of crust and slid the sword gently back into its scabbard. ‘Progress can be painful,’ he muttered, sucking the cut.

‘Chief?’ Far as Craw could tell in the gloom, and with Drofd’s hair blown across his face by the wind, the lad looked worried. ‘Don’t reckon Brack wants to get up.’

‘We’ll see.’ Craw strode over to him, a big shape swaddled up on his side, shadow pooling in the folds of his blanket. ‘Brack.’ He poked him with the toe of his boot. ‘Brack?’ The tattooed side of Brack’s face was all beaded with dew. Craw put his hand on it. Cold. Didn’t feel like a person at all. Meat and hair, like Whirrun said.

‘Up you get, Brack, you fat hog,’ snapped Wonderful. ‘Before Yon eats all your—’

‘Brack’s dead,’ said Craw.

*

Finree could not have said how long she had been awake, sitting on her travelling chest at the window with her arms resting on the cold sill and her chin resting on her wrists. Long enough to watch the ragged line of the fells to the north become distinct from the sky, for the quick-flowing river to emerge glittering from the mist, for the forests to the east to take on the faintest texture. Now, if she squinted, she could pick out the jagged top of the fence around Osrung, a light twinkling at the window of a single tower. In the few hundred strides of black farmland between her and the town a ragged curve of flickering torches marked out the Union positions.

A little more light in the sky, a little more detail in the world, and Lord Governor Meed’s men would be rushing from those trenches and towards the town. The strong right fist of her father’s army. She bit down on the tip of her tongue, so hard it was painful. Excited and afraid at once.

She stretched, looking over her shoulder into the cobwebby little room. She had made a desultory effort at cleaning but had to admit she was pathetic as a homemaker. She wondered what had become of the owners of

the inn. Wondered what its name was, even. She thought she had seen a pole over the gate, but the sign was gone. That's what war does. Strips people and places of their identities and turns them into enemies in a line, positions to be taken, resources to be foraged. Anonymous things that can be carelessly crushed, and stolen, and burned without guilt. War is hell, and all that. But full of opportunities.

She crossed to the bed, or the straw-filled mattress they were sharing, and leaned down over Hal, studying his face. He looked young, eyes closed and mouth open, cheek squashed against the sheet, breath whistling in his nose. Young, and innocent, and ever so slightly stupid.

'Hal,' she whispered, and sucked gently at his top lip. His eyelids fluttered open and he stretched back, arms above his head, craned up to kiss her, then saw the window and the glimmer of light in the sky.

'Damn it!' He threw the blankets back and scrambled out of bed. 'You should've woken me sooner.' He splashed water from the cracked bowl onto his face and rubbed it with a cloth, started pulling yesterday's trousers on.

'You'll still be early,' she said, leaning back on her elbows and watching him dress.

'I have to be twice as early. You know I do.'

'You looked so peaceful. I didn't have the heart to wake you.'

'I'm supposed to be helping coordinate the attack.'

'I suppose someone has to.'

He froze for a moment with his shirt over his head, then pulled it down. 'Perhaps … you should stay at your father's headquarters today, up on the fell. Most of the other wives have already headed back to Uffrith.'

'If we could only pack Meed off along with the rest of the clothes-obsessed old women, perhaps we'd have a chance of victory.'

Hal soldiered on. 'There's only you and Aliz dan Brint, now, and I worry about you—'

He was painfully transparent. 'You worry that I'll make a scene with your incompetent commanding officer, you mean.'

'That too. Where's my—'

She kicked his sword rattling across the boards and he had to stoop to retrieve it. 'It's a shame, that a man like you should have to take orders from a man like Meed.'

‘The world is full of shameful things. That’s a long way from the worst.’

‘Something really should be done about him.’

Hal was still busy fumbling with his sword-belt. ‘There’s nothing to be done but to make the best of it.’

‘Well … someone could mention the mess he’s making to the king.’

‘You may not be aware of this, but my father and the king had a minor falling out. I don’t stand very high in his Majesty’s favour.’

‘Your good friend Colonel Brint does.’

Hal looked up sharply. ‘Fin. That’s low.’

‘Who cares how high it is if it helps you get what you deserve?’

‘*I* care,’ he snapped, dragging the buckle closed. ‘You get on by doing the right thing. By hard work, and loyalty, and doing as you’re told. You don’t get on by … by …’

‘By what?’

‘Whatever it is you’re doing.’

She felt a sudden, powerful urge to hurt him. She wanted to say she could easily have married a man with a father who wasn’t the most infamous traitor of his generation. She wanted to point out he only had the place he had now through her father’s patronage and her constant wheedling, and that left to his own devices he’d have been demonstrating hard work and loyalty as a poor lieutenant in a provincial regiment. She wanted to tell him he was a good man, but the world was not the way good people thought it was. Fortunately, he got in first.

‘Fin, I’m sorry. I know you want what’s best for us. I know you’ve done a lot for me already. I don’t deserve you. Just … let me do things my way. Please. Just promise me you won’t do anything … rash.’

‘I promise.’ She’d make sure whatever she did was well thought out. That or she’d just break her promise. She didn’t take them terribly seriously.

He smiled, somewhat relieved, and bent to kiss her. She returned it halfheartedly, but then, when she felt his shoulders slump, remembered he’d be in danger today, and she pinched his cheek and shook it about. ‘I love you.’ That was why she had come up here, no? Why she was slogging through the mud along with the soldiers? To be with him. To support him. To steer him in the right direction. The Fates knew, he needed it.

‘I love you more,’ he said.

‘It’s not a competition.’

‘No?’ And he went out, pulling on his jacket. She loved Hal. Really she did. But if she waited for him to get what they deserved through honesty and good nature she’d be waiting until the sky fell in.

And she did not plan to live out her days as some colonel’s wife.

Corporal Tunny had long ago acquired a reputation as the fiercest sleeper in his Majesty’s army. He could sleep on anything, in any situation, and wake in an instant ready for action or, better still, to avoid it. He’d slept through the whole assault at Ulrioch in the lead trench fifty strides from the breach, then woken just in time to hop between the corpses as the fighting petered out and snatch as fine a share of the booty as anyone who actually drew steel that day.

So a patch of waterlogged forest in the midst of a spotty drizzle with nothing but a smelly oilskin over his head was good as a feather bed to him. His recruits weren’t anywhere near so tough in the eyelids, though. Tunny snapped awake in the chill gloom around dawn, back against a tree and the regimental standard in one fist, and nudged his oilskin up with one finger to see the two men he had left hunched over the damp ground.

‘Like this?’ Yolk was squeaking.

‘No,’ whispered Worth. ‘Tinder under there, then strike it like—’

Tunny was up in a flash, stomped down hard on their pile of slimy sticks and crushed it flat. ‘No fires, idiots, if the enemy miss the flames they’ll see the smoke for sure!’ Not that Yolk would’ve got that pitiable collection of soaked rot lit in ten years of trying. He wasn’t even holding the flint properly.

‘How we going to cook our bacon, though, Corporal?’ Worth held up his skillet, a pale and unappetising slice lying limp inside.

‘You’re not.’

‘We’ll eat it raw?’

‘Can’t advise it,’ said Tunny, ‘especially not to you, Worth, given the sensitivity of your intestines.’

‘My what?’

‘Your dodgy guts.’

His shoulders slumped. ‘What do we eat, then?’

‘What have you got?’

‘Nothing.’

‘That’s what you’re eating, then. Unless you can find something better.’ Even considering he’d been woken before dawn, Tunny was unusually grumpy. He had a lurking sense he had something to be very annoyed about, but wasn’t sure what. Until he remembered the dirty water closing over Klige’s face, and kicked Yolk’s embarrassment of a fire away into the dripping brush.

‘Colonel Vallimir came up a while ago,’ murmured Yolk, as though that was the very thing Tunny needed to lift his spirits.

‘Wonderful,’ he hissed. ‘Maybe we can eat him.’

‘Might be some food came up with him.’

Tunny snorted. ‘All officers ever bring up is trouble, and our boy Vallimir’s the worst kind.’

‘Stupid?’ muttered Worth.

‘Clever,’ said Tunny. ‘And ambitious. The kind of officer climbs to a promotion over the bodies of the common man.’

‘Are we the common man?’ asked Yolk.

Tunny stared at him. ‘You are the fucking definition.’ Yolk even looked pleased about it. ‘No sign of Latherliver yet?’

‘Lederlingen, Corporal Tunny.’

‘I know his name, Worth. I choose to mispronounce it because it amuses me.’ He puffed out his cheeks. His standard for amusement really had plummeted since this campaign got underway.

‘Haven’t seen him,’ said Yolk, gazing sadly at that forlorn slice of bacon.

‘That’s something, at least.’ Then, when the two lads looked blankly at him. ‘Leperlover went to tell the tin-soldier pushers where we are. Chances are he’ll be the one bringing the orders back.’

‘What orders?’ asked Yolk.

‘How the hell should I know what orders? But any orders is a bad thing.’ Tunny frowned off towards the treeline. He couldn’t see much through the thicket of trunk, branch, shadow and mist, but he could just hear the sound of the distant stream, swollen with half the drizzle that had fallen last night. The other half felt like it was in his underwear. ‘Might even be an order to attack. Cross that stream and hit the Northmen in the flank.’

Worth carefully set his pan down, pressing at his stomach. ‘Corporal, I think—’

‘Well, I don’t want you doing it here, do I?’

Worth dashed off into the shadowy brush, already fumbling with his belt. Tunny sat back against his trunk, slipped out Yolk’s flask and took the smallest nip.

Yolk licked his pale lips. ‘Could I—’

‘No.’ Tunny regarded the recruit through narrowed eyes as he took another. ‘Unless you’ve something to pay with.’ Silence. ‘There you go, then.’

‘A tent would be something,’ whispered Yolk in a voice almost too soft to hear.

‘It would, but they’re with the horses, and the king has seen fit to supply his loyal soldiers with a new and spectacularly inefficient type which leaks at every seam.’ Leading, as it happened, to a profitable market in the old type in which Tunny had already twice turned a handsome profit. ‘How would you pitch one here anyway?’ And he wriggled back against his tree so the bark scratched his itchy shoulder blades.

‘What should we do?’ asked Yolk.

‘Nothing whatsoever, trooper. Unless specifically and precisely instructed otherwise, a good soldier always does nothing.’ In a narrow triangle between black branches, the sky was starting to show the faintest sickly tinge of light. Tunny winced, and closed his eyes. ‘The thing folks at home never realise about war is just how bloody boring it is.’

And like that he was asleep again.

Calder’s dream was the same one as always.

Skarling’s Hall in Carleon, dim with shadows, sound of the river outside the tall windows. Years ago, when his father was King of the Northmen. He was watching his younger self, sitting in Skarling’s Chair and smirking. Smirking down at Forley the Weakest, all bound up, Bad-Enough standing over him with his axe out.

Calder knew it for a dream, but he felt the same freezing dread as ever. He was trying to shout, but his mouth was all stopped up. He was trying to move, but he was bound as tight as Forley. Bound by what he’d done, and what he hadn’t.

‘What shall we do?’ asked Bad-Enough.

And Calder said, ‘Kill him.’

He woke with a jolt as the axe came down, floundering with his blankets. The room was fizzing black. There was none of that warm wash of relief you get when you wake from a nightmare. It had happened. Calder swung from his bed, rubbing at his sweaty temples. He’d given up on being a good man long ago, hadn’t he?

Then why did he still dream like one?

‘Peace?’ Calder looked up with a start, heart jumping at his ribs. There was a great shape in the chair in the corner. A blacker shape than the darkness. ‘It was talk of peace got you banished in the first place.’

Calder breathed out. ‘And a good morning to you, brother.’ Scale was wearing his armour, but that was no surprise. Calder was starting to think he slept in it.

‘I thought you were the clever one? At this rate you’ll clever yourself right back into the mud, and me along with you, and so much for our father’s legacy then. Peace? On a day of victory?’

‘Did you see their faces, though? Plenty even at that meet are ready to stop fighting, day of victory or not. There’ll be harder days coming, and when they come more and more will see it our way—’

‘Your way,’ snapped Scale, ‘I’ve a battle to fight. A man doesn’t get to be reckoned a hero by talking.’

Calder could hardly keep the contempt out of his voice. ‘Maybe what the North needs is fewer heroes and more thinkers. More builders. Maybe our father’s remembered for his battles, but his legacy is the roads he laid, the fields he cleared, the towns, and the forges, and the docks, and the—’

‘He built the roads to march his armies on. He cleared the fields to feed them. The towns bred soldiers, the forges made swords, the docks brought in weapons.’

‘Our father fought because he had to, not because he—’

‘This is the North!’ bellowed Scale, voice making the little room ring. ‘Everyone has to fight!’ Calder swallowed, suddenly unsure of himself and ever so slightly scared. ‘Whether they want to or not. Sooner or later, everyone has to fight.’

Calder licked his lips, not ready to admit defeat. ‘Our father preferred to get what he wanted with words. Men listened to—’

‘Men listened because they knew he had *iron in him*!’ Scale smashed the arm of his chair with his fist, wood cracking, struck it again and broke it off, sent it clattering across the boards. ‘Do you know what I remember him telling me? “Get what you can with words, because words are free, but the words of an armed man ring that much sweeter. So when you talk, bring your sword.”’ He stood, and tossed something across the room. Calder squeaked, half-caught it, half-hit painfully in the chest by it. Heavy and hard, metal gleaming faintly. His sheathed sword. ‘Come outside.’ Scale loomed over him. ‘And bring your sword.’

It was hardly any lighter outside the ramshackle farmhouse. Just the first smear of dawn in the heavy eastern sky, picking out the Heroes on their hilltop in solemn black. The wind was coming up keen, whipping drizzle in Calder’s eyes, sweeping waves through the barley and making him hug himself tight. A scarecrow danced a mad jig on a pole near the house, torn gloves endlessly beckoning for a partner. Clail’s Wall was a chest-high heap of moss running through the fields from beyond a rise on their right to a good way up the steep flank of the Heroes. Scale’s men were huddled in its lee, most still swaddled in blankets, exactly where Calder wished he was. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d seen the world this early and it was an even uglier place than usual.

Scale pointed south, through a gap in the wall and down a rough track scarred with puddles. ‘Half the men are hidden in sight of the Old Bridge. When the Union try to cross, we’ll stop the bastards.’

Calder didn’t want to deny it, of course, but he had to ask. ‘How many Union on the other side of the river now?’

‘A lot.’ Scale looked at him as if daring him to say something. Calder only scratched his head. ‘You’re staying back here, with Pale-as-Snow and the rest of the men, behind Clail’s Wall.’ Calder nodded. Staying behind a wall sounded like his kind of job. ‘Sooner or later, though, chances are I’ll need your help. When I send for it, come forward. We’ll fight together.’ Calder winced into the wind. That sounded less like his kind of job. ‘I can trust you to do that, right?’

Calder frowned sideways. ‘Of course.’ Prince Calder, a byword for trustiness. ‘I won’t let you down.’ Brave, bold, good Prince Calder.

‘Whatever we’ve lost, we’ve got each other still.’ Scale put his big hand on Calder’s shoulder. ‘It’s not easy, is it? Being a great man’s son. You’d

have thought it would come with all kinds of advantages – with borrowed admiration, and respect. But it's only as easy as it is for the seeds of a great tree, trying to grow in its choking shadow. Not many make it to the sunlight for themselves.'

'Aye.' Calder didn't mention that being a great man's younger son was twice the trial. Then you've two trees to take the axe to before you can spread your leaves in the sunshine.

Scale nodded up towards Skarling's Finger. A few fires still twinkled on the flanks of the hill where Tenways' men had their camps. 'If we can't hold up, Brodd Tenways is meant to be helping.'

Calder raised his brows. 'I'll expect Skarling himself to ride to my aid before I count on that old bastard.'

'Then it's you and me. We might not always agree, but we're family.' Scale held out his hand, and Calder took it.

'Family.' Half-family, anyway.

'Good luck, brother.'

'And to you.' Half-brother. Calder watched Scale swing up onto his horse and spur off sharply down that track towards the Old Bridge.

'Got a feeling you'll need more'n luck today, your Highness.' Foss Deep was under the dripping ruins of a porch beside the house, his weathered clothes and his weathered face fading into the weathered wall behind.

'I don't know.' Shallow sat wrapped in a grey blanket so only his grinning head showed, disembodied. 'The biggest mountain of best luck ever might do it.'

Calder turned away from them in sulky silence, frowning across the fields to the south. He'd a feeling they might have the truth of it.

Theirs wasn't the only bit of earth being turned over. Few other wounded men must've died in the night. You could see the little groups, hunched in the drizzle with sorrow, or more likely self-pity, which looks about the same and serves just as well at a funeral. You could hear the Chiefs trotting out their empty babble, all aiming at that same sorry tone. Splitfoot was one, standing over the grave of one of Dow's Named Men not twenty paces distant, giving it the moist eye. No sign of Dow himself, mind you. Moist eyes weren't really his style.

Meanwhile the ordinary business of the day got started like the burial parties were ghosts themselves, invisible. Men grumbling as they crawled from wet beds, cursing at damp clothes, rubbing down damp weapons and armour, searching out food, pissing, scratching, sucking the last drops from last night's bottles, comparing trophies stole from the Union, chuckling over one joke or another. Chuckling too loud because they all knew there'd be more dark work today and chuckles had to be grabbed where they could be.

Craw looked at the others, all with heads bowed. All except Whirrun, who was arching back, hugging the Father of Swords in his folded arms, letting the rain patter on his tongue. Craw was a little annoyed by that, and a little jealous of it. He wished he was known as a madman and didn't have to go through the empty routines. But there's a right way of doing things, and for him there was no dodging it.

'What makes a man a hero?' he asked the wet air. 'Big deeds? Big name? Tall glory and tall songs? No. Standing by your crew, I reckon.' Whirrun grunted his agreement, then stuck his tongue out again. 'Brack-i-Dayn, come down from the hills fifteen years ago, fought beside me fourteen of 'em, and always thought of his crew 'fore himself. Lost count on the number o' times that big bastard saved my life. Always had a kind word, or a funny one. Think he even made Yon laugh one time.'

'Twice,' said Yon, face harder'n ever. Got any harder he'd be knocking lumps from the Heroes with it.

'He made no complaints. Except not enough to eat.' Craw's voice went for a moment and he gave a kind of squeaky croak. Stupid bloody noise for a Chief to make, 'specially at a time like this. He cleared his throat and hammered on. 'Never enough for Brack to eat. He died … peaceful. Reckon he'd have liked that, even if he loved a good fight. Dying in your sleep is a long stretch better'n dying with steel in your guts, whatever the songs say.'

'Fuck the songs,' said Wonderful.

'Aye. Fuck 'em. Don't know who's buried under here, really. But if it's Skarling his self he should be proud to share some earth with Brack-i-Dayn.' Craw curled his lips back. 'And if not, fuck him too. Back to the mud, Brack.' He knelt, not having to try too hard to look in pain since his kneecap felt like it was going to pop off, clawed up a fistful of damp black soil and shook it out again over the rest.

'Back to the mud,' muttered Yon.

‘Back to the mud,’ came Wonderful’s echo.

‘Looking on the sunny side,’ said Whirrun, ‘it’s where we’re all headed, one way or another. No?’ He looked about as though expecting that to lift spirits, and when it didn’t, shrugged and turned away.

‘Old Brack’s all done.’ Scorry squatted by the grave, one hand on the wet ground, brow furrowed like at a puzzle he couldn’t work out. ‘Can’t believe it. Good words, though, Chief.’

‘You reckon?’ Craw winced as he stood, slapping the dirt from his hands. ‘I’m not sure how many more o’ these I can stand.’

‘Aye,’ murmured Scorry.

‘I guess those are the times.’

Opening Remarks

‘Get up.’

Beck shoved the foot away, scowling. He didn’t care for a boot in the ribs at any time, but ’specially not from Reft, and ’specially not when it felt like he only just got off to sleep. He’d lain awake in the darkness a long time, thinking on Caul Shivers stabbing that man, turning it over and over as he twisted about under his blanket. Not able to get comfortable. Not with his blanket or with the thought of that little knife poking away. ‘What?’

‘The Union are coming, that’s what.’

Beck tore his blanket back and strode across the garret room, ducking under the low beam, sleep and anger forgotten both at once. He kicked the creaking door of the big cupboard closed, shouldered Brait and Stodder out of the way and stared through one of the narrow windows.

He’d half-expected to see men slaughtering each other outside in the lanes of Osrung, blood flying and flags waving and songs being sung right under his window. But the town was quiet at a first glance. Weren’t much beyond dawn and the rain was flitting down, drawing a greasy haze over the huddled buildings.

Maybe forty strides away across a cobbled square the brown river was churning past, swollen with rain off the fells. The bridge didn’t look much for all the fuss being made of it – a worn stone span barely wide enough for two riders to pass each other. A mill house stood on its right, a row of low houses on its left, shutters open with a few nervy faces at the windows, most looking off to the south, just like Beck. Beyond the bridge a rutted lane led between wattle shacks and up to the fence on the south side of

town. He thought he could see men moving there on the walkways, dim through the drizzle. Maybe a couple with flatbows already shooting.

While he was looking, men started hurrying from an alley and into the square below, forming up a shield wall at the north end of the bridge while a man in a fine cloak bellowed at 'em. Carls to the front, ready to lock their painted shields together. Thralls behind, spears ready to bring down.

There was a battle on the way, all right.

'You should've told me sooner,' he snapped, hurrying back to his blanket and dragging on his boots.

'Didn't know sooner,' said Reft.

'Here.' Colving offered Beck a hunk of black bread, his eyes scared circles in his chubby face.

Even the thought of eating made Beck feel sick. He snatched up his sword, then realised he'd nowhere to take it to. Weren't like he had a place at the fence, or in the shield wall, or anywhere else in particular. He looked towards the stairs, then towards the window, free hand opening and closing. 'What do we do?'

'We wait.' Flood dragged his stiff leg up the steps and into the attic. He'd got his mail on, glistening with drizzle across the shoulders. 'Reachey's given us two houses to hold, this and one just across the street. I'll be in there.'

'You will?' Beck realised he'd made himself sound scared, like a child asking his mummy if she was really going to leave him in the dark. 'You know, some o' these boys could do with a man to look to—'

'That'll have to be you and Reft. You might not believe it, but the lads in the other house are even greener'n you lot.'

'Right. 'Course.' Beck had spent the past week chafing at Flood being always around, keeping him back. Now the thought of the old boy going only made him feel more jittery.

'There'll be you five and five more in this house. Some other lads from the weapontake. For the time being just set tight. Block up the windows downstairs best you can. Who's got a bow?'

'I have,' said Beck.

'And me.' Reft held his up.

'I've got my sling,' said Colving, hopefully.

'You any good with it?' asked Reft.

The boy shook his head sadly. ‘Couldn’t use it at a window, anyway.’

‘Why bring it up, then?’ snapped Beck, fingering his own bow. His palm was all sweaty.

Flood walked to the two narrow windows and pointed towards the river. ‘Maybe we’ll hold ’em at the fence, but if not we’re forming up a shield wall at the bridge. If we don’t hold ’em there, well, anyone with a bow start shooting. Careful, though, don’t go hitting any of our boys in the back, eh? Better not to shoot at all than risk killing our own, and when the blood’s up it can get hard to make out the difference. The rest of you downstairs, ready to keep ’em out of the house if they make it across.’ Stodder chewed at his big bottom lip. ‘Don’t worry. They won’t make it across, and even if they do they’ll be in a right mess. Reachey’ll be getting ready to hit back by then, you can bet on that. So if they try to get in, just keep ’em out ’til help gets here.’

‘Keep ’em out,’ piped Brait, jabbing happily at nothing with his twig of a spear. He didn’t look like he could’ve kept a cat out of a chicken coop with that.

‘Any questions?’ Beck didn’t feel he had a clue what to do, but it hardly seemed one question would plug the gap, so he kept quiet. ‘Right, then. I’ll check back if I can.’ Flood limped to the stairway and was gone. They were on their own. Beck strode to a window again, thinking it was better’n doing nothing, but naught had changed that he could see.

‘They over the fence yet?’ Brait was up on tiptoe, trying to look over Beck’s shoulder. He sounded all excited, eyes bright like a boy on his birthday, waiting to see what his present might be. He sounded a little bit like Beck always thought he’d feel facing battle. But he didn’t feel that way. He felt sick and hot in spite of the damp breeze on his face.

‘No. And ain’t you supposed to be downstairs?’

‘Not ’til they come, I’m not. Don’t get to see this every day, do you?’

Beck brushed him off with an elbow. ‘Just get out of it! Your stink’s making me sick!’

‘All right, all right.’ Brait shambled away, looking hurt, but Beck couldn’t bring up much sympathy. It was the best he could do not to bring up the breakfast he hadn’t had.

Reft was stood at the other window, bow over his shoulder. ‘Thought you’d be happy. Looks like you’ll get your chance to be a hero.’

‘I am happy,’ snapped Beck. And not shitting himself at all.

Meed had established his headquarters in the inn’s common hall, which by the standards of the North was a palatial space, double height and with a gallery at first-floor level. Overnight it had been decorated like a palace too with gaudy hangings, inlaid cupboards, gilded candlesticks and all the pompous trappings one would expect in a lord governor’s own residence, presumably carted half way across the North at monstrous expense. A pair of violinists had set up in the corner and were grinning smugly at each other as they sawed out jaunty chamber music. Three huge oil paintings had even been hoisted into position by Meed’s industrious servants: two renderings of great battles from the Union’s history and, incredibly, a portrait of Meed himself, glowering from on high in antique armour. Finree gaped at it for a moment, hardly knowing whether to laugh or cry.

Large windows faced south into the inn’s weed-colonised courtyard, east across fields dotted with trees towards brooding woods, and north towards the town of Osrung. With all the shutters wide open a chilly breeze drifted through the room, ruffling hair and snatching at papers. Officers clustered about the northern windows, eager to catch a glimpse of the assault, Meed in their midst in a uniform of eye-searing crimson. He glanced sideways as Finree slipped up beside him and gave the slightest sneer of distaste, like a fastidious eater who has spied an insect in his salad. She returned it with a beaming smile.

‘Might I borrow your eyeglass, your Grace?’

He worked his mouth sourly for a moment but was held prisoner by etiquette, and handed it stiffly over. ‘Of course.’

The road curved off to the north, a muddy stripe through muddy fields overflowing with the sprawling camp, tents haphazardly scattered like monstrous fungi sprouted in the night. Beyond them were the earthworks Meed’s men had thrown up in the darkness. Beyond them, through the haze of mist and drizzle, she could just make out the fence around Osrung, perhaps even the suggestion of scaling ladders against it.

Her imagination filled in the blanks. Ranks of marching men ordered forward to the palisade, grim-faced and determined as arrows showered down. The wounded dragged for the rear or left screaming where they lay.

Rocks tumbling, ladders shoved from the fence, men butchered as they tried to climb over onto the walkways, thrust screaming back to be dashed on the ground below.

She wondered whether Hal was in the midst of that, playing the hero. For the first time she felt a stab of worry for him, a cold shiver through her shoulders. This was no game. She lowered Meed's eyeglass, chewing at her lip.

'Where the hell is the Dogman and his rabble?' the lord governor was demanding of Captain Hardrick.

'I believe they were behind us on the road, your Grace. His scouts came upon a burned-out village and the lord marshal gave him leave to investigate. They should be here within an hour or two—'

'Typical. You can rely on him for a knowing shrug but when the battle begins he is nowhere to be seen.'

'Northmen are treacherous by nature,' someone tossed out.

'Cowardly.'

'Their presence would only slow us down, your Grace.'

'That much is true,' snorted Meed. 'Order every unit into the attack. I want them overwhelmed. I want that town crushed into the dust and every Northman in it dead or running.'

Finree could not help herself. 'Surely it would be wise to leave at least one regiment behind? As I understand it, the woods to the east have not been thoroughly—'

'Do you seriously suppose you will hit upon some scheme by which you will replace me with your husband?'

There was a pause that seemed impossibly long, while Finree wondered if she might be dreaming. 'I beg your—'

'He is a pleasant enough man, of course. Brave and honest and all those things housewives like to coo about. But he is a fool and, what is worse, the son of a notorious traitor and the husband of a shrew to boot. His only significant friend is your father, and your father's days in the sun are numbered in small digits.' Meed spoke softly, but not so softly that he could not easily be overheard. One young captain's mouth fell open with surprise. It seemed Meed was not held quite so tightly by the bonds of etiquette as she had supposed.

‘I frustrated an attempt by the Closed Council to prevent me taking my brother’s place as lord governor, did you know that? The Closed Council. Do you really suppose some soldier’s daughter might succeed where they failed? Address me only once again without the proper respect and I will crush you and your husband like the pretty, ambitious, irrelevant lice you are.’ He calmly plucked his eyeglass from her limp hand and looked through it towards Osrung, precisely as if he had never spoken and she did not exist.

Finree should have whipped out some acid rejoinder, but the only thing in her mind was an overpowering urge to smash the front of Meed’s eyeglass with her fist and drive the other end into his skull. The room seemed uncomfortably bright. The violins ripped at her ears. Her face burned as if she had been slapped. All she could do was blink, and meekly retreat. It was as if she floated to the other side of the room without moving her feet. A couple of the officers watched her get there, muttering among themselves, evidently party to her one-sided humiliation and no doubt relishing it too.

‘Are you all right?’ asked Aliz. ‘You look pale.’

‘I am perfectly well.’ Or, in fact, seething with fury. Insulting her was one thing, no doubt she deserved it. Insulting her husband and her father were other things entirely. That she would make the old bastard pay for, she swore it.

Aliz leaned close. ‘What do we do now?’

‘Now? We sit here like good little girls and applaud while idiots stack up the coffins.’

‘Oh.’

‘Don’t worry. Later on they might let you weep over a wound or two and, if the mood takes you, you can flutter your eyelashes at the awful futility of it all.’

Aliz swallowed, and looked away. ‘Oh.’

‘That’s right. Oh.’

So this was battle. Beck and Reft had never had too much to say to each other, but since the Union first started fighting their way over the fence they hadn’t said a word. Just stood silent at the windows. Beck wished he’d got

friends beside him. Or wished he'd tried harder to make friends of the lads he'd found beside him. But it was too late now.

His bow was in his hand, an arrow nocked and the string ready to draw. He'd had it ready the best part of an hour, but there was no one he could shoot at. Nothing he could do but watch, and sweat, and lick his lips, and watch. He'd started off wishing he could see more, but now the rain had slacked off, and the sun was getting up, and Beck found he was seeing far more than he wanted to.

The Union were over the fence in three or four places, into the town in numbers. There was fighting all over, everything broken up into separate little scraps facing every which way. No lines, just a mass of confusion and mad noise. Shouts and howls mashed together, din of clashing metal and breaking wood.

Beck was no expert. He didn't know how anyone could be at this. But he could feel the balance shifting over there on the south side of the river. More and more Northmen were scurrying back across the bridge, some limping or holding wounds, some shouting and pointing off south, threading their way through the shield wall at the north end of the span and into the square under Beck's window. Safety. He hoped. Felt a long bloody way from safe, though. Felt about as far from safe as Beck had in his whole life.

'I want to see!' Brait was dragging at Beck's shirt, trying to get a peek through the window. 'What's going on?'

Beck didn't know what to say. Didn't know if he could find his voice, even. Right under them some wounded man was screaming. Gurgling, retching screams. Beck wished he'd stop. He felt dizzy with it.

The fence was mostly lost. He could see one tall Union man on the walkway, pointing towards the bridge with a sword, clapping men on their backs as they flooded off the ladders to either side of him. There were still a few dozen Carls at the gate, clustered around a tattered standard, painted shields facing out in a half-circle but they were surrounded and well outnumbered, shafts hissing down into 'em from the walkways.

Some of the bigger buildings were still in Northern hands. Beck could see men at the windows, shooting arrows out, ducking back in. Doors nailed shut and barricaded, but Union men swarming around 'em like bees around a hive. They'd managed to set fires for a couple of the most stubborn

holdouts, in spite of the damp. Now brown smoke billowed out and was carried off east by the wind, lit by the dull orange of flames flickering.

A Northman came charging from a burning building, swinging an axe around his head in both hands. Beck couldn't hear him shouting, could see he was, though. In the songs he'd have taken a load down with him and joined the dead proud. Couple of Union men scattered away before some others herded him back against the wall with spears. One stuck him in the arm and he dropped his axe, held his other hand up, shouting more. Giving up, maybe, or insults, didn't make much difference. They stuck him in the chest and he slumped down. Stuck him on the ground, spear shafts going up and down like a couple of men digging in the fields.

Beck's wide-open, watery eyes kept on darting across the buildings, murder in plain view all along the riverbank not a hundred strides from where he stood. They dragged someone struggling out from a hovel and bent him over. There was the twinkle of a knife, then they shoved him into the water and he floated away on his face while they wandered back inside the house. Cut his throat, Beck reckoned. Cut his throat, just like that.

'They've got the gate.' Reft's voice sounded strangled. Like he'd never spoken before. Beck saw he was right, though. They'd cut down the last defenders, and were dragging the bars clear, and pulling the gates open, and daylight showed through the square archway.

'By the dead,' whispered Beck, but it came out just a breath. Hundreds of the bastards started flowing into Osrung, pouring out into the smoke and the scattered buildings, flooding down the lane towards the bridge. The triple row of Northmen at its north end looked a pitiful barrier all of a sudden. A sand wall to hold back the ocean. Beck could see them stirring. Wilting, almost. Could feel their deep desire to join the men who were scattering back across the bridge and through their ranks, trying to escape the slaughter on the far bank.

Beck felt it too, that tickling need to run. To do something, and run was all he could think of. His eyes flickered over the burning buildings on the south side of the river, flames reaching higher now, smoke spreading over the town.

Beck wondered what it was like inside those houses. No way out. Thousands of Union bastards beating at the doors, at the walls, shooting arrows in. Low rooms filling up with smoke. Wounded men with small

hopes of mercy. Counting their last shafts. Counting their dead friends. No way out. Time was Beck's blood would've run hot at thoughts like that. It was on the chilly side now, though. Those weren't no fortresses built for defending on the other side of the river, they were little wooden shacks.

Just like the one he was in.

The Infernal Contraptions

Your August Majesty,

Morning on the second day of battle, and the Northmen occupy strong positions on the north side of the river. They hold the Old Bridge, they hold Osrung, and they hold the Heroes. They hold the crossings and invite us to take them. The ground is theirs, but they have handed the initiative to Lord Marshal Kroy and, now that all our forces have reached the battlefield, he will not be slow to seize it.

On the eastern wing, Lord Governor Meed has already begun an attack in overwhelming force upon the town of Osrung. I find myself upon the western, observing General Mitterick's assault upon the Old Bridge.

The general delivered a rousing speech this morning as the first light touched the sky. When he asked for volunteers to lead the attack every man put up his hand without hesitation. Your Majesty would be most proud of the bravery, the honour, and the dedication of your soldiers. Truly, every man of them is a hero.

I remain your Majesty's most faithful and unworthy servant,
Bremer dan Gorst, Royal Observer of the Northern War

Gorst blotted the letter, folded it and passed it to Younger, who sealed it with a blob of red wax and slid it into a courier's satchel with the golden sun of the Union worked into the leather in elaborate gilt.

'It will be on its way south within the hour,' said the servant, turning to go.

‘Excellent,’ said Gorst.

But is it? Does it truly matter whether it goes sooner, or later, or if Younger tosses it into the latrine pits along with the rest of the camp’s ordure? Does it matter whether the king ever reads my pompous platitudes about General Mitterick’s pompous platitudes as the first light touched up the sky? When did I last get a letter back? A month ago? Two? Is just a note too much to ask? Thanks for the patriotic garbage, hope you‘re keeping well in ignominious exile?

He picked absently at the scabs on the back of his right hand, wanting to see if he could make them hurt. He winced as he made them hurt more than he had intended to. *Ever a fine line.* He was covered with grazes, cuts and bruises he could not even recall the causes of, but the worst pain came from the loss of his Calvez-made short steel, drowned somewhere in the shallows. One of the few relics remaining of a time when he was the king’s exalted First Guard rather than an author of contemptible fantasies. *I am like a jilted lover too cowardly to move on, clinging tremble-lipped to the last feeble mementoes of the cad who abandoned her. Except sadder, and uglier, and with a higher voice. And I kill people for a hobby.*

He stepped from under the dripping awning outside his tent. The rain had slackened to a few flitting specks, and there was even some blue sky torn from the pall of cloud that smothered the valley. He surely should have felt some flicker of optimism at the simple pleasure of the sun on his face. But there was only the unbearable weight of his disgrace. The fool’s tasks lined up in crushingly tedious procession. *Run. Practice. Shit a turd. Write a letter. Eat. Watch. Write a turd. Shit a letter. Eat. Bed. Pretend to sleep but actually lie awake all night trying to wank. Up. Run. Letter …*

Mitterick had already presided over one failed attempt on the bridge: a bold, rash effort by the Tenth Foot which had crossed unresisted to a lot of victorious whooping. The Northmen had met them with a hail of arrows as they attempted to find their order on the far side, then sprang from hidden trenches in the barley and charged with a blood-freezing wail. Whoever was in command of them knew his business. The Union soldiers fought hard but were surrounded on three sides and quickly cut down, forced back into the river to flounder helplessly in the water, or crushed into a hellish confusion on the bridge itself, mingled with those still striving mindlessly to cross from behind.

A great line of Mitterick's flatbowmen had then appeared from behind a hedgerow on the south bank and raked the Northmen with a savage volley, forcing them into a disorganised retreat back to their trenches, leaving the dead scattered in the trampled crops on their side of the bridge. The Tenth had been too mauled to take advantage of the opening, though, and now archers on both sides were busy with a desultory exchange of ammunition across the water while Mitterick and his officers marshalled their next wave. *And, one imagines, their next batch of coffins too.*

Gorst watched the whirling clouds of gnats that haunted the bank, and the corpses that floated past beneath them. *The bravery.* Turning with the current. *The honour.* Face up and face down. *The dedication of the soldiers.* One sodden Union hero wallowed to a halt in some rushes, bobbing for a moment on his side. A Northman drifted up, bumped gently into him and carried him from the bank and through a patch of frothy yellow scum in an awkward embrace. *Ah, young love. Perhaps someone will hug me after my death. I certainly haven't had many before.* Gorst had to stop himself snorting with spectacularly inappropriate laughter.

'Why, Colonel Gorst!' The First of the Magi strolled up with staff in one hand and teacup in the other. He took in the river and its floating cargo, heaved a long breath through his nose and exhaled satisfaction. 'Well, you couldn't say they aren't giving it a good try, anyway. Successes are all very well, but there's something grand about a glorious failure, isn't there?'

I can't see what, and I should know.

'Lord Bayaz.' The Magus' curly-headed servant snapped open a folding chair, brushed an imaginary speck of dust from its canvas seat and bowed low.

Bayaz tossed his staff on the wet grass without ceremony and sat, eyes closed, tipping his smiling face towards the strengthening sun. 'Wonderful thing, a war. Done in the right way, of course, for the right reasons. Separates the fruit from the chaff. Cleans things up.' He snapped his fingers with an almost impossibly loud crack. 'Without them societies are apt to become soft. Flabby. Like a man who eats only cake.' He reached up and punched Gorst playfully on the arm, then shook out his limp fingers in fake pain. 'Ouch! I bet you don't eat only cake, do you?'

'No.'

Like virtually everyone Gorst ever spoke to, Bayaz was hardly listening. ‘Things don’t change just by the asking. You have to give them a damn good shake. Whoever said war never changes anything, well … they just haven’t fought enough wars, have they? Glad to see this rain’s clearing up, though. It’s been playing hell with my experiment.’

The experiment consisted of three giant tubes of dull, grey-black metal, seated upon huge wooden cradles, each closed at one end with the other pointed across the river in the vague direction of the Heroes. They had been set up with immense care and effort on a hump of ground a hundred strides from Gorst’s tent. The ceaseless din of men, horses and tackle would have kept him awake all night had he not been half-awake anyway, as he always was. Lost in the smoke of Cardotti’s House of Leisure, searching desperately for the king. Seeing a masked face in the gloom, at the stairway. Before the Closed Council as they stripped him of his position, the bottom dropping out of the world all over again. Twisted up with Finree, holding her. Holding smoke. Coughing smoke, as he stumbled through the twisted corridors of Cardotti’s House of—

‘Pitiful, isn’t it?’ asked Bayaz.

For a moment, Gorst wondered if the Magus had read his thoughts. *And yes, it certainly fucking is.* ‘Pardon?’

Bayaz spread his arms to encompass the scene of crawling activity. ‘All the doings of men, still at the mercy of the fickle skies. And war most of all.’ He sipped from his cup again, grimaced and flung the dregs out across the grass. ‘Once we can kill people at any time of day, in any season, in any weather, why, *then* we’ll be civilised, eh?’ And he chuckled away to himself.

The two old Adepti from the University of Adua scraped up like a pair of priests given a personal audience with God. The one called Denka was ghoul-pale and trembling. The one called Saurizin had a sheen of sweat across his wrinkled forehead which sprang back as fast as he could wipe it off.

‘Lord Bayaz.’ He tried to bow and grin at once and couldn’t manage either with any conviction. ‘I believe the weather has improved to the point where the devices can be tested.’

‘At last,’ snapped the Magus. ‘Then what are you waiting for, the Midwinter Festival?’

The two old men fled, Saurizin snarling fiercely at his colleague. They had an ill-tempered discussion with the dozen aproned engineers about the nearest tube, including a deal of arm-waving, pointing at the skies and reference to some brass instruments. Finally one produced a long torch, flames licking at the tarred end. The Adepti and their minions hurried away, squatting behind boxes and barrels, covering their ears. The torch-bearer advanced with all the enthusiasm of a condemned man to the scaffold, touched the brand at arm's length to the top of the tube. A few sparks flew, a lick of smoke curled up, a faint pop and fizzle were heard.

Gorst frowned. 'What is—'

There was a colossal explosion and he shrank to the ground, hands clasped over his head. He had heard nothing like it since the Siege of Adua, when the Gurkish put fire to a mine and blew a hundred strides of the walls to gravel. Guardsmen peeped terrified from behind their shields. Exhausted labourers scrambled gaping from their fires. Others struggled to control terrified horses, two of which had torn a rail free and were galloping away with it clattering behind them.

Gorst slowly, suspiciously, stood. Smoke was issuing gently from the end of one of the pipes, engineers swarming around it. Denka and Saurizin were arguing furiously with each other. What had been the effect of the device beyond the noise, Gorst had not the slightest idea.

'Well.' Bayaz stuck a finger in one ear and waggled it around. 'They're certainly loud enough.'

A faint rumble echoed over the valley. Something like thunder, though it seemed to Craw the weather was just clearing up.

'You hear that?' asked Splitfoot.

Craw could only shrug up at the sky. Plenty of cloud still, even if there were a few blue patches showing. 'More rain, maybe.'

Dow had other things on his mind. 'How are we doing at the Old Bridge?'

'They came just after first light but Scale held 'em,' said Splitfoot. 'Drove 'em back across.'

'They'll be coming again, 'fore too long.'

'Doubtless. Reckon he'll hold?'

'If he don't we got a problem.'

‘Half his men are across the valley with Calder.’

Dow snorted. ‘Just the man I’d want at my back if I was fighting for my life.’

Splitfoot and a couple of the others chuckled.

There was a right way of doing things, far as Craw was concerned, and it didn’t include letting men laugh at your friends behind their backs, however laughable they may be. ‘That lad might surprise you,’ he said.

Splitfoot smirked wider. ‘Forgot you and him were tight.’

‘Practically raised the boy,’ said Craw, squaring up and giving him the eye.

‘Explains a lot.’

‘Of what?’

Dow spoke over ’em, an edge to his voice. ‘The pair o’ you can wank Calder off once the light’s gone. In case you hadn’t noticed we’ve got bigger business. What about Osrung?’

Splitfoot gave Craw a parting look, then turned back to his Chief. ‘Union are over the fence, fighting on the south side of town. Reachey’ll hold ’em, though.’

‘He better,’ grunted Dow. ‘And the middle? Any sign of ’em crossing the shallows?’

‘They keep marching around down there, but no—’

Splitfoot’s head vanished and something went in Craw’s eye.

There was a cracking sound then all he could hear was a long, shrill whine.

He got knocked in the back hard and he fell, rolled, scrambled up, bent over like a drunken man, the ground weaving.

Dow had his axe out, waving it at something, shouting, but Craw couldn’t hear him. Just that mad ringing. There was dust everywhere. Choking clouds, like fog.

He nearly tripped over Splitfoot’s headless corpse, blood welling out of it. Knew it was his from the collar of his mail coat. He was missing an arm as well. Splitfoot was. Not Craw. He had both his. He checked. Blood on his hands, though, not sure whose.

Probably he should’ve drawn his sword. He waved at the hilt but couldn’t work out how far away it was. People ran about, shapes in the murk.

Craw rubbed at his ears. Still nothing but that whine.

A Carl was sitting on the ground, screaming silently, tearing at his bloody chain mail. Something was sticking out of it. Too fat to be an arrow. A splinter of stone.

Were they attacked? Where from? The dust was settling. People shambling about, knocking into each other, kneeling over wounded men, pointing every which way, cowering on their faces.

The top half of one of the Heroes was missing, the old stone sheared off jagged in a fresh, shiny edge. Dead men were scattered around its base. More'n dead. Smashed apart. Folded and twisted. Split open and gutted. Ruined like Craw had never seen before. Even after the Bloody-Nine did his black work up in the High Places.

A boy sat alive in the midst of the bodies and the chunks of rock, blood-sprayed, blinking at a drawn sword on his knees, a whetstone held frozen in one hand. No sign how he'd been saved, if he had been.

Whirrun's face loomed up. His mouth moved like he was talking but Craw could only hear a crackle.

'What? What?' Even his own words made no sound. Thumbs poked at his cheek. It hurt. A lot. Craw touched his face and his fingers were bloody. But his hands were bloody anyway. Everything was.

He tried to push Whirrun away, tripped over something and sat down heavily on the grass.

Probably best all round if he stayed there a bit.

'A hit!' cackled Saurizin, shaking a mystifying arrangement of brass screws, rods and lenses at the sky like a geriatric warrior brandishing a sword in victory.

'A palpable hit with the second discharge, Lord Bayaz!' Denka could barely contain his delight. 'One of the stones on the hill was struck directly and destroyed!'

The First of the Magi raised an eyebrow. 'You talk as if destroying stones was the point of the exercise.'

'I am sure considerable injury and confusion were inflicted upon the Northmen at the summit as well!'

'Considerable injury and confusion!' echoed Saurizin.

'Fine things to visit upon an enemy,' said Bayaz. 'Continue.'

The mood of the two old Adepti sagged. Denka licked his lips. ‘It would be prudent to check the devices for evidence of damage. No one knows what the consequences of discharging them frequently might be—’

‘Then let us find out,’ said Bayaz. ‘Continue.’

The two old men clearly feared carrying on. *But a great deal less than they fear the First of the Magi.* They scraped their way back towards the tubes where they began to bully their helpless engineers as they themselves had been bullied. *And the engineers no doubt will harangue the labourers, and the labourers will whip the mules, and the mules will kick at the dogs, and the dogs will snap at the wasps, and with any luck one of the wasps will sting Bayaz on his fat arse, and thus the righteous wheel of life will be ready to turn once again …*

Away to the west a second attempt on the Old Bridge was just petering out, having achieved no more than the first. This time an ill-advised effort had been made to cross the river on rafts. A couple had broken up not long after pushing off, leaving their passengers floundering in the shallows or dragged under by their armour in deeper water. Others were swept off merrily downstream while the men on board flailed pointlessly with their paddles or their hands, arrows plopping around them.

‘Rafts,’ murmured Bayaz, sticking out his chin and scratching absently at his short beard.

‘Rafts,’ murmured Gorst, watching an officer on one furiously brandish his sword at the far bank, about as likely ever to reach it as he was the moon.

There was another thunderous explosion, followed almost immediately by a chorus of gasps, sighs and cheers of wonder from the swelling audience, gathered at the top of the rise in a curious crescent. This time Gorst scarcely flinched. *Amazing how quickly the unbearable becomes banal.* More smoke issued from the nearest tube, wandering gently up to join the acrid pall already hanging over the experiment.

That weird rumble rolled out again, smoke rising from somewhere across the river to the south. ‘What the hell are they up to?’ muttered Calder. Even standing on the wall, he couldn’t see a thing.

He'd been there all morning, waiting. Pacing up and down, in the drizzle, then the dry. Waiting, every minute an age, with his thoughts darting round and round like a lizard in a jar. Peering to the south and not being able to see a thing, the sounds of combat drifting across the fields in waves, sometimes sounding distant, sometimes worryingly near. But no call for help. Nothing but a few wounded carried past, scant reinforcement for Calder's wavering nerve.

'Here's news,' said Pale-as-Snow.

Calder stretched up, shading his eyes. It was White-Eye Hansul, riding up hard from the Old Bridge. He had a smile on his wrinkled face as he reined in, though, which gave Calder a trace of hope. Right then putting off the fighting seemed almost as good as not doing it at all.

He wedged a boot up on the gate in what he hoped was a manly style, trying to sound cool as snow while his heart was burning. 'Scale got himself in a pickle, has he?'

'It's the Southerners pickled so far, the stupid bastards.' White-Eye pulled his helmet off and wiped his forehead on the back of his sleeve. 'Twice Scale's driven them back. First time they came strolling across like they thought we'd just give the bridge over. Your brother soon cured them of that notion.' He chuckled to himself and Pale-as-Snow joined him. Calder offered up his own, though it tasted somewhat sour. Everything did today.

'Second time they tried rafts as well.' White-Eye turned his head and spat into the barley. 'Could've told them the current's way too strong for that.'

'Good thing they never asked you,' said Pale-as-Snow.

'That it is. I reckon you lot can sit back here and take your boots off. We'll hold 'em all day at this rate.'

'There's a lot of day still,' Calder muttered. Something flashed by. His first thought was that it was a bird skimming the barley, but it was too fast and too big. It bounced once in the fields, sending up a puff of stalk and dust and leaving a long scar through the crop. A couple of hundred strides to the east, down at the grassy foot of the Heroes, it hit Clail's Wall.

Broken stones went spinning high, high into the air, showering out in a great cloud of dust and bits. Bits of tents. Bits of gear. Bits of men, Calder realised, because there were men camped behind the whole length of the wall.

'By—' said Hansul, gaping at the flying wreckage.

There was a sound like a whip cracking but a thousand times louder. White-Eye's horse reared up and he went sliding off the back, tumbling down into the barley, arms flailing. All around men gawped and shouted, drew weapons or flung themselves on the ground.

That last looked a good idea.

'Shit!' hissed Calder, scrambling from the gate and throwing himself in a ditch, his desire to look manly greatly outweighed by his desire to stay alive. Earth and stones rattled down around them like unseasonal hail, pinging from armour, bouncing in the track.

'Sticking to the sunny side,' said Pale-as-Snow, utterly unmoved, 'that's Tenways' stretch of wall.'

Bayaz' servant lowered an eyeglass with a curl of mild disappointment to his mouth. 'Wayward,' he said.

A towering understatement. The devices had been discharged perhaps two dozen times and their ammunition, which appeared to be large balls of metal or stone, scattered variously across the slope of the hill ahead, the fields to each side, the orchard at the foot, the sky above and on one occasion straight into the river sending up an immense fountain of spray.

How much the cost of this little aside, so we could dig a few holes in the Northern landscape? How many hospitals could have been built with the money? How many alms-houses? Anything worthier? Burials for dead pauper children? Gorst struggled to care, but could not quite get there. *We probably could have paid the Northmen to kill Black Dow themselves and go home. But then what would I find to fill the blasted desert between getting out of bed and—*

There was an orange flash, and the vague perception of things flying. He thought he saw Bayaz' servant punch at nothing beside his master, his arm an impossible blur. A moment later Gorst's skull was set ringing by an explosion even more colossal than usual, accompanied by a note something like the tolling of a great bell. He felt the blast ripping at his hair, stumbled to keep his balance. The servant had a ragged chunk of curved metal the size of a dinner plate in his hand. He tossed it onto the ground where it smoked gently in the grass.

Bayaz raised his brows at it. 'A malfunction.'

The servant rubbed black dirt from his fingers. ‘The path of progress is ever a crooked one.’

Pieces of metal had been flung in all directions. A particularly large one had bounced straight through a group of labourers leaving several dead and the rest spotted with blood. Other fragments had knocked little gaps in the stunned audience, or flicked over guardsmen like skittles. A great cloud of smoke was billowing from where one of the tubes had been. A blood and dirt-streaked engineer wandered out of it, his hair on fire, walking unsteadily at a diagonal. He didn’t have any arms, and soon toppled over.

‘Ever,’ as Bayaz sank unhappily into his folding chair, ‘a crooked one.’

Some people sat blinking. Others screamed. Yet more rushed about, trying to help the many wounded. Gorst wondered whether he should do the same. *But what good could I do? Boost morale with jokes? Have you heard the one about the big idiot with the stupid voice whose life was ruined in Sipani?*

Denka and Saurizin were sidling towards them, black robes smudged with soot. ‘And here, the penitents,’ murmured Bayaz’ servant. ‘With your leave, I should attend to some of our business on the other side of the river. I have a feeling the Prophet’s little disciples are not idle over there.’

‘Then we cannot be idle either.’ The Magus waved his servant away with a careless hand. ‘There are more important things than pouring my tea.’

‘A very few.’ The servant gave Gorst a faint smile as he slipped away. ‘Truly, as the Kantic scriptures say, the righteous can afford no rest …’

‘Lord Bayaz, er …’ Denka looked across at Saurizin, who made a frantic get-on-with-it motion. ‘I regret to inform you that … one of the devices has exploded.’

The Magus let them stand for a moment while, out of sight, a woman shrieked like a boiling kettle. ‘Do you suppose I missed that?’

‘Another jumped from its carriage upon the last discharge, and I fear will take some considerable time to realign.’

‘The third,’ wheedled Denka, ‘is displaying a tiny crack which requires some attention. I am …’ his face crumpling up as though he feared someone was going to stick a sword in it, ‘reluctant to risk charging it again.’

‘Reluctant?’ Bayaz’ displeasure was as a mighty weight. Even standing beside him Gorst felt a powerful urge to kneel.

‘A defect in the casting of the metal,’ Saurizin managed to gasp, sending a poisonous glance at his colleague.

‘My alloys are perfect,’ whined Denka, ‘it was an inconsistency in the explosive powders that was to—’

‘Blame?’ The voice of the Magus was almost as fearsome as the explosion had been. Believe me, gentlemen, there is always plenty of that left over after a battle. Even on the winning side.’ The two old men positively grovelled. Then Bayaz waved a hand and the menace was gone. ‘But these things happen. Overall it has been … a most interesting demonstration.’

‘Why, Lord Bayaz, you are far too kind …’

Their servile mutterings faded as Gorst picked his way to where a guard had been standing a few moments before. He was lying in the long grass, arms out wide, a ragged chunk of curved metal embedded in his helmet. One eye could still be seen through the twisted visor, staring at the sky in a last moment of profound surprise. *Truly, every man of them is a hero.*

The guard’s shield lay nearby, the golden sun on the face gleaming as its counterpart showed through the clouds. Gorst picked it up, slid his left hand into the straps and trudged off, upstream, towards the Old Bridge. As he passed, Bayaz was sitting back in his folding chair with one boot crossed over the other, his staff forgotten in the wet grass beside him.

‘What should they be called? They are engines that produce fire, so … fire engines? No, silly. Death tubes? Names are so important, and I’ve never had the trick of them. Have you two any ideas?’

‘I liked death tubes …’ muttered Denka.

Bayaz was not listening. I daresay someone will think up something suitable in due course. Something simple. I’ve a feeling we’ll be seeing a great deal more of these devices …’

Reasoned Debate

Far as Beck could tell, things were coming apart.

The Union had a double row of archers on the south bank of the river. Squatting down behind a fence to load their evil little bows. Popping up every now and then to loose a clattering hail of bolts at the north end of the bridge. The Carls there were hunched behind their arrow-prickled shield wall, the Thralls huddling tight behind them, spears in a thoughtless tangle. A couple of men had ended up arrow-prickled too, been dragged squealing back through the ranks, doing nothing for the courage of the rest. Or for Beck's courage either. What there was of it left.

He was almost saying the words with every breath. Let's run. Plenty of others had. Grown men with names and everything, running for their lives from the fight across the river. Why the hell were Beck and the rest staying? Why should they care a shit whether Caul Reachey got to hold some town, or Black Dow got to keep wearing Bethod's old chain?

South of the river the fighting was done. The Union had broken into the last houses and slaughtered the defenders or burned 'em out with about the same results, the smoke of it still drifting across the water. Now they were getting ready to try the bridge, a wedge of soldiers coming together on the far side. Beck had never seen men so heavy armoured, cased head to toe in metal so they looked more like something forged than born. He thought of the lame weapons his half-arsed crew had. Dull knives and bent spears. It'd be like trying to bring down a bull with a pin.

Another hail of little arrows came hissing across the water and a great big Thrall leaped up, making a mad shriek, shoving men out of his way then

toppling off the bridge and into the water. The shield wall loosened where he'd passed, the back rank drifting apart, going ragged. None of 'em wanted to just squat there and get peppered, and they wanted to face those armoured bastards close up even less. Maybe Black Dow liked the smell of burning cowards, but Black Dow was far away. The Union were awful near and fixing to get nearer. Beck could almost see the bones going out of 'em, all edging back together, shields coming unlocked, spears wobbling.

The Named Man who led the shield wall turned to shout, waving his axe, then fell on his knees, trying to reach over his back at something. He keeled over on his face, a bolt poking out of his fine cloak. Then someone gave a long shout on the other side of the bridge and the Union came on. All that polished metal tramping up together like some single angry beast. Not the wild charge of a crowd of Carls but a steady jog, full of purpose. Like that, without even a blow given, the shield wall broke apart and men ran. The next hail of arrows dropped a dozen or more as they showed their backs and scattered the rest across the square like Beck used to scatter starlings with a clap.

Beck watched a man drag himself over the cobbles with three bolts in him. Watched him wide-eyed, breath slithering in his throat. What did it feel like when the arrow went in you? Deep into your flesh? In your neck. In your chest. In your fruits. Or a blade? All that sharp metal, and a body so soft. What did it feel like to have a leg cut off? How much could something hurt? All the time he'd spent dreaming of battle, but somehow he'd never thought of it before.

Let's run. He turned to Reft to say it but he was letting an arrow fly, cursing and reaching for another. Beck should've been doing the same, like Flood told him, but his bow seemed to weigh a ton, his hand so weak he could hardly grip it. By the dead he was sick. They had to run, but he was too coward even to say it. Too coward to show his shitting, screaming, trembling fear to the lads downstairs. All he could do was stand there, with his bow out the window but the string not even drawn like a lad who's got his prick out to piss but found he couldn't manage it with someone watching.

He heard Reft's bow string go again. Heard him shout, 'I'm going down!' Pulling out his long knife in one hand, his hatchet in the other and heading for the stairs. Beck watched him with his mouth half open but nothing to

say. Trapped between his fear of staying here alone and his fear of going downstairs.

He had to force himself to look out of the window. Union men flooding across the square, the heavy armoured ones and more behind. Dozens. Hundreds. Arrows flitting from the buildings and down into them. Corpses all over. A rock came from the roof of the mill and stove in a Union helmet, sent the man toppling. But they were everywhere, charging through the streets, beating at the doors, hacking down the wounded as they tried to limp away. A Union officer stood near the bridge, waving his sword towards the buildings, dressed in a fancy jacket with gold thread like the prisoner Shivers had taken. Beck raised his bow, found his mark, finally drew the string back.

Couldn't do it. His ears were full of mad din, he couldn't think. He started trembling so bad he could hardly see, and in the end he squeezed his eyes shut and shot the arrow off at nothing. The only one he'd shot. Too late to run. They were all around the house. Trapped. He'd had his chance and now the Union was everywhere. Splinters flew in his face and he tumbled back inside the attic, slipped and fell on his arse, heels scraping at the boards. A flatbow bolt was buried in the window frame, splitting the timber, its gleaming point coming through into the room. He lay, propped on his elbows, staring at it.

He wanted his mother. By the dead, he wanted his mother. What kind of a thing was that for a man to want?

Beck scrambled up, could hear crashes and bangs everywhere, wails and roars sounding hardly human, downstairs, outside, inside, his head snapping round at every hint of a noise. Were they in the house already? Were they coming for him? All he could do was stand there and sweat. His legs were wet with it. Too wet. He'd pissed himself. Pissed himself like a child and hardly even known 'til it started going cold.

He drew his father's sword. Felt the weight of it. Should've made him feel strong, the way it always had before. But instead it made him feel homesick. Sick for the smelly little room he'd always drawn it in, the brave dreams that had hissed out of the sheath along with it. He could hardly believe he'd wished for this. He edged to the stairs, head turned away, looking out of the corner of one narrowed eye as if not seeing clearly might somehow keep him safe.

The room at the bottom was full of mad movement, shadows and darker shadows and splashes of light through broken shutters, furniture scattered, blades glinting. A regular splintering of wood, someone trying to break their way in. Voices, mangled up and saying nothing, Union words or no words at all. Screams and whimpers.

Two of Flood's Northern lads were lying on the floor. One was leaking blood everywhere. The other was saying, 'No, no, no,' over and over. Colving had this wild, mad look on his chubby face, jabbing at a Union man who'd squeezed in through the door. Reft came out of the shadows and hit him in the back of the helmet with his hatchet, knocked him sprawling on top of Colving, hacked away at his back-plate as he tried to get up, finally found the gap between plate and helmet and put him down with his head hanging off.

'Keep 'em out!' Reft screamed, jumping back to the door and heaving it shut with his shoulder.

A Union man burst through the shutters not far from the bottom of the steps. Beck could've stabbed him in the back. Probably without even being seen. But he couldn't help thinking about what would happen if it went wrong. What would happen after he did it. So he didn't do anything. Brait squealed, spun around to poke at the Union man with his spear, but before he could do it the soldier's sword thudded into Brait's shoulder and split him open to his chest. He gave this breathy shriek, waving his spear about while the Union man struggled to rip his sword out of him, blood squirting out black over the pair of 'em.

'Help!' roared Stodder at no one, pressed against the wall with a cleaver dangling from one hand. 'Help!'

Beck didn't turn and run. He just backed softly up the stairs the way he came, and he hurried to the open cupboard, ripped its single shelf out then ducked into the cobwebby shadows inside. He worked his fingertips into a gap between two planks of the door and he dragged it shut, bent over with his back against the rafters. Pressed into the darkness, in a child's bad hiding place. Alone with his father's sword, and his own whimpering breath, and the sounds of his crew being slaughtered downstairs.

Lord Governor Meed gazed imperiously out of the northern window of the common hall with hands clasped behind his back, nodding knowingly at scraps of information as if he understood them, his officers crowding about him and gabbling away like eager goslings around their mother. An apt metaphor, as the man had all the military expertise of a mother goose. Finree lurked at the back of the room, an ugly secret, desperately wanting to know what was going on but desperately not wanting to give anyone the satisfaction of asking, chewing at her nails, silently stewing and turning over various unlikely scenarios for her revenge.

Mostly, though, she was forced to admit, she was annoyed at herself. She saw now it would have been much better if she had pretended to be patient, and charming, and humble just as Hal had wanted, clapped her hands at Meed's pitiful soldiering and slid into his confidence like a cuckoo into an old pigeon's nest.

Still, the man was vain enough to haul an overblown portrait of himself around on campaign. It might not be too late to play the wayward lamb, and worm her way into his good graces through simpering contrition. Then, when the opportunity presented, she could stab him in the back from a nice, short distance. She'd stab him one way or another, that was a promise. She could hardly wait to see the look on Meed's papery old face when she finally—

Aliz let go a snort of laughter. 'Why, who's that?'

'Who's what?' Finree glanced out of the eastern window, entirely ignored since the battle was happening to the north. A ragged man had emerged from the woods and was standing on a small outcropping of rock, staring towards the inn, long black hair twitched by the wind. Clearly, he was by no stretch of the imagination a Union soldier.

Finree frowned. Most of the Dogman's men were supposed to be well behind them, and in any case there was something about this lonely figure that just looked … *wrong*.

'Captain Hardrick!' she called. 'Is he one of the Dogman's men?'

'Who?' Hardrick strolled up beside them. 'All honesty I couldn't say …'

The man on the rock lifted something to his mouth and bent his head back. A moment later a long, mournful note echoed out over the empty fields.

Aliz laughed. 'A horn!'

Finree felt that note right in her stomach, and straight away she knew. She grabbed Hardrick's arm. 'Captain, you need to ride to General Jalenhorm and tell him we are under attack.'

'What? But there's …' His gormless grin slowly faded as he looked towards the east.

'Oh,' said Aliz. The whole treeline was suddenly alive with men. Wild, they looked, even at this distance. Long-haired, rag-clothed, many half-naked. Now that he stood in the midst of hundreds of others and there was some sense of scale, Finree realised what had puzzled her about the man with the horn. He was a giant, in the truest sense of the word.

Hardrick stared, his mouth hanging open, and Finree dug her fingers into his arm and dragged him towards the door. 'Now! Find General Jalenhorm. Find my father. Now!'

'I should have orders—' His eyes flickered over to Meed, still blithely observing his attack on Osrung, along with all the other officers except for a couple who had drifted over without much urgency to investigate the sound of the horn.

'Who are they?' one asked.

Finree had no time to argue her case. She gave vent to the shrillest, longest, most blood-curdling girlish scream she could manage. One of the musicians issued a screeching wrong note, the other played on for a moment before leaving the room in silence, every head snapping towards Finree, except Hardrick's. She was relieved to see she had shocked him into running for the door.

'What the hell—' Meed began.

'Northmen!' somebody wailed. 'To the east!'

'What Northmen? Whatever are you—'

'Then everyone was shouting. 'There! There!'

'Bloody hell!'

'Man the walls!'

'Do we have walls?'

Men out in the fields – drivers, servants, smiths and cooks – were scattering wildly from tents and wagons, back towards the inn. There were already horsemen among them, mounted on shaggy ponies, without stirrups, even, but moving quickly nonetheless. She thought they might have bows, and a moment later arrows clattered against the north wall of the inn. One

looped through a window and skittered across the floor. A black, jagged, ill-formed thing, but no less dangerous for that. Someone drew their sword with a faint ring of metal, and soon there were blades flashing out all around the hall.

'Get some archers on the roof!'

'Do we have archers?'

'Get the shutters!'

'Where is Colonel Brint?'

A folding table squealed in protest as it was dragged in front of one of the windows, papers sliding across the floor.

Finree snatched a look out as two officers struggled to get the rotten shutters closed. A great line of men was surging through the fields towards them, already half way between the trees and the inn and closing rapidly, spreading out as they charged. Torn standards flapped behind them, adorned with bones. At her first rough estimate there were at least two thousand, and no more than a hundred in the inn, most lightly armed. She swallowed at the simple horror of the arithmetic.

'Are the gates closed?'

'Prop them!'

'Recall the Fifteenth!'

'Is it too late to take—'

'By the Fates.' Aliz' eyes had gone wide, white showing all the way around, darting about as if looking for some means of escape. There was none. 'We're trapped!'

'Help will be coming,' said Finree, trying to sound as calm as she could with her heart threatening to burst her ribs.

'From who?'

'From the Dogman,' who had very reasonably made every effort to put as much ground between himself and Meed as possible, 'or General Jalenhorm,' whose men were in such a disorganised shambles after yesterday's disaster they were no help to themselves let alone anyone else, 'or from our husbands,' who were both thoroughly entangled with the attack on Osrung and probably had not the slightest idea that a new threat had emerged right behind them. 'Help will be coming.' It sounded pathetically unconvincing even to her.

Officers dashed to nowhere, pointed everywhere, screeched contradictory orders at each other, the room growing steadily darker and more confused as the windows were barricaded with whatever gaudy junk was to hand. Meed stood in the midst, suddenly ignored and alone, staring uncertainly about with his gilded sword in one hand and the other opening and closing powerlessly. Like a nervous father at a great wedding so carefully planned that he found himself entirely unwanted on the big day. Above him, his masterful portrait frowned scornfully down.

'What should we do?' he asked of no one in particular. His desperately wandering eyes lighted on Finree. 'What should we do?'

It wasn't until she opened her mouth that she realised she had no answer.

Chains of Command

After a brief spell of fair weather the clouds had rolled back in and rain had begun to fall again, gently administering Marshal Kroy and his staff another dose of clammy misery and entirely obscuring both flanks of the battlefield.

'Damn this drizzle!' he snapped. 'I might as well have a bucket on my head.'

People often supposed that a lord marshal wielded supreme power on the battlefield, even beyond an emperor in his throne room. They did not appreciate the infinite constraints on his authority. The weather, in particular, was prone to ignore orders. Then there was the balance of politics to consider: the whims of the monarch, the mood of the public. There were a galaxy of logistical concerns: difficulties of supply and transport and signalling and discipline, and the larger the army the more staggeringly cumbersome it became. If one managed, by some miracle, to prod this unwieldy mass into a position to actually fight, a headquarters had to be well behind the lines and even with the opportunity to choose a good vantage point a commander could never see everything, if anything. Orders might take half an hour or longer to reach their intended recipients and so were often useless or positively dangerous by the time they got there, if they ever got there.

The higher you climbed up the chain of command, the more links between you and the naked steel, the more imperfect the communication became. The more men's cowardice, rashness, incompetence or, worst of all, good intentions might twist your purposes. The more chance could play a hand,

and chance rarely played well. With every promotion, Marshal Kroy had looked forward to finally slipping the shackles and standing all powerful. And with every promotion he had found himself more helpless than before.

'I'm like a blind old idiot who's got himself into a duel,' he murmured. Except there were thousands of lives hanging on his clueless flailing, rather than just his own.

'Would you care for your brandy and water, Lord—'

'No I would not bloody care for it!' he snapped at his orderly, then winced as the man backed nervously away with the bottle. How could he explain that he had been drinking it yesterday when he heard that he was responsible for the deaths of hundreds of his men, and now the very idea of brandy and water utterly sickened him?

It was no help that his daughter had placed herself so close to the front lines. He kept finding his eyeglass drawn towards the eastern side of the battle, trying to pick out the inn Meed was using as his headquarters through the drizzle. He scratched unhappily at his cheek. He had been interrupted while shaving by a worrying report sent from the Dogman, signs of savages from beyond the Crinna loose in the countryside to their east. Men the Dogman reckoned savage were savage indeed. Now Kroy was deeply distracted and, what was more, one side of his face was smooth and the other stubbly. Those sorts of details had always upset him. An army is made of details the way a house is made of bricks. One brick carelessly laid and the whole is compromised. But attend to the perfect mortaring of every —

'Huh,' he muttered to himself. 'I am a bloody mason.'

'Latest report from Meed says things are going well on the right,' said Felnigg, no doubt trying to allay his fears. His chief of staff knew him too well. 'They've got most of southern Osrung occupied and are making an effort on the bridge.'

'So things were going well half an hour ago?'

'Best one could say for them, sir.'

'True.' He looked for a moment longer, but could scarcely make out the inn, let alone Osrung itself. There was nothing to be gained by worrying. If his entire army had been as brave and resourceful as his daughter they would already have won and been on their way home. He almost pitied the Northman who ran across her in a bad mood. He turned to the west,

following the line of the river with his eyeglass until he came to the Old Bridge.

Or thought he did. A faint, straight, light line across the faint, curved, dark line which he assumed was the water, all of it drifting in and out of existence as the rain thickened or slackened in the mile or two between him and the object. In truth he could have been looking at anything.

'Damn this drizzle! What about the left?'

'Last word from Mitterick was that his second assault had, how did he put it? Been blunted.'

'By now it will have failed, then. Still, tough work, carrying a bridge against determined resistance.'

'Huh,' grunted Felnigg.

'Mitterick may lack many things—'

'Huh,' grunted Felnigg.

'—but persistence is not one of them.'

'No, sir, he is persistently an arse.'

'Now, now, let us be generous.' And then, under his breath, 'Every man needs an arse, if only to sit on.' If Mitterick's second assault had recently failed he would be preparing another. The Northmen facing him would be off balance. Kroy snapped his eyeglass closed and tapped it against his palm.

The general who waited to make a decision until he knew everything he needed to would never make one, and if he did it would be far too late. He had to feel out the moment. Anticipate the ebb and flow of battle. The shifting of morale, of pressure, of advantage. One had to trust one's instincts. And Marshal Kroy's instincts told him the crucial moment on the left wing was soon coming.

He strode through the door of his barn-cum-headquarters, making sure he ducked this time, as he had no need of another painful bruise on the crown of his head, and went straight to his desk. He dipped pen in ink without even sitting and wrote upon the nearest of several dozen slips of paper prepared for the purpose:

Colonel Vallimir

General Mitterick's troops are heavily engaged at the Old Bridge. Soon he will force the enemy to commit all his reserves. I wish you to begin your attack immediately, therefore, as discussed, and with every man at your disposal. Good luck.

Kroy

He signed it with a flourish. 'Felnigg, I want you to take this to General Mitterick.'

'He might take it better from a messenger.'

'He can take it however he damn well pleases, but I don't want him to have any excuse to ignore it.'

Felnigg was an officer of the old school and rarely betrayed his feelings; it was one of the things Kroy had always admired about the man. But his distaste for Mitterick was evidently more than he could suppress. 'If I must, Lord Marshal.' And he plucked the order sourly from Kroy's hand.

Colonel Felnigg stalked from the headquarters, nearly clubbing himself on the low lintel and only just managing to disguise his upset. He thrust the order inside his jacket pocket, checked that no one was looking and took a quick nip from his flask, then checked again and took another, pulled himself into the saddle and whipped his horse away down the narrow path, sending servants, guardsmen and junior officers scattering.

If it had been Felnigg put in command of the Siege of Ulrioch all those years ago and Kroy sent off on a fruitless ride to dusty nowhere, Felnigg who had reaped the glory and Kroy who had ridden thirsty back with his twenty captured wagons to find himself a forgotten man, things could so easily have been different. Felnigg might have been the lord marshal now, and Kroy his glorified messenger boy.

He clattered down from the hillside, spurring west towards Adwein along the puddle-pocked track. The ground sloping down to the river crawled with Jalenhorm's men, still struggling to find some semblance of organisation. Seeing things done in so slovenly a manner caused Felnigg something close to physical pain. It was the very most he could do not to pull up his horse, start screaming orders at all and sundry and put some damn purpose into them. *Purpose* – was that too much to ask in an army?

‘Bloody Jalenhorm,’ Felnigg hissed. The man was a joke, and not even a funny one. He had neither the wit nor experience for a sergeant’s place, let alone a general’s, but apparently having been the king’s old drinking partner was better qualification than years of competent and dedicated service. It would have been enough to make a lesser man quite bitter, but Felnigg it only drove to greater heights of excellence. He slowed for a moment to take another nip from his flask.

On the grassy slope to his right there had been some manner of accident. Aproned engineers fussed around two huge tubes of dark metal and a large patch of blackened grass. Bodies were laid out by the road, bloody sheets for shrouds. No doubt the First of the Magi’s damn fool experiment blown up in everyone’s faces. Whenever the Closed Council became directly involved in warfare there was sure to be some heavy loss of life and, in Felnigg’s experience, rarely on the enemy’s side.

‘Out of the way!’ he roared, forcing a path through a herd of foraged cattle that should never have been allowed on the road and making one of its handlers dive for the verge. He cantered through Adwein, as miserable a village as he had ever seen and packed today with miserable faces, injured men and filthy remnants of who-knew-what units. The useless, self-pitying flotsam of Mitterick’s failed assaults, swept out the back of his division like dung from a stables.

At least Jalenhorm, fool that he was, could obey an order. Mitterick was forever squirming out from under his to do things his own way. Incompetence was unforgivable, but disobedience was … still less forgivable, damn it. If everyone simply did as they pleased, there would be no coordination, no command, no purpose. No army at all, just a great crowd of men indulging their own petty vanities. The very idea made him—

A servant carrying a bucket stepped suddenly from a doorway and right into Felnigg’s path. His horse skittered to a stop, rearing up and nearly throwing him from the saddle.

‘Out of the way!’ Without thinking, Felnigg struck the man across the face with his riding crop. The servant cried out and went sprawling in the gutter, his bucket spraying water across the wall. Felnigg gave his horse the spurs and rode on, the heat of spirits in his stomach turned suddenly cold. He should not have done that. He had let anger get the better of him and the realisation only made him angrier than ever.

Mitterick's headquarters was the most unruly place in his unruly division. Officers dashed about, spraying mud and shouting over one another, the loudest voice obeyed and the finest ideas ignored. A commander set the tone for his entire command. A captain for his company, a major for his battalion, a colonel for his regiment and Mitterick for his entire division. Sloppy officers meant sloppy men, and sloppy soldiering meant defeat. Rules saved lives at times like these. What kind of officer allowed things to degenerate into chaos in his own headquarters? Felnigg reined his horse up and made a direct line for the flap of Mitterick's great tent, clearing excitable young adjutants from his path by sheer force of disapproval.

Inside the confusion was redoubled. Mitterick was leaning over a table in the midst of a clamouring press of crimson uniforms, an improvised map of the valley spread out upon it, holding forth at tremendous volume. Felnigg felt his revulsion for the man almost like a headwind. He was the worst kind of soldier, the kind that dresses his incompetence up as flair and, to make matters worse, he fooled people more often than not. But he did not fool Felnigg.

Felnigg stepped up and gave an impeccable salute. Mitterick gave the most peremptory movement of his hand, barely looking up from his map.

'I have an order for the King's Own First Regiment from Lord Marshal Kroy. I would be gratified if you could despatch it *at once.'* He could not entirely keep the contempt out of his voice, and Mitterick evidently noticed.

'We're a little busy *soldiering* here, perhaps you could leave it—'

'I am afraid that will not be good enough, General.' Felnigg only just prevented himself from slapping Mitterick across the face with his gloves. 'The lord marshal was most specific, and I must insist on haste.'

Mitterick straightened, the jaw muscles working on the side of his out-sized head. 'Must you?'

'Yes. I absolutely must.' And Felnigg thrust the order at him as if he would throw it in his face, only by a last shred of restraint keeping it in his fingertips.

Mitterick snatched the paper from Felnigg's hand, only just preventing himself from punching him in the face with his other fist, and tore it open.

Felnigg. What an arse. What an arrogant, pedantic fool. A prickly stickler with no imagination, no initiative, none of what the Northmen called, with their gift for simplicity, ‘bones’. He was lucky he had Marshal Kroy for a friend, lucky Kroy had dragged him up through the ranks behind him or he would most likely have remained all his career a tight-buttoned captain.

Felnigg. What an *arse.* Mitterick remembered him bringing in those six wretched wagons after Kroy won his great victory at Ulrioch. Remembered him demanding to have his contribution noted. His battalion ground down to a dusty stub for the sake of six bloody wagons. His contribution had been noted, all right. Mitterick had thought then, *what an arse,* and his opinion had not changed in all the years between.

Felnigg. What a suppurating arse. Look at him. Arse. Probably he thought he was better than everyone else, still, even though Mitterick knew for a fact he could barely get up without a drink. Probably he thought he could have done Mitterick’s job better. Probably he thought he should have had Kroy’s. Bloody arse. He was the worst kind of soldier, the kind that dresses his stupidity up as discipline, and to make matters worse he fooled people more often than not. But he did not fool Mitterick.

Already two of his assaults on the bridge had failed, he had a third to prepare and no time to waste on this pompous streak of bureaucracy. He turned to Opker, his own chief of staff, stabbing at the map with the crumpled order. ‘Tell them to get the Seventh ready, and I want the Second in place right behind. I want cavalry across that bridge as soon as we get a foothold, damn it, these fields are made for a charge! Get the Keln Regiment out of the way, clear out the wounded. Dump ’em in the river if we have to, we’re giving the bloody Northmen time to get set. Time to have a bloody bath if they bloody want one! Tell them to get it done now or I’ll go down there myself and lead the charge, whether I can fit my fat arse into my armour or not. Tell them to—’

A finger jabbed at his shoulder. ‘This order must be attended to at once, General Mitterick. *At once!*’ Felnigg nearly shrieked the last words, blasting Mitterick with spit. He could hardly believe the man’s obsession with proper form. Rules cost lives at times like these. What kind of an officer insisted on them in a headquarters while outside men were fighting? Dying? He ran a furious eye over the order:

Colonel Vallimir

General Mitterick's troops are heavily engaged at the Old Bridge. Soon he will force the enemy to commit all his reserves. I wish you to begin your attack immediately, therefore, as discussed, and with every man at your disposal. Good luck.

Kroy

The First had been attached to Mitterick's division and so, as their commander, it was his responsibility to clarify their instructions. Kroy's order was lean and efficient as the marshal himself, as always, and the timing was apt. But Mitterick was damned if he was going to miss an opportunity to frustrate the marshal's chinless stick-insect of a right hand man. If he wanted it by the book, he could have it by the book and bloody choke on it. So he spread the paper out on top of his map, snapped his fingers until someone thrust a pen into them, and added a scratchy line of his own at the bottom almost without considering the content.

Ensure that the enemy are fully engaged before crossing the stream, and in the meantime take care not to give away your position on their flank. My men and I are giving our all. I will not have them let down.

General Mitterick, Second Division

He took a route to his tent flap that enabled him to shoulder Felnigg rudely out of the way. 'Where the hell is that boy from Vallimir's regiment?' he bellowed into the thinning drizzle. 'What was his name? Leperlisper?'

'Lederlingen, sir!' A tall, pale, nervous-looking young man stepped forward, gave an uncertain salute and finished it off with an even more uncertain, 'General Mitterick, sir.' Mitterick would not have trusted him to convey his chamber pot safely to the stream, let alone to carry a vital order, but he supposed, as Bialoveld once said, 'In battle one must often make the best of contrary conditions.'

'Take this order to Colonel Vallimir at once. It's from the lord marshal, d'you understand? Highest importance.' And Mitterick pressed the folded, creased and now slightly ink-blotted paper into his limp hand.

Lederlingen stood there for a moment, staring at the order.

'Well?' snapped the general.

'Er …' He saluted again. 'Sir, yes—'

'Move!' roared Mitterick in his face. 'Move!'

Lederlingen backed away, still at absurd attention, then hurried through the boot-mashed mud and over to his horse.

By the time he'd struggled into his wet saddle, a thin, chinless officer in a heavily starched uniform had emerged from Mitterick's tent and was hissing something incomprehensible at the general while a collection of guards and officers looked on, among them a large, sad-eyed man with virtually no neck who seemed vaguely familiar.

Lederlingen had no time to waste trying to place him. Finally, he had a job worth the doing. He turned his back on the unedifying spectacle of two of his Majesty's most senior officers bitterly arguing with one another and spurred off to the west. He couldn't honestly say he was sorry to be going. A headquarters appeared to be an even more frightening and disorientating place than the front line.

He rode through the tight-packed men before the tent, shouting for them to give him room, then through the looser mass making ready for another attack on the bridge, all the time with one hand on the reins and the order clutched in the other. He should have put it in his pocket, it was only making it harder for him to ride, but he was terrified of losing it. An order from Lord Marshal Kroy himself. This was exactly the kind of thing he'd been hoping for when he first signed up, bright-eyed, was it really only three months ago?

He'd cleared the main body of Mitterick's division now, their clamour fading behind him. He upped the pace, bending low over his horse's back, thumping down a patchy track away from the Old Bridge and towards the marshes. He'd have to leave his horse with the picket at the south bank, unfortunately, and cross the bogs on foot to take the order to Vallimir. If he didn't put a foot wrong and end up taking the order down to Klige instead.

That thought gave him a shudder. His cousin had warned him not to enlist. Had told him wars were upside-down places where good men did worse than bad. Had told him wars were all about rich men's ambitions and poor men's graves, and there hadn't been two honest fellows to strike a spark of decency in the whole company he served with. That officers were all

arrogance, ignorance and incompetence. That soldiers were all cowards, braggarts, bullies or thieves. Lederlingen had supposed his cousin to be exaggerating for effect, but now had to admit that he seemed rather to have understated the case. Corporal Tunny, in particular, gave the strong impression of being coward, braggart, bully and thief all at once, as thorough a villain as Lederlingen had laid eyes upon in his life, but by some magic almost celebrated by the other men as a hero. All hail good old Corporal Tunny, the shabbiest cheat and shirker in the whole division!

The track had become a stony path, threading through a gully alongside a stream, or at any rate a wide ditch full of wet mud, trees heavy with red berries growing out over it. The place smelled of rot. It was impossible to ride at anything faster than a bumpy trot. Truly, the soldier's life took a man to some beautiful and exotic locations.

Lederlingen heaved out a sigh. War was an upside-down place, all right, and he was rapidly coming around to his cousin's opinion that it was no place for him at all. He would just have to keep his head low, stay out of trouble and follow Tunny's advice never to volunteer for anything—

'Ah!' A wasp had stung his leg. Or that was what he thought at first, though the pain was considerably worse. When he looked down, there was an arrow in his thigh. He stared at it. A long, straight stick with grey and white flights. An arrow. He wondered if someone was playing a joke on him for a moment. A fake arrow. It hurt so much less than he'd ever thought it might. But there was blood soaking into his trousers. It was a real arrow.

Someone was shooting at him!

He dug his heels into his horse's flanks and screamed. Now the arrow hurt. It hurt like a flaming brand rammed through his leg. His mount jerked forwards on the rocky path and he lost his grip on the reins, bounced once in the saddle, the hand clutching the order flailing at the air. Then he hit the ground, teeth rattling, head spinning, tumbling over and over.

He staggered up, sobbing at the pain in his leg, half-hopped about, trying to get his bearings. He managed to draw his sword. There were two men on the path behind. Northmen. One was walking towards him, purposeful, a knife in his hand. The other had a bow raised.

'Help!' shouted Lederlingen, but it was breathy, weak. He wasn't sure when he last passed a Union soldier. Before he came into the gully, maybe, he'd seen some scouts, but that had been a while back. 'Help—'

The arrow stuck right through his jacket sleeve. Right through his arm inside it. This time it hurt from the start. He dropped his sword with a shriek. His weight went onto his right leg and it gave under him. He tumbled down the bank, jolts of agony shooting through his limbs whenever the ground caught at the broken shafts.

He was in the mud. Had the order in his fist still. He tried to get up. Heard the squelch of a boot beside him. Something hit him in the side of the neck and made his head jolt.

Foss Deep plucked the bit of paper out of the Southerner's hand, wiped his knife on the back of his jacket, then planted a boot on his head and pushed his face down into the bloody mud. Didn't want him screaming any. In part on account of stealth, but in part just because he found these days he didn't care for the sounds of persons dying. If it had to be done, so, so, but he didn't need to hear about it, thank you very much all the same.

Shallow was leading the Southerner's horse down the bank into the soggy stream bed. 'She's a good one, no?' he asked, grinning up at it.

'Don't call her she. It's a horse, not your wife.'

Shallow patted the horse on the side of its face. 'She's better looking than your wife was.'

'That's rude and uncalled for.'

'Sorry. What shall we do with … it, then? It's a good one. Be worth a pretty—'

'How you going to get it back over the river? I ain't dragging that thing through a bog, and there's a fucking battle on the bridge, in case you forgot.'

'I didn't forget.'

'Kill it.'

'Just a shame is all—'

'Just bloody kill it and let's get on.' He pointed down at the Southerner under his boot. 'I'm killing him, aren't I?'

'Well, he isn't bloody worth anything—'

'Just kill it!' Then, realising he shouldn't be raising his voice, since they was on the wrong side of the river and there might be Southerners anywhere, whispered, 'Just kill it and hide the bloody thing!'

Shallow gave him a sour look, but he dragged on the horse's bridle, put his weight across its neck and got it down, then gave it a quick stab in the neck, leaning on it while it poured blood into the muck.

'Shit on a shitty shit.' Shallow shook his head. 'There's no money in killing horses. We're taking risksies enoughsies coming over here in the first—'

'Stop it.'

'Stop what?' As he dragged a fallen tree branch over the horse's corpse.

Deep looked up at him. 'Talking like a child, what do you think? It's odd, is what it is. It's like your head's trapped at four years old.'

'My parts of speech upset you?' Chopping another branch free with his hatchet.

'They do, as it goes, yes.'

Shallow got the horse hidden to his satisfaction. 'Guess I'll have to stopsy wopsy, then.'

Deep gave a long sigh through gritted teeth. One day he'd kill Shallow, or the other way around, he'd known it ever since he was ten years old. He unfolded the paper and held it up to the light.

'What's the matter of it?' asked Shallow, peering over his shoulder.

Deep turned slowly to look at him. He wouldn't have been surprised if today turned out to be the day. 'What? Did I learn to read Southerner in my sleep and not realise? How in the land of the dead should I know what the bloody matter of it is?'

Shallow shrugged. 'Fair point. It has the look of import, though.'

'It do indeed have every appearance of significance.'

'So?'

'I guess it becomes a question of who we know might find 'emselves tempted to fork out for it.'

They looked at each other and said it together. 'Calder.'

This time White-Eye Hansul rode up fast, and with no hint of a smile. His shield had a broken arrow shaft in it and there was a cut across his forehead. He looked like a man who'd been in action. Calder felt sick just seeing him.

'Scale wants you to bring your men up.' There was no laughter in his voice now. 'The Southerners are coming across the bridge again and this

time they've come hard. He can't hold out much longer.'

'All right.' Calder had known the moment would come, but that didn't make it any sweeter. 'Get them ready.'

'Aye.' And Pale-as-Snow strode off barking orders.

Calder reached for his sword hilt and made a show of loosening it as he watched his brother's men – his men – stand up from behind Clail's Wall and prepare to join the battle. Time to write the first verse in the song of bold Prince Calder. And hope it wasn't the last.

'Your prince-li-ness!'

Calder looked round. 'Foss Deep. You always come upon me at my brightest moments.'

'I can smell desperation.' Deep was dirty, and not just from a moral standpoint. Even dirtier than usual, as if he'd dived into a bog, which Calder didn't doubt he would have if he'd thought there was a coin at the bottom.

'What is it? I've a battle to die gloriously in.'

'Oh, I wouldn't want to stop 'em strumming ballads in your honour.'

'They already sing songs about him,' said Shallow.

Deep grinned. 'Not in his honour, though. We found something might be of interest.'

'Look!' Shallow pointed off to the south, white teeth smiling in his mud-spattered face. 'There's a rainbow!'

There was, in fact, a faint one, curving down towards the distant barley as the rain slackened and the sun showed itself again, but Calder was in no mood to appreciate it. 'Did you just want to draw my attention to the endless beauty all around us, or is there something more to the point?'

Deep held out a piece of folded paper, creased and dirty. Calder reached for it and he whipped it theatrically away. 'For a price.'

'The price for paper isn't high.'

''Course not,' said Deep. 'It's what's written on that paper gives it value.'

'And what's written on it?'

The brothers looked at each other. 'Something. We found it on some Union lad.'

'I've no time for this. Chances are high it's just some letter from Mother.'

'Letter?' asked Shallow.

Calder snapped his fingers. 'Give it me and I'll pay you what it's worth. Or you can peddle your rainbows elsewhere.'

The brothers exchanged glances again. Shallow shrugged. Deep slapped the paper into Calder's hand. It didn't appear to be worth much at a glance, spotted with mud and what looked suspiciously like blood. Knowing these two, definitely blood. There was neat writing inside.

Colonel Vallimir,

General Mitterick's troops are heavily engaged at the Old Bridge. Soon he will force the enemy to commit all his reserves. I wish you to begin your attack immediately, therefore, as discussed, and with every man at your disposal. Good luck.

Then what might have been a name but it was right in the crease, the paper was all scuffed and Calder couldn't make sense of it. It looked like an order, but he'd never heard of any Vallimir. An attack on the Old Bridge. That was hardly news. He was about to throw it away when he caught the second block of writing in a wilder, slanting hand.

Ensure that the enemy are fully engaged before crossing the stream, and in the meantime take care not to give away your position on their flank. My men and I are giving our all. I will not have them let down.

General Mitterick, Second Division

Mitterick. Dow had mentioned that name. One of the Union's generals. Something about him being sharp and reckless. My men and I are giving our all? He sounded a pompous idiot. Ordering an attack across a stream, though. On the flank. Calder frowned. Not the river. And not the bridge. He blinked around at the terrain, thinking about it. Wondering where soldiers could be for that order to make sense.

'By the dead,' he whispered. There were Union men in the woods over to the west, ready to cross the beck and take them in their flank at any moment. There had to be!

'Worth something, then?' asked Shallow, smirking.

Calder hardly heard him. He pushed past the two killers and hurried up the rise to the west, shoving between the grim-faced men leaning against Clail's Wall so he could get a view across the stream.

‘What is it?’ asked White-Eye, bringing his horse up on the other side of the drystone.

Calder snapped open the battered eyeglass his father used to use and peered westwards, up that slope covered with old stumps, past the woodcutters’ sheds and towards the shadowy trees beyond. Were they crawling with Union soldiers, ready to charge across the shallow water as soon as they saw him move? There was no sign of men there. Not even a glint of steel among the trees. Could it be a trick?

Should he keep his promise, charge to his brother’s aid and risk offering the whole army’s bare arse to the enemy? Or stay behind the wall and leave Scale the one with his backside in the breeze? That was the safe thing, wasn’t it? Hold the line. Prevent disaster. Or was he only telling himself what he wanted to hear? Was he relieved to have found a way to avoid fighting? A way to get rid of his idiot older brother? Liar, liar, he didn’t even know when he was telling himself the truth any more.

He desperately wanted someone to tell him what to do. He wished Seff was with him, she always had bold ideas. She was brave. Calder wasn’t made for riding to the rescue. Hanging back was more his style. Saving his own skin. Killing prisoners. Not doing it himself, of course, but ordering it done. Poking other men’s wives while they were doing the fighting, maybe, if he was really feeling adventurous. But this was a long way outside his expertise. What the hell should he do?

‘What’s going on?’ asked Pale-as-Snow. ‘The men are—’

‘The Union are in the woods on the other side of that stream!’

There was a silence, in which Calder realised he’d spoken far louder than he needed to.

‘The Union’s over there? You sure?’

‘Why haven’t they come already?’ White-Eye wanted to know.

Calder held up the paper. ‘Because I’ve got their orders. But they’ll get more.’

He could hear the Carls around him muttering. Knew they were passing the news from man to man. Probably that was no bad thing. Probably that was why he’d shouted it.

‘What do we do, then?’ hissed White-Eye. ‘Scale’s waiting for help.’

‘I know that, don’t I? No one knows that better than me!’ Calder stood frowning towards the trees, his free hand opening and closing. ‘Tenways.’

By the dead, he was clutching at dust now, running for help to a man who'd tried to have him murdered a few days before. 'Hansul, get up to Skarling's Finger and tell Brodd Tenways we've got the Union out there in the woods to the west. Tell him Scale needs him. Needs him now, or we'll lose the Old Bridge.'

Hansul raised an eyebrow. 'Tenways?'

'Dow said he should help, if we needed it! We need it.'

'But—'

'Get up there!'

Pale-as-Snow and Hansul traded a glance. Then White-Eye clambered back up onto his horse and cantered off towards Skarling's Finger. Calder realised everyone was watching him. Wondering why he hadn't done the right thing already, and charged to his brother's rescue. Wondering whether they should stay loyal to this clueless idiot with the good hair.

'Tenways has to help,' he muttered, though he wasn't sure who he was trying to convince. 'We lose that bridge and we're all in the shit. This is about the whole North.' As if he'd ever cared a damn about the whole North, or even anyone much further away than the end of his own foot.

His patriotic bluster carried no more weight with Pale-as-Snow than it did with him. 'If the world worked that way,' said the old warrior, 'we'd have no need for swords in the first place. No offence, Calder, but Tenways hates you like the plague hates the living, and he doesn't feel a whole stretch warmer towards your brother. He won't put himself or his men on the line for your sakes, whatever Dow says. If you want your brother helped, I reckon you'll have to do it yourself. And soon.' He raised his white brows. 'So what do we do?'

Calder wanted very much to hit him, but he was right. He wanted to hit him because he was right. What should he do? He lifted his eyeglass again and scanned the treeline, slowly one way, then the other, then stopped dead.

Did he catch, just for a moment, the glint of another eyeglass trained on him?

Corporal Tunny peered through his eyeglass towards the drystone wall. He wondered if, just for an instant, he caught the glint of another trained on

him? But probably he'd just imagined it. There certainly wasn't much sign of anything else going on.

'Movement?' squeaked Yolk.

'Nah.' Tunny slapped the glass closed then scratched at his increasingly stubbly, greasy, itchy neck. He'd a strong feeling something other than him had taken up residence in his collar. A decision hard to understand, since he'd rather have been pretty much anywhere else himself. 'They're just sitting there, far as I can tell.'

'Like us.'

'Welcome to the glory-fields, Trooper Yolk.'

'Still no damn orders? Where the hell has bloody Lederlingen got to?'

'No way of knowing.' Tunny had long ago given up feeling any surprise when the army didn't function quite as advertised. He glanced over his shoulder. Behind them, Colonel Vallimir was having another one of his rages, this time directed at Sergeant Forest.

'Yolk leaned in to whisper, 'Every man shitting on the man below, Corporal?'

'Oh, you're developing a keen sense of the mechanisms of his Majesty's forces. I do believe you'll make a fine general one day, Yolk.'

'My ambition don't go past corporal, Corporal.'

'I think that's very wise. As you can tell.'

'Still no orders, sir,' Forest was saying, face screwed up like a man looking into a stiff wind.

'Bloody hell!' snapped Vallimir. 'It's the right time to go! Any fool can see that.'

'But … we can't go without orders, sir.'

'Of course we bloody can't! Dereliction of duty, that'd be! But now's the right time, so of course General bloody Mitterick will be demanding to know why I didn't act on my own initiative!'

'Very likely, sir.'

'Initiative, eh, Forest? *Initiative.* What the bloody hell is that except an excuse to demote a man? It's like a card game they won't tell you the rules to, only the stakes!' And on, and on, and on he went, just like always.

Tunny gave a sigh, and handed his eyeglass to Yolk.

'Where you going, Corporal?'

‘Nowhere, I reckon. Absolutely nowhere.’ He wedged himself back against his tree trunk and dragged his coat closed over him. ‘Wake me if that changes, eh?’ He scratched his neck, then pulled his cap down over his eyes. ‘By some miracle.’

Closing Arguments

It was the noise that was the most unexpected thing about battle. It was probably the loudest thing Finree had ever heard. Several dozen men roaring and shrieking at the very highest extent of their broken voices, crashing wood, stamping boots, clanging metal, all amplified and rendered meaningless by the enclosed space, the walls of the room ringing with mindless echoes of pain, and fury, and violence. If hell had a noise, it sounded like this. No one could have heard orders, but it hardly mattered.

Orders could have made no difference now.

The shutters of another window were bludgeoned open, a gilded cupboard that had been blocking them flattening an unfortunate lieutenant and spewing an avalanche of shattering dress crockery across the floor. Men swarmed through the square of brightness, ragged black outlines at first, gaining awful detail as they burst into the inn. Snarling faces smeared with paint, and dirt, and fury. Wild hair tangled with bones, with rough-carved wooden rings and rough-cast metal. They brandished jagged axes and clubs toothed with dull iron. They wept and gurgled a mad clamour, eyes bulging with battle-madness.

Aliz screamed again, but Finree felt oddly cold-headed. Perhaps it was some kind of beginner's luck at bravery. Or perhaps it had yet to really dawn on her how bad things were. They were very, very bad. Her eyes darted around as she struggled to take it all in, not daring to blink in case she missed something.

In the middle of the room an old sergeant was wrestling with a grey-haired primitive, each holding the other's wrist with weapons waggling at

the ceiling, dragging each other this way and that as though through the steps of some drunken dance, unable to agree on who should be leading. Nearby one of the violinists was beating at someone with his shattered instrument, reduced now to a tangle of strings and splinters. Outside in the courtyard the gates were shuddering, splinters flying from their inside faces while guardsmen tried desperately to prop them shut with their halberds.

She found herself rather wishing that Bremer dan Gorst was beside her. Probably she should have wished for Hal instead, but she had a feeling courage, and duty, and honour would do no good here. Brute strength and rage were what was needed.

She saw a plump captain with a scratch down his face, who was rumoured to be the bastard son of someone-or-other important, stabbing at a man wearing a necklace of bones, both of them slick with red. She saw a pleasant major who used to tell her bad jokes when she was a girl clubbed on the back of the head. He tottered sideways, knees buckling like a clown's, one hand fishing at his empty scabbard. He was caught with a sword and flung to the floor in a shower of blood. Another officer's backswing, she realised.

'Above us!' someone screamed.

The savages had somehow got up onto the gallery, were shooting arrows down. An officer just next to Finree slumped over a table with a shaft in his back, dragging one of the hangings down on top of him, his long steel clattering from his dangling hand. She reached out nervously and slid his short steel from the sheath, backed away again towards the wall with it hidden beside her skirts. As though anyone would complain at a theft in the midst of this.

The door burst open and savages spilled into the common hall from the rest of the inn. They must have taken the courtyard, killed the guards. Men desperately trying to keep the attackers out from the windows spun about, their frozen faces pictures of horror.

'The lord governor!' someone screamed. 'Protect his—' Cut off in a snivelling wail.

The melee had lost all shape. The officers were fighting hard for every inch of ground but they were losing, forced grimly back into a corner, cut down one by one. Finree was shoved against the wall, perhaps by some pointless act of chivalry, more likely by the random movement of the fight.

Aliz was next to her, pale and blubbing, Lord Governor Meed on the other side, in a state little better. All three of them jostled by men's backs as they fought hopelessly for survival.

Finree could hardly see over the armoured shoulder of a guard, then he fell and a savage darted into the gap, a jagged iron sword in his fist. She got one quick, sharp look at his face. Lean, yellow-haired, splinters of bone pushed through the rim of one ear.

Meed held up a hand, breath whooshing in to speak, or scream, or beg. The jagged sword chopped into him between neck and collarbone. He took a wobbling step, eyes rolled up to the ceiling so the whites showed huge, tongue sticking out and his fingers plucking at the ragged wound while blood welled up from between them and down the torn braid on the front of his uniform. Then he crashed over on his face, catching a table on the way and knocking it half in the air, a sheaf of papers spilling across his back.

Aliz let go another piercing shriek.

The thought flashed through Finree's mind as she stared at Meed's corpse that this might all have been her fault. That the Fates had despatched this as the method of her vengeance. It seemed disproportionate, to say the least. She would have been happy with something considerably less—

'Ah!' Someone grabbed her left arm, twisted it painfully around, and she was staring into a leering face, a mouthful of teeth filed to points, one pitted cheek marked with a blue handprint and speckled red.

She shoved him away, he gave a whooping squeal and she realised she had the short steel in her hand, had rammed it into his ribs. He pressed her against the wall, wrenching her head up. She managed to drag the steel free, slippery now, work it between them, grunting as she pushed the point up into his jaw, blade sliding into his head. She could see the skin on his blue cheek bulge from the metal behind it.

He tottered back, one hand fishing at the bloody hilt under his jaw, left her gasping against the wall, hardly able to stand her knees were shaking so badly. She felt her head suddenly yanked sideways, a stab of pain in her scalp, in her neck. She yelped, cut off as her skull smacked—

Everything was bright for a moment.

The floor thumped her in the side. Boots shuffled and crunched.

'Fingers around her neck.

She couldn't breathe, plucked at the hand with her nails, ears throbbing with her own heartbeat.

A knee pressed into her stomach, crushing her against a table. Hot, foul breath blasted at her cheek. It felt as if her head was going to burst. She could hardly see, everything was so bright.

Then there was silence. The hand at her throat released a fraction, enough for her to draw in a shuddering breath. Cough, gag, cough again. She thought she was deaf, then realised the room had gone deathly quiet. Corpses of both sides were tangled up with broken furniture, scattered cutlery, torn papers, piles of fallen plaster. A few weak groans came from dying men. Only three officers appeared to have survived, one holding his bloody arm, the other two sitting with hands up. One was crying softly. The savages stood over them, still as statues. Nervous, almost, as if waiting for something.

Finree heard a creaking footstep in the corridor outside. And then another. As though some great weight was pressing on the boards. Another groaning footstep. Her eyes rolled towards the doorway, straining to see.

A man came through. The shape of a man, at least, if not the size. He had to duck under the lintel and then stayed suspiciously stooped, as if he was below decks in a small ship, scared of catching his head on low beams. Black hair streaked with grey stuck to his knobbly face with wet, black beard jutting, tangled black fur across his great shoulders. He surveyed the scene of wreckage with an expression strangely disappointed. Hurt even. As if he had been invited to attend a tea party and found instead a slaughter-yard at the venue.

'Why is everything broken?' he said in a voice oddly soft. He stooped to pick up one of the fallen plates, no more than a saucer in his immense hand, licked a fingertip and rubbed a few specks of blood from the maker's mark on the back, frowning at it like a cautious shopper. His eyes lighted on Meed's corpse, and his frown grew deeper. 'Did I not ask for trophies? Who killed this old man?'

The savages stared at each other, eyes bulging in their painted faces. They were terrified, Finree realised. One raised a trembling arm to point at the man who was holding her down. 'Saluc did it!'

The giant's eyes slid across to Finree, then the man with his knee in her stomach, then narrowed. He put the plate on a gouged table, so gently it

made no sound. ‘What are you doing with my woman, Saluc?’

‘Nothing!’ The hand around Finree’s neck released and she dragged herself back across the table, struggling to get a proper breath. ‘She killed Bregga, I was just—’

‘You were robbing me.’ The giant took a step forwards, his head on one side.

Saluc stared desperately around but his friends were all scrambling away from him as if he was infected with the plague. ‘But … I only wanted to—’

‘I know.’ The giant nodded sadly. ‘But rules are rules.’ He was across the space between them in an instant. With one great hand he caught the man’s wrist while the other closed around his neck, fingers almost meeting thumb behind his head, lifting him squirming off his feet, smashing his skull crunching into the wall, once, twice, three times, blood spattering across the cracked plaster. It was over so quickly Finree did not have time to cower.

‘You try to show them a better way …’ The giant carefully set the dead man down in a sitting position against the wall, arranging his hands in his lap, resting his flattened head in a comfortable position, like a mother putting a child to sleep. ‘But some men will never be civilised. Take my women away. And do not tamper with them. Alive they are worth something. Dead they are …’ He rolled Meed’s corpse over with one huge boot. The lord governor flopped onto his back, eyes goggling at the ceiling. ‘Dirt.’

Aliz screamed yet again. Finree wondered how she could still produce so high and true a note after all that screaming. She did not make a sound herself as they dragged her out. Partly that blow to her head seemed to have knocked all the voice out of her. Partly she was still having trouble getting a good breath after being throttled. But mostly she was occupied trying desperately to think of a way to live through this nightmare.

*

The battle was still going outside, Beck could hear it. But it was quiet downstairs. Maybe the Union men reckoned they’d got everyone killed. Maybe they’d missed the little stairway somehow. By the dead, he hoped they’d missed the—

One of the steps creaked and the breath stopped in Beck's throat. Maybe one creak sounds like another, but somehow he knew this was made by the foot of a man aiming to keep quiet. Sweat sprang out of his skin. Trickling, tickling down his neck. Didn't dare move to scratch it. He strained with every muscle to make no sound, wincing at every smallest wheeze in his throat, not daring even to swallow. His fruits, and his arse, and his guts all felt like they were a huge, cold weight he could hardly stop from dropping out of him.

Another stealthy, creaking step. Beck thought he could hear the bastard hissing something. Taunting him. Knew he was there, then. Couldn't make out the words, his heart was thumping so loud in his ears, so hard it felt like it might pop his eyes right out. Beck tried to shrink back into the cupboard, one eye fixed on the ragged slit between two planks of the door, the slice of attic beyond. The point of the man's sword slid into view, glinting murder, then the blade, dotted with red. Colving's blood, or Brait's, or Reft's. And Beck's too, soon enough. A Union sword, he could tell from the twisted metal around the hilt.

Another creaking step, and Beck spread his fingertips out against the rough wood, hardly touching it in case the rusted hinges gave him away. He gripped the hot hilt of his own sword, a narrow strip of light across the bright blade, the rest gleaming in the darkness. He had to fight. Had to, if he wanted to see his mother, and his brothers, and their farm again. And that was all he wanted, now.

One more creaking step. He took a long, cutting breath, chest swelling with it, frozen, frozen, time stretching. How long could a man need to take a pace?

One more footstep.

Beck burst out, screaming, flinging back the door. The loose corner caught on the boards and he stumbled over it, plunging off balance, no choice but to charge.

The Union man stood in the shadows, head turning. Beck thrust wild, felt the point bite, crosspiece digging at his knuckles as the blade slid through the Union man's chest. They spun in a growling hug and something whacked Beck hard on the head. The low beam. He came down on his back with the weight of the Union man full across him, breath driven out in a whoosh, hand squashed around the grip of his sword. Took a moment for

Beck's eyes to adjust, but when they did he was staring straight up into a twisted, bulge-eyed face.

Only it weren't a Union man at all. It was Reft.

He took a long, slow, wheezing breath in, cheeks trembling. Then he coughed blood into Beck's face.

Beck whimpered, kicked, squirmed free, rolled Reft off and scrambled clear of him. Knelt there, staring.

Reft lay on his side. One hand scratched at the floor, one eye rolled up towards Beck. He was trying to say something but the words were gurgles. Blood bubbling out from mouth and nose. Blood creeping from underneath him and down the grain of the boards. Black in the shadows. Dark red where it crossed a patch of light.

Beck put one hand on his shoulder. Almost whispered his name, knew there was no point. His other hand closed around the grip of his sword, slick with blood. It was a lot harder to get it out than it had been to put it in. Made a faint sucking sound as it came clear. Almost said Reft's name again. Found he couldn't speak. Reft's fingers had stopped moving, his eyes wide open, red on his lips, on his neck. Beck put the back of one hand against his mouth. Realised it was all bloody. Realised he was bloody all over. Soaked with it. Red with it. Stood, stomach suddenly rolling. Reft's eyes were still on him. He tottered over to the stairs and down 'em, sword scraping a pink groove in the plaster. His father's sword.

No one moved downstairs. He could hear fighting out in the street, maybe. Mad shouting. There was a faint haze of smoke, tang of it tickling his throat. His mouth tasted of blood. Blood and metal and raw meat. All the lads were dead. Stodder was on his face near the steps, one hand reaching for 'em. The back of his head was neatly split, hair matted to dark curls. Colving was against the wall, head back, hands clamped to his chubby gut, shirt soaked with blood. Brait just looked like a pile of rags in the corner. Never had looked like much more'n a pile a rags, the poor bastard.

There were four Union men dead too, all near each other, like they'd decided to stick together. Beck stood in the midst of 'em. The enemy. Such good gear they all had. Breastplates, and greaves, and polished helmets, all the same. And boys like Brait had died with not much more'n a split stick and a knife blade stuck in it. Weren't fair, really. None of it was fair.

One of ’em was on his side and Beck rolled him over with his boot, head flopping. He was left squinting up at the ceiling, eyes looking off different ways. Apart from his gear, there didn’t look to be much special about him. He was younger’n Beck had thought, a downy effort at a beard on his cheeks. The enemy.

There was a crash. The shattered door was kicked out of the way and someone took a lurching step into the room, shield in front of him and a mace up in the other hand. Beck just stood staring. Didn’t even raise his sword. The man limped forward, and gave a long whistle.

‘What happened, lad?’ asked Flood.

‘Don’t know.’ He didn’t know, really. Or at least, he knew what, but not how. Not why. ‘I killed …’ He tried to point upstairs, but he couldn’t raise his arm. Ended up pointing at the dead Union boys at his feet. ‘I killed …’

‘You hurt?’ Flood was pressing at his blood-soaked shirt, looking him over for a wound.

‘Ain’t mine.’

‘Got four o’ the bastards, eh? Where’s Reft?’

‘Dead.’

‘Right. Well. You can’t think about that. Least you made it.’ Flood slid one arm around his shoulders and led him out into the bright street.

The wind outside felt cold through Beck’s blood-soaked shirt and his piss-soaked trousers, made him shiver. Cobbles coated with dust and blowing ash, with splintered wood, fallen weapons. Dead of both sides tossed around and wounded too. Saw a Union man on the ground, holding up a helpless arm while two Thralls hacked at him with axes. Smoke still shifting across the square, but Beck could see there was a new struggle on the bridge, shadows of men and weapons in the murk, the odd flitting arrow.

A big old-timer in dark mail and a battered helmet sat on horseback at the front of a wedge of others, pointing across the square with a broken length of wood, roaring at the top of his lungs in a voice husky from smoke. ‘Push ’em back over the bridge! Drive the bastards!’ One of the men behind had a standard on a pole – white horse on green. Reachey’s sign. Which he guessed made the old man Reachey his self.

Beck was only just starting to make sense of it. The Northmen had laid on an attack of their own, just the way Flood had said, and caught the Union as they got bogged down in the houses and the twisting lanes. Driven ’em back

across the river. Looked like he might even not die today, and the thought made him want to cry. Maybe he would've, if his eyes hadn't been watering already from the smoke.

'Reachey!'

The old warrior looked over. 'Flood! Still alive, y'old bastard?'

'Half way to it, Chief. Hard fighting hereabouts.'

'I'll say. I broke my bloody axe! Union men got good helmets, eh? Not good enough, though.' Reachey tossed the splintered haft clattering across the ruined square. 'You did some decent work here.'

'Lost about all my boys, though,' said Flood. 'Just this one left.' And he clapped Beck on the shoulder. 'Got four o' the bastards on his own, he did.'

'Four? What's your name, lad?'

Beck gawped up at Reachey and his Named Men. All watching him. He should've put 'em all right. Told the truth. But even if he'd had the bones, and he didn't, he didn't have the breath in him to say that many words. So he just said, 'Beck.'

'Just Beck?'

'Aye.'

Reachey grinned. 'Man like you needs a bit more name than that, I reckon. We'll call you …' He looked Beck up and down for a moment, then nodded to himself like he had the answer. 'Red Beck.' He turned in his saddle and shouted to his Named Men. 'How d'you like that, lads? Red Beck!' And they started banging their shields with their sword hilts, and their chests with their gauntlets, and sending up a right clatter.

'You see this?' shouted Reachey. 'Here's the kind o' lad we need! Everyone look at this lad! Let's find us some more like him! Some more bloody little bastards!' Laughter, and cheering, and nods of approval all round. Mostly for the Union being driven back past the bridge, but partly for him, and his bloody day. He'd always wanted respect, and the company of fighting men, and above all a fearsome name. Now he had the lot, and all he'd had to do was hide in a cupboard and kill someone on his own side, then take the credit for his work.

'Red Beck.' Flood grinned proudly like a father at his baby's first steps. 'What d'you reckon to that, boy?'

Beck stared down at the ground. 'Don't know.'

Straight Edge

‘Ah!’ Craw jerked away from the needle on an instinct and only made the thread tug at his cheek and hurt him worse, ‘Ah!’

‘Oftentimes,’ murmured Whirrun, ‘a man’s better served embracing his pain than trying to escape it. Things are smaller when you face ’em.’

‘Easily said when you’re the one with the needle.’ Craw sucked air through his teeth as the point nipped at his cheek again. Hardly the first stitches he ever had, but it’s strange how quick you forget what a given kind of pain feels like. It was coming back to him now, and no mistake. ‘Best thing might be to get it over with quick, eh?’

‘I’m right there with you on that, but the sorry fact is I’m a much better killer than I am a healer. Tragedy of my life. I can stitch all right and I know Crow’s Foot from the Alomanter and how to rub each one on a bandage and I can hum a charm or two—’

‘They any use?’

‘The way I sing ’em? Only for scaring off cats.’

‘Ah!’ grunted Craw as Whirrun pressed his cut closed between finger and thumb and pushed the needle through again. He really had to stop squawking, there were plenty about with far worse’n a scratch across the cheek.

‘Sorry,’ grunted Whirrun. ‘You know, I’ve thought on it before, now and then, in the slow moments—’

‘You get a lot o’ those, don’t you?’

‘Well, you’re taking your time about showing me this destiny of mine. Anyway, it seems to me a man can do an awful lot of evil in no time at all.

Swing of a blade is all it takes. Doing good needs time. And all manner of complicated efforts. Most men don't have the patience for it. 'Specially not these days.'

'Those are the times.' Craw paused, chewing at a flap of loose skin on his bottom lip. 'Do I say that too much? Am I turning into my father? Am I turning into a boring old fool?'

'All heroes do.'

Craw snorted. 'Those that live to hear their own songs.'

'Terrible strain on a man, hearing his self sung about. Enough to make anyone a shit.'

'Even if they weren't one in the first place.'

'Which isn't likely. I guess hearing songs about warriors makes men feel brave their own selves, but a great warrior has to be at least half way mad.'

'Oh, I've known a few great warriors weren't mad at all. Just heartless, careless, selfish bastards.'

Whirrun bit off the thread with his teeth. 'That is the other common option.'

'Which are you, then, Whirrun? Mad or a heartless prick?'

'I try to bridge the gap between the two.'

Craw chuckled in spite of the throbbing in his face. 'That right there. That right there is a bloody hero's effort.'

Whirrun settled back on his heels. 'You're done. And not a bad job either, though I'm singing my own praises. Maybe I'll give up the killing and turn to healing after all.'

A growling voice cut through the faint ringing still going in Craw's ears. 'After the battle, though, eh?'

Whirrun blinked up. 'Why, if it ain't the Protector of the North. I feel all … protected. Swaddled up, like in a good coat.'

'Had that effect all my life.' Dow looked down at Craw with his hands on his hips, the sun bright behind him.

'You going to bring me some fighting, Black Dow?' Whirrun slowly stood, pulling his sword up after him. 'I came here to fill graves, and the Father of Swords is getting thirsty.'

'I daresay I can scare you up something to kill before too long. In the meantime I need a private word with Curnden Craw, here.'

Whirrun clapped a hand to his chest. ‘Wouldn’t dream of putting myself in between two lovers.’ And he swanned off up the hill, sword over one shoulder.

‘Strange bastard, that,’ said Dow as he watched Whirrun go.

Craw grunted as he unfolded his legs and slowly stood, shaking his aching joints out. ‘He plays up to it. You know how it is, having a reputation.’

‘Fame’s a prison, no doubt. How’s your face?’

‘Lucky I’ve always been an ugly bastard. I’ll look no worse’n before. Do we know what it was did the damage?’

Dow shook his head. ‘Who knows with the Southerners? Some new weapon. Some style o’ sorcery.’

‘It’s an evil one. That can just reach out and pluck men away like that.’

‘Is it? The Great Leveller’s waiting for all of us, ain’t he? There’ll always be someone stronger, quicker, luckier’n you, and the more fighting you do the quicker he’s going to find you. That’s what life is for men like us. The time spent plummeting towards that moment.’

Craw wasn’t sure he cared for that notion. ‘At least in the line, or the charge, or the circle a man can fight. Pretend to have a hand in the outcome.’ He winced as he touched the fresh stitching with his fingertips. ‘How do you make a song about someone whose head got splattered while he was half way through saying nothing much?’

‘Like Splitfoot.’

‘Aye.’ Craw wasn’t sure he’d ever seen anyone look deader than that bastard.

‘I want you to take his place.’

‘Eh?’ said Craw. ‘My ears are still whining. Not sure I heard you right.’

Dow leaned closer. ‘I want you to be my Second. Lead my Carls. Watch my back.’

Craw stared. ‘Me?’

‘Aye, you, what did I fucking say?’

‘But … why the hell *me*?’

‘You got the experience, and the respect …’ Dow looked at him for a moment, his jaw clenched tight. Then he waved a hand like he was swatting a fly. ‘You remind me o’ Threetrees.’

Craw blinked. It might’ve been one of the best things anyone had ever said to him, and not from a source prone to lazy compliments. Or any

compliments at all, in fact. ‘Well … I don’t know what to say. Thank you, Chief. That means a lot. A hell of a bloody lot. If I ever get to be a tenth of the man he was then I’ll be more’n satisfied—’

‘Shit on that. Just tell me you’ll do it. I need someone I can count on, Craw, and you do things the old way. You’re a straight edge, and there ain’t many left. Just tell me you’ll do it.’ He had a strange look to him, suddenly. An odd, weak twist to his mouth. If Craw hadn’t known better, he’d have called it fear, and suddenly he saw it.

Dow had no one he could turn his back to. No friends but those he’d scared into serving him and a mountain of enemies. No choice but to trust to a man he hardly knew ’cause he reminded him of an old comrade long gone back to the mud. The cost of a great big name. The harvest of a lifetime in the black business.

‘’Course I’ll do it.’ And like that it was said. Maybe he felt for Dow in that moment, however mad it sounded. Maybe he understood the loneliness of being Chief. Or maybe the embers of his own ambitions, that he’d thought burned out beside his brothers’ graves long ago, flared up one last time when Dow raked ’em over. Either way it was said, and there was no unsaying it. Without wondering if it was the right thing to do. For him, or for his dozen, or for anyone, and straight away Craw had a terrible feeling like he’d made a bastard of a mistake. ‘Just while the battle’s on, though,’ he added, rowing back from the waterfall fast as he could. ‘I’ll hold the gap ’til you find someone better.’

‘Good man.’ Dow held out his hand, and they shook, and when Craw looked up again it was into that wolf grin, not a trace of weakness or fear or anything even close. ‘You done the right thing, Craw.’

Craw watched Dow walk back up the hillside towards the stones, wondering whether he’d really let his hard mask slip or if he’d just slipped a soft one on. The right thing? Had Craw just signed up as right hand to one of the most hated men in the world? A man with more enemies than any other in a land where everyone had too many? A man he didn’t even particularly like, promised to guard with his life? He gave a groan.

What would his dozen have to say about this? Yon shaking his head with a face like thunder. Drofd looking all hurt and confused. Brack rubbing at his temples with his— Brack was back to the mud, he realised with a jolt. Wonderful? By the dead, what would she have to—

‘Craw.’ And there she was, right at his elbow.

‘Ah!’ he said, taking a step away.

‘How’s the face?’

‘Er … all right … I guess. Everyone else all right?’

‘Yon got a splinter in his hand and it’s made him pissier’n ever, but he’ll live.’

‘Good. That’s … good. That everyone’s all right, that is, not … not the splinter.’

Her brows drew in, guessing something was wrong, which wasn’t too difficult since he was making a pitiful effort at hiding it. ‘What did our noble Protector want?’

‘He wanted …’ Craw worked his lips for a moment, wondering how to frame it, but a turd’s a turd however it’s framed. ‘He wanted to offer me Splitfoot’s place.’

He’d been expecting her to laugh her arse off, but she just narrowed her eyes. ‘You? Why?’

Good question, he was starting to wonder about it now. ‘He said I’m a straight edge.’

‘I see.’

‘He said … I remind him of Threetrees.’ Realising what a pompous cock he sounded even as the words came out.

He’d definitely been expecting her to laugh at that, but she just narrowed her eyes more. ‘You’re a man can be trusted. Everyone knows that. But I can see better reasons.’

‘Like what?’

‘You were tight with Bethod and his crowd, and with Threetrees before him, and maybe Dow thinks you’ll bring him a few friends he hasn’t already got. Or at any rate a few less enemies.’ Craw frowned. Those were better reasons. ‘That and he knows Whirrun’ll go wherever you go, and Whirrun’s a damn good man to have standing behind you if things get ugly.’ Shit. She was double right. She’d sussed it all straight off. ‘And knowing Black Dow, things are sure to get ugly … What did you tell him?’

Craw winced. ‘I said yes,’ and hurried after with, ‘just while the battle’s on.’

‘I see.’ Still no anger, and no surprise either. She just watched him. That was making him more nervy than if she’d punched him in the face. ‘And

what about the dozen?'

'Well …' Ashamed to say he hadn't really considered it. 'Guess you'll be coming along with me, if you'll have it. Unless you want to go back to your farm and your family and—'

'Retire?'

'Aye.'

She snorted. 'The pipe and the porch and the sunset on the water? That's you, not me.'

'Then … I reckon it's your dozen for the time being.'

'All right.'

'You ain't going to give me a tongue-lashing?'

'About what?'

'Not taking my own advice, for a start. About how I should keep my head down, not stick my neck out, get everyone in the crew through alive, how old horses can't jump new fences and blah, blah, blah—'

'That's what you'd say. I'm not you, Craw.'

He blinked. 'Guess not. Then you think this is the right thing to do?'

'The right thing?' She turned away with a hint of a grin. 'That's you an' all.' And she strolled back up towards the Heroes, one hand resting slack on her sword hilt, and left him stood there in the wind.

'By the bloody dead.' He looked off across the hillside, desperately searching for a finger that still had some nail left to chew at.

Shivers was standing not far off. Saying nothing. Just staring. Looking, in fact, like a man who felt himself stepped in front of. Craw's wince became a full grimace. Seemed that was getting to be the normal shape to his face, one way and another. 'A man's worst enemies are his own ambitions,' Bethod used to tell him. 'Mine have got me in all the shit I'm in today.'

'Welcome to the shit,' he muttered to himself through gritted teeth. That's the problem with mistakes. You can make 'em in an instant. Years upon years spent tiptoeing about like a fool, then you take your eye away for a moment and …

Bang.

Escape

Finree thought they were in some kind of shack. The floor was damp dirt, a chill draught across it making her shiver. The place smelled of fust and animals.

They had blindfolded her, and marched her lurching across the wet fields into the trees, crops tangling her feet, bushes clutching at her dress. It was a good thing she had been wearing her riding boots or she would probably have ended up barefoot. She had heard fighting behind them, she thought. Aliz had kept screaming for a while, her voice getting more and more hoarse, but eventually stopped. It changed nothing. They had crossed water on a creaking boat. Maybe over to the north side of the river. They had been shoved in here, heard a door wobble shut and the clattering of a bar on the outside.

And here they had been left, in the darkness. To wait for who knew what.

As Finree slowly got her breath back the pain began to creep up on her. Her scalp burned, her head thumped, her neck sent vicious stings down between her shoulders whenever she tried to turn her head. But no doubt she was a great deal better off than most who had been trapped in that inn.

She wondered if Hardrick had made it to safety, or if they had ridden him down in the fields, his useless message never delivered. She kept seeing that major's face as he stumbled sideways with blood running from his broken head, so very surprised. Meed, fumbling at the bubbling wound in his neck. All dead. All of them.

She took a shuddering breath and forced the thought away. She could not think of it any more than a tightrope walker could think about the ground.

‘You have to look forward,’ she remembered her father telling her, as he plucked another of her pieces from the squares board. ‘Concentrate on what you can change.’

Aliz had been sobbing ever since the door shut. Finree wanted quite badly to slap her, but her hands were tied. She was reasonably sure they would not get out of this by sobbing. Not that she had any better ideas.

‘Quiet,’ Finree hissed. ‘Quiet, please, I need to think. Please. Please.’

The sobbing stuttered back to ragged whimpering. That was worse, if anything.

‘Will they kill us?’ squeaked Aliz’ voice, along with a slobbering snort. ‘Will they murder us?’

‘No. They would have done it already.’

‘Then what will they do with us?’

The question sat between them like a bottomless abyss, with nothing but their echoing breath to fill it. Finree managed to twist herself up to sitting, gritting her teeth at the pain in her neck. ‘We have to think, do you understand? We have to look forward. We have to try and escape.’

‘How?’ Aliz whimpered.

‘Any way we can!’ Silence. ‘We have to try. Are your hands free?’

‘No.’

Finree managed to worm her way across the floor, dress sliding over the dirt until her back hit the wall, grunting with the effort. She shifted herself along, fingertips brushing crumbling plaster, damp stone.

‘Are you there?’ squeaked Aliz.

‘Where else would I be?’

‘What are you doing?’

‘Trying to get my hands free.’ Something tugged at Finree’s waist, cloth ripped. She wormed her shoulder blades up the wall, following the caught material with her fingers. A rusted bracket. She rubbed away the flakes between finger and thumb, felt a jagged point underneath, a sudden surge of hope. She pulled her wrists apart, struggling to find the metal with the cords that held them.

‘If you get your hands free, what then?’ came Aliz’ shrill voice.

‘Get yours free,’ grunted Finree through gritted teeth. ‘Then feet.’

‘Then what? What about the door? There’ll be guards, won’t there? Where are we? What do we do if—’

‘I don’t know!’ She forced her voice down. ‘I don’t know. One battle at a time.’ Sawing away at the bracket. ‘One battle at a—’ Her hand slipped and she lurched back, felt the metal leave a burning cut down her arm.

‘Ah!’

‘What?’

‘Cut myself. Nothing. Don’t worry.’

‘Don’t worry? We’ve been captured by the Northmen! Savages! Did you see—’

‘Don’t worry about the cut, I meant! And yes, I saw it all.’ And she had to concentrate on what she could change. Whether her hands were free or not was challenge enough. Her legs were burning from holding her up against the wall, she could feel the greasy wetness of blood on her fingers, of sweat on her face. Her head was pounding, agony in her neck with every movement of her shoulders. She wriggled the cord against that piece of rusted metal, back and forward, back and forward, grunting with frustration. ‘Damn, bloody— Ah!’

Like that it came free. She dragged her blindfold off and tossed it away. She could hardly see more without it. Chinks of light around the door, between the planks. Cracked walls glistening with damp, floor scattered with muddy straw. Aliz was kneeling a stride or two away, dress covered in dirt, bound hands limp in her lap.

Finree jumped over to her, since her ankles were still tied, and knelt down. She tugged off Aliz’ blindfold, took both of her hands and pressed them in hers. Spoke slowly, looking her right in her pink-rimmed eyes. ‘We will escape. We must. We will.’ Aliz nodded, mouth twisting into a desperately hopeful smile for a moment. Finree peered down at her wrists, numb fingertips tugging at the knots, tongue pressed between her teeth as she prised at them with her broken nails—

‘How does he know I have them?’ Finree went cold. Or even colder. A voice, speaking Northern, and heavy footsteps, coming closer. She felt Aliz frozen in the dark, not even breathing.

‘He has his ways, apparently.’

‘His ways can sink in the dark places of the world for all I care.’ It was the voice of the giant. That soft, slow voice, but it had anger in it now. ‘The women are mine.’

‘He only wants one.’ The other sounded like his throat was full of grit, his voice a grinding whisper.

‘Which one?’

‘The brown-haired one.’

An angry snort. ‘No. I had in mind she would give me children.’ Finree’s eyes went wide. Her breath crawled in her throat. They were talking about her. She went at the knot on Aliz’ wrists with twice the urgency, biting at her lip.

‘How many children do you need?’ came the whispering voice.

‘Civilised children. After the Union fashion.’

‘What?’

‘You heard me. Civilised children.’

‘Who eat with a fork and that? I been to Styria. I been to the Union. Civilisation ain’t all it’s made out to be, believe me.’

‘A pause. ‘Is it true they have holes there in which a man can shit, and the turds are carried away?’

‘So what? Shit is still shit. It all ends up somewhere.’

‘I want civilisation. I want civilised children.’

‘Use the yellow-haired one.’

‘She pleases my eye less. And she is a coward. She does nothing but cry. The brown-haired one killed one of my men. She has bones. Children get their courage from the mother. I will not have cowardly children.’

The whispering voice dropped lower, too quiet for Finree to hear. She tugged desperately at the knots with her nails, mouthing curses.

‘What are they saying?’ came Aliz’ whisper, croaky with terror.

‘Nothing,’ Finree hissed back. ‘Nothing.’

‘Black Dow takes a high hand with me in this,’ came the giant’s voice again.

‘He takes a high hand with me and all. There it is. He’s the one with the chain.’

‘I shit on his chain. Stranger-Come-Knocking has no masters but the sky and the earth. Black Dow does not command—’

‘He ain’t commanding nothing. He’s asking nicely. You can tell me no. Then I’ll tell him no. Then we can see.’

There was a pause. Finree pressed her tongue into her teeth, the knot starting to give, starting to give—

The door swung open and they were left blinking into the light. A man stood in the doorway. One of his eyes was strangely bright. Too bright. He stepped under the lintel, and Finree realised that his eye was made of metal, and set in the midst of an enormous, mottled scar. She had never seen a more monstrous-looking man. Aliz gave a kind of stuttering wheeze. Too scared even to scream, for once.

'She got her hands free,' he whispered over his shoulder.

'I said she had bones,' came the giant's voice from outside. 'Tell Black Dow there will be a price for this. A price for the woman and a price for the insult.'

'I'll tell him.' The metal-eyed man came forward, pulling something from his belt. A knife, she saw the flash of metal in the gloom. Aliz saw it too, whimpered, gripped hard at Finree's fingers and she gripped back. She was not sure what else she could do. He squatted down in front of them, forearms on his knees and his hands dangling, the knife loose in one. Finree's eyes flickered from the gleam of the blade to the gleam of his metal eye, not sure which was more awful. 'There's a price for everything, ain't there?' he whispered to her.

The knife darted out and slit the cord between her ankles in one motion. He reached behind his back and pulled a canvas bag over her head with another, plunging her suddenly into fusty, onion-smelling darkness. She was dragged up by her armpit, hands slipping from Aliz' limp grip.

'Wait!' she heard Aliz shouting behind her. 'What about me? What about __'

The door clattered shut.

The Bridge

Your August Majesty,

If this letter reaches you I have fallen in battle, fighting for your cause with my final breath. I write it only in the hope of letting you know what I could not in person: that the days I spent serving with the Knights of the Body, and as your Majesty's First Guard in particular, were the happiest of my life, and that the day when I lost that position was the saddest. If I failed you I hope you can forgive me, and think of me as I was before Sipani: dutiful, diligent, and always utterly loyal to your Majesty.

I bid you a fond farewell,
Bremer dan Gorst

He thought better of 'a fond' and crossed it out, realised he should probably rewrite the whole thing without it, then decided he did not have the time. He tossed the pen away, folded the paper without bothering to blot it and tucked it down inside his breastplate.

Perhaps they will find it there, later, on my crap-stained corpse. Dramatically bloodied at the corner, maybe? A final letter! Why, to whom? Family? Sweetheart? Friends? No, the sad fool had none of those, it is addressed to the king! And borne upon a velvet pillow into his Majesty's throne room, there perhaps to wring out some wretched drip of guilt. A single sparkling tear spatters upon the marble tiles. Oh! Poor Gorst, how unfairly he was used! How unjustly stripped of his position! Alas, his blood

has watered foreign fields, far from the warmth of my favour! Now what's for breakfast?

Down on the Old Bridge the third assault had reached its critical moment. The narrow double span was one heaving mass, rows of nervous soldiers waiting unenthusiastically to take their turn while the wounded, exhausted and otherwise spent staggered away in the opposite direction. The resolve of Mitterick's men was flickering, Gorst could see it in the pale faces of the officers, hear it in their nervous voices, in the sobs of the injured. Success or failure was balanced on a knife-edge.

'Where the hell is bloody Vallimir?' Mitterick was roaring at everyone and no one. 'Bloody coward, I'll have him cashiered in disgrace! I'll go down there my bloody self! Where did Felnigg get to? Where … what … who …' His words were buried in the hubbub as Gorst walked down towards the river, his mood lifting with every jaunty step as if a great weight was floating from his shoulders piece by leaden piece.

A wounded man stumbled by, one arm around a fellow, clutching a bloody cloth to his eye. *Someone will be missing from next year's archery contest!* Another was hauled past on a stretcher, crying out piteously as he bounced, the stump of his leg bound tightly with red-soaked bandages. *No more walks in the park for you!* He grinned at the injured men laid groaning at the verges of the muddy track, gave them merry salutes. *Unlucky, my comrades! Life is not fair, is it?*

He strode through a scattered crowd, then threaded through a tighter mass, then shouldered through a breathless press, the fear building around him as the bodies squeezed tighter, and with it his excitement. Feelings ran high. Men shoved at each other, thrashed with their elbows, screamed pointless insults. Weapons waved dangerously. Stray arrows would occasionally putter down, no longer in volleys but in apologetic ones and twos. *Little gifts from our friends on the other side. No, really, you shouldn't have!*

The mud beneath Gorst's feet levelled off, then began to rise, then gave way to old stone slabs. Between twisted faces he caught glimpses of the river, the bridge's mossy parapet. He began to make out from the general din the metallic note of combat and the sound tugged at his heart like a lover's voice across a crowded room. *Like the whiff of the husk pipe to the addict. We all have our little vices. Our little obsessions. Drink, women, cards. And here is mine.*

Tactics and technique were useless here, it was a question of brute strength and fury, and very few men were Gorst's match in either. He put his head down and strained at the press as he had strained at the mired wagon a few days before. He began to grunt, then growl, then hiss, and he rammed his way through the soldiers like a ploughshare through soil, shoving heedlessly with shield and shoulder, tramping over the dead and wounded. *No small talk. No apologies. No petty embarrassments here.*

'Out of my fucking *way!'* he screeched, sending a soldier sprawling on his face and using him for a carpet. He caught a flash of metal and a spear-point raked his shield. For a moment he thought a Union man had taken objection, then he realised the spear had a Northman on the other end. *Greetings, my friend!* Gorst was trying to twist his sword free of the press and into a useful attitude when he was given an almighty shove from behind and found himself suddenly squashed up against the owner of the spear, their noses almost touching. A bearded face, with a scar on the top lip.

Gorst smashed his forehead into it, and again, and again, shoved him down and stomped on his head until it gave under his heel. He realised he was shouting at the falsetto top of his voice. He wasn't even sure of the words, if they were words. All around him men were doing the same, spitting curses in each other's faces that no one on the other side could possibly understand.

A glimpse of sky through a thicket of pole-arms and Gorst thrust his sword into it, another Northman bent sideways, breath wheezing silently through a mouth frozen in a drooling ring of surprise. Too tangled to swing, Gorst gritted his teeth and jabbed away, jabbed, jabbed, jabbed, point grating against armour, pricking at flesh, opening an arm up in a long red slit.

A growling face showed for a moment over the rim of Gorst's shield and he set his boots and drove the man back, battering at his chest, jaw, legs. Back he went, and back, and squealing over the parapet, his spear splashing into the fast-flowing water below. Somehow he managed to cling on with the other hand, desperate fingers white on stone, blood leaking from his bloated nose, looking up imploringly. *Mercy? Help? Forbearance, at least? Are we not all just men? Brothers eternal, on this crooked road of life? Could we be bosom friends, had we met in other circumstances?*

Gorst smashed his shield down on the hand, bones crunching under the metal edge, watched the man fall cartwheeling into the river. ‘The Union!’ someone shrieked. ‘The Union!’ Was it him? He felt soldiers pushing forward, their blood rising, surging across the bridge with an irresistible momentum, carrying him northwards, a stick on the crest of a wave. He cut someone down with his long steel, laid someone’s else’s head open with the corner of his shield, strap twisting in his hand, his face aching he was smiling so hard, every breath burning with joy. *This is living! This is living! Well, not for them, but—*

He tottered suddenly into empty space. Fields opened wide before him, crops shifting in the breeze, golden in the evening sun like the paradise the Prophet promises to the Gurkish righteous. Northmen ran. Some running away, and more running towards. A counter-attack, and leading it a huge warrior, clad in plates of black metal strapped over black chain mail, a long sword in one gauntleted fist, a heavy mace in the other, steel glinting warm and welcoming in the mellow afternoon. Carls followed in a mailed wedge, painted shields up and offering their bright-daubed devices, screaming a chant – ‘Scale! Scale!’ in a thunder of voices.

The Union drive faltered, the vanguard still shuffling reluctantly forward from the weight of those behind. Gorst stood at their front and watched, smiling into the dropping sun, not daring to move a muscle in case the feeling ended. It was sublime. Like a scene from the tales he had read as a boy. Like that ridiculous painting in his father’s library of Harod the Great facing Ardlic of Keln. *A meeting of champions! All gritted teeth and clenched buttocks! All glorious lives, glorious deaths and glorious … glory?*

The man in black hammered up onto the bridge, big boots thumping the stones. His blade came whistling at shoulder height and Gorst set himself to parry, the breathtaking shock humming up his arm. The mace came a moment later and he caught it on his shield, the heavy head leaving a dent just short of his nose.

Gorst gave two savage cuts in return, high and low, and the man in black ducked the first and blocked the second with the shaft of his mace, lashed at Gorst with his sword and made him spin away, using a Union soldier’s shield as a backrest.

He was strong, this champion of the North, and brave, but strength and bravery are not always enough. He had not studied every significant text on swordsmanship ever committed to paper. Had not trained three hours a day every day since he was fourteen. Had run no ten thousand miles in his armour. Had endured no bitter, enraging years of humiliation. *And, worst of all, he cares whether he loses.*

Their blades met in the air with a deafening crash but Gorst's timing was perfect and it was the Northman who staggered off balance, favouring perhaps a weak left knee. Gorst was on him in a flash but someone else's stray weapon struck him on the shoulder-plate before he could swing, sent him stumbling into the man in black's arms.

They lumbered in an awkward embrace. The Northman tried to beat at him with the haft of his mace, trip him, shake him off. Gorst held tight. He was vaguely aware of fighting around them, of men locked in their own desperate struggles, of the screams of tortured flesh and tortured metal, but he was lost in the moment, eyes closed.

When was the last time I truly held someone? When I won the semi-final in the contest, did my father hug me? No. A firm shake of the hand. An awkward clap on the shoulder. Perhaps he would have hugged me if I'd won, but I failed, just as he said I would. When, then? Women paid to do it? Men I scarcely know in meaningless drunken camaraderie? But not like this. By an equal, who truly understands me. If only it could last…

He leaped back, jerking his head away from the whistling mace and letting the man in black stumble past. Gorst's steel flashed towards his head as he righted himself and he only just managed to deflect the blow, sword wrenched from his hand and sent skittering away among the pounding boots. The man in black bellowed, twisting to swing his mace at a vicious diagonal.

Too much brawn, not enough precision. Gorst saw it coming, let it glance harmlessly from his shield and slid around it into space, aimed a carefully gauged chop, little more than a fencer's flick, at that weak left knee. The blade of his steel caught the thigh-plate, found the chain mail on the joint and bit through. The man in black lurched sideways, only staying upright by clawing at the parapet, his mace scraping the mossy stone.

Gorst blew air from his nose as he brought the steel scything up and over, no fencer's movement this. It chopped cleanly through the man's thick

forearm, armour, flesh and bone, and clanged against the old rock underneath, streaks of blood, rings of mail, splinters of stone flying.

The man in black gave an outraged snort as he struggled up, roared as he swung his mace at Gorst's head with a killing blow. Or would have, had his hand still been attached. Somewhat to the disappointment of them both, Gorst suspected, his gauntlet and half his forearm were hanging by a last shred of chain mail, the mace dangling puppet-like from the wrist by a leather thong. As far as Gorst could tell without seeing his face, the man was greatly confused.

Gorst smashed him in the head with his shield and snapped his helmet back, blood squirting from his severed arm in thick black drops. He was pawing clumsily for a dagger at his belt when Gorst's long steel clanged into his black faceplate and left a bright dent down the middle. He tottered, arms out wide, then toppled backwards like a great tree felled.

Gorst held up his shield and bloody sword, shaking them at the last few dismayed Northmen like a savage, and gave a great shrill scream. *I win, fuckers! I win! I win!*

As if that were an order, the lot of them turned and fled northwards, thrashing through the crops in their desperate haste to get away, weighed down by their flapping mail and their fatigue and their panic, and Gorst was among them, a lion among the goats.

Compared to his morning routine this was like dancing on air. A Northman slipped beside him, yelping in terror. Gorst charted the downward movement of his body, timed the downward movement of his arm to match and neatly cut the man's head off, felt it bounce from his knee as he plunged on up the track. A young lad tossed away a spear, face contorted with fear as he looked over his shoulder. Gorst chopped deep into his backside and he went down howling in the crops.

It was so easy it was faintly ridiculous. Gorst hacked the legs out from one man, gained on another and dropped him with a cut across the back, struck an arm from a third and let him stumble on for a few wobbling steps before he smashed him over backwards with his shield.

Is this still battle? Is this still the glorious matching of man against man? Or is this just murder? He did not care. *I cannot tell jokes, or make pretty conversation, but this I can do. This I am made for. Bremer dan Gorst, king of the world!*

He chopped them down on both sides, left their blubbing, leaking bodies wrecked in his wake. A couple turned stumbling to face him and he chopped them down as well. Made meat of them all, regardless. On he went, and on, hacking away like a mad butcher, the air whooping triumphantly in his throat. He passed a farm on his right, half way or more to a long wall up ahead. No Northmen within easy reach, he stole a glance over his shoulder, and slowed.

None of Mitterick's men were following. They had stopped near the bridge, a hundred strides behind him. He was entirely alone in the fields, a one-man assault on the Northmen's positions. He stopped, uncertainly, marooned in a sea of barley.

A lad he must have overtaken earlier jogged up. Shaggy-haired, wearing a leather jerkin with a bloody sleeve. No weapon. He spared Gorst a quick glance, then laboured on. He passed close enough that Gorst could have stabbed him without moving his feet, but suddenly he could not see the point.

The elation of combat was leaking out of him, the familiar weight gathering on his shoulders again. *So quickly I am sucked back into the bog of despond. The foetid waters close over my face. Only count three, and I am once again the very same sad bastard who all know and scorn.* He looked back towards his own lines. The trail of broken bodies no longer felt like anything to take pride in.

He stood, skin prickling with sweat, sucking air through gritted teeth. Frowning towards the wall through the crops to the north, and the spears bristling up behind it, and the beaten men still struggling back towards it. *Perhaps I should charge on, all alone. Glorious Gorst, there he goes! Falling upon the enemy like a shooting star! His body dies but his name shall live for ever!* He snorted. *Idiot Gorst, throwing his life away, the stupid, squeaking arse. Dropping into his pointless grave like a turd into a sewer, and just as quickly forgotten.*

He shook the ruined shield from his arm and let it drop to the track, pulled the folded letter from his breastplate between two fingers, crumpled it tightly in his fist, then tossed it into the barley. *It was a pathetic letter anyway. I should be ashamed of myself.*

Then he turned, head hanging, and trudged back towards the bridge.

One Union soldier, for some reason, had chased far down the track after Scale's fleeing troops. A big man wearing heavy armour and with a sword in his hand. He didn't look particularly triumphant as he stared up the road, standing oddly alone in that open field. He looked almost as defeated as Calder felt. After a while he turned and plodded back towards the bridge. Back towards the trenches Scale's men had dug the previous night, and where the Union were now taking up positions.

Not all dramas on the battlefield spring from glorious action. Some slink from everyone just sitting there, doing nothing. Tenways had sent no help. Calder hadn't moved. He hadn't even got as far as making his mind up not to move. He'd just stood, staring at nothing through his eyeglass, in a frozen agony of indecision, and then suddenly all of Scale's men who still could were running, and the Union had carried the bridge.

Thankfully, it looked as if they were satisfied for now. Probably they didn't want to risk pushing further with the light fading. They could push further tomorrow, after all, and everyone knew it. They had a good foothold on the north bank of the river, and no shortage of men in spite of the price Scale had made them pay. It looked as if the price Scale had paid had been heavier yet.

The last of his defeated Carls were still hobbling back, clambering over the wall to lie scattered in the crops behind, dirt and blood-smeared, broken and exhausted. Calder stopped a man with a hand on his shoulder.

'Where's Scale?'

'Dead!' he screamed, shaking him off. 'Dead! Why didn't you come, you bastards? Why didn't you help us?'

'Union men over the stream there,' Pale-as-Snow was explaining as he led him away, but Calder hardly heard. He stood at the gate, staring across the darkening fields towards the bridge.

He'd loved his brother. For being on his side when everyone else was against him. Because nothing's more important than family.

He'd hated his brother. For being too stupid. For being too strong. For being in his way. Because nothing's more important than power.

And now his brother was dead. Calder had let him die. Just by doing nothing. Was that the same as killing a man?

All he could think about was how it might make his life more difficult. All the extra tasks he'd have to do, the responsibilities he didn't feel ready for.

He was the heir, now, to all his father's priceless legacy of feuds, hatred and bad blood. He felt annoyance rather than grief, and puzzled he didn't feel more. Everyone was looking at him. Watching him, to see what he'd do. To judge what kind of man he was. He was embarrassed, almost, that this was all his brother's death made him feel. Not guilty, not sad, just cold. And then angry.

And then very angry.

Strange Bedfellows

The hood was pulled from her head and Finree squinted into the light. Such as it was. The room was dim and dusty with two mean windows and a low ceiling, bowing in the middle, cobwebs drifting from the rafters.

A Northman stood a couple of paces in front of her, feet planted wide and hands on hips, head tipped slightly back in the stance of a man used to being obeyed, and quickly. His short hair was peppered with grey and his face was sharp as a chisel, notched with old scars, an appraising twist to his mouth. A chain of heavy golden links gleamed faintly around his shoulders. An important man. Or one who thought himself important, at least.

An older man stood behind him, thumbs in his belt near a battered sword hilt. He had a shaggy grey growth on his jaw somewhere between beard and stubble and a fresh cut on his cheek, dark red and rimmed with pink, closed with ugly stitches. He wore an expression somewhat sad, somewhat determined, as if he did not like what was coming but could see no way to avoid it, and now was fixed on seeing it through, whatever it cost him. A lieutenant of the first man.

As Finree's eyes adjusted she saw a third figure in the shadows against the wall. A woman, she was surprised to see, and with black skin. Tall and thin, a long coat hanging open to show a body wrapped in bandages. Where she stood in this, Finree could not tell.

She did not turn her head to look, in spite of the temptation, but she knew there was another man behind her, his gravelly breath at the edge of her hearing. The one with the metal eye. She wondered if he had that little knife

in his hand, and how close the point was to her back. Her skin prickled inside her dirty dress at the thought.

'This is her?' sneered the man with the chain at the black-skinned woman, and when he turned his head Finree saw there was only a fold of old scar where his ear should have been.

'Yes.'

'She don't look much like the answer to all my problems.'

The woman stared at Finree, unblinking. 'Probably she has looked better.' Her eyes were like a lizard's, black and empty.

The man with the chain took a step forwards and Finree had to stop herself cringing. There was something in the set of him that made her feel he was teetering on the edge of violence. That his every smallest movement was the prelude to a punch, or a headbutt, or worse. That his natural instinct was to throttle her and it took a constant effort to stop himself doing it, and talk instead. 'Do you know who I am?'

She lifted her chin, trying to look undaunted and almost certainly failing. Her heart was thumping so hard she was sure they must be able to hear it against her ribs. 'No,' she said in Northern.

'You understand me, then.'

'Yes.'

'I'm Black Dow.'

'Oh.' She hardly knew what to say. 'I thought you'd be taller.'

Dow raised one scar-nicked brow at the older man. The older man shrugged. 'What can I say? You're shorter'n your reputation.'

'Most of us are.' Dow looked back at Finree, eyes narrowed, judging her response. 'How 'bout your father? Taller'n me?'

They knew who she was. Who her father was. She had no idea how, but they knew. That was either a good thing or a very bad one. She looked at the older man and he gave her the faintest, apologetic smile, then winced since he must have stretched his stitches doing it. She felt the man with the metal eye shift his weight behind her, a floorboard creaking. This did not seem like a group from which she could expect good things.

'My father is about your height,' she said, her voice whispery.

Dow grinned, but there was no humour in it. 'Well, that's a damn good height to be.'

‘If you mean to gain some advantage over him through me, you will be disappointed.’

‘Will I?’

‘Nothing will sway him from his duty.’

‘Won’t be sorry to lose you, eh?’

‘He’ll be sorry. But he’ll only fight you harder.’

‘Oh, I’m getting a fine sense for the man! Loyal, and strong, and bulging with righteousness. Like iron on the outside, but …’ And he thumped at his chest with one fist and pushed out his bottom lip. ‘He feels it. *Feels* it all, right here. And weeps at the quiet times.’

Finree looked right back. ‘You have him close enough.’

Dow whipped out his grin like a killer might a knife. ‘Sounds like my fucking twin.’ The older man gave a snort of laughter. The woman smiled, showing a mouthful of impossibly perfect white teeth. The man with the metal eye made no sound. ‘Good thing you won’t be relying on your father’s tender mercies, then. I got no plans to bargain with you, or ransom you, or even send your head over the river in a box. Though we’ll see how the conversation goes, you might yet change my mind on that score.’

There was a long pause, while Dow watched her and she watched him. Like the accused waiting for the judge to pass sentence.

‘I’ve a mind to let you go,’ he said. ‘I want you to take a message back to your father. Let him know I don’t see the purpose shedding any more blood over this worthless fucking valley. Let him know I’m willing to talk.’ Dow gave a loud sniff, worked his mouth as if it tasted bad. ‘Talk about … *peace.’*

Finree blinked. ‘Talk.’

‘That’s right.’

‘About peace.’

‘That’s right.’

She felt dizzy. Drunk on the sudden prospect of living to see her husband and her father again. But she had to put that to one side, think past it. She took a long breath through her nose and steadied herself. ‘That will not be good enough.’

She was pleased to see Black Dow look quite surprised. ‘Won’t it, now?’

‘No.’ It was difficult to appear authoritative while bruised, beaten, dirt-spattered and surrounded by the most daunting enemies, but Finree did her

very best. She would not get through this with meekness. Black Dow wished to deal with someone powerful. That would make him feel powerful. The more powerful she made herself, the safer she was. So she raised her chin and looked him full in the eye. ‘You need to make a gesture of goodwill. Something to let my father know you are serious. That you are willing to negotiate. Proof you are a reasonable man.’

Black Dow snorted. ‘You hear that, Craw? Goodwill. Me.’

The older man shrugged. ‘Proof you’re reasonable.’

‘More proof than sending back his daughter without a hole in her head?’ grated Dow, looking her up and down. ‘Or her head in her hole, for that matter.’

She floated over it. ‘After the battle yesterday, you must have prisoners.’ Unless they had all been murdered. Looking into Black Dow’s eyes, it did not seem unlikely.

‘’Course we’ve got prisoners.’ Dow cocked his head on one side, drifting closer. ‘You think I’m some kind of an animal?’

Finree did, in fact. ‘I want them released.’

‘Do you, now? All of ’em?’

‘Yes.’

‘For nothing?’

‘A gesture of—’

He jerked forwards, nose almost touching hers, thick veins bulging from the side of his thick neck. ‘You’re in no place to negotiate, you fucking little —’

‘You aren’t negotiating with me!’ Finree barked back at him, showing her teeth. ‘You’re negotiating with my father, and he is in every position! Otherwise you wouldn’t be *fucking* asking!’

A ripple of twitches went through Dow’s cheek, and for an instant she was sure he was going to beat her to a pulp. Or give the smallest signal to his metal-eyed henchman and she would be slit from her arse to the back of her head. Dow’s arm jerked up, and for an instant she was sure her death was a breath away. But all he did was grin, and gently wag his finger in her face. ‘Oh, you’re a sharp one. You didn’t tell me she was so sharp.’

‘I am shocked to my very roots,’ intoned the black-skinned woman, looking about as shocked as the wall behind her.

‘All right.’ Dow puffed out his scarred cheeks. ‘I’ll let some of the wounded ones go. Don’t need their sobbing keeping me awake tonight anyway. Let’s say five dozen men.’

‘You have more?’

‘A lot more, but my goodwill’s a brittle little thing. Five dozen is all it’ll stretch around.’

An hour ago she had not seen any way to save herself. Her knees were almost buckling at the thought of coming out of this alive and saving sixty men besides. But she had to try one more thing. ‘There was another woman taken with me—’

‘Can’t do it.’

‘You don’t know what I’m going to ask—’

‘Yes I do, and I can’t do it. Stranger-Come-Knocking, that big bastard who took you prisoner? Man’s mad as a grass helmet. He don’t answer to me. Don’t answer to nothing. You’ve no idea what it’s cost me getting you. I can’t afford to buy anyone else.’

‘Then I won’t help you.’

Dow clicked his tongue. ‘Sharp is good, but you don’t want to get so sharp you cut your own throat. You won’t help me, you’re no use to me at all. Might as well send you back to Stranger-Come-Fucking, eh? The way I see it, you got two choices. Back to your father and share in the peace, or back to your friend and share in … whatever she’s got coming. Which appeals?’

Finree thought of Aliz’ scared breath, in the darkness. Her whimper as Finree’s hand slipped out of hers. She thought of that scarred giant, smashing his own man’s head apart against the wall. She wished she was brave enough to have tried to call the bluff, at least. But who would be?

‘My father,’ she whispered, and it was the most she could do to stop herself crying with relief.

‘Don’t feel bad about it.’ Black Dow drew his murderer’s grin one more time. ‘That’s the choice I’d have made. Happy fucking journey.’

The bag came down over her head.

*

Craw waited until Shivers had bundled the hooded girl through the door before leaning forward, one finger up, and gently asking his question. ‘Er … what’s going on, Chief?’

Dow frowned at him. ‘You’re supposed to be my Second, old man. You should be the last one questioning me.’

Craw held up his palms. ‘And I will be. I’m all for peace, believe me, just might help if I understood why you want it of a sudden.’

‘Want?’ barked Dow, jerking towards him like a hound got the scent. ‘*Want?’* Closer still, making Craw back up against the wall. ‘I got what I want I’d hang the whole fucking Union and choke this valley with the smoke o’ their cooking meat and sink Angland, Midderland and all their bloody other land in the bottom o’ the Circle Sea, how’s that for peace?’

‘Right.’ Craw cleared his throat, rightly wishing he hadn’t asked the question. ‘Right y’are.’

‘But that’s being Chief, ain’t it?’ snarled Dow in his face. ‘A dancing fucking procession o’ things you don’t want to do! If I’d known what it meant when I took the chain I’d have tossed it in the river along with the Bloody-Nine. Threetrees warned me, but I didn’t listen. There’s no curse like getting what you want.’

Craw winced. ‘So … why, then?’

‘Because the dead know I’m no peacemaker but I’m no idiot either. Your little friend Calder may be a pissing coward but he’s got a point. It’s a damn fool risks his life for what he can get just by the asking. Not everyone’s got my appetite for the fight. Men are getting tired, the Union are too many to beat and in case you hadn’t noticed we’re trousers down in a pit full of bloody snakes. Ironhead? Golden? Stranger-Come-Bragging? I don’t trust those bastards further’n I can piss with no hands. Better finish this up now while we can call it a win.’

‘Fair point,’ croaked Craw.

‘Got what I want there’d be no bloody talk at all.’ Dow’s face twitched, and he looked over at Ishri, leaning in the shadows against the wall, face a blank, black mask. He ran his tongue around the inside of his sneering mouth and spat. ‘But calmer heads have prevailed. We’ll try peace on, see whether it chafes. Now get that bitch back to her father ’fore I change my mind and cut the bloody cross in her for the fucking exercise.’

Craw edged for the door sideways, like a crab. ‘On my way, Chief.’

Hearts and Minds

‘How long should we spend out here, Corporal?’

‘As short a time as is possible without disgrace, Yolk.’

‘How long’s that?’

‘Until it’s too dark for me to see your gurning visage would be a start.’

‘And we patrol, do we?’

‘No, Yolk, we’ll just walk a few dozen strides and sit down for a while.’

‘Where will we find to sit that isn’t wet as an otter’s—’

‘Shh,’ hissed Tunny, waving at Yolk to get down. There were men in the trees on the other side of the rise. Three men, and two of them in Union uniforms. ‘Huh.’ One was Lance Corporal Hedges. A squinty, mean-spirited rat of a man who’d been with the First for about three years and thought himself quite the rogue but was no better than a nasty idiot. The kind of bad soldier who gives proper bad soldiers a bad name. His gangly sidekick was unfamiliar, probably a new recruit. Hedges’ version of Yolk, which was truly a concept too horrifying to entertain.

They both had swords drawn and pointed at a Northman, but Tunny could tell right off he was no fighter. Dressed in a dirty coat with a belt around it, a bow over one shoulder and some arrows in a quiver, no other weapon visible. A hunter, maybe, or a trapper, he looked somewhat baffled and somewhat scared. Hedges had a black fur in one hand. Didn’t take a great mind to work it all out.

‘Why, Lance Corporal Hedges!’ Tunny grinned wide as he stood and strolled down the bank, his hand loose on the hilt of his sword, just to make sure everyone realised he had one.

Hedges squinted guiltily over at him. ‘Keep out o’ this, Tunny. We found him, he’s ours.’

‘Yours? Where in the rule book does it say prisoners are yours to abuse because you found them?’

‘What do you care about the rules? What’re you doing here, I’d like to know.’

‘As it happens, First Sergeant Forest sent me and Trooper Yolk on patrol to make sure none of our men were out beyond the picket causing mischief. And what should I find but you, out beyond the picket and in the process of robbing this civilian. I call that mischievous. Do you call that mischievous, Yolk?’

‘Well, er …’

Tunny didn’t wait for an answer. ‘You know what General Jalenhorm said. We’re out to win hearts and minds as much as anything else. Can’t have you robbing the locals, Hedges. Just can’t have it. Contrary to our whole approach up here.’

‘General fucking Jalenhorm?’ Hedges snorted. ‘Hearts and minds? You? Don’t make me laugh!’

‘Make you laugh?’ Tunny frowned. ‘Make you *laugh*? Trooper Yolk, I want you to raise your loaded flatbow and point it at Lance Corporal Hedges.’

Yolk stared. ‘What?’

‘What?’ grunted Hedges.

Tunny threw up an arm. ‘You heard me, point your bow!’

Yolk raised the bow so that the bolt was aimed uncertainly at Hedges’ stomach. ‘Like this?’

‘How else exactly? Lance Corporal Hedges, how’s this for a laugh? I will count to three. If you haven’t handed that Northman back his fur by the time I get there I will order Trooper Yolk to shoot. You never know, you’re only five strides away, he might even hit you.’

‘Now, look—’

‘One.’

‘Look!’

‘Two.’

‘All right! All right.’ Hedges tossed the fur in the Northman’s face then stomped angrily away through the trees. ‘But you’ll fucking pay for this,

Tunny, I can tell you that!'

Tunny turned, grinning, and strolled after him. Hedges was opening his mouth for another prize retort when Tunny coshed him across the side of the head with his canteen, which represented a considerable weight when full. It happened so fast Hedges didn't even try to duck, just went down hard in the mud.

'You'll fucking pay for this, *Corporal* Tunny,' he hissed, and booted Hedges in the groin to underscore the point. Then he took Hedges' new canteen, and tucked his own badly dented one into his belt where it had been. 'Something to keep me in your thoughts.' He looked up at Hedges' lanky sidekick, fully occupied gawping. 'Anything to add, pikestaff?'

'I … I—'

'I? What do you think that adds? Shoot him, Yolk.'

'What?' squeaked Yolk.

'What?' squeaked the tall trooper.

'I'm joking, idiots! Bloody hell, does no one think at all but me? Drag your prick of a lance corporal back behind the lines, and if I see either one of you out here again I'll bloody shoot you myself.' The lanky one helped Hedges up, whimpering, bow-legged and bloody-haired, and the two of them shuffled off into the trees. Tunny waited until they'd disappeared from sight. Then he turned to the Northman and held out his hand. 'Fur, please.'

To be fair to the man, in spite of any troubles with the language, he fully understood. His face sagged, and he slapped the fur down into Tunny's hand. It wasn't that good a one, even, now he got a close look at it, rough-cured and sour-smelling. 'What else you got there?' Tunny came closer, one hand on the hilt of his sword, just in case, and started patting the man down.

'We're robbing him?' Yolk had his bow on the Northman now, which meant it was a good deal closer to Tunny than he'd have liked.

'That a problem? Didn't you tell me you were a convicted thief?'

'I told you I didn't do it.'

'Exactly what a thief would say! This isn't robbery, Yolk, it's war.' The Northman had some strips of dried meat, Tunny pocketed them. He had a flint and tinder, Tunny tossed them. No money, but that was far from surprising. Coinage hadn't fully caught on up here.

'He's got a blade!' squeaked Yolk, waving his bow about.

‘A skinning knife, idiot!’ Tunny took it and put it in his own belt. ‘We’ll stick some rabbit blood on it, say it came off a Named Man dead in battle, and you can bet some fool will pay for it back in Adua.’ He took the Northman’s bow and arrows too. Didn’t want him trying a shot at them out of spite. He looked a bit on the spiteful side, but then Tunny probably would’ve looked spiteful himself if he’d just been robbed. Twice. He wondered about taking the trapper’s coat, but it wasn’t much more than rags, and he thought it might have been a Union one in the first place anyway. Tunny had stolen a score of new Union coats out of the quartermaster’s stores back in Ostenhorm, and hadn’t been able to shift them all yet.

‘That’s all,’ he grunted, stepping back. ‘Hardly worth the trouble.’

‘What do we do, then?’ Yolk’s big flatbow was wobbling all over the place. ‘You want me to shoot him?’

‘You bloodthirsty little bastard! Why would you do that?’

‘Well … won’t he tell his friends across the stream we’re over here?’

‘We’ve had, what, four hundred men sitting around in a bog for over a day. Do you really think Hedges has been the only one wandering about? They know we’re here by now, Yolk, you can bet on that.’

‘So … we just let him go?’

‘You want to take him back to camp and keep him as a pet?’

‘No.’

‘You want to shoot him?’

‘No.’

‘Well, then?’

The three of them stood there for a moment in the fading light. Then Yolk lowered his bow, and waved with the other hand. ‘Piss off.’

Tunny jerked his head into the trees. ‘Off you piss.’

The Northman blinked for a moment. He scowled at Tunny, then at Yolk, then stalked off into the woods, muttering angrily.

‘Hearts and minds,’ murmured Yolk.

Tunny tucked the Northman’s knife inside his coat. ‘Exactly.’

Good Deeds

The buildings of Osrung crowded in on Craw, all looking like they'd bloody stories to tell, each corner turned opening up a new stretch of disaster. A good few were all burned out, charred rafters still smouldering, air sharp with the tang of destruction. Windows gaped empty, shutters bristled with broken shafts, axe-scarred doors hung from hinges. The stained cobbles were scattered with rubbish and twisting shadows and corpses too, cold flesh that once was men, dragged by bare heels to their places in the earth.

Grim-faced Carls frowned at their strange procession. A full sixty wounded Union soldiers shambling along with Caul Shivers at the back like a wolf trailing a flock and Craw up front with his sore knees and the girl.

He found he kept glancing sideways at her. Didn't get a lot of chances to look at women. Wonderful, he guessed, but that wasn't the same, though she probably would've kicked him in the fruits for saying so. Which was just the point. This girl was a girl, and a pretty one too. Though probably she'd been prettier that morning, just like Osrung had. War makes nothing more beautiful. Looked as if she'd had a clump of hair torn from her head, the rest matted with clot on one side. A big bruise at the corner of her mouth. One sleeve of her dirty dress ripped and brown with dry blood. She shed no tears, though, not her.

'You all right?' asked Craw.

She glanced over her shoulder at the shambling column, and its crutches, and stretchers, and pain-screwed faces. 'I could be worse.'

'Guess so.'

‘Are you all right?’

‘Eh?’

She pointed at his face and he touched the stitched cut on his cheek. He’d forgotten all about it until then. ‘What do you know, I could be worse myself.’

‘Just out of interest – if I wasn’t all right, what could you do about it?’ Craw opened his mouth, then realised he didn’t have much of an answer. ‘Don’t know. A kind word, maybe?’

The girl looked around at the ruined square they were crossing, the wounded men propped against the wall of a house on the north side, the wounded men following them. ‘Kind words wouldn’t seem to be worth much in the midst of this.’

Craw slowly nodded. ‘What else have we got, though?’

He stopped maybe a dozen paces from the north end of the bridge, Shivers walking up beside him. That narrow path of stone flags stretched off ahead, a pair of torches burning at the far end. No sign of men, but Craw was sure as sure the black buildings beyond the far bank were crammed full of the bastards, all with flatbows and tickly trigger-hands. Wasn’t that big a bridge, but it looked a hell of a march across right then. An awful lot of steps, and at every footfall he might get an arrow in his fruits. Still, waiting about wasn’t going to make that any less likely. More, in fact, since it was getting darker every moment.

So he hawked up some snot, made ready to spit it, realised the girl was watching him and swallowed it instead. Then he shrugged his shield off his shoulder and set it down by the wall, dragged his sword out from his belt and handed it to Shivers. ‘You wait here with the rest, I’ll go across and see if there’s someone around with an ear for reason.’

‘All right.’

‘And if I get shot … weep for me.’

Shivers gave a solemn nod. ‘A river.’

Craw held his hands up high and started walking. Didn’t seem that long ago he was doing more or less the same thing up the side of the Heroes. Walking into the wolf’s den, armed with nothing but a nervy smile and an overwhelming need to shit.

‘Doing the right thing,’ he muttered under his breath. Playing peacemaker. Threetrees would’ve been proud. Which was a great comfort, because when

he got shot in the neck he could use a dead man's pride to pull the arrow out, couldn't he? 'Too bloody old for this.' By the dead, he should be retired. Smiling at the water with his pipe and his day's work behind him. 'The right thing,' he whispered again. Would've been nice if, just one time, the right thing could've been the safe thing too. But Craw guessed life wasn't really set up that way.

'That's far enough!' came a voice in Northern.

Craw stopped, all kinds of lonely out there in the gloom, water chattering away underneath him. 'Couldn't agree more, friend! Just need to talk!'

'Last time we talked it didn't come out too well for anyone concerned.' Someone was walking up from the other end of the bridge, a torch in his hand, orange light on a craggy cheek, a ragged beard, a hard-set mouth with a pair of split lips.

Craw found he was grinning as the man stopped an arm's length away. He reckoned his chances at living through the night just took a leap for the better. 'Hardbread, 'less I'm mistook all over the place.' In spite of the fact they'd been struggling to kill each other not a week before, it felt more like greeting an old friend than an old enemy. 'What the hell are you doing over here?'

'Lot o' the Dogman's boys hereabouts. Stranger-Come-Knocking and his Crinna bastards showed up without an invite, and we been guiding 'em politely to the door. Some messed-up allies your Chief makes, don't he.'

Craw looked over towards some Union soldiers who'd gathered in the torchlight at the south end of the bridge. 'I could say the same o' yours.'

'Aye, well. Those are the times. What can I do for you, Craw?'

'I got some prisoners Black Dow wants handed back.'

'Hardbread looked profoundly doubtful. 'When did Dow start handing anything back?'

'He's starting now.'

'Guess it ain't never too late to change, eh?' Hardbread called something in Union, over his shoulder.

'Guess not,' muttered Craw, under his breath, though he was far from sure Dow had made that big a shift.

A man came warily up from the south side of the bridge. He wore a Union uniform, high up by the markings but young, and fine-looking too. He nodded to Craw and Craw nodded back, then he traded a few words with

Hardbread, then he looked over at the wounded starting to come across the bridge and his jaw dropped.

Craw heard quick footsteps at his back, saw movement as he turned. 'What the—' He made a tardy grab for his sword, realised it wasn't there, by which point someone had already flashed past. The girl, and straight into the young man's arms. He caught her, and they held each other tight, and they kissed, and Craw watched with his hand still fishing at the air where his hilt usually was and his eyebrows up high.

'That was unexpected,' he said.

Hardbread's were no lower. 'Maybe men and women always greet each other that way down in the Union.'

'Reckon I'll have to move down there myself.'

Craw leaned back against the pitted parapet of the bridge. Leaned back next to Hardbread and watched those two hold each other, eyes closed, swaying gently in the light of the torch like dancers to a slow music none could hear. He was whispering something in her ear. Comfort, or relief, or love. Words foreign to Craw, no doubt, and not just on account of the language. He watched the wounded shuffling across around the couple, a spark of hope lit in their worn-out faces. Going back to their own people. Hurt, maybe, but alive. Craw had to admit, the night might've been coming on cold but he'd a warmth inside. Not like that rush of winning a fight, maybe, not so strong nor so fierce as the thrill of victory.

But he reckoned it might last longer.

'Feels good.' As he watched the soldier and the girl make their way across the bridge to the south bank, his arm around her. 'Making a few folk happier, in the midst o' this. Feels damn good.'

'It does.'

'Makes you wonder why a man chooses to do what we do.'

Hardbread took in a heavy breath. 'Too coward to do aught else, maybe.'

'You might be right.' The woman and the officer faded into darkness, the last few wounded shambling after. Craw pushed himself away from the parapet and slapped the damp from his hands. 'Right, then. Back to it, eh?'

'Back to it.'

'Good to see you, Hardbread.'

'Likewise.' The old warrior turned away and followed the others back towards the south side of the town. 'Don't get killed, eh?' he tossed over his

shoulder.

'I'll try to avoid it.'

Shivers was waiting at the north end of the bridge, offering out Craw's sword. The sight of his eye gleaming in his lopsided smile was enough to chase any soft feelings away sharp as a rabbit from a hunter.

'You ever thought about a patch?' asked Craw, as he took his sword and slid it through his belt.

'Tried one for a bit.' Shivers waved a finger at the mass of scar around his eye. 'Itched like a bastard. I thought, why wear it just to make other fuckers more comfortable? If I can live with having this face, they can live with looking at it. That or they can get fucked.'

'You've a point.' They walked on through the gathering gloom in silence for a moment. 'Sorry to take the job.'

Shivers said nothing.

'Leading Dow's Carls. More'n likely you should've had it.'

Shivers shrugged. 'I ain't greedy. I've seen greedy, and it's a sure way back to the mud. I just want what's owed. No more and no less. A little *respect.'*

'Don't seem too much to ask. Anyway, I'll only be doing it while the battle's on, then I'm done. I daresay Dow'll want you for his Second then.'

'Maybe.' Another stretch of silence, then Shivers turned to look at him. 'You're a decent man, aren't you, Craw? Folk say so. Say you're a straight edge. How d'you stick at it?'

Craw didn't feel like he'd stuck at it too well at all. 'Just try to do the right thing, I reckon. That's all.'

'Why? I tried it. Couldn't make it root. Couldn't see the profit in it.'

'There's your problem. Anything good I done, and the dead know there ain't much, I done for its own sake. Got to do it because you want to.'

'It ain't no kind o' sacrifice if you want to do it, though, is it? How does doing what you want make you a fucking hero? That's just what I do.'

Craw could only shrug. 'I haven't got the answers. Wish I did.'

Shivers turned the ring on his little finger thoughtfully round and round, red stone glistening. 'Guess it's just about getting through each day.'

'Those are the times.'

'You think other times'll be any different?'

'We can hope.'

‘Craw!’ His own name echoed at him and Craw whipped around, frowning into the darkness, wondering who he’d upset recently. Pretty much everyone, was the answer. He’d made a shitpile of enemies the moment he said yes to Black Dow. His hand strayed to his sword again, which at least was in the sheath this time around. Then he smiled. ‘Flood! I seem to run into men I know all over the damn place.’

‘That’s what it is to be an old bastard.’ Flood stepped over with a grin of his own, and a limp of his own too.

‘Knew there had to be an upside to it. You know Caul Shivers, do you?’

‘By reputation.’

Shivers showed his teeth. ‘It’s a fucking beauty, ain’t it?’

‘How’s the day been over here with Reachey?’ asked Craw.

‘It’s been bloody,’ was Flood’s answer. ‘Had a few young lads calling me Chief. Too young. All but one back to the mud.’

‘Sorry to hear that.’

‘Me too. But it’s a war. Thought I might come back over to your dozen, if you’ll have me, and I thought I might bring this one with me.’ Flood jerked his thumb at someone else. A big lad, hanging back in the shadows, wrapped up in a stained green cloak. He was looking at the ground, dark hair across his forehead so Craw couldn’t see much more’n the gleam of one eye in the dark. He’d a good sword at his belt, though, gold on the hilt. Craw saw the gleam of that quick enough. ‘He’s a good hand. Earned his name today.’

‘Congratulations,’ said Craw.

The lad didn’t speak. Not full of bragging and vinegar like some might be who’d won a name that day. Like Craw had been the day he won his, for that matter. Craw liked to see it. He didn’t need any fiery tempers landing everyone in the shit. Like his had landed him in the shit, years ago.

‘What about it then?’ Flood asked. ‘You got room for us?’

‘Room? I can’t remember ever having more’n ten in the dozen, and there’s not but six now.’

‘Six? What happened to ’em all?’

Craw winced .‘About the same as happened to your lot. About what usually happens. Athroc got killed up at the Heroes day before yesterday. Agrick a day later. Brack died this morning.’

There was a bit of a silence. ‘Brack died?’

‘In his sleep,’ said Craw. ‘From a bad leg.’

‘Brack’s back to the mud.’ Flood shook his head. ‘That’s a tester. Didn’t think he’d ever die.’

‘Nor me. The Great Leveller’s lying in wait for all of us, no doubt, and he takes no excuses and makes no exceptions.’

‘None,’ whispered Shivers.

‘’Til then, we could certainly use the pair o’ you, if Reachey’ll let you go.’

Flood nodded. ‘He said he would.’

‘All right then. You ought to know Wonderful’s running the dozen for now, though.’

‘She is?’

‘Aye. Dow offered me charge of his Carls.’

‘You’re Black Dow’s Second?’

‘Just ’til the battle’s done.’

Flood puffed out his cheeks. ‘What happened to never sticking your neck out?’

‘Didn’t take my own advice. Still want in?’

‘Why not?’

‘Happy to have you back, then. And your lad too, if you say he’s up to it.’

‘Oh, he’s up to it, ain’t you boy?’

The boy didn’t say a thing.

‘What’s your name?’ asked Craw.

‘Beck.’

Flood thumped him on the arm. ‘*Red* Beck. Best get used to using the whole thing, eh?’

The lad looked a bit sick, Craw thought. Small wonder, given the state of the town. Must’ve been quite a scrap he’d been through. Quite an introduction to the bloody business. ‘Not much of a talker, eh? Just as well. We got more’n enough talk with Wonderful and Whirrun.’

‘Whirrun of Bligh?’ asked the lad.

‘That’s right. He’s one of the dozen. Or the half-dozen, leastways. Do you reckon I need to give him the big speech?’ Craw asked Flood. ‘You know, the one I gave you when you joined up, ’bout looking out for your crew and your Chief, and not getting killed, and doing the right thing, and all that?’

Flood looked at the lad, and shook his head. ‘You know what, I think he learned today the hard way.’

‘Aye,’ said Craw. ‘Reckon we all did. Welcome to the dozen, then, Red Beck.’

The lad just blinked.

One Day More

It was the same path she had ridden up the night before. The same winding route up the windswept hillside to the barn where her father had made his headquarters. The same view out over the darkened valley, filled with the pinprick lights of thousands of fires, lamps, torches, all glittering in the wet at the corners of her sore eyes. But everything felt different. Even though Hal was riding beside her, close enough to touch, jawing away to fill the silence, she felt alone.

'… good thing the Dogman turned up when he did, or the whole division might've come apart. As it is we lost the northern half of Osrung, but we managed to push the savages back into the woods. Colonel Brint was a rock. Couldn't have done it without him. He'll want to ask you … want to ask you about—'

'Later.' There was no way she could face that. 'I have to talk to my father.'

'Should you wash first? Change your clothes? At least catch your breath for a—'

'My clothes can wait,' she snapped at him. 'I've a message from Black Dow, do you understand?'

'Of course. Stupid of me. I'm sorry.' He kept flipping from fatherly stern to soppy soft, and she could not decide which was annoying her more. She felt as if he was angry, but lacked the courage to say so. At her for coming to the North when he had wanted her to stay behind. At himself for not being there to help her when the Northmen came. At both of them for not

knowing how to help her now. Probably he was angry that he was angry, instead of revelling in her safe return.

They reined in their horses and he insisted on helping her down. They stood in awkward silence, with an awkward distance between them, he with an awkward hand on her shoulder that offered less than no comfort. She badly wanted him to find some words that might help her see some sense in what had happened that day. But there was no sense in it, and any words would fall pathetically short.

'I love you,' he said lamely, in the end, and it seemed few words could have fallen as pathetically short as those did.

'I love you too.' But all she felt was a creeping dread. A sense that there was an awful weight at the back of her mind she was forcing herself not to look at, but that at any moment it might fall and crush her utterly. 'You should go back down.'

'No! Of course not. I should stay with—'

She put a firm hand on his chest. She was surprised how firm it was. 'I'm safe now.' She nodded towards the valley, its fires prickling at the night. 'They need you more than I do.'

She could almost feel the relief coming off him. To no longer be taunted by his inability to make everything better. 'Well, if you're sure—'

'I'm sure.'

She watched him mount up, and he gave her a quick, uncertain, worried smile, and rode away into the gathering darkness. Part of her wished he had fought harder to stay. Part of her was glad to see the back of him.

She walked to the barn, pulling Hal's coat tight around her, past a staring guard and into the low-raftered room. It was a much more intimate gathering than last night's. Generals Mitterick and Jalenhorm, Colonel Felnigg, and her father. For a moment she felt an exhausting sense of relief to see him. Then she noticed Bayaz, sitting slightly removed from the others, his servant occupying the shadows behind him with the faintest of smiles, and any relief died a quick death.

Mitterick was holding forth, as ever, and, as ever, Felnigg listening with the expression of a man forced to fish something from a latrine. 'The bridge is in our hands and my men are crossing the river even as we speak. I'll have fresh regiments on the north bank well before dawn, including plenty of cavalry and the terrain to make use of it. The standards of the Second and

Third are flying in the Northmen's trenches. And tomorrow I'll get Vallimir off his arse and into action if I have to kick him across that stream myself. I'll have those Northern bastards on the run by …'

His eyes drifted over to Finree, and he awkwardly cleared his throat and fell silent. One by one the other officers followed his gaze, and she saw in their faces what a state she must look. They could hardly have appeared more shocked if they had witnessed a corpse clamber from its grave. All except for Bayaz, whose stare was as calculating as ever.

'Finree.' Her father started up, gathered her in his arms and held her tight. Probably she should have dissolved into grateful tears, but he was the one who ended up dashing something from his eye on one sleeve. 'I thought maybe …' He winced as he touched her bloody hair, as though to finish the thought was more than he could bear. 'Thank the Fates you're alive.'

'Thank Black Dow. He's the one who sent me back.'

'Black Dow?'

'Yes. I met him. I spoke to him. He wants to talk. He wants to talk about peace.' There was a disbelieving silence. 'I persuaded him to let some wounded men go, as a gesture of good faith. Sixty. It was the best I could do.'

'You persuaded Black Dow to release prisoners?' Jalenhorm puffed out his cheeks. 'That's quite a thing. Burning them is more his style.'

'That's my girl,' said her father, and the pride in his voice made her feel sick.

Bayaz sat forward. 'Describe him.'

'Tallish. Strong-built. Fierce-looking. He was missing his left ear.'

'Who else was with him?'

'An older man called Craw, who led me back across the river. A big man with a scarred face and … a metal eye. And …' It seemed so strange now she was starting to wonder whether she had imagined the whole thing. 'A black-skinned woman.'

Bayaz' eyes narrowed, his mouth tightened, and Finree felt the hairs prickling on the back of her neck. 'A thin, black-skinned woman, wrapped in bandages?'

She swallowed. 'Yes.'

The First of the Magi sat slowly back, and he and his servant exchanged a long glance. 'They *are* here.'

‘I did say.’

‘Can nothing ever be straightforward?’ snapped Bayaz.

‘Rarely, sir,’ replied the servant, his different-coloured eyes shifting lazily from Finree, to her father, and back to his master.

‘Who are here?’ asked a baffled Mitterick.

Bayaz did not bother to answer. He was busy watching Finree’s father, who had crossed to his desk and was starting to write. ‘What are you about, Lord Marshal?’

‘It seems best that I should write to Black Dow and arrange a meeting so we can discuss the terms of an armistice—’

‘No,’ said Bayaz.

‘No?’ There was a pregnant silence. ‘But … it sounds as if he is willing to be reasonable. Should we not at least—’

‘Black Dow is not a reasonable man. His allies are …’ Bayaz’ lip curled and Finree drew Hal’s coat tight around her shoulders. ‘Even less so. Besides, you have done so well today, Lord Marshal. Such fine work from you, and General Mitterick, and Colonel Brock, and the Dogman. Ground taken and sacrifices made and so on. I feel your men deserve another crack at it tomorrow. Just one more day, I think. What’s one day?’

Finree found she was feeling awfully weak. Dizzy. Whatever force had been holding her up for the past few hours was ebbing fast.

‘Lord Bayaz …’ Her father looked trapped in no-man’s-land between pain and bafflement. ‘A day is just a day. We will strive, of course, with every sinew if that is the king’s pleasure, but there is a very good chance that we will not be able to secure a decisive victory in one day—’

‘That would be a question for tomorrow. Every war is only a prelude to talk, Lord Marshal, but it’s all about,’ and the Magus looked up at the ceiling, rubbing one thick thumb against one fingertip, ‘who you talk to. It would be best if we kept news of this among ourselves. Such things can be bad for morale. One more day, if you please.’

Finree’s father obediently bowed his head, but when he crumpled up his half-written letter in one fist his knuckles were white with force. ‘I serve at his Majesty’s pleasure.’

‘So do we all,’ said Jalenhorm. ‘And my men are ready to do their duty! I humbly entreat the right to lead an assault upon the Heroes, and redeem myself on the battlefield.’ As though anyone was redeemed on the

battlefield. They were only killed there, as far as Finree could see. Her legs seemed to weigh a ton a piece as she made for the door at the back of the room.

Mitterick was busy gushing his own military platitudes behind her. ‘My division is champing at the bloody bit, don’t worry on that score, Marshal Kroy! Don’t worry about that, Lord Bayaz!’

‘I am not.’

‘We have a bridgehead. Tomorrow we’ll drive the bastards, you’ll see. Just one day more …’

Finree shut the door on their posturing, her back against the wood. Maybe whatever herder had built this barn had lived in this room. Now her father was sleeping there, his bed against one unplastered wall, travelling chests neatly organised against the others like soldiers around a parade ground.

Everything was painful, suddenly. She pulled the sleeve of Hal’s coat back, grimacing at the long cut down her forearm, flesh angry pink along both sides. Probably it would need stitching, but she could not go back out there. Could not face their pitying expressions and their patriotic drivel. It felt as if her neck had ten strings of agony through it and however she moved her head it tugged at one or another. She touched her fingertips to her burning scalp. There was a mass of scab under her greasy hair. She could not stop her hand trembling as she took it away. She almost laughed it was shaking so badly, but it came out as an ugly snort. Would her hair grow back? She snorted again. What did it matter, compared to what she had seen? She found she could not stop snorting. Her breath came ragged, and shuddering, and in a moment her aching ribs were heaving with sobs, the quick breath whooping in her throat, her face crushed up and her mouth twisted, tugging at her split lip. She felt a fool, but her body would not let her stop. She slid down the door until her backside hit stone, and bit on her knuckle to smother her blubbering.

She felt absurd. Worse still, ungrateful. Treacherous. She should have been weeping with joy. She, after all, was the lucky one.

Bones

‘Where’s that scab-faced old cunt hiding?’

The man’s eyes flickered about uncertainly, caught off balance with his cup frozen half way to the water butt. ‘Tenways is up on the Heroes with Dow and the rest, but if you’re—’

‘Get to *fuck*!’ Calder shoved past him, striding on through Tenways’ puzzled Carls, away from Skarling’s Finger and towards the stones, picked out on their hilltop by the light of campfires behind.

‘We won’t be coming along up there,’ came Deep’s voice in his ear. ‘Can’t watch your arse if you’re minded on sticking it in the wolf’s mouth.’

‘No money’s worth going back to the mud for,’ said Shallow. ‘Nothing is, in my humble opinion.’

‘That’s an interesting point o’ philosophy you’ve stumbled upon,’ said Deep, ‘what’s worth dying for and what ain’t. Not one we’re likely to—’

‘Stay and talk shit, then.’ Calder kept walking, uphill, the cold air nipping at his lungs and a few too many nips from Shallow’s flask burning at his belly. The scabbard of his sword slapped against his calf, as if with every step it was gently reminding him it was there, and that it was far from the only blade about either.

‘What’re you going to do?’ asked Pale-as-Snow, breathing hard from keeping up.

Calder didn’t say anything. Partly because he was too angry to say anything worth hearing. Partly because he thought it made him look big. And partly because he hadn’t a clue what he was going to do, and if he started thinking about it there was every chance his courage would wilt, and

quick. He'd done enough nothing that day. He strode through the gap in the drystone wall that ringed the hill, a pair of Black Dow's Carls frowning as they watched him pass.

'Just keep calm!' Hansul shouted from further back. 'Your father always kept calm!'

'Shit on what my father did,' Calder snapped over his shoulder. He was enjoying not having to think and just letting the fury carry him. Sweep him up onto the hill's flat top and between two of the great stones. Fires burned inside the circle, flames tugged and snapped by the wind, sending up whirls of sparks into the black night. They lit up the inside faces of the Heroes in flickering orange, lit up the faces of the men clustered around them, catching the metal of their mail coats, the blades of their weapons. They clucked and grumbled as Calder strode heedless through them towards the centre of the circle, Pale-as-Snow and Hansul following in his wake.

'Calder. What are you about?' Curnden Craw, some staring lad Calder didn't know beside him. Jolly Yon Cumber and Wonderful were there too. Calder ignored the lot of them, brushed past Cairm Ironhead as he stood watching the flames with his thumbs in his belt.

Tenways was sitting on a log on the other side of the fire, and his flaking horror of a face broke out in a shining grin as he saw Calder coming. 'If it ain't pretty little Calder! Help your brother out today, did you, you—' His eyes went wide for a moment and he tensed, shifting his weight to get up.

Then Calder's fist crunched into his nose. He squawked as he went over backwards, boots kicking, and Calder was on top of him, flailing away with both fists, bellowing he didn't even know what. Punching mindlessly at Tenways' head, and his arms, and his flapping hands. He got another good one on that scabby nose before someone grabbed his elbow and dragged him off.

'Whoa, Calder, whoa!' Craw's voice, he thought, and he let himself be pulled back, thrashing about and shouting like you're supposed to. As if all he wanted to do was keep fighting when in fact he was all relief to let it be stopped, as he'd run right out of ideas and his left hand was really hurting.

Tenways stumbled up, blood bubbling out of his nostrils as he snarled curses, slapping away a helping hand from one of his men. He drew his sword with that soft metal whisper that somehow sounds so loud, steel gleaming in the firelight. There was a silence, the crowd of curious men

around them all heaving a nervous breath together. Ironhead raised his brows, and folded his arms, and took a pace out of the way.

'You little fucker!' growled Tenways, and he stepped over the log he'd been sitting on.

Craw dragged Calder behind him and suddenly his sword was out too. Not a moment later a pair of Tenways' Named Men were beside their Chief, a big bearded bastard and a lean one with a lazy eye, weapons ready, though they looked like men who never had to reach too far for them. Calder felt Pale-as-Snow slide up beside him, blade held low. White-Eye Hansul on his other side, red-faced and puffing from his trek up the hillside but his sword steady. More of Tenways' boys sprang up, and Jolly Yon Cumber was there with his axe and his shield and his slab of frown.

It was then Calder realised things had gone a bit further than he'd planned on. Not that he'd planned at all. He thought it was probably bad form to leave his sword sheathed, what with everyone else drawing and him having stirred the pot in the first place. So he drew himself, smirking in Tenways' bloody face.

He'd felt grand when he'd seen his father put on the chain and sit in Skarling's Chair, three hundred Named Men on their knee to the first King of the Northmen. He'd felt grand when he put his hand on his wife's belly and felt his child kick for the first time. But he wasn't sure he'd ever felt such fierce pride as he did in the moment Brodd Tenways' nose-bone broke under his knuckles.

No way he would've said no to more of that feeling.

'Ah, shit!' Drofd scrambled up, kicking embers over Beck's cloak and making him gasp and slap 'em off.

A right commotion had flared up, folk stomping, metal hissing, grunts and curses in the darkness. There was some sort of a fight, and Beck had no idea who'd started it or why or what side he was supposed to be on. But Craw's dozen were all piling in so he just went with the current, drew his father's sword and stood shoulder to shoulder with the rest, Wonderful on his left with her curved blade steady, Drofd on his right with a hatchet in his fist and his tongue stuck out between his teeth. Wasn't so difficult to do, what with everyone else doing it. Would've been damn near impossible not to, in fact.

Brodd Tenways and some of his boys were facing ’em across a windblown fire, and he had a lot of blood on his rashy face and maybe a broken nose too. Might be that Calder had been the one to do it, given how he’d come stomping past like that and now was standing next to Craw with sword in hand and smirk on face. Still, the whys didn’t seem too important right then. It was the what nexts that were looming large on everyone’s minds.

‘Put ’em away.’ Craw spoke slow but there was a kind of iron to his voice said he’d be backing down from nothing. It put iron in Beck’s bones, made him feel like he’d be backing down from nothing neither.

Tenways didn’t look like taking any backward steps himself, though. ‘You fucking put ’em away.’ And he spat blood into the fire.

Beck found his eyes had caught a lad’s on the other side, maybe a year or two older’n him. Yellow-haired lad with a scar on one cheek. They turned a little to face each other. As if on an instinct they were all pairing off with the partner who suited ’em best, like folk at a harvest dance. Except this dance seemed likely to shed a lot of blood.

‘Put ’em up,’ growled Craw, and his voice had more iron now. A warning, and the dozen all seemed to shift forwards around him at it, steel rattling.

Tenways showed his rotten teeth. ‘Fucking make me.’

‘I’ll give it a try.’

A man came strolling out of the dark, just his sharp jaw showing in the shadows of his hood, boots crunching heedless through the corner of the fire and sending a flurry of sparks up around his legs. Very tall, very lean and he looked like he was carved out of wood. He was chewing meat from a chicken bone in one greasy hand and in the other, held loose under the crosspiece, he had the biggest sword Beck had ever seen, shoulder-high maybe from point to pommel, its sheath scuffed as a beggar’s boot but the wire on its hilt glinting with the colours of the fire-pit.

He sucked the last shred of meat off his bone with a noisy slurp, and he poked at all the drawn steel with the pommel of his sword, long grip clattering against all those blades. ‘Tell me you lot weren’t working up to a fight without me. You know how much I love killing folk. I shouldn’t, but a man has to stick to what he’s good at. So how’s this for a recipe …’ He worked the bone around between finger and thumb, then flicked it at

Tenways so it bounced off his chain mail coat. ‘You go back to fucking sheep and I’ll fill the graves.’

Tenways licked his bloody top lip. ‘My fight ain’t with you, Whirrun.’

And it all came together. Beck had heard songs enough about Whirrun of Bligh, and even hummed a few himself as he fought his way through the logpile. Cracknut Whirrun. How he’d been given the Father of Swords. How he’d killed his five brothers. How he’d hunted the Shimbul Wolf in the endless winter of the utmost North, held a pass against the countless Shanka with only two boys and a woman for company, bested the sorcerer Daroum-ap-Yaught in a battle of wits and bound him to a rock for the eagles. How he’d done all the tasks worthy of a hero in the valleys, and so come south to seek his destiny on the battlefield. Songs to make the blood run hot, and cold too. Might be his was the hardest name in the whole North these days, and standing right there in front of Beck, close enough to lay a hand on. Though that probably weren’t a good idea.

‘Your fight ain’t with me?’ Whirrun glanced about like he was looking for who it might be with. ‘You sure? Fights are twisty little bastards, you draw steel it’s always hard to say where they’ll lead you. You drew on Calder, but when you drew on Calder you drew on Curnden Craw, and when you drew on Craw you drew on me, and Jolly Yon Cumber, and Wonderful there, and Flood – though he’s gone for a wee, I think, and also this lad here whose name I’ve forgotten.’ Sticking his thumb over his shoulder at Beck. ‘You should’ve seen it coming. No excuse for it, a proper War Chief fumbling about in the dark like you’ve nothing in your head but shit. So my fight ain’t with you either, Brodd Tenways, but I’ll still kill you if it’s called for, and add your name to my songs, and I’ll still laugh afterwards. So?’

‘So what?’

‘So shall I draw? And you’d best keep always before you that if the Father of Swords is drawn it must be blooded. That’s the way it’s been since before the Old Time, and the way it must be still, and must always be.’

They stood there for a moment longer, the lot of ’em, all still, all waiting, then Tenways’ brows drew in, and his lips curled back, and Beck felt the guts dropping out of him, because he could feel what was coming, and—

‘What the *fuck*?’ Another man stalked up into the firelight, eyes slits and teeth bared, head forwards and shoulders up like a fighting dog, no want in

it but killing. His scowl was crossed with old scars, one ear missing, and he wore a golden chain, a big jewel alive with orange sparks in the middle.

Beck swallowed. Black Dow, no question. Who beat Bethod's men six times in the long winter then burned Kyning to the ground with its people in the houses. Who fought the Bloody-Nine in the circle and nearly won, was left with his life and bound to serve. Fought alongside him then, and with Rudd Threetrees, and Tul Duru Thunderhead, and Harding Grim, as tough a crew as ever walked the North since the Age of Heroes and of which, aside from the Dogman, he was the last drawing breath. Then he betrayed the Bloody-Nine, and killed him who men said couldn't die, and took Skarling's Chair for himself. Black Dow, right before him now. Protector of the North, or stealer of it, depending on who you asked. He'd never dreamed of coming so close to the man.

Black Dow looked over at Craw, and he looked an awful long way from happy. Beck weren't sure how that pickaxe of a face ever could. 'Ain't you supposed to be keeping the peace, old man?'

'That's what I'm doing.' Craw's sword was still out but the point had dropped towards the ground now. Most of 'em had.

'Oh, aye. Here's a peaceful fucking picture.' Dow swept the lot of 'em with his scowl. 'No one draws steel up here without my say so. Now put 'em away, the lot o' you, you're embarrassing yourselves.'

'Boneless little fucker broke my nose!' snarled Tenways.

'Spoil your looks, did he?' snapped Dow. 'Want me to kiss it better? Let me frame this in terms you fucking halfheads can understand. Anyone still holding a blade by the time I get to five is stepping into the circle with me, and I'll do things like I used to 'fore old age softened me up. One.'

He didn't even need to get to two. Craw put up right away, and Tenways just after, and all the rest of that steel was good and hidden almost as swift as it had come to light, leaving the two lines of men frowning somewhat sheepishly across the fire at each other.

Wonderful whispered in Beck's ear. 'Might want to put that away.'

He realised he still had his steel out, shoved it back so fast he damn near cut his leg. Only Whirrun was left there, between the two sides, one hand on the hilt of his sword and the other on the scabbard, still ready to draw, and looking at it with the smallest curl of a smile to his mouth. 'You know, I'm just a little tempted.'

‘Another time,’ growled Dow, then threw one arm up. ‘Brave Prince Calder! I’m honoured all the way to fuck! I was about to send over an invitation but you’ve got in first. Come to tell me what happened at the Old Bridge today?’

Calder still had the fine cloak he’d been wearing when Beck first saw him up at Reachey’s camp, but he had mail underneath it now, and a scowl instead of a grin. ‘Scale got killed.’

‘I heard. Can’t you tell? I’m weeping a sea o’ tears. What happened at my bridge is what I’m asking.’

‘He fought as hard as he could. Hard as anyone could.’

‘Went down fighting. Good for Scale. What about you? Don’t look like you fought that hard.’

‘I was ready to.’ Calder slid a piece of paper out from his collar and held it up between two fingers. ‘Then I got this. An order from Mitterick, the Union general.’ Dow snatched it from his hand and pulled it open, frowning down at it. ‘There are Union men in the woods to our west, ready to come across. It’s lucky I found out, because if I’d gone to help Scale they’d have taken us in the flank and there’s a good chance the lot of you would be dead now, rather than arguing the toss over whether I’ve got no bones.’

‘I don’t think anyone’s arguing you’ve got bones, Calder,’ said Dow. ‘Just sat there behind the wall, did you?’

‘That, and sent to Tenways for help.’

Dow’s eyes slid sideways, glittering with the flames. ‘Well?’

Tenways rubbed blood from under his broken nose. ‘Well what?’

‘Did he send for help?’

‘Spoke to Tenways myself,’ piped up one of Calder’s men. An old boy with a scar down his face and the eye on that side milky white. ‘Told him Scale needed help, but Calder couldn’t go on account of the Southerners across the stream. Told him the whole thing.’

‘And?’

The half-blind old man shrugged. ‘Said he was busy.’

‘Busy?’ whispered Dow, face getting harder’n ever if that was possible. ‘So you just sat there and all, did you?’

‘I can’t just move soon as that bastard tells me to—’

‘You sat on the hill with Skarling’s Finger up your arse and fucking *watched?’* Dow roared. ‘Sat and watched the Southerners have *my bridge*?’

Stabbing at his chest with his thumb.

Tenways flinched back, one eye twitching. ‘There weren’t no Southerners over the river, that’s all lies! Lies like he always tells.’ He pointed across the fire with a shaking finger. ‘Always some fucking excuse, eh, Calder? Always some trick to keep your hands clean! Talk of peace, or talk of treachery, or some kind of bloody talk—’

‘Enough.’ Black Dow’s voice was quiet, but it cut Tenways off dead. ‘I don’t care a runny shit whether there are Union men out west or if there aren’t.’ He crumpled the paper up in his trembling fist and flung it at Calder. ‘I care whether you do as you’re told.’ He took a step towards Tenways, and leaned in close.

‘You won’t be sitting watching tomorrow, no, no, no.’ And he sneered over at Calder. ‘And nor will you, prince of nothing fucking much. Your sitting days are over, the pair o’ you. You two lovers’ll be down there on that wall together. That’s right. Side by side. Arm in arm from dawn to dusk. Making sure this shitcake you’ve cooked up between you don’t start stinking any worse. Doing what I brought you idiots here for – which, in case anyone’s started wondering, is *fighting the fucking Union*!’

‘What if they are across that stream?’ asked Calder. Dow turned towards him, brow furrowed like he couldn’t believe what he was hearing. ‘We’re stretched thin as it is, lost a lot of men today and we’re well outnumbered —’

‘It’s a fucking *war*!’ roared Dow, leaping over to him and making everyone shuffle back. ‘Fight the bastards!’ He tore at the air as if he was only just stopping himself from tearing Calder’s face apart with his hands. ‘Or you’re the planner, ain’t you? The great trickster? Trick ’em! You wanted your brother’s place? Then deal with it, you little arsehole, or I’ll find a man who will! And if anyone don’t do his bit tomorrow, anyone with a taste for *sitting out*…’ Black Dow closed his eyes and tipped his face back towards the sky. ‘By the dead, I’ll cut the bloody cross in you. And I’ll hang you. And I’ll burn you. And I’ll make such an end of you the very song of it will turn the bards white. Am I leaving room for doubts?’

‘No,’ said Calder, sullen as a whipped mule.

‘No,’ said Tenways, no happier.

Beck didn’t get the feeling the bad blood between ’em was anywhere near settled, though.

‘Then this is the fucking end o’ this!’ Dow turned, saw one of Tenways’ lads was in his way, grabbed hold of his shirt and flung him cringing onto the ground, then stalked back into the night the way he came.

‘With me,’ Craw hissed in Calder’s ear, then took him under the armpit and marched him off.

Tenways and his boys found their way back to their seats, grumbling, the yellow-haired lad giving Beck a hard look as he went. Time was Beck would’ve given him one back, maybe even a hard word or two to go with it. After the day he’d had he just looked away quick as he could, heart thumping in his ears.

‘Shame. I was enjoying that.’ Whirrun of Bligh pulled his hood back and scrubbed at his flattened hair with his fingernails. ‘What is your name, anyway?’

‘Beck.’ He thought he’d best leave it at just that. ‘Is every day with you lot like this?’

‘No, no, no, lad. Not every day.’ And Whirrun’s pointed face broke into a mad grin. ‘Only a precious few.’

*

Craw had always had rooted suspicions that one day Calder would land him in some right shit, and it seemed this was the day. He marched him down the hillside away from the Heroes, through the cutting wind, gripping him tight by the elbow. He’d spent a good twenty years trying to keep his enemies to a strict few. One afternoon as Dow’s Second and they were sprouting up like saplings in a wet spring, and Brodd Tenways was one he could have very well done without. That man was as ugly inside as out and had a bastard of a memory for slights.

‘What the hell was that?’ He dragged Calder to a halt a good way from fires or prying ears. ‘You could’ve got us all killed!’

‘Scale’s dead. That’s what that was. Because that rotting fucker did nothing, Scale’s dead.’

‘Aye.’ Craw felt himself softening. Stood there for a moment while the wind lashed the long grass against his calves. ‘I’m sorry for that. But adding more corpses ain’t going to help matters. ’Specially not mine.’ He stuck a

hand on his ribs, heart thumping away behind 'em. 'By the dead, I think I might die just o' the excitement.'

'I'm going to kill him.' Calder scowled up towards the fire, and he did seem to have a purpose in him Craw hadn't seen before. Something that made him put a warning hand on Calder's chest and gently steer him back.

'Keep it for tomorrow. Save it for the Union.'

'Why? My enemies are here. Tenways sat there while Scale died. Sat there and laughed.'

'And you're angry because he sat there, or because you did?' He put his other hand down on Calder's shoulder. 'I loved your father, in the end. I love you, like the son I never had. But why the hell is it the pair o' you always had to take on every fight you were offered? There'll always be more. I'll stand by you if I can, you know I will, but there's other things to think about than just—'

'Yes, yes.' Calder slapped Craw's hands away. 'Keeping your crew alive, and not sticking your neck out, and doing the right thing, even when it's the wrong thing—'

Craw grabbed hold of his shoulders again and gave him a shake. 'I have to keep the peace! I'm in charge o' Dow's Carls now, his Second, and I can't—'

'You're what? You're guarding him?' Calder's fingers dug into Craw's arms, his eyes suddenly wide and bright. Not anger. A kind of eagerness. 'You're at his back, with your sword drawn? That's your job?' And Craw suddenly saw the pit he'd dug for himself opening under his feet.

'No, Calder!' snarled Craw, trying to wriggle free. 'Shut your—'

Calder kept his grip, dragging him into an awkward hug, and Craw could smell the drink on his breath as he hissed in his ear. 'You could do it! Put an end to this!'

'No!'

'Kill him!'

'No!' Craw tore free and shoved him off, hand tight around the grip of his sword. 'No, you bloody fool!'

Calder looked like he couldn't understand what Craw was saying. 'How many men have you killed? That's what you do for a living. You're a killer.'

'I'm a Named Man.'

‘So you’re better at it than most. What’s killing one more? And this time for a purpose! You could stop all this. You don’t even like the bastard!’

‘Don’t matter what I like, Calder! He’s Chief.’

‘He’s Chief now, but stick an axe in his head he’s just mud. No one’ll care a shit then.’

‘I will.’ They watched each other for what felt like a long while, still in the darkness, not much more to see but the gleam of Calder’s eyes in his pale face. They slid down to Craw’s hand, still on the hilt of his sword.

‘Going to kill me?’

‘’Course I’m not.’ Craw straightened, letting his hand drop. ‘But I’ll have to tell Black Dow.’

More silence. Then, ‘Tell him what, exactly?’

‘That you asked me to kill him.’

And another. ‘I don’t think he’ll like that very much.’

‘Nor do I.’

‘I think cutting the bloody cross in me, then hanging me, then burning me, is the least of what he’ll do.’

‘Reckon so. Which is why you’d better run.’

‘Run where?’

‘Wherever you like. I’ll give you a start. I’ll tell him tomorrow. I have to tell him. That’s what Threetrees would’ve done.’ Though Calder hadn’t asked for a reason, and that sounded a particularly lame one right then.

‘Threetrees got killed, you know. For nothing, out in the middle of nowhere.’

‘Don’t matter.’

‘Ever think you should be looking for another man to imitate?’

‘I gave my word.’

‘Killer’s honour, eh? Swear it, did you, on Skarling’s cock, or whatever?’

‘Didn’t have to. I gave my word.’

‘To Black Dow? He tried to have me killed a few nights back, and I’m supposed to sit on my hands waiting for him to do it again? The man’s more treacherous than winter!’

‘Don’t matter. I said yes.’ And by the dead how he wished he hadn’t now.

Calder nodded, little smile at the corner of his mouth. ‘Oh, aye. Gave your word. And good old Craw’s a straight edge, right? No matter who gets cut.’

‘I have to tell him.’

‘But tomorrow.’ Calder backed away, still with that smirk on his face. ‘You’ll give me a start.’ One foot after another, down the hillside. ‘You won’t tell him. I know you, Craw. Raised me from a babe, didn’t you? You’ve got more bones than that. You’re not Black Dow’s dog. Not you.’

‘It ain’t a question of bones, nor dogs neither. I gave my word, and I’ll tell him tomorrow.’

‘No, you won’t.’

‘Yes, I will.’

‘No.’ And Calder’s smirk was gone into the darkness. ‘You won’t.’

Craw stood there for a moment, in the wind, frowning at nothing. Then he gritted his teeth, and pushed his fingers into his hair, bent over and gave a strangled roar of frustration. He hadn’t felt this hollow since Wast Never sold him out and tried to kill him after eight years a friend. Would’ve done it too if it hadn’t been for Whirrun. Wasn’t clear who’d get him out of this particular scrape. Wasn’t clear how anyone could. This time it was him doing the betraying. He’d be doing it to someone whatever he did.

Always do the right thing sounds an easy rule to stick to. But when’s the right thing the wrong thing? That’s the question.

The King's Last Hero

Your August Majesty,

Darkness has finally covered the battlefield. Great gains were made today. Great gains at great cost. I deeply regret to inform you that Lord Governor Meed was killed, fighting with the highest personal courage for your Majesty's cause alongside many of his staff.

There was bitter combat from dawn to dusk in the town of Osrung. The fence was carried in the morning and the Northmen driven across the river, but they launched a savage counterattack and retook the northern half of the town. Now the water separates the two sides once again.

On the western wing, General Mitterick had better fortune. Twice the Northmen resisted his assaults on the Old Bridge, but on the third attempt they were finally broken and fled to a low wall some distance away over open fields. Mitterick is moving his cavalry across the river, ready for an attack at first light tomorrow. From my tent I can see the standards of your Majesty's Second and Third Regiments, defiantly displayed on ground held by the Northmen only a few hours ago.

General Jalenhorm, meanwhile, has reorganised his division, augmented by reserves from the levy regiments, and is prepared for an attack upon the Heroes in overwhelming force. I mean to stay close to him tomorrow, witness his success at first hand, and inform your Majesty of Black Dow's defeat as soon as the stones are recaptured.

I remain your Majesty's most faithful and unworthy servant,

Bremer dan Gorst, Royal Observer of the Northern War

Gorst held the letter out to Rurgen, clenching his teeth as pain flashed through his shoulder. Everything was hurting. His ribs were even worse than yesterday. His armpit was one great itching graze where the edge of his breastplate had been ground into it. For some reason there was a cut between his shoulder blades just where it was hardest to reach. *Though no doubt I deserve far worse, and probably will get it before we're done with this worthless valley.*

'Can Younger take this?' he grunted.

Younger!' called Rurgen.

'What?' from outside.

'Letter!'

The younger man ducked his head through the tent flap, stretching for it. He winced, had to come a step closer, and Gorst saw that the right side of his face was covered by a large bandage, soaked through with a long brown mark of dried blood.

Gorst stared at him. 'What happened?'

'Nothing.'

'Huh,' grunted Rurgen. 'Tell him.'

Younger frowned at his colleague. 'It doesn't matter.'

'Felnigg happened,' said Rurgen. 'Since you ask.'

Gorst was out of his seat, pains forgotten. 'Colonel Felnigg? Kroy's chief of staff?'

'I got in his way. That's all. That's the end of it.'

'Whipped him,' said Rurgen.

'Whipped … you?' whispered Gorst. He stood staring for a moment. Then he snatched up his long steel, cleaned, sharpened and sheathed just beside him on the table.

Younger blocked his way, hands up. 'Don't do anything stupid.' Gorst brushed him aside and was out through the tent flap, into the chilly night, striding across the trampled grass. 'Don't do anything stupid!'

Gorst kept walking.

Felnigg's tent was pitched on the hillside not far from the decaying barn Marshal Kroy had taken for his headquarters. Lamplight leaked from the

flap and into the night, illuminating a slit of muddy grass, a tuft of dishevelled sedge and the face of a guard, epically bored.

'Can I help you, sir?'

Help me, you bastard? Rather than giving him the opportunity to consider his position, the long walk up from the valley had only stoked Gorst's fury. He grabbed the guard's breastplate by one armhole and flung him tumbling down the hillside, ripping the tent flap wide. 'Felnigg—!'

He came up short. The tent was crammed with officers. Senior members of Kroy's staff, some of them clutching cards, others drinks, most with uniforms unbuttoned to some degree, clustered around an inlaid table that looked as if it had been salvaged from a palace. One was smoking a chagga pipe. Another was sloshing wine from a green bottle. A third hunched over a heavy book, making interminable entries by candlelight in an utterly unreadable script.

'—that bloody captain wanted to charge fifteen for each cabin!' Kroy's chief quartermaster was braying as he clumsily sorted his hand. 'Fifteen! I told him to be damned.'

'What happened?'

'We settled on twelve, the bloody sea-leech …' He trailed off as, one by one, the officers turned to look at Gorst, the bookkeeper peering over thick spectacles that made his eyes appear grotesquely magnified.

Gorst was not good with crowds. Even worse than with individuals, which was saying something. *But witnesses will only add to Felnigg's humiliation. I will make him beg. I will make all of you bastards beg.* Yet Gorst had stopped dead, his cheeks prickling with heat.

Felnigg sprang up, looking slightly drunk. They all looked drunk. Gorst was not good with drunk. Even worse than with sober, which was saying something. 'Colonel Gorst!' He lurched forwards, beaming. Gorst raised his open hand to slap the man across the face, but there was a strange delay in which Felnigg managed to grasp it with his own and give it a hearty shake. 'I'm delighted to see you! Delighted!'

'I … What?'

'I was at the bridge today! Saw the whole thing!' Still pumping away at Gorst's hand like a demented washerwoman at a mangle. 'Crashing through the crops after them, cutting them down!' And he slashed at the air with his glass, slopping wine about. 'Like something out of a storybook!'

‘Colonel Felnigg!’ The guard from outside, shoving through the flap with mud smeared all down his side. ‘This man—’

‘I know! Colonel Bremer dan Gorst! Never saw such personal courage! Such skill at arms! The man’s worth a regiment to his Majesty’s cause! Worth a division, I swear! How many of the bastards did you get, do you think? Must’ve been two dozen! Three dozen, if it was a single one!’

The guard scowled but, seeing that things were not running his way, was forced to retreat into the night. ‘No more than fifteen,’ Gorst found he had said. *And only a couple on our side! A heroic ratio if ever there was one!* ‘But thank you.’ He tried unsuccessfully to lower his voice to somewhere around a tenor. ‘Thank you.’

‘It’s us who should be thanking you! That bloody idiot Mitterick certainly should be. His fiasco of an attack would have sunk in the river without you. No more than fifteen, did you hear that?’ And he slapped one of his fellows on the arm and made him spill his wine. ‘I’ve already written to my friend Halleck on the Closed Council, told him what a bloody hero you are! Didn’t think there was room for ’em in the modern age, but here you are, large as life.’ He clapped Gorst jauntily on the shoulder. ‘Larger! I’ve been telling everyone I could find all about it!’

‘I’ll say he has,’ grunted one of the officers, peering down at his cards.

‘That is … most kind.’ *Most kind? Kill him! Hack his head off like you hacked the head from that Northman today. Throttle him. Murder him. Punch all his teeth out, at least. Hurt him. Hurt him now!*’ Most … kind.’

‘I’d be bloody honoured if you’d consent to have a drink with me. We all would!’ Felnigg spun about and snatched up the bottle. ‘What brings you up here onto the fell, anyway?’

Gorst took a heavy breath. *Now. Now is the time for courage. Now do it.* But he found each word was an immense effort, excruciatingly aware of how foolish his voice sounded. How singularly lacking in threat or authority, the nerve leaking out of him with every slobbering movement of his lips. ‘I am here … because I heard that earlier today … you whipped …’ *My friend. One of my only friends. You whipped my friend, now prepare for your last moments.* ‘My servant.’

Felnigg spun about, his jaw falling open. ‘That was your servant? By the … you must accept my apologies!’

‘You whipped someone?’ asked one of the officers.

‘And not even at cards?’ muttered another, to scattered chuckles.

Felnigg blathered on. ‘So very sorry. No excuse for it. I was in a terrible rush with an order from the lord marshal. No excuse, of course.’ He grabbed Gorst by the arm, leaning close enough to blast him with a strong odour of spirits. ‘You must understand, I would never have … never, had I known he was *your* servant … of course I would never have done any such thing!’

But you did, you chinless satchel of shit, and now you will pay. There must be a reckoning, and it will be now. Must be now. Definitely, positively, absolutely bloody now. ‘I must ask—’

‘Please say you’ll drink with me!’ And Felnigg thrust the overfull glass into Gorst’s hand, wine slopping onto his fingers. ‘A cheer for Colonel Gorst! The last hero in his Majesty’s army!’ The other officers hurried to raise their own glasses, all grinning, one thumping at the table with his free hand and making the silverware jingle.

Gorst found he was sipping at the glass. And he was smiling. Worse yet, he was not even having to force himself. He was enjoying their adulation.

I slaughtered men today who had done me not the slightest grain of harm. No more than fifteen of them. And here I stand with a man who whipped one of my only friends. What horrors should I visit upon him? Why, to smile, and slurp up his cheap wine, and the congratulations of pandering strangers too, what else? What will I tell Younger? That he need not worry about his pain and humiliation because his tormentor warmly approved of my murderous rampage? The king’s last hero? I want to be fucking sick. He became acutely aware that he was still clutching his sheathed long steel in one white knuckled fist. He attempted, unsuccessfully, to hide it behind his leg. I *want to vomit up my own liver.*

‘It’s certainly a hell of a story the way Felnigg tells it,’ one of the officers was droning while he rearranged his cards. ‘I daresay it’s the second bravest thing I’ve heard about today.’

‘Risking his Majesty’s rations hardly counts,’ someone frothed, to more drunken laughter.

‘I was speaking of the lord marshal’s daughter, in fact. I do prefer a heroine to a hero, they look much better in the paintings.’

Gorst frowned. ‘Finree dan Kroy? I thought she was at her father’s headquarters?’

‘You didn’t hear?’ asked Felnigg, giving him another dose of foul breath. ‘The damndest thing! She was with Meed at the inn when the Northmen butchered him and his whole staff. Right there, in the room! She was taken prisoner, but she talked her way free, and negotiated the release of sixty wounded men besides! What do you make of that! More wine?’

Gorst did not know what to make of it, except that he felt suddenly hot and dizzy. He ignored the proffered bottle, turned without another word and pushed through the tent flap into the chill night air. The guard he had thrown was outside, making a futile effort to brush himself clean. He gave an accusing look and Gorst glanced guiltily away, unable to summon the courage even to apologise—

And there she was. Standing by a low stone wall before Marshal Kroy’s headquarters and frowning down into the valley, a military coat wrapped tight around her, one pale hand holding it closed at her neck.

Gorst went to her. He had no choice. It was as if he was pulled by a rope. *A rope around my cock. Dragged by my infantile, self-destructive passions from one cringingly embarrassing episode to another.*

She looked up at him, and the sight of her red-rimmed eyes froze the breath in his throat. ‘Bremer dan Gorst.’ Her voice was flat. ‘What brings you up here?’

Oh, I came to murder your father’s chief of staff but he offered me drunken praise so instead I drank a toast with him to my heroism. There is a joke there somewhere …

He found he was staring at the side of her darkened face. Staring and staring. A lantern beyond her picked out her profile in gold, made the downy hairs on her top lip glow. He was terrified that she would glance across, and catch him looking at her mouth. *No innocent reason, is there, to stare at a woman’s mouth like this? A married woman? A beautiful, beautiful, married woman?* He wanted her to look. Wanted her to catch him looking. But of course she did not. *What possible reason would a woman have to look at me? I love you. I love you so much it hurts me. More than all the blows I took today. More even than all the blows I gave. I love you so much I want to shit. Say it. Well, not the part about shit, but the other part. What is there to lose? Say it and be damned!*

‘I heard that—’ he almost whispered.

‘Yes,’ she said.

An exquisitely uncomfortable pause. ‘Are you—’

‘Yes. Go on, you can tell me. Tell me I shouldn’t have been down there in the first place. Go on.’

Another pause, more uncomfortable yet. For him there was a chasm between mind and mouth he could not see how to bridge. Did not dare to bridge. She did it so easily it quite took his breath away. ‘You brought men back,’ he managed to murmur in the end. ‘You saved lives. You should be proud of—’

‘Oh, yes, I’m a real hero. Everyone’s terribly proud. Do you know Aliz dan Brint?’

‘No.’

‘Neither did I, really. Thought she was a fool, if I’m honest. She was with me. Down there.’ She jerked her head towards the dark valley. ‘She’s still down there. What’s happening to her now, do you think, while we stand here, talking?’

‘Nothing good,’ said Gorst, before he had considered it.

She frowned sideways at him. ‘Well. At least you say what you really think.’ And she turned her back and walked away up the slope towards her father’s headquarters, leaving him standing there as she always did, mouth half-open to say words he never could.

Oh yes, I always say what I really think. Would you like to suck my cock, by the way? Please? Or a tongue in the mouth? A hug would be something. She disappeared inside the low barn, and the door was closed, and the light shut in. *Hold hands? No? Anyone?*

The rain had started to come down again.

Anyone?

My Land

Calder took his time strolling up out of the night, towards the fires behind Clail's Wall, spitting and hissing in the drizzle. He'd been in danger for a long time, and never deeper than now, but the strange thing was he still had his smirk.

His father was dead. His brother was dead. He'd even managed to turn his old friend Craw against him. His scheming had got him nowhere. All his careful seeds had yielded not the slightest bitter little fruit. With the help of an impatient mood and a bit too much of Shallow's cheap booze he'd made a big, big mistake tonight, and there was a good chance it was going to kill him. Soon. Horribly.

And he felt strong. Free. No more the younger son, the younger brother. No more the cowardly one, the treacherous one, the lying one. He was even enjoying the throbbing pain in his left hand where he'd skinned his knuckles on Tenways' mail. For the first time in his life he felt … brave.

'What happened up there?' Deep's voice came out of the darkness behind him without warning, but Calder was hardly surprised.

He gave a sigh. 'I made a mistake.'

'Whatever you do, don't make another, then,' came Shallow's whine from the other side.

Deep's voice again. 'You ain't thinking of fighting tomorrow, are you?'

'I am, in fact.'

A pair of sharp in-breaths. 'Fighting?' said Deep.

'You?' said Shallow.

‘Get moving now, we could be ten miles away before sun up. No reason to—’

‘No,’ said Calder. There was nothing to think about. He couldn’t run. The Calder of ten years ago, who’d ordered Forley the Weakest killed without a second thought, would already have been galloping off on the fastest horse he could steal. But now he had Seff, and an unborn child. If Calder stayed to pay for his own stupidity, Dow would probably stop at ripping him apart in front of a laughing crowd but spare Seff so Reachey would be left owing him. If Calder ran, Dow would see her hanged, and he couldn’t let that happen. It wasn’t in him.

‘Can’t recommend this,’ said Deep. ‘Battles. Never a good idea.’

Shallow clicked his tongue. ‘You want to kill a man, by the dead, you do it while he’s facing the other way.’

‘I heartily concur,’ said Deep. ‘I thought you did too.’

‘I did.’ Calder shrugged. ‘Things change.’

Whatever else he might be, he was Bethod’s last son. His father had been a great man, and he wasn’t about to put a cowardly joke on the end of his memory. Scale might have been an idiot but at least he’d had the dignity to die in battle. Better to follow his example than be hunted down in some desolate corner of the North, begging for his worthless hide.

But more than that, Calder couldn’t run because … fuck them. Fuck Tenways, and Golden, and Ironhead. Fuck Black Dow. Fuck Curnden Craw, too. He was sick of being laughed at. Sick of being called a coward. Sick of being one.

‘We don’t do battles,’ said Shallow.

‘Can’t watch over you if you’re fixed on fighting,’ said Deep.

‘Wasn’t expecting you to.’ And Calder left them in the darkness without a backward glance and strolled on down the track to Clail’s Wall, past men darning shirts, and cleaning weapons, and discussing their chances on the morrow. Not too good, the general opinion. He put one foot up on a crumbled patch of drystone and grinned over at the scarecrow, hanging sadly limp. ‘Cheer up,’ he told it. ‘I’m going nowhere. These are my men. This is my land.’

‘If it ain’t Bare-Knuckle Calder, the punching prince!’ Pale-as-Snow came swaggering from the night. ‘Our noble leader returns! Thought maybe we’d lost you.’ He didn’t sound too upset at the possibility.

‘I was giving some thought to running for the hills, in fact.’ Calder worked his toes inside his boot, enjoying the feel of it. He was enjoying little things a lot, tonight. Maybe that’s what happened when you saw your death coming at you fast. ‘But the hills are probably turning cold this time of year.’

‘The weather’s on our side, then.’

‘We’ll see. Thanks for drawing your sword for me. I always had you down as a man to back the favourite.’

‘So did I. But for a moment up there you reminded me of your father.’ Pale-as-Snow planted his own boot on the wall beside Calder’s. ‘I remembered how it felt to follow a man I admire.’

Calder snorted. ‘I wouldn’t get used to that feeling.’

‘Don’t worry, it’s gone already.’

‘Then I’ll spend every moment I’ve got left struggling to bring it back for you.’ Calder hopped up onto the wall, waving his arms for balance as a loose stone rocked under his feet, then stood, peering off across the black fields towards the Old Bridge. The torches of the Union pickets formed a dotted line, others moving about as soldiers poured across the river. Making ready to come flooding across the fields tomorrow morning, and over their tumbledown little wall, and murder the lot of them, and leave Bethod’s memory a joke regardless.

Calder squinted, shading his eyes from the light of his own fires. It looked as if they’d stuck two tall flags right up at the front. He could see them shifting in the wind, gold thread faintly glinting. It seemed strange that they were so easy to see, until he realised they were lit up on purpose. Some sort of display. Some show of strength, maybe.

‘By the dead,’ he muttered, and snorted with laughter. His father used to tell him it’s easy to see the enemy one of two ways. As some implacable, terrifying, unstoppable force that can only be feared and never understood. Or some block of wood that doesn’t think, doesn’t move, a dumb target to shoot your plans at. But the enemy is neither one. Imagine he’s you, that he’s no more and no less of a fool, or a coward, or a hero than you are. If you can imagine that, you won’t go too far wrong. The enemy is just a set of men. That’s the realisation that makes war easy. And the one that makes it hard.

The chances were high that General Mitterick and the rest were just as big a set of idiots as Calder was himself. Which meant they were big ones. ‘Have you seen those bloody flags?’ he called down.

Pale-as-Snow shrugged. ‘It’s the Union.’

‘Where’s White-Eye?’

‘Touring the fires, trying to keep mens’ spirits up.’

‘Not buoyed by having me in charge, then?’

Pale-as-Snow shrugged again. ‘They don’t all know you like I do. Probably Hansul’s busy singing the song of how you punched Brodd Tenways in the face. That’ll do their love for you no harm.’

Maybe not, but punching men on his own side wasn’t going to be enough. Calder’s men were beaten and demoralised. They’d lost a leader they loved and gained one nobody did. If he did any more nothing, the chances were high they’d fall apart in battle tomorrow morning, if they were even there when the sun rose.

Scale had said it. This is the North. Sometimes you have to fight.

He pressed his tongue into his teeth, the glimmers of an idea starting to take shape from the darkness. ‘Mitterick, is it, across the way?’

‘The Union Chief? Aye, Mitterick, I think.’

‘Sharp, Dow told me, but reckless.’

‘He was reckless enough today.’

‘Worked for him, in the end. Men tend to stick to what works. He loves horses, I heard.’

‘What? Loves ’em?’ Pale-as-Snow mimed a grabbing action and gave a couple of thrusts of his hips.

‘Maybe that too. But I think fighting on them was more the point.’

‘That’s good ground for horses.’ Pale-as-Snow nodded at the sweep of dark crops to the south. ‘Nice and flat. Maybe he thinks he’ll ride all over us tomorrow.’

‘Maybe he will.’ Calder pursed his lips, thinking about it. Thinking about the order crumpled in his shirt pocket. *My men and I are giving our all.* ‘Reckless. Arrogant. Vain.’ Roughly what men said about Calder, as it went. Which maybe gave him a little insight into his opponent. His eyes shifted back to those idiot flags, thrust out front, lit up like a dance on midsummer eve. His mouth found that familiar smirk, and stayed there. ‘I want you to

get your best men together. No more than a few score. Enough to keep together and work quickly at night.'

'What for?'

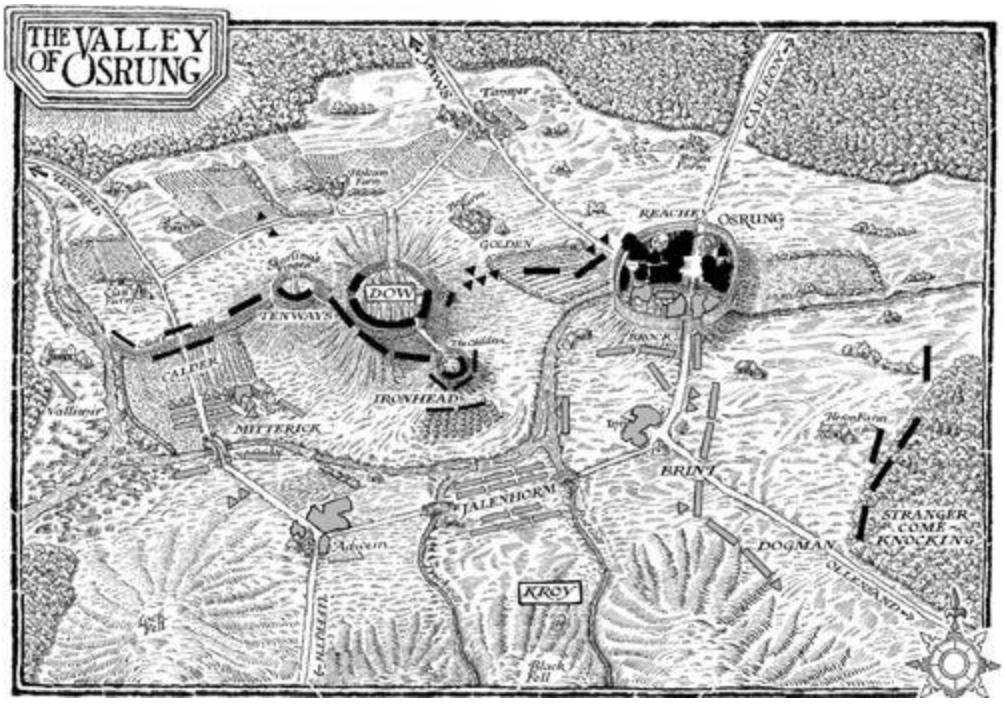
'We're not going to beat the Union moping back here.' He kicked the bit of loose stone from the top of the wall. 'And I don't think some farmer's boundary mark is going to keep them out either, do you?'

Pale-as-Snow showed his teeth. 'Now you're reminding me of your father again. What about the rest of the lads?'

Calder hopped down from the wall. 'Get White-Eye to round them up. They've got some digging to do.'

‘I’m not sure how much violence and butchery the readers will stand’

Robert E. Howard



The Standard Issue

The light came and went as the clouds tore across the sky, showing a glimpse of the big full moon then hiding it away, like a clever whore might show a glimpse of tit once in a while, just to keep the punters eager. By the dead, Calder wished he was with a clever whore now, rather than crouching in the middle of a damp barley-field, peering through the thrashing stalks in the vain hope of seeing a whole pile of night-dark nothing. It was a sad fact, or perhaps a happy one, that he was a man better suited to brothels than battlefields.

Pale-as-Snow was rather the reverse. The only part of him that had moved in an hour or more was his jaw, slowly shifting as he ground a lump of chagga down to mush. His flinty calm only made Calder more jumpy. Everything did. The scraping of shovels dug at his nerves behind them, sounding just a few strides distant one moment then swallowed up by the wind the next. The same wind that was whipping Calder's hair in his face, blasting his eyes with grit and cutting through his clothes to the bone.

'Shit on this wind,' he muttered.

'Wind's a good thing,' grunted Pale-as-Snow. 'Masks the sound. And if you're chill, brought up to the North, think how they feel over there, used to sunnier climes. All in our favour.' Good points, maybe, and Calder was annoyed he hadn't thought of them, but they didn't make him feel any warmer. He clutched his cloak tight at his chest, other hand wedged into his armpit, and pressed one eye shut.

'I expected war to be terrifying but I never thought it'd be so bloody boring.'

‘Patience.’ Pale-as-Snow turned his head, softly spat and licked the juice from his bottom lip. ‘Patience is as fearsome a weapon as rage. More so, in fact, ’cause fewer men have it.’

‘Chief.’ Calder spun about, fumbling for his sword hilt. A man had slithered from the barley beside them, mud smeared on his face, eyes standing out strangely white in the midst of it. One of theirs. Calder wondered if he should’ve smeared some mud on his face too. It made a man look like he knew his business. He waited for Pale-as-Snow to answer for a while. Then he realised he was the Chief.

‘Oh, right.’ Letting go of his sword and pretending he hadn’t been surprised at all. ‘What?’

‘We’re in the trenches,’ whispered the newcomer. ‘Sent a few Union boys back to the mud.’

‘They seem ready?’ asked Pale-as-Snow, who hadn’t so much as looked round.

‘Shit, no.’ The man’s grin was a pale curve in his blacked-out face. ‘Most of ’em were sleeping.’

‘Best time to kill a man.’ Though Calder had to wonder whether the dead would agree. The old warrior held out one hand. ‘Shall we?’

‘We shall.’ Calder winced as he set off crawling through the barley. It was far sharper, rougher, more painful stuff to sneak through than you could ever have expected. It didn’t take long for his hands to chafe raw, and it hardly helped that he knew he was heading towards the enemy. He was a man better suited to the opposite direction. ‘Bloody barley.’ When he took his father’s chain back he’d make a law against growing the bastard stuff. Only soft crops allowed, on pain of— He ripped two more bristly wedges out of his way and froze.

The standards were right ahead, no more than twenty strides off, flapping hard on their staves. Each was embroidered with a golden sun, glittering in the light of a dozen lanterns. Beyond them the stretch of bald, soggy ground Scale had died defending sloped down towards the river, crawling with Union horses. Hundreds of tons of big, glossy, dangerous-looking horseflesh and, as far as he could tell by the patchy torchlight, they were still coming across, hooves clattering on the flags of the bridge, panicked whinnies echoing out as they jostled each other in the darkness. There was no shortage of men either, shouting as they struggled to get their mounts

into position, bellowed orders fading on the wind. All making good and ready to trample Calder and his boys into the mud in a few short hours. Not a particularly comforting thought, it had to be said. Calder didn't mind the odd trampling but he much preferred being in the saddle to being under the hooves.

A pair of guards flanked the standards, one with his arms wrapped around him and a halberd hugged tight in the crook of his elbow, the other stamping his feet, sword sheathed and using his shield as a windbreak.

'Do we go?' whispered Pale-as-Snow.

Calder looked at those guards, and he thought about mercy. Neither one seemed the slightest bit ready for what was coming. They looked even more unhappy about being here than he was, which was quite the achievement. He wondered whether they had wives waiting for them too. Wives with children in their soft bellies, maybe, curled up asleep under the furs with a warm space beside them. He sighed. Damn shame they weren't all with their wives, but mercy wasn't going to drive the Union out of the North, or Black Dow out of his father's chair either.

'We go,' he said.

Pale-as-Snow held up a hand and made a couple of gestures. Then he did the same on the other side and settled back onto his haunches. Calder wasn't sure who he was even waving at, let alone what the meaning was, but it worked like magic.

The guard with the shield suddenly went over backwards. The other turned his head to look then did the same. Calder realised they'd both had their throats cut. Two black shapes lowered them gently to the ground. A third had caught the halberd as it dropped and now he turned, hugging it in the crook of his own elbow, giving them a gap-toothed grin as he imitated the Union guard.

More Northmen had broken from the crops and were scurrying forwards, bent double, weapons gleaming faintly as the moon slipped from the clouds again. Not twenty strides away from them three Union soldiers were struggling with a wind-torn tent. Calder chewed at his lip, hardly able to believe they weren't seen as they crept across the open ground and into the lamplight, one of them taking a hold of the right-hand flag, starting to twist it free of the earth.

‘You!’ A Union soldier, a flatbow part-raised, a look of mild puzzlement on his face. There was a moment of awkward silence, everyone holding their breath.

‘Ah,’ said Calder.

‘Shit,’ said Pale-as-Snow.

The soldier frowned. ‘Who are—’ Then he had an arrow in his chest. Calder didn’t hear the bowstring but he could see the black line of the shaft. The soldier shot his flatbow into the ground, gave a high shriek and fell to his knees. Not far away some horses startled, one dragging its surprised handler over onto his face and bumping across the mud. The three soldiers with the tent all snapped around at the same moment, two of them letting go of the canvas so that it was blown straight into the face of the third. Calder felt a sucking feeling in his stomach.

More Union men spilled into the light with frightening suddenness, a dozen or more, a couple with torches, flames whipped out sideways by a new gust. High wails echoed on Calder’s right and men darted from nowhere, steel glinting as swords were swung. Shadows flickered in the darkness, a weapon, or an arm, or the outline of a face caught for an instant against the orange glow of fire. Calder could hardly tell what was happening, then one of the torches guttered out and he couldn’t tell at all. It sounded as if there was fighting over on the left now too, his head yanked about by every sound.

He nearly jumped into the sky when he felt Pale-as-Snow’s hand on his shoulder. ‘Best be moving.’

Calder needed no further encouragement, he was off through the barley like a rabbit. He could hear other men, whooping, laughing, cursing, no clue whether they were his or the enemy. Something hissed into the crops next to him. An arrow, or just the wind blowing stalks about. Crops tangled his ankles, thrashed at his calves. He tripped and fell on his face, tore his way back up with Pale-as-Snow’s hand under his arm.

‘Wait! Wait.’

He stood frozen in the dark, bent over with his hands on his knees, ribcage going like a bellows. Voices were gabbling over each other. Northern voices, he was greatly relieved to hear.

‘They following?’

‘Where’s Hayl?’

‘Did we get the bloody flags?’

‘Those bastards wouldn’t even know which way to go.’

‘Dead. Caught an arrow.’

‘We got ’em!’

‘They were just dragging their bloody horses around!’

‘Thought we’d have nothing to say about it.’

‘But Prince Calder had something to say,’ Calder looked up at his name and found Pale-as-Snow smiling at him, one of the standards in his fist. Something like the smile a smith might have when his favourite apprentice finally hammers out something worth selling on the anvil.

Calder felt a poke in his side, started, then realised it was the other standard, the flag rolled up tight. One of the men was offering it out to him, grin shining in the moonlight in the midst of his muddy face. There was a whole set of grins pointed at him. As if he’d said something funny. As if he’d done something great. It didn’t feel that way to Calder. He’d just had the idea, which had been no effort at all, and set other men to work out how, and others still to take the risks. Hardly seemed possible that Calder’s father had earned his great reputation like this. But maybe that’s how the world works. Some men are made for doing violence. Some are meant for planning it. Then there are a special few whose talent is for taking the credit.

‘Prince Calder?’ And the grinning man offered him the flag again.

Well. If they wanted someone to admire, Calder wasn’t about to disappoint them. ‘I’m no prince.’ He snatched the standard, swung one leg over the flagstaff and held it there, sticking up at an angle. He drew his sword, for the first time that night, and thrust it straight up into the dark sky. ‘I’m the king of the fucking Union!’

It wasn’t much of a joke, but after the night they’d had, and the day they’d had yesterday, they were ready to celebrate. A gale of laughter went up, Calder’s men chuckling away, slapping each other on the backs.

‘All hail his fucking Majesty!’ shouted Pale-as-Snow, holding up the other flag, gold thread sparkling as it snapped in the wind. ‘King bloody Calder!’

Calder just kept on grinning. He liked the sound of that.

Shadows

Your August Fuck-Hole,

The truth? Under the wilful mismanagement of the old villains on your Closed Council, your army is rotting. Frittered away with cavalier carelessness, as a rake might fritter away his father's fortune. If they were the enemy's councillors they could scarcely do more to frustrate your Fuck-Hole's interests in the North. You could do better yourself, which is truly the most damning indictment of which I am capable. It would have been more honourable to load the men aboard in Adua, wave them off with a tear in the eye, then simply set fire to the ships and send them all to the bottom of the bay.

The truth? Marshal Kroy is competent, and cares for his soldiers, and I ardently desire to fuck his daughter, but there is only so much one man can do. His underlings, Jalenhorm, Mitterick and Meed, have been struggling manfully with each other for the place of worst general in history. I hardly know which deserves the higher contempt – the pleasant but incompetent dullard, the treacherous, reckless careerist, or the indecisive, war-mongering pedant. At least the last has already paid for his folly with his life. With any luck the rest of us will follow.

The truth? Why would you care? Old friends like us need have no pretences. I know better than most you are a cringing cipher, a spineless figurehead, a self-pitying, self-loving, self-hating child-man, king of nothing but your own vanity. Bayaz rules here, and he is bereft of conscience, scruple or mercy. The man is a monster. The worst I have seen, in fact, since I last looked in the mirror.

The truth? I am rotting too. I am buried alive, and already rotting. If I was not such a coward I would kill myself, but I am, and so I must content myself with killing others in the hope that one day, if I can only wade deep enough in blood, I will come out clean. While I wait breathlessly for rehabilitation that will never come, I will of course be delighted to consume any shit you might deign to squeeze into my face from the royal buttocks.

I remain your Fuck-Hole's most betrayed and vilified scapegoat,
Bremer dan Gorst, Royal Observer of the Northern Fiasco

Gorst put down his pen, frowning at a tiny cut he had somehow acquired on the very tip of his forefinger where it rendered every slightest task painful. He blew gently over the letter until every gleam of wet ink had turned dry black, then folded it, running his one unbroken nail slowly along it to make the sharpest of creases. He took up the stick of wax, tongue pressed into the roof of his mouth. His eyes found the candle flame, twinkling invitingly in the shadows. He looked at that spark of brightness as a man scared of heights looks at the parapet of a great tower. It called to him. Drew him. Made him dizzy with the delightful prospect of self-annihilation. *Like that, and this shameful unpleasantness that I laughingly call a life could all be over.* Only seal it, and send it, and wait for the storm to break.

Then he sighed, and slid the letter into the flame, watched it slowly blacken, crinkle, dropped the last smouldering corner on the floor of his tent and ground it under his boot. He wrote at least one of these a night, savage punctuation points between rambling sentences of trying to force himself to sleep. Sometimes he even felt better afterwards. *For a very short while.*

He frowned up at a clatter outside, then started at a louder crash, the gabble of raised voices, something in their tone making him reach for his boots. Many voices, then the sounds of horses too. He snatched up his sword and ripped aside his tent flap.

Younger had been sitting outside, tapping the day's dents out of Gorst's armour by lamplight. He was standing up now, craning to see, a greave in one hand and the little hammer in the other.

'What is it?' Gorst squeaked at him.

‘I’ve no— Woah!’ He shrank back as a horse thundered past, flicking mud all over both of them.

‘Stay here.’ Gorst put a gentle hand on his shoulder. ‘Stay out of danger.’ He strode from his tent and towards the Old Bridge, tucking his shirt in with one hand, sheathed long steel gripped firmly in the other. Shouts echoed from the darkness ahead, lantern beams twinkling, glimpses of figures and faces mixed up with the after-image of the candle flame still fizzing across Gorst’s vision.

A messenger jogged from the night, breathing hard, one cheek and the side of his uniform caked with mud. ‘What’s happening?’ Gorst snapped at him.

‘The Northmen have attacked in numbers!’ he wheezed as he laboured past. ‘We’re overrun! They’re coming!’ His terror was Gorst’s joy, excitement flaring up his throat so hot it was almost painful, the petty inconveniences of his bruises and aching muscles all burned away as he strode on towards the river. *Will I have to fight my way across that bridge for the second time in twelve hours?* He was almost giggling at the stupidity of it. *I cannot wait.*

Some officers pleaded for calm while others ran for their lives. Some men searched feverishly for weapons while others threw them away. Every shadow was the first of a horde of marauding Northmen, Gorst’s palm itching with the need to draw his sword, until the tricking shapes resolved themselves into baffled soldiers, half-dressed servants, squinting grooms.

‘Colonel Gorst? Is that you, sir?’

He stalked on, thoughts elsewhere. Back in Sipani. Back in the smoke and the madness at Cardotti’s House of Leisure. Searching for the king in the choking gloom. *But this time I will not fail.*

A servant with a bloody knife was staring at a crumpled shape on the ground. *Mistaken identity.* A man came blundering from a tent, hair sticking wildly from his head, struggling to undo the clasp on a dress sword. *Pray excuse me.* Gorst swept him out of his way with the back of one arm and squawking over into the mud. A plump captain sat, surprised face streaked with blood, clasping a bandage to his head. ‘What’s happening? What’s happening?’ *Panic. Panic is happening. Amazing how quickly a steadfast army can dissolve. How quickly daylight heroes become night-time cowards. Become a herd, acting with the instincts of the animal.*

‘This way!’ someone shouted behind him. ‘He knows!’ Footsteps slapped after him in the mud. *A little herd of my own.* He did not even look around. *But you should know I’m going wherever the killing is.*

A horse plunged out of nowhere, eyes rolling. Someone had been trampled, was howling, pawing at the muck. Gorst stepped over them, following an inexplicable trail of fashionable lady’s dresses, lace and colourful silk crushed into the filth. The press grew tighter, pale faces smeared across the dark, mad eyes shining with reflected fire, water glimmering with reflected torches. The Old Bridge was as packed and wild as it had been the previous day when they drove the Northmen across it. More so. Voices shouted over each other.

‘Have you seen my—’

‘Is that Gorst?’

‘They’re coming!’

‘Out of my way! Out of my—’

‘They’re gone already!’

‘It’s him! He’ll know what to do!’

‘Everyone back! Back!’

‘Colonel Gorst, could I—’

‘Have to find some order! Order! I beseech you!’

Beseeching will not work here. The crowd swelled, surged, opening out then crushing tight, fear flashing up like lightning as a drawn sword or a lit torch wafted in someone’s face. An elbow caught Gorst in the darkness and he lashed out with his fist, scuffed his knuckles on armour. Something grabbed at his leg and he kicked at it, tore himself free and shoved on. There was a shriek as someone was pushed over the parapet, Gorst caught a glimpse of his boots kicking as he vanished, heard the splash as he hit the fast-flowing water below.

He ripped his way clear on the far side of the bridge. His shirt was torn, the wind blowing chill through the rip. A ruddy-faced sergeant held a torch high and bellowed in a broken voice for calm. There was more shouting up ahead, horses plunging, weapons waving. But Gorst could not hear the sweet note of steel. He gripped his sword tight and stomped grimly on.

‘No!’ General Mitterick stood in the midst of a group of staff officers, perhaps the best example Gorst had ever seen of a man incandescent with rage. ‘I want the Second and Third ready to charge at once!’

‘But, sir,’ wheedled one of his aides, ‘it is still some time until dawn, the men are in disarray, we can’t—’

Mitterick shook his sword in the young man’s face. ‘I’ll give the orders here!’ *Though it is obviously too dark to mount a horse safely, let alone ride several hundred at a gallop towards an invisible enemy.* ‘Put guards on the bridge! I want any man who tries to cross hanged for desertion! *Hanged!*’

Colonel Opker, Mitterick’s second-in-command, stood just outside the radius of blame, watching the pantomime with grim resignation.

Gorst clapped a hand down on his shoulder. ‘Where are the Northmen?’

‘Gone!’ snapped Opker, shaking free. ‘There were no more than a few score of them! They stole the standards of the Second and Third and were off into the night.’

‘His Majesty will not countenance the loss of his standards, General!’ someone was yelling. Felnigg. *Swooped down on Mitterick’s embarrassment like a hawk on a rabbit.*

‘I am well aware of what his Majesty will not countenance!’ roared Mitterick back at him. ‘I’ll damn well get those standards back and kill every one of those thieving bastards, you can tell the lord marshal that! I *demand* you tell him that!’

‘Oh, I’ll be telling him all about it, never fear!’

But Mitterick had turned his back and was bellowing into the night.

‘Where are the scouts? I told you to send scouts, didn’t I? Dimbik? Where’s Dimbik? The ground, man, the ground!’

‘Me?’ a white-faced young officer stammered out. ‘Well, er, yes, but—’

‘Are they back yet? I want to be sure the ground’s good! Tell me it’s good, damn it!’

The man’s eyes darted desperately about, then it seemed he steeled himself, and snapped to attention. ‘Yes, General, the scouts were sent, and have returned, in fact, very much returned, and the ground is … perfect. Like a card table, sir. A card table … with barley on it—’

‘Excellent! I want no more bloody surprises!’ Mitterick stomped off, loose shirt tails flapping. ‘Where the bloody hell is Major Hockelman? I want these horsemen ready to charge as soon as we have light to piss by! Do you understand me? To *piss* by!’

His voice faded into the wind along with Felnigg’s grating complaints, and the lamps of his staff went with them, leaving Gorst frowning in the

darkness, as choked with disappointment as a jilted groom.

A raid, then. An opportunistic little sally had caused all this, triggered by Mitterick's petty little display with his flags. *And there will be no glory and no redemption here. Only stupidity, cowardice and waste.* Gorst wondered idly how many had died in the chaos. *Ten times as many as the Northmen killed? Truly, the enemy are the least dangerous element of a war.*

How could we have been so ludicrously unready? Because we could not imagine they would have the gall to attack. If the Northmen had pushed harder they might have driven us back across the bridge, and captured two whole regiments of cavalry rather than just their standards. Five men and a dog could have done it. But they could not imagine we might be so ludicrously unready. A failure for everyone. Especially me.

He turned to find a small crowd of soldiers and servants with a mismatched assortment of equipment at his back. Those who had followed him down to the bridge, and beyond. A surprising number. *Sheep. Which makes me what? The sheep-dog? Woof, woof, you fools.*

'What should we do, sir?' asked the nearest of them.

Gorst could only shrug. Then he trudged slowly back towards the bridge, just as he had trudged back that afternoon, brushing through the deflated mob on the way. There was no sign of dawn yet, but it could not be far off.

Time to put on my armour.

Under the Wing

Craw picked his way down the hill, peering into the blackness for his footing, wincing at his sore knee with every other step. Wincing at his sore arm and his sore cheek and his sore jaw besides. Wincing most of all at the question he'd been asking himself most of a stiff, cold, wakeful night. A night full of worries and regrets, of the faint whimpering of the dying and the not-so-faint snoring of Whirrun of bloody Bligh.

Tell Black Dow what Calder had said, or not? Craw wondered whether Calder had already run. He'd known the lad since he was a child, and couldn't ever have accused him of courage, but there'd been something different about him when they talked last night. Something Craw hadn't recognised. Or rather something he had, but not from Calder, from his father. And Bethod hadn't been much of a runner. That was what had killed him. Well, that and the Bloody-Nine smashing his head apart. Which was probably better'n Calder could expect if Dow found out what had been said. Better'n Craw could expect himself, if Dow found out from someone else. He glanced over at Dow's frowning face, criss-cross scars picked out in black and orange by Shivers' torch.

Tell him or not?

'Fuck,' he whispered.

'Aye,' said Shivers. Craw almost took a tumble on the wet grass. 'Til he remembered there was an awful lot a man could be saying fuck about. That's the beauty of the word. It can mean just about anything, depending on how things stand. Horror, shock, pain, fear, worry. None were out of place. There was a battle on.

The little tumbledown house crept out of the dark, nettles sprouting from its crumbling walls, a piece of the roof fallen in and the rotten timbers sticking up like dead rib bones. Dow took Shivers' torch. 'You wait here.'

Shivers paused just a moment, then bowed his head and leaned back by the door, faintest gleam of moonlight settled on his metal eye.

Craw ducked through the low doorway, trying not to look worried. When he was alone with Black Dow, some part of him – and not a small one – always expected a knife in the back. Or maybe a sword in the front. But a blade, anyway. Then he was always the tiniest bit surprised when he lived out the meeting. He'd never felt that way with Threetrees, or even Bethod. Hardly seemed the mark of the right man to follow … He caught himself chewing at a fingernail, if you could even call it a fingernail there was that little left of the bastard thing, and made himself stop.

Dow took his torch over to the far side of the room, shadows creeping about the rough-sawn rafters as he moved. 'Ain't heard back from the girl, then, or her father neither.' Craw thought it best to stick to silence. Whenever he said a word these days it seemed to end up in some style of disaster. 'Looks like I put myself in debt to the bloody giant for naught.' Silence again. 'Women, eh?'

Craw shrugged. 'Don't reckon I'll be lending you any insights on that score.'

'You had one for a Second, didn't you? How did you make that work?'

'She made it work. Couldn't ask for a better Second than Wonderful. The dead know I made some shitty choices but that's one I've never regretted. Not ever. She's tough as a thistle, tough as any man I know. Got more bones than me and sharper wits too. Always the first to see to the bottom o' things. And she's a straight edge. I'd trust her with anything. No one I'd trust more.'

Dow raised his brows. 'Toll the fucking bells. Maybe I should've picked her for your job.'

'Probably,' muttered Craw.

'Got to have someone you can trust for a Second.' Dow crossed to the window, peering out into the windy night. 'Got to have trust.'

Craw snatched at another subject. 'We waiting for your black-skinned friend?'

'Not sure I'd call her a friend. But yes.'

‘Who is she?’

‘One o’ those desert-dwellers. Don’t the black give it away?’

‘What’s her interest in the North, is my question?’

‘Couldn’t tell you that for sure, but from what I’ve gathered she’s got a war of her own to fight. An old war, and for now we’ve a battlefield in common.’

Craw frowned. ‘A war between sorcerers? That something we want a part of?’

‘We’ve a part of it already.’

‘Where did you find her?’

‘She found me.’

That was a long way from putting his fears to rest. ‘Magic. I don’t know —’

‘You were up on the Heroes yesterday, no? You saw Splitfoot.’

Hardly a memory to lift the mood. ‘I did.’

‘The Union have magic, that’s a fact, and they’re happy to use it. We need to match fire with fire.’

‘What if we all get burned?’

‘I daresay we will.’ Dow shrugged. ‘That’s war.’

‘Can you trust her, though?’

‘No.’ Ishri was leaning against the wall by the door, one foot crossed over the other and a look like she knew what Craw was thinking and wasn’t much impressed. He wondered if she knew he’d been thinking about Calder and tried not to, which only brought him more to mind.

Dow, meanwhile, didn’t even turn around. Just slid his torch into a rusted bracket on the wall, watching the flames crackle.

‘Seems our little gesture of peace fell on stony ground,’ he tossed over his shoulder.

Ishri nodded.

Dow stuck his bottom lip out. ‘Nobody wants to be my friend.’

Ishri made one thin eyebrow arch impossibly high.

‘Well, who wants to shake hands with a man whose hands are bloody as mine?’

Ishri shrugged.

Dow looked down at his hand, made a fist of it and sighed. ‘Reckon I’ll just have to get ’em bloodier. Any idea where they’re coming from today?’

‘Everywhere.’

‘Knew you’d say that.’

‘Why ask, then?’

‘Least I got you to speak.’ There was a long silence, then Dow finally turned around, settling back with elbows on the narrow windowsill. ‘Go on, go for some more.’

Ishri stepped away from the wall, letting her head drop back and roll in a slow circle. For some reason every movement of hers made Craw feel a little disgusted, like watching a snake slither. ‘In the east, a man called Brock has taken charge, and prepares to attack the bridge in Osrung.’

‘And what kind of man is he? Like Meed?’

‘The opposite. He is young, pretty and brave.’

‘I love those young brave pretty men!’ Dow glanced over at Craw. ‘It’s why I picked one out for my Second.’

‘None out of three ain’t bad.’ Craw realised he was chewing at his nail yet again, and whipped his hand away.

‘In the centre,’ said Ishri, ‘Jalenhorm has a great number of foot ready to cross the shallows.’

Dow gave his hungry grin. ‘Gives me something to look forward to today. I quite enjoy watching men try to climb hills I’m sat on top of.’ Craw couldn’t say he was looking forward to it, however much the ground might have taken their side.

‘In the west Mitterick strains at the leash, keen to make use of his pretty horses. He has men across the little river too, in the woods on your western flank.’

Dow raised his brows. ‘Huh. Calder was right.’

‘Calder has been hard at work all night.’

‘Damned if it ain’t the first hard work that bastard’s ever done.’

‘He stole two standards from the Union in the darkness. Now he taunts them.’

Black Dow chuckled to himself. ‘You’ll not find a better hand at taunting. I’ve always liked that lad.’

Craw frowned over at him. ‘You have?’

‘Why else would I keep giving him chances? I got no shortage of men can kick a door down. I can use a couple who’ll think to try the handle once in a while.’

‘Fair enough.’ Though Craw had to wonder what Dow would say if he knew Calder was trying the handle on his murder. When he knew. It was a case of when. Wasn’t it?

‘This new weapon they’ve got.’ Dow narrowed his eyes to lethal slits. ‘What is it?’

‘Bayaz.’ Ishri did some fairly deadly eye-narrowing of her own. Craw wondered if there was a harder pair of eye-narrowers in the world than these two. ‘The First of the Magi. He is with them. And he has something new.’

‘That’s the best you can do?’

She tipped her head back, looking down her nose. ‘Bayaz is not the only one who can produce surprises. I have one for him, later today.’

‘I knew there had to be a reason why I took you under my wing,’ said Dow.

‘Your wing shelters all the North, oh mighty Protector.’ Ishri’s eyes rolled slowly to the ceiling. ‘The Prophet shelters under the wing of God. I shelter under the wing of the Prophet. That thing that keeps the rain from your head?’ And she held her arm up, long fingers wriggling, boneless as a jar of bait. Her face broke out in a grin too white and too wide. ‘Great or small, we all must find some shelter.’ Dow’s torch popped, its light flickered for a moment, and she wasn’t there.

‘Think on it,’ came her voice, right in Craw’s ear.

Names

Beck hunched his shoulders and stared at the fire. Not much more'n a tangle of blackened sticks, a few embers in the centre still with a glow to 'em and a little tongue of flame, whipped, and snatched, and torn about, helpless in the wind. Burned out. Almost as burned out as he was. He'd clutched at that dream of being a hero so long that now it was naught but ashes he didn't know what he wanted. He sat there under fading stars named for great men, great battles and great deeds, and didn't know who he was.

'Hard to sleep, eh?' Drofd shuffled up into the firelight cross-legged, blanket around his shoulders.

Beck gave the smallest grunt he could. Last thing he wanted to do was talk.

Drofd held out a piece of yesterday's meat to him, glistening with grease. 'Hungry?'

Beck shook his head. He weren't sure when he last ate. Just before he last slept, most likely, but the smell alone was making him sick.

'Might keep it for later, then.' Drofd stuck the meat into a pocket on the front of his jerkin, bone sticking out, rubbed his hands together and held 'em to the smear of fire, so dirty the lines on his palms were picked out black. He looked about of an age with Beck, but smaller and darker, some spare stubble on his jaw. Right then, in the darkness, he looked a little bit like Reft. Beck swallowed, and looked away. 'So you got yourself a name, then, eh?'

A little nod.

‘Red Beck.’ Drofd gave a chuckle. ‘It’s a good ’un. Fierce-sounding. You must be pleased.’

‘Pleased?’ Beck felt a stinging urge to say, ‘I hid in a cupboard and killed one o’ my own,’ but instead he said, ‘I reckon.’

‘Wish I had a name. Guess it’ll come in time.’

Beck kept staring into the fire, hoping to head off any more chatter. Seemed Drofd was the chattering sort, though.

‘You got family?’

All the most ordinary, obvious, lame bloody talk a lad could’ve thought of. Dragging the words out felt like a painful effort to begin with. ‘A mother. Two little brothers. One’s ’prenticed to the smith in the valley.’ Lame, maybe, but once he’d started talking, thoughts drifting homewards, he found he couldn’t stop. ‘More’n likely my mother’s making ready to bring the harvest in. Was getting ripe when I left. She’ll be sharpening the scythe and that. And Festen’ll be gathering up after her …’ And by the dead, how he wished he was with ’em. He wanted to smile and cry at once, didn’t dare say more for fear of doing it.

‘I got seven sisters,’ said Drofd, ‘and I’m the youngest. Like having eight mothers fussing over me, and putting me right all day long, and each with a tongue sharper’n the last. No man in the house, and no man’s business ever talked of. Home was a special kind of hell, I can tell you that.’

A warm house with eight women and no swords didn’t sound so awful right then. Beck had thought his home was a special kind of hell once. Now he had a different notion of what hell looked like.

Drofd blathered on.

‘But I got a new family now. Craw, and Wonderful, and Jolly Yon and the rest. Good fighters. Good names. Stick together, you know, mind their own. Lost a couple o’ people the last few days. Couple of good people, but …’ Seemed he ran out of words himself for a moment. Didn’t take him long to find more, though. ‘Craw was Second to old Threetrees, you know, way back. Been in every battle since whenever. Does things the old way. Real straight edge. You fell on your feet to fall in with this lot, I reckon.’

‘Aye.’ Beck didn’t feel like he’d fallen on his feet. He felt like he was still falling and, sooner or later but probably sooner, the ground would smash his brains out.

‘Where did you get the sword?’

Beck blinked at the hilt, almost surprised to see it was still there beside him. ‘It was my father’s.’

‘He was a fighter?’

‘Named Man. Famous one, I guess.’ And how he’d loved to boast about it once. Now the name was sour on his tongue. ‘Shama Heartless.’

‘What? The one who fought a duel against the Bloody-Nine? The one who …’

Lost. ‘Aye. The Bloody-Nine brought an axe to the duel, and my father brought this blade, and they spun the shield, and the Bloody-Nine won, and he chose the sword.’ Beck slid it out, stupidly worried he might stab someone without meaning to. He’d a respect of sharp metal he hadn’t had the night before. ‘They fought, and the Bloody-Nine split my father’s belly wide open.’ Seemed mad now that he’d rushed to follow the man’s footsteps. A man he’d never known, whose footsteps led all the way to his own spilled guts.

‘You mean … the Bloody-Nine held that sword?’

‘Guess he must’ve.’

‘Can I?’

Time was Beck would’ve told Drofd to fuck himself, but acting the loner hadn’t worked out too well for anyone concerned. This time around maybe he’d try and coax out a friendship or two. So he handed the blade across, pommel first.

‘By the dead, that’s a damn good sword.’ Drofd stared at the hilt with big eyes. ‘There’s still blood on it.’

‘Aye,’ Beck managed to croak.

‘Well, well, well.’ Wonderful strutted up, hands on hips, tip of her tongue showing between her teeth. ‘Two young lads, handling each other’s weapons by firelight? Don’t worry, I see how it can happen. You think no one’s watching, and there’s a fight coming, and you might never get another chance to try it. Most natural thing in the world.’

Drofd cleared his throat and gave the sword back quick. ‘Just talking about … you know. Names. How’d you come by yours?’

‘Mine?’ snapped Wonderful, narrowing her eyes at ’em. Beck didn’t rightly know what to make of a woman fighting, let alone one who led a dozen. One who was his Chief, now, even. He had to admit she scared him a little, with that hard look and that knobbly head with an old scar down one

side and a fresh one down the other. Being scared by a woman might've shamed him once, but it hardly seemed to matter now he was scared of everything. 'I got it giving a pair of curious young lads a wonderful kicking.'

'She got it off Threetrees.' Jolly Yon rolled over in his blankets and propped himself on an elbow, peering at the fire through one hardly open eye, scratching at his black and grey thatch of a beard. 'Her family had a farm just north of Uffrith. Stop me if I'm wrong.'

'I will,' she said, 'don't worry.'

'And when trouble started up with Bethod, some of his boys came down into that valley. So she shaved her hair.'

'Shaved it a couple of months before. Always got in my way when I was following the plough.'

'I stand corrected. You want to take over?'

'You're doing all right.'

'No need for the shears, then, but she took up a sword, and she got a few others in the valley to do the same, and she laid an ambush for 'em.'

Wonderful's eyes gleamed in the firelight. 'Did I ever.'

'And then Threetrees turned up, and me and Craw along with him, expecting to find the valley all burned out and the farmers scattered and instead he finds a dozen of Bethod's boys hanged and a dozen more prisoner and this bloody girl watching over 'em with quite the smile. What was it he said now?'

'Can't say I recall,' she grunted.

'Wonderful strange to have a woman in charge,' said Yon, putting on a gravelly bass. 'We called her Wonderful Strange for a week or two, then the strange dropped off, and there you have it.'

Wonderful nodded grimly at the fire. 'And a month later Bethod came in earnest and the valley got all burned out anyway.'

Yon shrugged. 'Still a good ambush, though.'

'And what about you, eh, Jolly Yon Cumber?'

Yon dragged his blankets off and sat up. 'Ain't much to it.'

'Don't be modest. Jolly was said straight in the old days, 'cause he used to be quite the joker, did Yon. Then his cock was tragically cut off in the battle at Ineward, a loss more mourned by the womenfolk of the North than

all the husbands, sons and fathers killed there. Ever since then, not a single smile.'

'A cruel lie.' Yon pointed a thick finger across at Beck. 'I never had a sense o' humour. And it was just a little nick out of my thigh at Ineward. Lot of blood but no damage. Everything still working down below, don't you worry.'

Over his shoulder and out of his sight, Wonderful was pointing at her crotch. 'Cock and fruits,' she mouthed, miming a chopping action with one open hand. 'Cock … and …' Then when Yon looked around peered at her fingernails like she'd done nothing.

'Up already?' Flood came limping between the sleepers and the fires along with a man Beck didn't know, lean with a mop of grey-streaked hair.

'Our youngest woke us,' grunted Wonderful. 'Drofd was having a feel of Beck's weapon.'

'You can see how it can happen, though …' said Yon.

'You can check mine over if you like.' Flood grabbed the mace at his belt and stuck it up at an angle. 'It's got a big lump on the end!' Drofd gave a chuckle at that, but it seemed most of the rest weren't in a laughing mood. Beck surely weren't. 'No?' Flood looked around at 'em expectantly. 'It's 'cause I'm old, ain't it? You can say. It's 'cause I'm old.'

'Old or not, I'm glad you're here,' said Wonderful, one eyebrow up. 'The Union won't dare attack now we've got you two.'

'Never would have given 'em the chance but I had to go for a piss.'

'Third of the night?' asked Yon.

Flood peered up at the sky. 'Think it was the fourth.'

'Which is why they call him Flood,' murmured Wonderful under her breath. ''Case you were wondering.'

'I ran into Scorry Tiptoe on the way.' Flood jerked his thumb at the lean man beside him.

Tiptoe took a while weighing up the words, then spoke 'em soft. 'I was taking a look around.'

'Find anything out?' asked Wonderful.

He nodded, real slow, like he'd come upon the secret of life itself.

'There's a battle on.' He slid down next to Beck on crossed legs and held out a hand to him. 'Scorry Tiptoe.'

‘On account of his gentle footfall,’ said Drofd. ‘Scouting, mostly. And back rank, with a spear, you know.’

Beck gave it a limp shake. ‘Beck.’

‘Red Beck,’ threw in Drofd. ‘That’s his name. Got it yesterday. Off Reachey. Down in the fight in Osrung. Now he’s joined up … with us … you know …’ He trailed off, Beck and Scorry both frowning at him, and huddled down into his blanket.

‘Craw give you the talk?’ asked Scorry.

‘The talk?’

‘About the right thing.’

‘He mentioned it.’

‘Wouldn’t take it too seriously.’

‘No?’

Scorry shrugged. ‘Right thing’s a different thing for every man.’ And he started pulling knives out and laying ’em on the ground in front of him, from a huge great thing with a bone handle only just this side of a short sword to a tiny little curved one without even a grip, just a pair of rings for two fingers to fit in.

‘That for peeling apples?’ asked Beck.

Wonderful drew a finger across her sinewy neck. ‘Slitting throats.’

Beck thought she was probably having a laugh at him, then Scorry spat onto a whetstone and that little blade gleamed in the firelight and suddenly he weren’t so sure. Scorry pressed it to the stone and gave it a lick both ways, snick, snick, and all of a sudden there was a thrashing of blankets.

‘Steel!’ Whirrun sprang up, reeling about, sword all tangled up with his bed. ‘I hear steel!’

‘Shut up!’ someone called.

Whirrun tore his sword free, jerking his hood out of his eyes. ‘I’m awake! Is it morning?’ Seemed the stories about Whirrun of Bligh being always ready were a bit overdone. He let his sword drop, squinting up at the black sky, stars peeping between shreds of cloud. ‘Why is it dark? Have no fear, children, Whirrun is among you and ready to fight!’

‘Thank the dead,’ grunted Wonderful. ‘We’re saved.’

‘That you are, woman!’ Whirrun pulled his hood back, scratched at his hair, plastered flat on one side and sticking out like a thistle on the other. He stared about the Heroes and, seeing nought but guttering fires, sleeping men

and the same old stones as ever, crawled up close to the flames, yawning. ‘Saved from dull conversation. Did I hear some talk of names?’

‘Aye,’ muttered Beck, not daring to say more. It was like having Skarling himself to talk to. He’d been raised on stories about Whirrun of Bligh’s high deeds. Listened to old drunk Scavi tell ’em down in the village, and begged for more. Dreamed of standing beside him as an equal, claiming a place in his songs. Now here he was, sitting beside him as fraud, and coward, and friend-killer. He dragged his mother’s cloak tight, felt something crusted under his fingers. Realised the cloth was still stiff with Reft’s blood and had to stop a shiver. Red Beck. He’d blood on his hands, all right. But it didn’t feel like he’d always dreamed it would.

‘Names, is it?’ Whirrun lifted his sword and stood it on end in the firelight, looking too long and too heavy ever to make much sense as a weapon. ‘This is the Father of Swords, and men have a hundred names for it.’ Yon closed his eyes and sank back, Wonderful rolled hers up towards the sky, but Whirrun droned on, deep and measured, like it was a speech he’d given often before. ‘Dawn Razor. Grave-Maker. Blood Harvest. Highest and Lowest. Scac-ang-Gaioc in the valley tongue which means the Splitting of the World, the battle that was fought at the start of time and will be fought again at its end. This is my reward and my punishment both. My blessing and my curse. It was passed to me by Daguf Col as he lay dying, and he had it from Yorweel the Mountain who had it from Four-Faces who had it from Leef-reef-Ockang, and so on ’til the world was young. When Shoglig’s words come to pass and I lie bleeding, face to face with the Great Leveller at last, I’ll hand it on to whoever I think best deserves it, and will bring it fame, and the list of its names, and the list of the names of the great men who wielded it, and the great men who died by it, will grow, and lengthen, and stretch back into the dimness beyond memory. In the valleys where I was born they say it is God’s sword, dropped from heaven.’

‘Don’t you?’ asked Flood.

Whirrun rubbed some dirt from the crosspiece with his thumb. ‘I used to.’

‘Now?’

‘God makes things, no? God is a farmer. A craftsman. A midwife. God gives things life.’ He tipped his head back and looked up at the sky. ‘What would God want with a sword?’

Wonderful pressed one hand to her chest. ‘Oh, Whirrun, you’re so fucking *deep*. I could sit here for hours trying to work out everything you meant.’

‘Whirrun of Bligh don’t seem so deep a name,’ said Beck, and regretted it straight away when everyone looked at him, Whirrun in particular.

‘No?’

‘Well … you’re from Bligh, I guess. Ain’t you?’

‘Never been there.’

‘Then—’

‘I couldn’t honestly tell you how it came about. Maybe Bligh’s the only place up there folk down here ever heard of.’ Whirrun shrugged. ‘Don’t hardly matter. A name’s got nothing in it by itself. It’s what you make of it. Men don’t brown their trousers when they hear the Bloody-Nine because of the name. They brown their trousers because of the man that had it.’

‘And Cracknut Whirrun?’ asked Drofd.

‘Straightforward. An old man up near Ustred taught me the trick of cracking a walnut in my fist. What you do is—’

Wonderful snorted. ‘That ain’t why they call you Cracknut.’

‘Eh?’

‘No,’ said Yon. ‘It ain’t.’

‘They call you Cracknut for the same reason they gave Cracknut Leef the name,’ and Wonderful tapped at the side of her shaved head. ‘Because it’s widely assumed your nut’s cracked.’

‘They do?’ Whirrun frowned. ‘Oh, that’s less complimentary, the fuckers. I’ll have to have words next time I hear that. You’ve completely bloody spoiled it for me!’

Wonderful spread her hands. ‘It’s a gift.’

‘Morning, people.’ Curnden Craw walked slowly up to the fire with his cheeks puffed out and his grey hair twitching in the wind. He looked tired. Dark bags under his eyes, nostrils rimmed pink.

‘Everyone on their knees!’ snapped Wonderful. ‘It’s Black Dow’s right hand!’

Craw pretended to wave ’em down. ‘No need to grovel.’ Someone else came behind him. Caul Shivers, Beck realised with a sick lurch in his stomach.

‘Y’all right, Chief?’ asked Drofd, pulling the bit of meat out of his pocket and offering it over.

Craw winced as he bent his knees and squatted by the fire, put one finger on one nostril, then blew out through the other with a long wheeze like a dying duck. Then he took the meat and had a bite out of it. ‘The definition of all right changes with the passing winters, I find. I’m about all right by the standards of the last few days. Twenty years ago I’d have considered this close to death.’

‘We’re on a battlefield, ain’t we?’ Whirrun was all grin. ‘The Great Leveller’s pressed up tight against us all.’

‘Nice thought,’ said Craw, wriggling his shoulders like there was someone breathing on his neck. ‘Drofd.’

‘Aye, Chief?’

‘If the Union come later, and I reckon it’s a set thing they will … might be best if you stay out of it.’

‘Stay out?’

‘It’ll be a proper battle. I know you’ve got the bones but you don’t have the gear. A hatchet and a bow? The Union got armour, and good steel and all the rest …’ Craw shook his head. ‘I can find you a place behind somewhere—’

‘Chief, no, I want to fight!’ Drofd looked across at Beck, like he wanted support. Beck had none to give. He wished he could be left behind. ‘I want to win myself a name. Give me the chance!’

Craw winced. ‘Name or not, you’ll just be the same man. No better. Maybe worse.’

‘Aye,’ Beck found he’d said.

‘Easy for those to say who have one,’ snapped Drofd, staring surly at the fire.

‘He wants to fight, let him fight,’ said Wonderful.

Craw looked up, surprised. Like he’d realised he wasn’t quite where he’d thought he was. Then he leaned back on one elbow, stretching one boot out towards the fire. ‘Well. Guess it’s your dozen now.’

‘That’s a fact,’ said Wonderful, nudging that boot with hers. ‘And they’ll all be fighting.’ Yon slapped Drofd on the shoulder, all flushed and grinning now at the thought of glory. Wonderful reached out and flicked the pommel of the Father of Swords with a fingernail. ‘Besides, you don’t need a great weapon to win yourself a name. Got yours with your teeth, didn’t you, Craw?’

‘Bite someone’s throat out, did you?’ asked Drofd.

‘Not quite.’ Craw had a faraway look for a moment, firelight picking out the lines at the corners of his eyes. ‘First full battle I was in we had a real red day, and I was in the midst. I had a thirst, back then. Wanted to be a hero. Wanted myself a name. We was all sat around the fire-pit after, and I was expecting something fearsome.’ He looked up from under his eyebrows. ‘Like Red Beck. Then when Threetrees was considering it, I took a big bite from a piece of meat. Drunk, I guess. Got a bone stuck in my throat. Spent a minute hardly able to breathe, everyone thumping me on the back. In the end a big lad had to hold me upside down ’fore it came loose. Could barely talk for a couple of days. So Threetrees called me Craw, on account of what I’d got stuck in it.’

‘Shoglig said …’ sang Whirrun, arching back to look into the sky, ‘I would be shown my destiny … by a man choking on a bone.’

‘Lucky me,’ grunted Craw. ‘I was furious, when I got the name. Now I know the favour Threetrees was doing me. His way of trying to keep me level.’

‘Seems like it worked,’ croaked Shivers. ‘You’re the straight edge, ain’t you?’

‘Aye.’ Craw licked unhappily at his teeth. ‘A real straight edge.’

Scorry gave the straight edge of his latest knife one last flick with the whetstone and picked up the next. ‘You met our latest recruit, Shivers?’ Sticking his thumb sideways. ‘Red Beck.’

‘I have.’ Shivers stared across the fire at him. ‘Down in Osrung. Yesterday.’

Beck had that mad feeling Shivers could see right through him with that eye, and knew him for the liar he was. Made him wonder how none of the others could see it, writ across his face plain as a fresh tattoo. Cold prickled his back, and he pulled his blood-crusted cloak tight again.

‘Quite a day yesterday,’ he muttered.

‘And I reckon today’ll be another.’ Whirrun stood and stretched up tall, lifting the Father of Swords high over his head. ‘If we’re lucky.’

Still Yesterday

The blue skin stretched as the steel slid underneath it, paint flaking like parched earth, stubbly hairs shifting, red threads of veins in the wide whites near the corners of his eyes. Her teeth ground together as she pushed it in, pushed it in, pushed it in, coloured patterns bursting on the blackness of her closed lids. She could not get that damned music out of her head. The music the violinists had been playing. Were playing still, faster and faster. The husk-pipe they had given her had blunted the pain just as they said it would, but they had lied about the sleep. She twisted the other way, huddling under the blankets. As though you can roll over and leave a day of murder on the other side of the bed.

Candlelight showed around the door, through the cracks between the slats. As the daylight had showed through the door of the cold room where they were kept prisoner. Kneeling in the darkness, plucking at the knots with her nails. Voices outside. Officers, coming and going, speaking with her father. Talking of strategy and logistics. Talking of civilisation. Talking of which one of them Black Dow wanted.

What had happened blurred with what might have, with what should have. The Dogman arrived an hour earlier with his Northmen, saw off the savages before they left the wood. She found out ahead of time, warned everyone, was given breathless thanks by Lord Governor Meed. Captain Hardrick brought help, instead of never being heard from again, and the Union cavalry arrived at the crucial moment like they did in the stories. Then she led the defence, standing atop a barricade with sword aloft and a blood-spattered breastplate, like a lurid painting of Monzcarro Murcatto at the

battle of Sweet Pines she once saw on the wall of a tasteless merchant. All mad, and while she spun out the fantasies she knew they were mad, and she wondered if she was mad, but she did it all the same.

And then she would catch something at the edge of her sight, and she was there, as it had been, on her back with a knee crushing her in the stomach and a dirty hand around her neck, could not breathe, all the sick horror that she somehow had not felt at the time washing over her in a rotting tide, and she would rip back the blankets and spring up, and pace round and round the room, chewing at her lip, picking at the scabby bald patch on the side of her head, muttering to herself like a madwoman, doing the voices, doing all the voices.

If she'd argued harder with Black Dow. If she'd pushed, demanded, she could have brought Aliz with her, instead of … in the darkness, her blubbering wail as Finree's hand slipped out of hers, the door rattling shut. A blue cheek bulged as the steel slid underneath it, and she bared her teeth, and moaned, and clutched at her head, and squeezed her eyes shut.

'Fin.'

'Hal.' He was leaning over her, candlelight picking out the side of his head in gold. She sat up, rubbing her face. It felt numb. As if she was kneading dead dough.

'I brought you fresh clothes.'

'Thank you.' Laughably formal. The way one might address someone else's butler.

'Sorry to wake you.'

'I wasn't asleep.' Her mouth still had a strange taste, a swollen feeling from the husk. The darkness in the corners of the room fizzed with colours.

'I thought I should come … before dawn.' Another pause. Probably he was waiting for her to say she was glad, but she could not face the petty politeness. 'Your father has put me in charge of the assault on the bridge in Osrung.'

She did not know what to say. Congratulations. Please, no! Be careful. Don't go! Stay here. Please. Please. 'Will you be leading from the front?' Her voice sounded icy.

'Close enough to it, I suppose.'

'Don't indulge in any heroics.' Like Hardrick, charging out of the door for help that could never come in time.

‘There’ll be no heroics, I promise you that. It’s just … the right thing to do.’

‘It won’t help you get on.’

‘I don’t do it to get on.’

‘Why, then?’

‘Because someone has to.’ They were so little alike. The cynic and the idealist. Why had she married him? ‘Brint seems … all right. Under the circumstances.’ Finree found herself hoping that Aliz was all right, and made herself stop. That was a waste of hope, and she had none to spare.

‘How should one feel when one’s wife has been taken by the enemy?’

‘Utterly desperate. I hope he will be all right.’

‘All right’ was such a useless, stilted expression. It was a useless, stilted conversation. Hal felt like a stranger. He knew nothing about who she really was. How can two people ever really know each other? Everyone went through life alone, fighting their own battle.

He took her hand. ‘You seem—’

She could not bear his skin against hers, jerked her fingers away as though she was snatching them from a furnace. ‘Go. You should go.’

His face twitched. ‘I love you.’

Just words, really. They should have been easy to say. But she could not do it any more than she could fly to the moon. She turned away from him to face the wall, dragging the blanket over her hunched shoulder. She heard the door shut.

A moment later, or perhaps a while, she slid out of bed. She dressed. She splashed water on her face. She twitched her sleeves down over the scabbing chafe marks on her wrists, the ragged cut up her arm. She opened the door and went through. Her father was in the room on the other side, talking to the officer she saw crushed by a falling cupboard yesterday, plates spilling across the floor. No. A different man.

‘You’re awake.’ Her father was smiling but there was a wariness to him, as if he was expecting her to burst into flames and he was ready to grab for a bucket. Maybe she would burst into flames. She would not have been surprised. Or particularly sorry, right then. ‘How do you feel?’

‘Well.’ Hands closed around her throat and she plucked at them with her nails, ears throbbing with her own heartbeat. ‘I killed a man yesterday.’

He stood, put his hand on her shoulder. ‘It may feel that way, but—’

‘It certainly does feel that way. I stabbed him, with a short steel I stole from an officer. I pushed the blade into his face. Into his face. So. I got one, I suppose.’

‘Finree—’

‘Am I going mad?’ She snorted up a laugh, it sounded so stupid. ‘Things could be so much worse. I should be glad. There was nothing I could do. What can anyone do? What should I have done?’

‘After what you have been through, only a madman could feel normal. Try to act as though … it is just another day, like any other.’

She took a long breath. ‘Of course.’ She gave him a smile which she hoped projected reassurance rather than insanity. ‘It is just another day.’

There was a wooden bowl, on a table, with fruit in it. She took an apple. Half-green, half-blood-coloured. She should eat while she could. Keep her strength up. It was just another day, after all.

Still dark outside. Guards stood by torchlight. They fell silent as she passed, watching while pretending not to watch. She wanted to spew all over them, but she tried to smile as if it was just another day, and they did not look exactly like the men who had strained desperately to hold the gates of the inn closed, splinters bursting around them as the savages hacked down the doors.

She stepped from the path and out across the hillside, pulling her coat tight around her. Wind-lashed grass sloped away into the darkness. Patches of sedge tangled at her boots. A bald man stood, coat-tails flapping, looking out across the darkened valley. He had one fist clenched behind him, thumb rubbing constantly, worriedly at forefinger. The other daintily held a cup. Above him, in the eastern sky, the first faint smudges of dawn were showing.

Perhaps it was the after-effects of the husk, or the sleeplessness, but after what she had seen yesterday the First of the Magi did not seem so terrible. ‘Another day!’ she called, feeling as if she might take off from the hillside and float into the dark sky. ‘Another day’s fighting. You must be pleased, Lord Bayaz!’

He gave her a curt bow. I—’

‘Is it “Lord Bayaz” or is there a better term of address for the First of the Magi?’ She pushed some hair out of her face but the wind soon whipped it back. ‘Your Grace, or your Wizardship, or ‘your Magicosity?’

‘I try not to stand on ceremony.’

‘How does one become First of the Magi, anyway?’

‘I was the first apprentice of great Juvens.’

‘And did he teach you magic?’

‘He taught me High Art.’

‘Why don’t you do some then, instead of making men fight?’

‘Because making men fight is easier. Magic is the art and science of forcing things to behave in ways that are not in their nature.’ Bayaz took a slow sip from his cup, watching her over the rim. ‘There is nothing more natural to men than to fight. You are recovered, I hope, from your ordeal yesterday?’

‘Ordeal? I’ve almost forgotten about it already! My father suggested that I act as though this is just another day. Then, perhaps it will be one. Any other day I would spend feverishly trying to advance my husband’s interests, and therefore my own.’ She grinned sideways. ‘I am venomously ambitious.’

Bayaz’ green eyes narrowed. ‘A characteristic I have always found most admirable.’

‘Meed was killed.’ His mouth opening and closing silently like a fish snatched from the river, plucking at the great rent in his crimson uniform, crashing over with papers sliding across his back. ‘I daresay you are in need of a new lord governor of Angland.’

‘His Majesty is.’ The Magus heaved up a sigh. ‘But making such a powerful appointment is a complicated business. No doubt some relative of Meed expects and demands the post, but we cannot allow it to become some family bauble. I daresay a score of other great magnates of the Open Council think it their due, but we cannot raise one man too close in power to the crown. The closer they come the less they can resist reaching for it, as your father-in-law could no doubt testify. We could elevate some bureaucrat but then the Open Council would rail about stoogery and they are troublesome enough as it is. So many balances to strike, so many rivalries, and jealousies, and dangers to navigate. It’s enough to make one abandon politics altogether.’

‘Why not my husband?’

Bayaz cocked his head on one side. ‘You are very frank.’

‘I seem to be, this morning.’

‘Another characteristic I have always found most admirable.’

‘By the Fates, I’m admirable!’ she said, hearing the door clatter shut on Aliz’ sobs.

‘I am not sure how much support I could raise for your husband, however.’ Bayaz wrinkled his lip as he tossed the dregs from his cup into the dewy grass. ‘His father stands among the most infamous traitors in the history of the Union.’

‘Too true. And the greatest of all the Union’s noblemen, the first man on the Open Council, only a vote away from the crown.’ She spoke without considering the consequences any more than a spinning stone considers the water it skims across. ‘When his lands were seized, his power snuffed out as though it had never existed, I would have thought the nobles felt threatened. For all they delighted in his fall they saw in it the shadow of their own. I imagine restoring his son to some prudent fraction of his power might be made to play well with the Open Council. Asserting the rights of the ancient families, and so on.’

Bayaz’ chin went up a little, his brows drew down. ‘Perhaps. And?’

‘And while the great Lord Brock had allies and enemies in abundance, his son has none. He has been scorned and ignored for eight years. He is part of no faction, has no agenda but faithfully to serve the crown. He has more than proved his honesty, bravery and unquestioning loyalty to his Majesty on the field of battle.’ She fixed Bayaz with her gaze. ‘It would be a fine story to tell. Instead of lowering himself to dabble in base politics, our monarch chooses to reward faithful service, merit and old-time heroism. The commoners would enjoy it, I think.’

‘Faithful service, merit and heroism. Fine qualities in a soldier.’ As though talking about fat on a pig. ‘But a lord governor is first a politician. Flexibility, ruthlessness and an eye for expediency are more his talents. How is your husband there?’

‘Weak, but perhaps someone close to him could supply those qualities.’

She fancied Bayaz had the ghost of a smile about his lips. ‘I am beginning to suspect they could. You make an interesting suggestion.’

‘You have not thought of everything, then?’

‘Only the truly ignorant believe they have thought of everything. I might even mention it to my colleagues on the Closed Council when we next meet.’

‘I would have thought it would be best to make a choice swiftly, rather than to allow the whole thing to become … an issue. I cannot be considered impartial but, even so, I truly believe my husband to be the best man in the Union.’

Bayaz gave a dry chuckle. ‘Who says I want the best man? It may be that a fool and a weakling as lord governor of Angland would suit everyone better. A fool and a weakling with a stupid, cowardly wife.’

‘That, I am afraid, I cannot offer you. Have an apple.’ And she tossed it at him, made him juggle it with one hand before catching it in the other, his cup tumbling into the sedge, his brows up in surprise. Before he could speak she was already walking away. She could hardly even remember what their conversation had been about. Her mind was entirely taken up with the way that blue cheek bulged as steel slid underneath it, pushing it in, pushing it in.

For What We Are About to Receive …

It's an awful fine line between being raised above folk like a leader and being raised above 'em like a hanged man on display. When Craw climbed up on an empty crate to give his little speech, he had to admit he felt closer to the latter. A sea of faces opened up in front of him, the Heroes packed with men from one side of the circle to the other and plenty more pressing in outside. Didn't help that Black Dow's own Carls were the grimmest, darkest, toughest-looking crowd you'd find anywhere in the North. And you'll find a lot of tough crowds in the North. Probably these were a long stretch more interested in doing plunder, rape and murder than anyone's idea of the right thing, and didn't care much who got on the pointy end of it either.

Craw was glad he had Jolly Yon, and Flood, and Wonderful stood frowning around the crate. He was even gladder he had Whirrun just beside. The Father of Swords was enough metal to add some weight to anyone's words. He remembered what Threetrees told him when he made him his Second. He was trying to be their leader, not their lover, and a leader's best feared first, and liked afterward.

'Men o' the North!' he bellowed into the wind. ''Case you didn't hear, Splitfoot's dead, and Black Dow's put me in his place.' He picked out the biggest, nastiest, most scornful-looking bastard in the whole crowd, a man looked like he shaved with an axe, and leaned towards him. 'Do what I fucking tell you!' he snarled. 'That's your job now.' He lingered on him for long enough to make the point he feared nothing, even if the opposite was closer to the truth. 'Keeping everyone alive, that's mine. There's a strong

likelihood I ain't going to succeed in every case. That's war. Won't stop me trying, though. And by the dead it won't stop you lot trying either.'

They milled about a little, a long way from won over. Time to list the pedigree. Bragging weren't his strong suit these days but there'd be no prize for modesty. 'My name's Curnden Craw, and I'm thirty years a Named Man! I stood Second to Rudd Threetrees, back in the day.' That name got a nodding rustle of approval. 'The Rock of Uffrith himself. Held a shield for him when he fought his duel with the Bloody-Nine.' That name got a bigger one. 'Then I fought for Bethod, and now Black Dow. Every battle you pricks heard of I had a part in.' He curled his lip. 'So safe to say you needn't worry about whether I'm up to the task.' Even if Craw was worrying his bowels loose over it himself. But his voice rang out gruff and deep still. Thank the dead for his hero's voice, even if time had given him a coward's guts.

'I want each man here to do the right thing today!' he roared. 'And before you start sneering and I'm forced to stick my boot up your arse, I ain't talking about patting children on the head, or giving your last crust to a squirrel, or even being bolder'n Skarling once the blades are drawn. I ain't talking about acting the hero.' He jerked his head towards the stones around them. 'You can leave that to the rocks. They won't bleed for it. I'm talking about standing by your Chief! Standing with your crew! Standing with the man beside you! And above all I'm talking about not getting yourselves fucking killed!'

He picked Beck out with a pointed finger. 'Look at this lad here. Red Beck, his name.' Beck's eyes went wide as the whole front rank of killers turned to look at him. 'He did the right thing yesterday. Stuck in a house in Osrung with the Union breaking down the door. Listened to his Chief. Stood with his kind. Kept his head. Put four o' the bastards in the mud and came through alive.' Maybe Craw was flowering up the truth a little but that was the point of a speech, wasn't it? 'If a lad o' seventeen years can keep the Union out of a shack, I reckon men o' your experience should have no trouble keeping 'em off a hill like this one here. And since everyone knows how rich the Union is … no doubt they'll leave plenty behind 'em as they go running down that slope, eh?' That got a bit of a laugh at least. Nothing worked like tickling their greed.

‘That’s all!’ he bellowed. ‘Find your places!’ And he hopped down, little wobble as his knee jarred but at least he kept standing. No applause, but he reckoned he’d won enough of ’em over not to get stabbed in his back before the battle was done. And in this company that was about as much as he could’ve hoped for.

‘Nice speech,’ said Wonderful.

‘You reckon?’

‘Not sure about the whole right thing bit, though. You have to say that?’

Craw shrugged. ‘Someone should.’

‘You may have heard some commotion this morning.’ Colonel Vallimir gave the assembled officers and sergeants of his Majesty’s First Regiment a stern glance. ‘That was the sound of a raid by the Northmen.’

‘That was the sound of someone fucking up,’ muttered Tunny. He’d known that as soon as he heard the clamour floating across from the east. There’s no better recipe for fuck-ups than night-time, armies and surprises.

‘There was some confusion on the front line …’

‘Further fuck-ups,’ muttered Tunny.

‘Panic spread in the darkness …’

‘Several more,’ muttered Tunny.

‘And …’ Vallimir grimaced. ‘The Northmen made off with two standards.’

Tunny opened his mouth a crack, but he lacked the words for that. A disbelieving murmur went through the gathering, clear in spite of the wind shaking the branches. Vallimir shouted them down.

‘The standards of the Second and Third were captured by the enemy! General Mitterick is …’ The colonel gave the impression of choosing his words with great care. ‘Not happy.’

Tunny snorted. Mitterick wasn’t happy at the best of times. What effect having two of his Majesty’s standards stolen from under his nose might have on the man was anyone’s guess. Probably if you stuck a pin in him right now he’d explode and take half the valley with him. Tunny realised he was clutching the standard of the First with extra-special care, and made his fists relax.

‘To make matters a great deal worse,’ Vallimir went on, ‘apparently we were sent orders to attack yesterday afternoon and they never reached us.’ Forest gave Tunny a hard look sideways but he could only shrug. Of Lederlingen there was still no sign. Possibly he’d volunteered for desertion. ‘By the time the next set came it was dark. So Mitterick wants us to make up for it today. As soon as there’s light, the general will launch an assault on Clail’s Wall in overwhelming force.’

‘Huh.’ Tunny had heard a lot about overwhelming force the last few days and the Northmen were still decidedly underwhelmed.

‘The wall at this far western end he’s going to leave to us, though. The enemy cannot possibly spare enough men to hold it once the attack is underway. As soon as we see them leave the wall, we cross the river and take them in the flank.’ Vallimir slapped one hand with the other to illustrate the point. ‘And that’ll be the end of them. Simple. As soon as they leave the wall, we attack. Any questions?’

What if they don’t leave the wall? was the one that immediately occurred, but Tunny knew a great deal better than to make himself conspicuous in front of a crowd of officers.

‘Good.’ Vallimir smiled as though silence meant the plan must be perfect, rather than just that his men were too thick, eager or cautious to point out its shortcomings. ‘We’re missing half our men and all our horses, but that won’t stop his Majesty’s First, eh? If everyone does his duty today, there’s still time for all of us to be heroes.’

Tunny had to choke off his scornful laughter as the thick, eager, cautious officers broke up and began to drift into the trees to make their soldiers ready. ‘You hear that, Forest? We can all be heroes.’

‘I’ll settle for living out the day. Tunny, I want you to get up to the treeline and keep a watch on the wall. Need some experienced eyes up there.’

‘Oh, I’ve seen it all, Sergeant.’

‘And then some more, I don’t doubt. The very instant you see the Northmen start to clear out, you give the signal. And Tunny?’ He turned back. ‘You won’t be the only one watching, so don’t even think about pulling anything clever. I still remember what happened with that ambush outside Shricta. Or what didn’t happen.’

‘No evidence of wrongdoing, and I’m quoting the tribunal there.’

‘Quoting the tribunal, you’re a piece of work.’

‘First Sergeant Forest, I am crushed that a colleague would hold so low an opinion of my character.’

‘What character?’ called Forest after him as he threaded his way uphill through the trees. Yolk was crouched in the bushes pretty much where they’d been crouching all night, peering across the stream through Tunny’s eyeglass.

‘Where’s Worth?’ Yolk opened his mouth. ‘On second thought, I can guess. Any signs of movement?’ Yolk opened his mouth again. ‘Other than in Trooper Worth’s bowels, that is?’

‘None, Corporal Tunny.’

‘Hope you don’t mind if I check.’ He snatched the eyeglass without waiting for an answer and scanned along the line of the wall, uphill from the stream, towards the east, where it disappeared over a hump in the land. ‘Not that I doubt your expertise …’ There was no one in front of the drystone but he could see spears behind it, a whole lot of them, just starting to show against the dark sky.

‘No movement, right, Corporal?’

‘No, Yolk.’ Tunny lowered his eyeglass and gave his neck a scratch. ‘No movement.’

General Jalenhorm’s entire division, reinforced by two regiments from Mitterick’s, was drawn up in parade-ground order on the gentle slope of grass and shingle that led down to the shallows. They faced north. Towards the Heroes. Towards the enemy. *So we got that much right, at least.*

Gorst had never seen so many arrayed for battle in one place and at one time, dwindling into darkness and distance on either side. Above their massed ranks a thicket of spears and barbed pole-arms jutted, the pennants of companies fluttered, and in one spot nearby the gilded standard of the King’s Own Eighth Regiment snapped in the stiff breeze, proudly displaying several generations of battle honours. Lamps cast pools of light, picking out clutches of solemn faces, striking sparks from polished steel. Here and there mounted officers waited to hear orders and give them, swords shouldered. A ragged handful of the Dogman’s Northmen stood near the water’s edge, gawping up towards this military multitude.

For the occasion General Jalenhorm had donned a thing more work of art than piece of armour: a breastplate of mirror-bright steel engraved front and back with golden suns whose countless rays became swords, lances, arrows, entwined with wreaths of oak and laurel in the most exquisite craftsmanship.

'Wish me luck,' he murmured, then gave his horse his heels and nudged it up the shingle towards the front rank.

'Good luck,' whispered Gorst.

The men were quiet enough that one could hear the faint ringing as Jalenhorm drew his sword. 'Men of the Union!' he thundered, holding it high. 'Two days ago many of you were among those who suffered a defeat at the hands of the Northmen! Who were driven from the hill you see ahead of us. The fault that day was entirely mine!' Gorst could hear other voices echoing the general's words. Officers repeating the speech to those too far away to hear the original. 'I hope, and I trust, that you will help me gain redemption today. Certainly I feel a great pride to be given the honour of leading men such as you. Brave men of Midderland, of Starikland, of Angland. Brave men of the Union!'

Staunch discipline prevented anyone from shouting out but a kind of murmur still went up from the ranks. Even Gorst felt a patriotic lifting of his chin. *A jingoistic misting of the eye. Even I, who should know so much better.*

'War is terrible!' Jalenhorm's horse pawed at the shingle and he brought it under control with a tug of the reins. 'But war is wonderful! In war, a man can find out all he truly is. All he can be. War shows us the worst of men – their greed, their cowardice, their savagery! But it also shows us the best – our courage, our strength, our mercy! Show me your best today! And more than that, show it to the enemy!'

There was a brief pause as the distant voices relayed the last sentence, and as members of Jalenhorm's staff let it be known that the address was at an end, then the men lifted their arms as one and gave a thunderous cheer. Gorst realised after a moment that he was making his own piping contribution, and stopped. The general sat with his sword raised in acknowledgement, then turned his back on the men and rode towards Gorst, his smile fading.

‘Good speech. Far as these things go.’ The Dogman was slouched in the battered saddle of a shaggy horse, blowing into his cupped palms.

‘Thank you,’ answered the general as he reined in. ‘I tried simply to tell the truth.’

‘The truth is like salt. Men want to taste a little, but too much makes everyone sick.’ The Dogman grinned at them both. Neither replied. ‘Quite some piece of armour, too.’

Jalenhorm looked down, somewhat uncomfortably, at his magnificent breastplate. ‘A gift from the king. It never seemed like quite the right occasion before …’ *But if one shouldn’t make an effort when charging to one’s doom, then, really, when should one?*

‘So what’s the plan?’ asked the Dogman.

Jalenhorm swept his arm towards his waiting division. ‘The Eighth and Thirteenth Foot and the Stariksa Regiment will lead off.’ *He makes it sound like a wedding dance. I suspect the casualties will be higher.* ‘The Twelfth and the Aduan Volunteers will form our second wave.’ *Waves break on a beach, and melt away into the sand, and are forgotten.* ‘The remnants of the Rostod Regiment and the Sixth will follow in reserve.’ *Remnants, remnants. We all will be remnants, in due course.*

The Dogman puffed his cheeks out as he looked at the massed ranks. ‘Well, you’ve no shortage of bodies, anyway.’ *Oh no, and no shortage of mud to bury them in either.*

‘First we cross the shallows.’ Jalenhorm pointed towards the twisting channels and sandbars with his sword. ‘I expect they will have skirmishers hidden about the far bank.’

‘No doubt,’ said the Dogman.

The sword drifted up towards the rows of fruit trees, just becoming visible on the sloping ground between the glimmering water and the base of the hill. ‘We expect some resistance as we pass through the orchards.’ *More than some, I imagine.*

‘We might be able to flush ’em out of the trees.’

‘But you have no more than a few score men over here.’

The Dogman winked. ‘There’s more to war than numbers. Few o’ my boys are already across the river, lying low. Once you’re over, just give us a chance. If we’re able to shift ’em, fine, if not, you’ve lost nothing.’

‘Very well,’ said Jalenhorm. ‘I am willing to take any course that might save lives.’ *Ignoring the fact that the entire business is an exercise in slaughter.* ‘Once the orchards are in our hands …’ His sword drifted implacably up the bare hillside, pointing out the smaller stones on the southern spur, then the larger ones on the summit, glowing faintly orange in the light of guttering fires. He shrugged, letting his sword drop. ‘We climb the hill.’

‘You climb that hill?’ asked the Dogman, eyebrows high.

‘Indeed.’

‘Fuck.’ Gorst could only silently concur. ‘They’ve been up there two days now. Black Dow’s all kinds of things but he’s no fool, he’ll be ready. Stakes planted, and ditches dug, and men at the drystone walls, and arrows showering down, and—’

‘Our purpose is not necessarily to drive them off,’ Jalenhorm interrupted, grimacing as though there were arrows showering on him already. ‘It is to fix them in place while General Mitterick on the left, and Colonel Brock on the right, force openings on the flanks.’

‘Aye,’ said the Dogman, somewhat uncertainly.

‘But we hope we may achieve much more than that.’

‘Aye, but, I mean …’ The Dogman took a deep breath as he frowned up towards the hill. ‘Fuck.’ *I’m not sure I could have said it better.* ‘You sure about this?’

‘My opinion does not enter into the case. The plan is Marshal Kroy’s, on the orders of the Closed Council and the wishes of the king. My responsibility is the timing.’

‘Well, if you’re going to go, I wouldn’t leave it too long.’ The Dogman nodded to them, then turned his shaggy horse away. ‘Reckon we’ll have rain later. And lots of it!’

Jalenhorm peered up at the sullen sky, bright enough now to see the clouds flowing quickly across it, and sighed. ‘The timing is in my hands. Across the river, through the orchards, and straight up the hill. Just go north, basically. That should be within my capabilities, I would have thought.’ They sat in silence for a moment. ‘I wanted very much to do the right thing, but I have proved myself to be … not the greatest tactical mind in his Majesty’s army.’ He sighed again. ‘At least I can still lead from the front.’

‘With the greatest respect, might I suggest you remain behind the lines?’

Jalenhorm's head jerked around, astonished. *At the words themselves or at hearing me speak more than three together? People talk to me as though they were talking to a wall, and they expect the same return.* 'Your concern for my safety is touching, Colonel Gorst, but—'

'Bremer.' *I might as well die with one person in the world who knows me by my first name.*

Jalenhorm's eyes went even wider. Then he gave a faint smile. 'Truly touching, Bremer, but I am afraid I could not consider it. His Majesty expects—'

Fuck his Majesty. 'You are a good man.' *A floundering incompetent, but still.* 'War is no place for good men.'

'I respectfully disagree, on both counts. War is a wonderful thing for redemption.' Jalenhorm narrowed his eyes at the Heroes, seeming so close now, just across the water. 'If you smile in the face of danger, acquit yourself well, stand your ground, then, live or die, you are made new. Battle can make a man … clean, can't it?' *No. Wash yourself in blood and you come out bloody.* 'Only look at you. I may or may not be a good man, but you are without doubt a hero.'

'Me?'

'Who else? Two days ago, here at these very shallows, you charged the enemy alone and saved my division. An established fact, I witnessed part of the action myself. And yesterday you were at the Old Bridge?' Gorst frowned at nothing. 'You forced a crossing when Mitterick's men were mired in the filth, a crossing that may very well win this battle for us today. You are an inspiration, Bremer. You prove that one man still can be worth something in the midst of … all this. You do not need to fight here today, and yet you stand ready to give your life for king and country.' *To toss it away for a king who does not care and a country which cannot.* 'Heroes are a great deal rarer than good men.'

'Heroes are quickly fashioned from the basest materials. Quickly fashioned, and quickly replaced. If I qualify, they are worthless.'

'I beg to differ.'

'Differ, by all means, but please … remain behind the lines.'

Jalenhorm gave a sad little smile, and he reached out, and tapped at Gorst's dented shoulder-plate with his fist. 'Your concern for my safety

really is touching, Bremer. But I'm afraid I cannot do it. I cannot do it any more than you can.'

'No.' Gorst frowned up towards the hill, a black mass against the stained sky. 'A shame.'

Calder squinted through his father's eyeglass. Beyond the circle of light cast by all the lamps, the fields faded into shifting blackness. Down towards the Old Bridge he could pick out spots of brightness, perhaps the odd glint of metal, but not much more. 'Do you think they're ready?'

'I can see horses,' said Pale-as-Snow. 'A lot of horses.'

'You can? I can't see a bloody thing.'

'They're there.'

'You think they're watching?'

'I reckon they are.'

'Mitterick watching?'

'I would be.'

Calder squinted up at the sky, starting to show grey between the fast-moving clouds. Only the most committed optimist could've called it dawn, and he wasn't one. 'Guess it's time, then.'

He took one more swig from the flask, rubbed at his aching bladder, then passed it over to Pale-as-Snow and clambered up the stack of crates, blinking into the lamplight, conspicuous as a shooting star. He took a look over his shoulder at the ranks of men ranged behind him, dark shapes in front of the long wall. He didn't really understand them, or like them, and they felt the same about him, but they had one powerful thing in common. They'd all basked in his father's glory. They'd been great men because of who they served. Because they'd sat at the big table in Skarling's Hall, in the places of honour. They'd all fallen a long way when Calder's father died. It looked like none of them could stand to fall any further, which was a relief, since a Chief without soldiers is just a very lonely man in a big bloody field.

He was very much aware of all those eyes on him as he unlaced. The eyes of a couple of thousand of his boys behind, and a fair few of Tenways' too, and the eyes of a few thousand Union cavalry ahead, he hoped, General Mitterick among them, ready to pop his skull with anger.

Nothing. Try to relax or try to push? Bloody typical, that would be, all this effort and he found he couldn't go. To make matters worse the wind was keen and it was freezing the end of his prick. The man holding up the flag on his left, a grizzled old Carl with a great scar right across one cheek, was watching his efforts with a slightly puzzled expression.

'Can you not look?' snapped Calder.

'Sorry, Chief.' And he cleared his throat and almost daintily averted his eyes.

Maybe it was being called Chief that got him over the hump. Calder felt that hint of pain down in his bladder, and he grinned, let it build, let his head drop back, looked up at the bruised sky.

'Hah.' Piss showered out, drops shining in the lamplight, and spattered all over the first flag with a sound like rain on the daisies. Behind Calder, a wave of laughter swept down the lines. Easily pleased, maybe, but large bodies of fighting men don't tend to go for subtle jokes. They go for shit, and piss, and people falling over.

'And some for you too.' He sent a neat arc across the other flag, and he smirked towards the Union as wide as he could. Behind him men started to jump up, and dance about, and jeer across the barley. He might not be much of a warrior, or a leader, but he knew how to make men laugh, and how to make them angry. With his free hand he pointed up at the sky, and he gave a great whoop, and he shook his hips around and sent piss shooting all over the place. 'I'd shit on 'em too,' he shouted over his shoulder, 'but I'm all bound up from White-Eye's stew!'

'I'll shit on 'em!' someone shrieked, to a scattering of shrill chuckles.

'Save it for the Union, you can shit on them when they get here!'

And the men whooped and laughed, shook their weapons at the sky and clattered them against their shields and sent up quite the happy din. A couple had even climbed up on the wall and were pissing at the Union lines themselves. Maybe they found it a good deal funnier because they knew what was coming, just across the other side of the barley, but still Calder smiled to hear it. At least he'd stood up, and done one thing worth singing about. At least he'd given his father's men a laugh. His brother's men. His men.

Before they all got fucking murdered.

Beck thought he could hear laughter echoing on the wind, but he'd no idea what anyone might have to laugh about. It was getting light enough to see across the valley now. Light enough to get an idea of the Union's numbers. To begin with Beck hadn't believed those faint blocks on the other side of the shallows could be solid masses of men. Then he'd tried to make himself believe they weren't. Now there was no denying it.

'There are thousands of 'em,' he breathed.

'I know!' Whirrun was nearly jumping with happiness. 'And the more there are, the more our glory, right, Craw?'

Craw took a break from chewing his nails. 'Oh, aye. I wish there were twice as many.'

'By the dead, so do I!' Whirrun dragged in a long breath and blew it through a beaming smile. 'But you never know, maybe they've got more out of sight!'

'We can hope,' grunted Yon out of the corner of his mouth.

'I fucking love war!' squeaked Whirrun. 'I fucking love it, though, don't you?'

Beck didn't say anything.

'The smell of it. The feel of it.' He rubbed one hand up and down the stained sheath of his sword, making a faint swishing sound. 'War is honest. There's no lying to it. You don't have to say sorry here. Don't have to hide. You cannot. If you die? So what? You die among friends. Among worthy foes. You die looking the Great Leveller in the eye. If you live? Well, lad, that's living, isn't it? A man isn't truly alive until he's facing death.' Whirrun stamped his foot into the sod. 'I love war! Just a shame Ironhead's down there on the Children. Do you reckon they'll even get all the way up here, Craw?'

'Couldn't say.'

'I reckon they will. I hope they will. Better come before the rain starts, though. That sky looks like witch's work, eh?' It was true there was a strange colour to the first hint of sunrise, great towers of sullen-looking cloud marching in over the fells to the north. Whirrun bounced up and down on his toes. 'Oh, bloody hell, I can't wait!'

'Ain't they people too, though?' muttered Beck, thinking of the face of that Union man lying dead in the shack yesterday. 'Just like us?'

Whirrun squinted across at him. ‘More than likely they are. But if you start thinking like that, well … you’ll get no one killed at all.’

Beck opened his mouth, then closed it. Didn’t seem much he could say to that. Made about as much sense as anything else had happened the last few days.

‘It’s easy enough for you,’ grunted Craw. ‘Shoglig told you the time and place of your death and it ain’t here.’

Whirrun’s grin got bigger. ‘Well, that’s true and I’ll admit it’s a help to my courage, but if she’d told me here and she’d told me now, do you really reckon that’d make any difference to me?’

Wonderful snorted. ‘You might not be yapping about it so bloody loud.’

‘Oh!’ Whirrun wasn’t even listening. ‘They’re off already, look! That’s early!’ He pointed the Father of Swords at arm’s length to the west, towards the Old Bridge, flinging his other arm around Beck’s shoulders. The strength in it was fearsome, he nearly lifted Beck without even trying. ‘Look at the pretty horses!’ Beck couldn’t see much down there but dark land, the glimmer of the river and a speckling of lights. ‘That’s fresh of ’em, isn’t it, though? That’s cheeky! Getting started and it’s hardly dawn!’

‘Too dark for riding,’ said Craw, shaking his head.

‘They must be as bloody eager as I am. Reckon they mean business today, eh, Craw? Oh, by the dead,’ and he shook his sword towards the valley, dragging Beck back and forth and nearly right off his feet, ‘I reckon there’ll be some songs sung about today!’

‘I daresay,’ grunted Wonderful through gritted teeth. ‘Some folk’ll sing about any old shit.’

The Riddle of the Ground

‘Here they come,’ said Pale-as-Snow, utterly deadpan, as if there was nothing more worrying than a herd of sheep on its way. It hardly needed an announcement. Calder could hear them, however dark it was. First the long note of a trumpet, then the whispering rustle of horses through crops, far off but closing, sprinkled with calls, whinnies, jingles of harness that seemed to tickle at Calder’s clammy skin. All faint, but all crushingly inevitable. They were coming, and Calder hardly knew whether to be smug or terrified. He settled on a bit of both.

‘Can’t believe they fell for it.’ He almost wanted to laugh it was so ridiculous. Laugh or be sick. ‘Those arrogant fucks.’

‘If you can rely on one thing in a battle, it’s that men rarely do what’s sensible.’ Good point. If Calder had any sense he’d have been on horseback himself, spurring hard for somewhere a long, long way away. ‘That’s what made your father the great man. Always kept a cold head, even in the fire.’

‘Would you say we’re in the fire now?’

Pale-as-Snow leaned forward and carefully spat. ‘I’d say we’re about to be. Reckon you’ll keep a cold head?’

‘Can’t see why.’ Calder’s eyes darted nervously to either side, across the snaking line of torches before the wall. The line of his men, following the gentle rise and fall of the earth. ‘The ground is a puzzle to be solved,’ his father used to say, ‘the bigger your army, the harder the puzzle.’ He’d been a master at using it. One look and he’d known where to put every man, how to make each slope, and tree, and stream, and fence fight on his side. Calder had done what he could, used each tump and hummock and ranged his

archers behind Clail's Wall, but he doubted that ribbon of waist-high farmer's drystone would give a warhorse anything more than a little light exercise.

The sad fact was a flat expanse of barley didn't offer much help. Except to the enemy, of course. No doubt they were delighted.

It was an irony Calder hadn't missed that his father was the one who'd smoothed off this ground. Who'd broken up the little farms in this valley and a lot of others. Pulled up the hedgerows and filled in the ditches so there could be more crops grown, and taxes paid, and soldiers fed. Rolled out a golden carpet of welcome to the matchless Union cavalry.

Calder could just make out, against the dim fells on the far side of the valley, a black wave through the black sea of barley, sharpened metal glimmering at the crest. He found himself thinking about Seff. Her face coming up so sharp it caught his breath. He wondered if he'd see that face again, if he'd live to kiss his child. Then the soft thoughts were crushed under the drumming of hooves as the enemy broke into a trot. The shrill calls of officers as they struggled to keep the ranks closed, to keep hundreds of tons of horseflesh lined up in one unstoppable mass.

Calder glanced over to the left. Not too far off the ground sloped up towards Skarling's Finger, the crops giving way to thin grass. Much better ground, but it belonged to that flaking bastard Tenways. He glanced over to the right. A gentler upward slope, Clail's Wall hugging the middle, then disappearing out of sight as the ground dropped away to the stream. Beyond the stream, he knew, were woods full of more Union troops, eager to charge into the flank of his threadbare little line and rip it to tatters. But enemies Calder couldn't see were far from his most pressing problem. It was the hundreds, if not thousands, of heavily armed horsemen bearing down from dead ahead, whose treasured flags he'd just pissed on, that were demanding his attention. His eyes flickered over that tide of cavalry, details starting from the darkness now, hints of faces, of shields, lances, polished armour.

'Arrows?' grunted White-Eye, leaning close beside him.

Best to look like he had some idea how far bowshot was, so he waited a moment longer before he snapped his fingers. 'Arrows.'

White-Eye roared the order and Calder heard the bowstrings behind him, shafts flickering overhead, flitting down into the crops between them and

the enemy, into the enemy themselves. Could little bits of wood and metal really do any damage to all that armoured meat, though?

The sound of them was like a storm in his face, pressing him back as they closed and quickened, streaming north towards Clail's Wall and the feeble line of Calder's men. The hooves battered the shaking land, threshed crops flung high. Calder felt a sudden need to run. A shock through him. Found he was edging back despite himself. To stand against that was mad as standing under a falling mountain.

But he found he was less afraid with every moment, and more excited. All his life he'd been dodging this, ferreting out excuses. Now he was facing it, and finding it not so terrible as he'd always feared. He bared his teeth at the dawn. Almost smiling. Almost laughing. Him, leading Carls into battle. Him, facing death. And suddenly he was standing, and spreading his arms in welcome, and roaring nothing at the top of his lungs. Him, Calder, the liar, the coward, playing the hero. You never can tell who'll be called on to fill the role.

The closer the riders came the lower they leaned over their horses, lances swinging down. The faster they moved, stretching to a lethal gallop, the slower time seemed to crawl. Calder wished he'd listened to his father when he'd talked about the ground. Talked about it with a far-off look like a man remembering a lost love. Wished he'd learned to use it like a sculptor uses stone. But he'd been busy showing off, fucking and making enemies that would dog him for the rest of his life. So yesterday evening, when he'd looked at the ground and seen it thoroughly stacked against him, he'd done what he did best.

Cheat.

The horsemen had no chance of seeing the first pit, not in that darkness and those crops. It was only a shallow trench, no more than a foot deep and a foot wide, zigzagging through the barley. Most horses went clean over it without even noticing. But a couple of unlucky ones put a hoof right in, and they went down. They went down hard, a thrashing mass of limbs, tangled straps, breaking weapons, flying dust. And where one went down, more went down behind, caught up in the wreck.

The second pit was twice as wide and twice as deep. More horses fell, snatched away as the front rank ploughed into it, one flailing man flung high, lance still in his hand. The order of the rest, already crumbling in their

eagerness to get at the enemy, started to come apart altogether. Some plunged onwards. Others tried to check as they realised something was wrong, spreading confusion as another flight of arrows fell among them. They became a milling mass, almost as much of a threat to each other as they were to Calder and his men. The terrible thunder of hooves became a sorry din of scrapes and stumbles, screams and whinnies, desperate shouting.

The third pit was the biggest of all. Two of them, in fact, about as straight as a Northman could dig by darkness and angling roughly inwards. Funnelling Mitterick's men on both sides towards a gap in the centre where the precious flags were set. Where Calder was standing. Made him wonder, as he gaped at the mob of plunging horses converging on him, whether he should have found somewhere else to stand, but it was a bit late for that.

'Spears!' roared Pale-as-Snow.

'Aye,' muttered Calder, brandishing his sword as he took a few cautious steps back. 'Good idea.'

And Pale-as-Snow's picked men, who'd fought for Calder's brother and his father at Uffrith and Dunbrec, at the Cumnur and in the High Places, came up from behind the wind-blown barley five ranks deep, howling their high war cry, and their long spears made a deadly thicket, points glittering as the first sunlight crept into the valley.

Horses screamed and skidded, tumbled over, tossed their riders, driven onto the spears by the weight of those behind. A crazy chorus of shrieking steel and murdered men, tortured wood and tortured flesh. Spear shafts bent and shattered, splinters flying. A new gloom of kicked-up dirt and trampled barley dust and Calder coughing in the midst of it, sword dangling from his limp hand.

Wondering what strange convergence of mischances could have allowed this madness to happen. And what other one might allow him to get out of it alive.

Onwards and Upwards

‘Do you suppose we could call that dawn?’ asked General Jalenhorm.

Colonel Gorst shrugged his great shoulders, battered armour rattling faintly.

The general looked down at Retter. ‘Would you call that dawn, boy?’

Retter blinked at the sky. Over in the east, where he imagined Osrung was though he’d never been there, the heavy clouds had the faintest ominous tinge of brightness about their edges. ‘Yes, General.’ His voice was a pathetic squeak and he cleared his throat, rather embarrassed.

General Jalenhorm leaned close and patted his shoulder. ‘There’s no shame in being scared. Bravery is being scared, and doing it anyway.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Just stay close beside me. Do your duty, and everything will be well.’

‘Yes, sir.’ Though Retter was forced to wonder how doing his duty might stop an arrow. Or a spear. Or an axe. It seemed a mad thing to him to be climbing a hill as big as that one, with slavering Northmen waiting for them on the slopes. Everyone said they were slavering. But he was only thirteen, and had been in the army for six months, and didn’t know much but polishing boots and how to sound the various manoeuvres. He wasn’t even entirely sure what the word manoeuvres meant, just pretended. And there was nowhere safer to be than close by the general and a proper hero like Colonel Gorst, albeit he looked nothing like a hero and sounded like one less. There wasn’t the slightest glitter about the man, but Retter supposed if you needed a battering ram at short notice he’d make a fair substitute.

‘Very well, Retter.’ Jalenhorm drew his sword. ‘Sound the advance.’

‘Yes, sir.’ Retter carefully wet his lips with his tongue, took a deep breath and lifted his bugle, suddenly worried that he’d fumble it in his sweaty hand, that he’d blow a wrong note, that it would somehow be full of mud and produce only a miserable fart and a shower of dirty water. He had nightmares about that. Maybe this would be another. He very much hoped it would be.

But the advance rang out bright and true, tooting away as bravely as it ever had on the parade ground. ‘Forward!’ the bugle sang, and forward went Jalenhorm’s division, and forward went Jalenhorm himself, and Colonel Gorst, and a clump of the general’s staff, pennants snapping. So, with some reluctance, Retter gave his pony his heels, and clicked his tongue, and forward he went himself, hooves crunching down the bank then slopping out into the sluggish water.

He supposed he was one of the lucky ones since he got to ride. At least he’d come out of this with dry trousers. Unless he wet himself. Or got wounded in the legs. Either one of which seemed quite likely, come to think of it.

A few arrows looped over from the far bank. Exactly from where, Retter couldn’t say. He was more interested in where they were going. A couple plopped harmlessly into the channels ahead. Others were lost among the ranks where they caused no apparent damage. Retter flinched as one pinged off a helmet and spun in among the marching soldiers. Everyone else had armour. General Jalenhorm had what looked like the most expensive armour in the world. It hardly seemed fair that Retter didn’t have any, but the army wasn’t the place for fair, he supposed.

He snatched a look back as his pony scrambled from the water and up onto a little island of sand, driftwood gathered in a pale tangle at one end. The shallows were filled with soldiers, marching up to ankles, or knees, or even waists in places. Behind them the whole long bank was covered by ranks of men waiting to follow, still more appearing over the brow behind them. It made Retter feel brave, to be one among so many. If the Northmen killed a hundred, if they killed a thousand, there would still be thousands more. He wasn’t honestly sure how many a thousand was, but it was a lot.

Then it occurred to him that was all very well unless you were one of the thousand flung in a pit, in which case it wasn’t very good at all, especially since he’d heard only officers got coffins, and he really didn’t want to lie

pressed up cold against the mud. He looked nervously towards the orchards, flinched again as an arrow clattered from a shield a dozen strides away.

'Keep up, lad!' called Jalenhorm, spurring his horse onto the next bar of shingle. They were half way across the shallows now, the great hill looming up ever steeper beyond the trees ahead.

'Sir!' Retter realised he was hunching his shoulders, pressing himself down into his saddle to make a smaller target, realised he looked a coward and forced himself straight. Over on the far bank he saw men scurrying from a patch of scrubby bushes. Ragged men with bows. The enemy, he realised. Northern skirmishers. Close enough to shout at, and be heard. So close it seemed a little silly. Like the games of chase he used to play behind the barn. He sat up taller, forced his shoulders back. They looked every bit as scared as he was. One with a shock of blond hair knelt to shoot an arrow which came down harmlessly in the sand just ahead of the front rank. Then he turned and hurried off towards the orchards.

Curly ducked into the trees along with the rest, rushed through the apple-smelling darkness bent low, heading uphill. He hopped over the felled logs and came up kneeling on the other side, peering off to the south. The sun was barely risen and the orchards were thick with shadows. He could see the metal gleaming to either side, men hidden in a long line through the trees.

'They coming?' someone asked. 'They here?'

'They're coming,' said Curly. Maybe he'd been the last to run but that was nothing much to take pride in. They'd been rattled by the sheer number of the bastards. It was like the land was made of men. Seething with 'em. Hardly seemed worth sitting there on the bank, no cover but a scraggy bush or two, just a few dozen shooting arrows at all that lot. Pointless as going at a swarm of bees with a needle. Here in the orchard was a better place to give 'em a test. Ironhead would understand that. Curly hoped to hell he would.

They'd got all mixed up with some folks he didn't know on the way back. A tall old-timer with a red hood was squatting by him in the dappled shadows. Probably one of Golden's boys. There was no love lost between Golden's lot and Ironhead's most of the time. Not much more'n there was

between Golden and Ironhead themselves, which was less than fuck all. But right now they had other worries.

'You see the number of 'em?' someone squeaked.

'Bloody hundreds.'

'Hundreds and hundreds and hundreds and—'

'We ain't here to stop 'em,' growled Curly. 'We slow 'em, we put a couple down, we give 'em something to think about. Then, when we have to, we pull back to the Children.'

'Pull back,' someone said, sounding like it was the best idea he'd ever heard.

'When we have to!' snapped Curly over his shoulder.

'They got Northmen with 'em too,' someone said, 'some o' the Dogman's boys, I reckon.'

'Bastards,' someone grunted.

'Aye, bastards. Traitors.' The man with the red hood spat over their log. 'I heard the Bloody-Nine was with 'em.'

There was a nervy silence. That name did no favours for anyone's courage.

'The Bloody-Nine's back to the mud!' Curly wriggled his shoulders. 'Drowned. Black Dow killed him.'

'Maybe.' The man with the red hood looked grim as a gravedigger. 'But I heard he's here.'

A bowstring went right by Curly's ear and he spun around. 'What the—'

'Sorry!' A young lad, bow trembling in his hand. 'Didn't mean to, just—'

'The Bloody-Nine!' It came echoing out of the trees on their left, a mad yell, slobbering, terrified. 'The Bloody—' It cut off in a shriek, long drawn out and guttering away into a sob. Then a burst of mad laughter in the orchard ahead, making the collar prickle at Curly's sweaty neck. An animal sound. A devil sound. They all crouched there for a stretched-out moment – staring, silent, disbelieving.

'Shit on this!' someone shouted, and Curly turned just in time to see one of the lads running off through the trees.

'I ain't fighting the Bloody-Nine! I ain't!' A boy scrambling back, kicking up fallen leaves.

'Get back here, you bastards!' Curly snarled, waving his bow about, but it was too late. His head snapped around at another blubbering scream.

Couldn’t see where it came from but it sounded like hell, right enough.

‘The Bloody-Nine!’ came roaring again out of the gloom on the other side. He thought he could see shadows in the trees, flashes of steel, maybe. There were others running, right and left. Giving up good spots behind their logs without a shaft shot or a blade drawn. When he turned back, most of his lads were showing their backs. One even left his quiver behind, snagged on a bush.

‘Cowards!’ But there was naught Curly could do. A Chief can kick one or two boys into line, but when the lot of ’em just up and run he’s helpless. Being in charge can seem like a thing iron-forged, but in the end it’s just an idea everyone agrees to. By the time he ducked back behind the log everyone had stopped agreeing, and far as he could tell it was just him and the stranger with the red hood.

‘There he is!’ he hissed, stiffening up all of a sudden. ‘It’s him!’

That madman’s laughter echoed through the trees again, bouncing around, coming from everywhere and nowhere. Curly nocked an arrow, his hands sticky, his bow sticky in ’em. Eyes jerking around, catching one slice of slashed-up shade then another, jagged branches and the shadows of jagged branches. The Bloody-Nine was dead, everyone knew that. What if he weren’t, though?

‘I don’t see nothing!’ His hands were shaking, but shit on it, the Bloody-Nine was just a man, and an arrow would kill him as dead as anyone else. Just a man is all he was, and Curly weren’t running from one man no matter how fucking hard, no matter if the rest of ’em were running, no matter what. ‘Where is he?’

‘There!’ hissed the man with the red hood, catching him by the shoulder and pointing off into the trees. ‘There he is!’

Curly raised his bow, peering into the darkness. ‘I don’t— Ah!’ There was a searing pain in his ribs and he let go of the string, arrow spinning off harmless into the dirt. Another searing pain, and he looked down, and he saw the man with the red hood had stabbed him. Knife hilt right up against his chest, and the hand dark with blood.

Curly grabbed a fistful of the man’s shirt, twisted it. ‘Wha …’ But he didn’t have the breath in him to finish, and he didn’t seem to be able to take another.

‘Sorry,’ said the man, wincing as he stabbed him again.

Red Hat took a quick look about, make sure no one was watching, but it looked like Ironhead's boys were all too busy legging it out of the orchards and uphill towards the Children, a lot of 'em with brown trousers, more'n likely. He'd have laughed to see it if it weren't for the job he'd just had to do. He laid down the man he'd killed, patting him gently on his bloody chest as his eyes went dull, still with that slightly puzzled, slightly upset look.

'Sorry 'bout that.' A hard reckoning for a man who'd just been doing his job the best he could. Better'n most, since he'd chosen to stick when the rest had run. But that's how war is. Sometimes you're better off doing a worse job. This was the black business and there was no use crying about it. Tears'll wash no one clean, as Red Hat's old mum used to tell him.

'The Bloody-Nine!' he shrieked, broken and horror-struck as he could manage. 'He's here! He's here!' Then he gave a scream as he wiped his knife on the lad's jerkin, still squinting into the shadows for signs of other holdouts, but signs there were none.

'The Bloody-Nine!' someone roared, no more'n a dozen strides behind. Red Hat turned and stood up.

'You can stop. They've gone.'

The Dogman's grey face slid from the shadows, bow and arrows loose in one hand. 'What, all of 'em?'

Red Hat pointed down at the corpse he'd just made. 'All but a few.'

'Who'd have thought it?' The Dogman squatted beside him, a few more of his lads creeping out from the trees behind. 'The work you can get done with a dead man's name.'

'That and a dead man's laugh.'

'Colla, get back there and tell the Union the orchards are clear.'

'Aye.' And one of the others scurried off through the trees.

'How does it look up ahead?' Dogman slid over the logs and stole towards the treeline, keeping nice and low. Always careful, the Dogman, always sparing with men's lives. Sparing o' lives on both sides. Rare thing in a War Chief, and much to be applauded, for all the big songs tended to harp on spilled guts and what have you. They squatted there in the brush, in the shadows. Red Hat wondered how long the pair of 'em had spent squatting in the brush, in the shadows, in one damp corner of the North or another. Weeks on end, more'n likely. 'Don't look great, does it?'

‘Not great, no,’ said Red Hat.

Dogman eased his way closer to the edge of the trees and hunkered down again. ‘And it looks no better from here.’

‘Wasn’t going to, really, was it?’

‘Not really. But a man needs hope.’

The ground weren’t offering much. A couple more fruit trees, a scrubby bush or two, then the bare hillside sloped up sharp ahead. Some runners were still struggling up the grass and beyond them, as the sun started throwing some light onto events, the ragged line of some digging in. Above that the tumbledown wall that ringed the Children, and above that the Children themselves.

‘All crawling with Ironhead’s boys, no doubt,’ muttered the Dogman, speaking Red Hat’s very thoughts.

‘Aye, and Ironhead’s a stubborn bastard. Always been tricky to shift, once he gets settled.’

‘Like the pox,’ said Dogman.

‘And about as welcome.’

‘Reckon the Union’ll need more’n dead heroes to get up there.’

‘Reckon they’ll need a few living ones too.’

‘Aye.’

‘Aye.’ Red Hat shielded his eyes with one hand, realised too late he’d got blood stuck all over the side of his face. He thought he could see a big man standing up on the diggings below the Children, shouting at the stragglers as they fled. Could just hear his bellowing voice. Not quite the words, but the tone spoke plenty.

Dogman was grinning. ‘He don’t sound happy.’

‘Nope,’ said Red Hat, grinning too. As his old mum used to say, there’s no music so sweet as an enemy’s despair.

‘You fucking coward bastards!’ snarled Irig, and he kicked the last of ’em on the arse as he went past, bent over and gasping from the climb, knocked him on his face in the muck. Better’n he deserved. Lucky he only got Irig’s boot, rather’n his axe.

‘Fucking bastard cowards!’ sneered Temper at a higher pitch, and kicked the coward in the arse again as he started to get up.

‘Ironhead’s boys don’t run!’ snarled Irig, and he kicked the coward in the side and rolled him over.

‘Ironhead’s boys never run!’ And Temper kicked the lad in the fruits as he tried to scramble off and made him squeal.

‘But the Bloody-Nine’s down there!’ shouted another, his face milk pale and his eyes wide as shit-pits, cringing like a babe. A worried muttering followed the name, rippling through the boys all waiting behind the ditch. ‘The Bloody-Nine. The Bloody-Nine? The Bloody-Nine. The—’

‘Fuck,’ snarled Irig, ‘the Bloody-Nine!’

‘Aye,’ hissed Temper. ‘Fuck him. Fucking fuck him!’

‘Did you even see him?’

‘Well … no, I mean, not myself, but—’

‘If he ain’t dead, which he is, and if he’s got the bones, which he don’t, he can come up here.’ And Irig leaned close to the lad, and tickled him under the chin with the spike on the end of his axe. ‘And he can deal with me.’

‘Aye!’ Temper was nearly shrieking it, veins popping out his head. ‘He can come up here and deal with … with him! With Irig! That’s right! Ironhead’s going to hang you bastards for running! Like he hung Crouch, and cut his guts out for treachery, he’ll fucking do the same to you, he will, and we’ll—’

‘You think you’re helping?’ snapped Irig.

‘Sorry, Chief.’

‘You want names? We got Cairm Ironhead up there at the Children. And at his back on the Heroes, we got Cracknut Whirrun, and Caul Shivers, and Black Dow his bloody self, for that matter—’

‘Up there,’ someone muttered.

‘Who said that?’ shrieked Temper. ‘Who fucking well said—’

‘Any man who stands now,’ Irig held up his axe and gave it a shake with each word, since he’d often found a shaken axe adds an edge to the bluntest of arguments, ‘and does his part, he’ll get his place at the fire and his place in the songs. Any man runs from this spot here, well,’ and Irig spat onto the curled-up coward next to his boot. ‘I won’t put Ironhead to the trouble o’ passing judgement, I’ll just give you to the axe, and there’s an end on it.’

‘An end!’ shrieked Temper.

‘Chief.’ Someone was tugging at his arm.

‘Can’t you see I’m trying to—’ snarled Irig, spinning around. ‘Shit.’

‘Never mind the Bloody-Nine. The Union were coming.

‘Colonel, you must dismount.’

Vinkler smiled. Even that was an effort. ‘Couldn’t possibly.’

‘Sir, really, this is no time for heroics.’

‘Then …’ Vinkler glanced across the massed ranks of men emerging from the fruit trees to either side. ‘When is the time, exactly?’

‘Sir—’

‘The bloody leg just won’t manage it.’ Vinkler winced as he touched his thigh. Even the weight of his hand on it was agonising now.

‘Is it bad, sir?’

‘Yes, sergeant, I think it’s quite bad.’ He was no surgeon, but he was twenty years a soldier and well knew the meaning of stinking dressings and a mottling of purple-red bruises about a wound. He had, in all honesty, been surprised to wake at all this morning.

‘Perhaps you should retire and see the surgeon, sir—’

‘I have a feeling the surgeons will be very busy today. No, Sergeant, thank you, but I’ll press on.’ Vinkler turned his horse with a twitch of the reins, worried that the man’s concern would cause his courage to weaken. He needed all the courage he had. ‘Men of his Majesty’s Thirteenth!’ He drew his sword and directed its point towards the scattering of stones high above them. ‘Forward!’ And with his good heel he urged his horse up onto the slope.

He was the only mounted man in the whole division now, as far as he could tell. The rest of the officers, General Jalenhorm and Colonel Gorst among them, had left their horses in the orchard and were proceeding on foot. Only a complete fool would have chosen to ride up a hill as steep as this one, after all. Only a fool, or the hero from an unlikely storybook, or a dead man.

The irony was that it hadn’t even been much of a wound. He’d been run through at Ulrioch, all those years ago, and Lord Marshal Varuz had visited him in the hospital tent, and pressed his sweaty hand with an expression of deep concern, and said something about bravery which Vinkler had often wished he could remember. But to everyone’s surprise, his own most of all,

he had lived. Perhaps that was why he had thought nothing of a little nick on the thigh. Now it gave every appearance of having killed him.

'Bloody appearances,' he forced through gritted teeth. The only thing for it was to smile through the agony. That's what a soldier was meant to do. He had written all the necessary letters and supposed that was something. His wife had always worried there would be no goodbye.

Rain was starting to flit down. He could feel the odd spot against his face. His horse's hooves were slipping on the short grass and it tossed and snorted, making him grimace as his leg was jolted. Then a flight of arrows went up ahead. A great number of arrows. Then they began to curve gracefully downwards, falling from on high.

'Oh, bloody hell.' He narrowed his eyes and hunched his shoulders instinctively as a man might stepping from a porch into a hailstorm. Some of them dropped down around him, sticking silently into the turf to either side. He heard clanks and rattles behind as they bounced from shields or armour. He heard a shriek, followed by another. Shouting. Men hit.

Damned if he was going to just sit there. 'Yah!' And Vinkler gave his horse the spurs, wincing as it lurched up the hill, well ahead of his men. He stopped perhaps twenty strides from the enemy's earthworks. He could see the archers peering down, their bows picked out black against the sky, which was starting to darken again, drizzle prickling at Vinkler's helmet. He was terribly close. An absurdly easy target. More arrows whizzed past him. With a great effort he turned in his saddle and, lips curled back against the pain, stood in his stirrups, raising his sword.

'Men of the Thirteenth! At the double now! Have you somewhere else to be?'

A few soldiers fell as more arrows whipped past into the front rank, but the rest gave a hearty roar and broke into something close to a run, which was a damned fine testament to their spirit after the march they'd already had.

Vinkler became aware of an odd sensation in his throbbing leg, looked down, and was surprised to see an arrow poking from his dead thigh. He burst out laughing. 'That's my least vulnerable spot, you bloody arseholes!' he roared at the Northmen on the earthworks. The foremost of his charging men were level with him now, pounding up the hill, yelling.

An arrow stuck deep into his horse's neck. It reared, and Vinkler bounced in his saddle, only just keeping hold of the reins, which proved a waste of time anyway as his mount tottered sideways, twisted, fell. There was an almighty thud.

Vinkler tried to shake the dizziness from his head. He tried to look about him but was trapped beneath his horse. Worse yet, it seemed he had crushed one of his soldiers and the man's spear had run him through as he fell. The bloody blade of it was poking through Vinkler's hip now, just under his breastplate. He gave a helpless sigh. It seemed that, wherever you put armour, you never had it where you needed it.

'Dear, dear,' he said, looking down at the broken arrow-shaft protruding from his leg, the spear-point from his hip. 'What a mess.' It hardly hurt, that was the strange thing. Maybe that was a bad sign, though. Probably. Boots were thumping at the dirt all around him as his men charged up the hill. 'On you go, boys,' waving one hand weakly. They would have to make it the rest of the way without him. He looked towards the earthworks, not far off. Not far off at all. He saw a wild-haired man perched there, bow levelled at him.

'Oh, damn,' he said.

Temper shot at the bastard who'd been on the horse. He was flattened under it, and no danger to no one, but a man acting that bloody fearless within shot of Temper's bow was an insult to his aim. As luck had it, luck being a fickle little shit, his elbow got jogged just as he was letting go the string and he shot his shaft off high into the air.

He snatched at another arrow, but by then things were getting a bit messy. A bit more'n a bit. The Union were up to the ditch they'd dug and the earth wall they'd thrown up, and Temper wished now they'd dug it a deal deeper and thrown it up a deal higher, 'cause there were a bloody lot of Southerners crowding round it, and plenty more on the way.

Irig's boys were packed in on the packed earth, jabbing down with spears, doing a lot of shouting. Temper saw a fair few spears jabbing the other way too. He went up on tiptoes trying to see, then lurched out the way of Irig's axe as it flashed past his nose. Once his blood was going that big bastard didn't care much who got caught on the backswing.

A Northman staggered past, tangling with Temper and nearly dragging him over, scrabbling at his chest as blood bubbled through his torn chain mail. A Union man sprang up onto the earth-wall in the gap he'd left like he was on a bloody spring. A neckless bastard with a great heavy jaw and hard brows wrinkled over hard little eyes. No helmet but thick plates of scuffed armour on the rest of him, shield in one hand, heavy sword in the other already dark with blood.

Temper stumbled away from him, since he only had his bow to hand and had always liked to keep fighting at a polite distance anyway, making way for a more willing Carl whose sword was already swinging. Neckless seemed off balance, the blade sure to take his head right off, but in one quick movement he blocked it with a clang of steel, and blood showered, and the Carl reeled back onto his face. Before he was still, Neckless had hit another man so hard he took him right off his feet, turned him over in the air and sent him tumbling down the hillside.

Temper scrambled back up the slope, mouth wide open and salty with someone's blood, sure he was looking the Great Leveller in the face at last, and an ugly face it was, too. Then Irig came rushing from the side, axe following close behind.

Neckless went down hard, a great dent smashed into his shield. Temper hooted with laughter but the Union man only went down as far as his knees would bend then burst straight back up, flinging Irig's great bulk away and slicing him across the guts all in one motion, sending him staggering, blood spraying from his chain mail coat, eyes popping more with shock than pain. Just couldn't believe he'd been done so easy, and neither could Temper. How could a man run up that hill and still move so hard and so fast at the top of it?

'It's the Bloody-Nine!' someone wailed, though it bloody obviously weren't the Bloody-Nine at all. He was causing quite a bloody panic all the same. Another Carl went at him with a spear and he slid around it, sword crashing down and leaving a mighty dent in the middle of the Carl's helmet, folding him on his face, arms and legs thrashing mindless in the mud.

Temper gritted his teeth, raised his bow, took a careful bead on the neckless bastard, but just as Temper let go the string Irig pushed himself up, clutching his bloody guts with one hand while he raised his axe in the other.

Luck being luck, he got himself right in the way of the arrow and it took him in the shoulder, made him grunt.

The Union man's eyes flicked sideways, and his sword flicked out with 'em and took Irig's arm off just like that, and almost before the blood began to spurt from the stump the blade lashed back the other way and ripped a bloody gash in his chest, back the other way and laid Irig's head wide open between his mouth and his nose, top teeth snatched through the air and off down the hill.

Neckless crouched there still, dented shield up in front, sword up behind, big face all spotted with red and his eyes ahead, calm as a fisherman waiting for a tug on the line. Four carved Northmen dead as ever a man could be at his feet and Irig toppling gently sideways and into the ditch, even deader.

He might as well have been the Bloody-Nine, this neckless bastard, Carls falling over 'emselves to get away from him. More Union men started to pull themselves up to either side, over the earth wall in numbers, and the shift backwards became a run.

Temper went with 'em, as eager as any. He caught an elbow in the neck from someone, slipped over and slapped his chin on the grass, gave his tongue an awful bite, scrambled up and ran on, men shouting and shrieking all around. He snatched one desperate look back, saw Neckless hack down a running Carl calmly as you might swat a fly. Beside him a tall Union man in a bright breastplate was pointing towards Temper with a drawn blade, shouting at the top of his voice.

'On!' roared Jalenhorm, waving his sword towards the Children. Bloody hell, he was out of breath. 'Up! Up!' They had to keep the momentum. Gorst had opened the gate a crack, and they had to push through before it closed. 'On! On!' He bent down, offering his hand to haul men over the ditch and slapping them on the back as they laboured off uphill again.

It looked as if the fleeing Northmen were causing chaos at the drystone wall above, tangling with the defenders there, spreading panic, letting the foremost of Jalenhorm's men clamber up after them without resistance. As soon as he had the breath to do it he followed himself, lurching up the steep slope. He had to push on.

Bodies. Bodies, and wounded men scattered on the grass. A Northman stared at him, bloody hands clapped to the top of his head. A Union soldier clutched dumbly at his oozing thigh. A soldier running just beside him made a hiccupping sound and fell on his back, and when Jalenhorm glanced over his shoulder he saw the man had an arrow in his face. He could not stop for him. Could only press on, swallowing a sudden wave of nausea. His own thudding heartbeat and his own whooshing breath damped the war cries and the clashes of metal down to an endless nagging rattle. The thickening drizzle was far from helping, turning the trampled grass slippery slick. The world jumped and wobbled, full of running men, slipping and sliding men, occasional whirring arrows, flying grass and mud.

'On,' he grunted, 'on.' No one could have heard him. It was himself he was ordering. 'On.' This was his one chance at redemption. If they could only capture the summit. Break the Northmen where they were strongest. 'Up. Up.' Then nothing else would matter. He would be no longer the king's incompetent old drinking partner, who fumbled his command on the first day. He would have finally earned his place. 'On,' he wheezed, 'up!'

He pushed on, bent over, clawing at the wet grass with his free hand, so intent on the ground that the wall caught him by surprise. He stood, waving his sword uncertainly, not sure whether it would be held by his men or the enemy, or what he should do about it in either case. Someone reached down with a gloved hand. Gorst. Jalenhorm found himself hauled up with shocking ease, scrambled over the damp stones and onto the flat top of the spur.

The Children stood just ahead. Much larger at close quarters than he had imagined, a circle of rough-hewn rocks a little higher than a man. There were more bodies here, but fewer than on the slopes below. It seemed resistance had been light and, for the moment at least, had disappeared altogether. Union soldiers stood about in various stages of exhausted confusion. Beyond them the hill sloped up towards the summit. Towards the Heroes themselves. A gentler incline, and covered with retreating Northmen. More of an organised withdrawal than a rout this time, from what Jalenhorm could gather at a glance.

A glance was all he could manage. With no immediate peril, his body sagged. He stood for a moment, hands on his knees, chest heaving, belly squeezing uncomfortably against the inside of his wondrous breastplate

with every in-breath. Damn thing didn't bloody fit him any more. It had never bloody fit him.

'The Northmen are falling back!' Gorst's weird falsetto jangled in Jalenhorm's ears. 'We must pursue!'

'General! We should regroup.' One of Jalenhorm's staff, his armour beaded with wet. 'We're well ahead of the second wave. Too far ahead.' He gestured towards Osrung, shrouded now in the thickening rain. 'And Northern cavalry have attacked the Stariksa Regiment, they're bogged down on our right—'

Jalenhorm managed to straighten up. 'The Aduan Volunteers?'

'Still in the orchard, sir!'

'We're getting split up from our support—' chimed in another.

'Gorst waved them angrily away, his piping voice making a ludicrous contrast with his blood-spotted aspect. He barely even looked out of breath. 'Damn the support! We press on!'

'General, sir, Colonel Vinkler is dead, the men are exhausted, we must pause!'

Jalenhorm stared up at the summit, chewing at his lip. Seize the moment, or wait for support? He saw the spears of the Northmen against the darkening sky. Gorst's eager, red-speckled face. The clean, nervous ones of his staff. He winced, looked at the handful of men to hand, then shook his head. 'We will hold here a little while for reinforcements. Secure this position and gather our strength.'

Gorst had the expression of a boy who had been told he could not have a puppy this year. 'But, General—'

Jalenhorm put a hand on his shoulder. 'I share your eagerness, Bremer, believe me, but not everyone can run for ever. Black Dow is ready, and cunning, and this retreat might only be a ruse. I do not intend to be fooled by him a second time.' He squinted up, the clouds getting steadily angrier above them. 'The weather is against us. As soon as we have the numbers, we must attack.' They might not be resting long. Union soldiers were flooding over the wall now, choking the stone circle.

'Where's Retter?'

'Here, sir,' called the lad. He looked pale, and scared, but so did they all.

Jalenhorm smiled to see him. There, indeed, was a hero. 'Sound the assembly, boy, and ready on the advance.'

They could not be reckless, but nor could they afford to waste the initiative. This was their one chance at redemption. Jalenhorm stared yearningly up at the Heroes, rain tinkling on his helmet. So very near. The last Northmen were swarming up the slopes towards the top. One stood, looking back through the rain.

Ironhead frowned back towards the Children, already riddled with Union soldiers.

'Shit,' he hissed.

Hurt him to do this. He'd a hard-won name for never giving ground, but he hadn't won it in fights he was sure to lose. He wasn't about to face the might of the Union on his own just so men could blow their noses and say Cairm Ironhead died bravely. He'd no plans to follow after Whitesides, or Littlebone, or Old Man Yawl. They'd all died bravely, and who sang about those bastards these days?

'Pull back!' he bellowed at the last of his men, urging 'em between the planted stakes and up towards the Heroes. A shameful thing to show your back to the enemy, but better their eyes on your back than their spears in your front. If Black Dow wanted to fight for this worthless hill and these worthless stones he could do it his worthless self.

He strode up frowning through the thickening rain, through the gap in the mossy wall that ringed the Heroes. He walked slow, shoulders back and head high, hoping folk would think this was all well planned and he'd done nothing the least bit cowardly—

'Well, well, well. Who should I find running away from the Union but Cairm Ironhead?' Who else but Glama Golden, the swollen prick, leaning against one of the great stones with a big, fat smile on his big, bruised face.

By the dead, how Ironhead hated this bastard. Those big puffy cheeks. That moustache, like a pair of yellow slugs on his fat top lip. Ironhead's skin crawled at the sight of him. The sight of him smug made him want to tear his own eyes out. 'Pulling back,' he growled.

'Showing back, I'd call it.'

That got a few laughs, but they sputtered out as Ironhead came forwards, baring his teeth. Golden took a careful step back, narrowed eyes flickering

down to Ironhead's drawn sword, hand dropping to his own axe, making ready.

Then Ironhead stopped himself. He hadn't got his name by letting anger tug him about by the nose. There was a right time to settle this, and a right way, and it wasn't now, standing on even terms with all kinds of witnesses. No. He'd wait for his moment, and make sure he enjoyed it too. So he forced his face into a smile of his own. 'We can't all have your record of bravery, Glama Golden. Takes some bones to batter a man's fist with your face the way you did.'

'Least I fucking fought, didn't I?' snarled Golden, his Carls bristling up around him.

'If you can call it fighting when a man just falls off his horse then runs away.'

Golden's turn to bare his teeth. 'You dare talk to me about running away, you cowardly—'

'Enough.' Black Dow had Curnden Craw on his left, Caul Shivers on his right and Cracknut Whirrun just behind. That and a whole crowd of heavy-armed, heavy-scarred, heavy-scowled Carls. A fearsome company, but the look on Dow's face was more fearsome still. He was rigid with rage, eyes bulging as if they might burst. 'This what you call Named Men these days? A pair o' great big names with a pair o' sulking *children* hiding inside?' Dow curled his tongue and blew spit onto the mud between Ironhead and Golden. 'Rudd Threetrees was a stubborn bastard, and Bethod a sly bastard, and the Bloody-Nine an evil bastard, the dead know that, but there are times I miss 'em. Those were *men*!' He roared the word in Ironhead's face, spraying spit and making everyone flinch. 'They said a thing, they *did a fucking thing*!'

Ironhead thought it best to make a second quick retreat, eyes on Black Dow's ready weapons just in case an even quicker one was needful. He was no keener on that fight than he was on the one with the Union. Even less, if anything, but luckily Golden couldn't resist sticking his broken nose in.

'I'm with you, Chief!' he piped up. 'With you all the way!'

'Is that right?' Dow turned to him, mouth curling with contempt. 'Oh, lucky *fucking* me!' And he shouldered Golden out of his way and led his men towards the wall.

When Ironhead turned back he found Curnden Craw giving him a look from under his grey brows. ‘What?’ he snapped.

Craw just kept giving him that look. ‘You know what.’

He shook his head as he brushed between Ironhead and Golden. They were a sorry excuse for a pair of War Chiefs. For a pair of men, for that matter, but Craw had seen worse. Selfishness, cowardice and greed never surprised him these days. Those were the times.

‘Pair o’ fucking worms!’ Dow hissed into the drizzle as Craw came up beside him. He clawed at the old drystone, tore loose a rock and stood, every muscle flexed, lips twisting and moving with no sound as if he didn’t know whether to fling it down the slope or stave in someone’s skull with it or smash his own face with it or what. In the end he just gave a frustrated snarl, and put it helplessly back on top of the wall. ‘I should kill ’em. Maybe I will. Maybe I will. Burn the fucking pair.’

Craw winced. ‘Don’t know they’d take a flame in this weather, Chief.’ He peered down through the shroud of rain towards the Children. ‘And I reckon there’ll be killing enough for everyone soon.’ The Union had fearsome numbers down there and, from what he could tell, they were finding their order. Forming ranks. Lots and lots of close-packed ranks. ‘Looks like they’re coming on.’

‘Why wouldn’t they? Ironhead good as invited the bastards.’ Dow took a scowling breath and snorted it out like a bull ready to charge, breath smoking in the wet. ‘You’d think it’d be easy being Chief.’ He shifted his shoulders like the chain sat too heavy on ’em. ‘But it’s like dragging a fucking mountain through the muck. Threetrees told me that. Told me every leader stands alone.’

‘Ground’s still with us.’ Craw thought he should have a stab at building up the positive. ‘And this rain’ll help too.’

Dow only frowned down at his free hand, fingers spread. ‘Once they’re bloody …’

‘Chief!’ Some lad was forcing his way through the crowd of sodden Carls, shoulders of his jerkin dark with damp. ‘Chief! Reachey’s hard pressed down in Osrung! They’re over the bridge and fighting in the streets and he needs someone to lend a— Gah!’

Dow grabbed him around the back of his neck, jerked him roughly forward and steered his face towards the Children and the Union men swarming over 'em like ants on a trodden nest. 'Do I look like I've got fucking men to spare? Well? What do you reckon?'

The lad swallowed. 'No, Chief?'

Dow shoved him tottering back and Craw managed to stick out a hand and catch him 'fore he fell. 'Tell Reachey to hold on best he can,' Dow tossed over his shoulder. 'Might be some help will come along.'

'I'll tell him.' And the lad backed off quick and was soon lost in the press.

The Heroes was left a strange, funeral quiet. Only the odd mutter, the faint clatter of gear, the soft ping and patter of rain on metal. Down at the Children, someone was tooting on a horn. Seemed a mournful little tune, somehow, floating up out of the rain. Or maybe it was just a tune, and Craw was the mournful one. Wondering who out of all these men around him would kill before the sun was set, and who get killed. Wondering which of them had the Great Leveller's cold hand on their shoulder. Wondering if he did. He closed his eyes, and made himself a promise that if he got through this he'd retire. Just like he had a dozen times before.

'Looks like it's time.' Wonderful was holding out her hand.

'Aye.' Craw took it, and shook it, and looked her in the face, her jaw set hard, her stubbly hair black in the wet, line of the long scar white down the side. 'Don't die, eh?'

'I'm not planning on it. Stick close and I'll try not to let you die either.'

'Deal.' And they were all grabbing each other's hands, and slapping each other's shoulders, that last moment of comradeship before the blood, when you feel bound together closer than with your own family. Craw clasped hands with Flood, and with Scorry, and with Drofd, and Shivers, even, and he found himself seeking among strangers for Brack's big paw to shake, then realised he was under the sod behind 'em.

'Craw.' Jolly Yon, and clear from his sorry look what he was after.

'Aye, Yon. I'll tell 'em. You know I will.'

'I know.' And they clasped hands, and Yon had a twitch to the corner of his mouth might've been a smile for him. All the while Beck just stood there, dark hair plastered to pale forehead, staring down towards the Children like he was staring at nothing.

Craw took the lad's hand and gave it a squeeze. 'Just do what's right. Stand with your crew, stand with your Chief.' He leaned a little closer. 'Don't get killed.'

Beck squeezed back. 'Aye. Thanks, Chief.'

'Where's Whirrun?'

'Never fear!' And he came shouldering through the wet and unhappy throng. 'Whirrun of Bligh stands among you!'

For reasons known only to himself he'd taken his shirt off and was standing stripped to his waist, Father of Swords over one shoulder. 'By the dead,' muttered Craw. 'Every time we fight you're bloody wearing less.'

Whirrun tipped his head back and blinked into the rain. 'I'm not wearing a shirt in this. A wet shirt only chafes my nipples.'

Wonderful shook her head. 'All part of the hero's mystery.'

'That too.' Whirrun grinned. 'How about it, Wonderful? Does a wet shirt chafe your nipples? I need to know.'

She shook his hand. 'You worry about your nipples, Cracknut, I'll handle mine.'

Everything was bright now, and still, and quiet. Water gleaming on armour, furs curled up with wet, bright painted shields beaded with dew. Faces flashed at Craw, known and unknown. Grinning, stern, crazy, afraid. He held out his hand, and Whirrun pressed it in his own, grinning with every tooth. 'You ready?'

Craw always had his doubts. Ate 'em, breathed 'em, lived 'em twenty years or more. Hardly a moment free of the bastards. Every day since he buried his brothers.

But now was no time for doubts. 'I'm ready.' And he drew his sword, and looked down towards the Union men, hundreds upon hundreds, blurring in the rain to spots and splashes and glints of colour, and he smiled. Maybe Whirrun was right, and a man ain't really alive until he faces death. Craw raised his sword up high, and he gave a howl, and all around him men did the same.

And they waited for the Union to come.

More Tricks

The sun had to be up somewhere but you'd never have known it. The angry clouds had thickened and the light was still poor. Positively beggarly, in fact. As far as Corporal Tunny could tell, and somewhat to his surprise, no one had moved. The helmets and spears still showed above the stretch of wall that he could see, shifting a little from time to time but going nowhere fast. Mitterick's attack was well underway. That much they could hear. But on this forgotten far end of the battle, the Northmen waited.

'Are they still there?' asked Worth. Waiting for action like this got most men shitting themselves. Worth was unique, in that it seemed it was the one thing that could stop him.

'They're still there.'

'Not moving?' squeaked Yolk.

'If they were moving we'd be moving, wouldn't we?' Tunny peered through his eyeglass once again. 'No. They're not moving.'

'Is that fighting I can hear?' muttered Worth, as a gust of wind brought the echoing of angry men, horses and metal across the stream.

'It's that or it's a serious disagreement in a stable. Do you think it's a disagreement in a stable?'

'No, Corporal Tunny.'

'No. Neither do I.'

'Then what's going on?' asked Yolk. A riderless horse appeared from over the rise, stirrups flapping at its flanks, trotted down towards the water, stopped and started nibbling at the grass.

Tunny lowered his eyeglass. ‘Honestly, I’m not sure.’ All around them, rain tapped at the leaves.

The trampled barley was scattered with dead and dying horses, dead and dying men. In front of Calder and his stolen standards they were heaped up in a bloody tangle. Only a few strides away, three Carls were arguing with each other as they tried to free their spears, all impaled in the same Union rider. A few boys had been sent scurrying out to gather spent arrows. A couple more had been unable to resist clambering into the third pit to get an early start at picking over the bodies there, and White-Eye was roaring at them to get back into line.

The Union cavalry were all done. A brave effort, but a stupid one. It seemed to Calder the two often went together. To make matters worse, having failed once they’d insisted on giving it another try, still more doomed. Three score or so had jumped the third pit on the right, managed to get over Clail’s Wall and kill a few archers before they were shot or speared themselves. All pointless as mopping a beach. That was the trouble with pride, and courage, and all those clench-jawed virtues bards love to harp on. The more you have, the more likely you are to end up bottom in a pile of dead men. All the Union’s bravest had achieved was to give Calder’s men the biggest boost to their spirits they’d had since Bethod was King of the Northmen.

They were letting the Union know it, now, as the survivors rode, or limped, or crawled back towards their lines. They danced about, and clapped and whooped into the drizzle. They shook each others’ hands, and thumped each other’s backs, and clashed their shields together. They chanted Bethod’s name, and Scale’s, and even quite frequently Calder’s, which was gratifying. The comradeship of warriors, who would’ve thought? He grinned around as men cheered and brandished their weapons at him, held up his sword and gave it a wave in return. He wondered whether it was too late to smear a bit of blood on the blade, since he hadn’t quite got around to swinging it. There was plenty of blood about and he doubted its previous owners would miss it now.

‘Chief?’

‘Eh?’

Pale-as-Snow was pointing off to the south. ‘Might want to pull ’em back into position.’

The rain was getting weightier, fat drops leaving the earth spattered with dark spots, pinging from the armour of the living and the dead. It had drawn a misty haze across the battlefield to the south, but beyond the riderless horses aimlessly wandering, and the horseless riders stumbling back towards the Old Bridge, Calder thought he could see shapes moving in the barley.

He shielded his eyes with one hand. More and more emerged from the rain, turning from ghosts to flesh and metal. Union foot. Vast blocks of them, trampling forward in carefully measured, well-ordered, dreadfully purposeful ranks, pole-arms held high, flags struck limp by the wet.

Calder’s men had seen them too, and their triumphant jeering was already a memory. The barking voices of Named Men rang through the rain, bringing them grimly back to their places behind the third pit. White-Eye was marshalling some of the lightly wounded to fight as a reserve and plug any holes. Calder wondered if they’d be plugging holes in him before the day was out. It looked a good bet.

‘Don’t suppose you’ve got any more tricks?’ asked Pale-as-Snow.

‘Not really.’ Unless you counted running like hell. ‘You?’

‘Just the one.’ And the old warrior carefully wiped the blood from his sword with a rag and held it up.

‘Oh.’ Calder looked down at his own clean blade, glistening with beads of water. ‘That.’

The Tyranny of Distance

‘I can’t see a damn thing!’ hissed Finree’s father, taking a stride forwards and peering through his eyeglass again, presumably to no more effect than before. ‘Can you?’

‘No, sir,’ grumbled one of his staff, unhelpfully.

They had witnessed Mitterick’s premature charge in stunned silence. Then, as the first light crawled across the valley, the start of Jalenhorm’s advance. Then the drizzle had begun. First Osrung had disappeared in the grey pall on the right, then Clail’s Wall on the left, then the Old Bridge and the nameless inn where Finree had almost died yesterday. Now even the shallows were half-remembered ghosts. Everyone stood silent, paralysed with anxiety, straining for sounds that would occasionally tickle at the edge of hearing, over the damp whisper of the rain. For all that they could see now, there might as well have been no battle at all.

Finree’s father paced back and forth, the fingers of one hand fussing at nothing. He came to stand beside her, staring off into the featureless grey. ‘I sometimes think there isn’t a person in the world more powerless than a supreme commander on a battlefield,’ he muttered.

‘How about his daughter?’

He gave her a tight smile. ‘Are you all right?’

She thought about smiling back but gave up on it. ‘I’m fine,’ she lied, and quite transparently too. Apart from the very real pain through her neck whenever she turned her head, down her arm whenever she used her hand, and across her scalp all the time, she still felt a constant, suffocating worry. Time and again she would startle, staring about like a miser for his lost

purse, but with no idea what she was even looking for. ‘You have far more important things to worry about—’

As if to prove her point he was already striding away to meet a messenger, riding up towards the barn from the east. ‘News?’

‘Colonel Brock reports that his men have begun their attack on the bridge in Osrung!’ Hal was in the fight, then. Leading from the front, no doubt. She felt herself sweating more than ever under her clothes, the damp beneath Hal’s coat meeting the damp leaking through from above in a crescendo of chafing discomfort. ‘Colonel Brint, meanwhile, is leading an assault against the savages who yesterday …’ His eyes flickered nervously to Finree, and back. ‘Against the savages.’

‘And?’ asked her father.

‘That is all, Lord Marshal.’

He grimaced. ‘My thanks. Please, bring further news when you are able.’

The messenger saluted, turned his horse and galloped off through the rain.

‘No doubt your husband is distinguishing himself enormously in the assault.’ Bayaz leaned beside her on his staff, bald pate glistening with moisture. ‘Leading from the front, in the style of Harod the Great. A latter-day hero! I’ve always had the greatest admiration for men of that stamp.’

‘Perhaps you should try it yourself.’

‘Oh, I have. I was quite the firebrand in my youth. But an unquenchable thirst for danger is unseemly in the old. Heroes have their uses, but someone has to point them the right way. And clean up afterwards. They always raise a cheer from the public, but they leave a hell of a mess.’ Bayaz thoughtfully patted his stomach. ‘No, a cup of tea at the rear is more my style. Men like your husband can gather the plaudits.’

‘You are far too generous.’

‘Few indeed would agree.’

‘But where is your tea now?’

Bayaz frowned at his empty hand. ‘My servant has … more important errands to run this morning.’

‘Can there be anything more important than attending to your whims?’

‘Oh, my whims stretch beyond the kettle …’

Hoofbeats echoed out of the rain, a lone rider thumping up the track from the west, everyone straining breathlessly to see as a chinless frown emerged from the wet gloom.

‘Felnigg!’ snapped Finree’s father. ‘What’s happening on the left?’

‘Mitterick bloody well went off half-drawn!’ frothed Felnigg as he swung from the saddle. ‘Sent his cavalry across the barley in the dark! Pure bloody recklessness!’

Knowing the state of the relationship between the two men, Finree suspected Felnigg had made his own contribution to the fiasco.

‘We saw,’ her father forced through tight lips, evidently coming to a similar conclusion.

‘The man should be bloody drummed out!’

‘Perhaps later. What was the outcome?’

‘It was … still in doubt when I left.’

‘So you haven’t the slightest idea what’s going on over there?’

Felnigg opened his mouth, then closed it. ‘I thought it best to return at once—’

‘And report Mitterick’s mistake, rather than inform me of its consequences. My thanks, Colonel, but I am already amply supplied with ignorance.’ And her father turned his back before Felnigg had the chance to speak, striding across the hillside again to look fruitlessly to the north. ‘Shouldn’t have sent them,’ she heard him mutter as he squelched past. ‘Should never have sent them.’

Bayaz sighed, the sound niggling at her sweaty shoulders like a corkscrew. ‘I sympathise most deeply with your father.’

Finree was finding that her admiration for the First of the Magi was steadily fading, while her dislike only sharpened with time. ‘Do you,’ she said, in the same way one would say, ‘Shut up,’ and with the same meaning.

If Bayaz took it he ignored it. ‘Such a shame we cannot see the little people struggle from afar. There is nothing quite like looking down upon a battle, and this is a large one, even in my experience. But the weather answers to no one.’ Bayaz grinned up into the increasingly solemn heavens. ‘A veritable storm! What drama, eh? What better accompaniment to a clash of arms?’

‘Did you call it up yourself just for the atmosphere?’

‘I wish I had the power. Only imagine, there could be thunder whenever I approached! In the Old Time my master, great Juvens, could call down lightning with a word, make a river flood with a gesture, summon a hoar frost with a thought. Such was the power of his Art.’ And he spread his

hands wide, tipping his face into the rain and raising his staff towards the streaming heavens. ‘But that was long ago.’ He let his arms drop. ‘These days the winds blow their own way. Like battles. We who remain must work in a more … roundabout fashion.’

More hoofbeats, and a dishevelled young officer cantered from the murk ahead.

‘Report!’ demanded Felnigg at great volume, making Finree wonder how he had lasted so long without being punched in the face.

‘Jalenhorm’s men have flushed the enemy from the orchards,’ answered the messenger breathlessly, ‘and are climbing the slope at the double!’

‘How far have they gone?’ asked Finree’s father.

‘When I last saw them they were well on the way up to the smaller stones. The Children. But whether or not they were able to take them—’

‘Heavy resistance?’

‘Becoming heavier.’

‘When did you leave them?’

‘I rode here with all despatch, sir, so perhaps a quarter of an hour ago?’

Finree’s father bared his teeth at the downpour. The outline of the hill the Heroes stood on was little more than a darker smudge in a curtain of grey. She could follow his thoughts. By now they might have captured the summit in glory, be engaged in furious combat, or have been bloodily driven off. Anyone or no one alive or dead, victorious or defeated. He spun on his heel. ‘Saddle my horse!’

Bayaz’ smugness was snuffed out like a candle flame. ‘I would advise against it. There is nothing you can do down there, Marshal Kroy.’

‘There is certainly nothing I can do up here, Lord Bayaz,’ said her father curtly, stepping past him and towards the horses. His staff followed, along with several guards, Felnigg snapping out orders in every direction, the headquarters suddenly alive with rattling activity.

‘Lord Marshal!’ shouted Bayaz. ‘I deem this unwise!’

Her father did not even turn. ‘By all means remain here, then.’ And he planted one boot in the stirrup and pulled himself up.

‘By the dead,’ hissed Bayaz under his breath.

Finree gave him a sickly smile. ‘It seems you may be called to the front after all. Perhaps you can see the little people struggle at first hand.’

The First of the Magi did not appear amused.

Blood

‘They’re coming!’

That much Beck knew already, but men were packed so tight into the Heroes he didn’t know much else. Wet furs, wet armour, weapons gleaming with rain, scowling faces running with water. The stones themselves were streaky shadows, ghosts beyond a forest of jagged spears. Spit and splattering whisper of drops on metal. Crash and clang of steel echoing from the slopes, shouts of battle muffled by the downpour.

A great surge went through the crowd and Beck was lifted right off his feet, kicking at nothing, dumped in a mass of punching, jostling, shouting men. Took him a moment to realise they weren’t the enemy, but there were a lot of blades poking every which way even so and it didn’t have to be a Union one to stick you in the fruits. Hadn’t been a Union sword killed Reft, had it?

Someone elbowed him in the head and he staggered sideways, was knocked by someone else and onto his knees, a trampling boot squashed his hand into the mud. Dragged himself up by a shield with a dragon’s head painted on it, owner not best pleased. Man with a beard roaring at him. Battle sounds were louder. Men struggling to get away or get towards. Men clutching at wounds, blood run pink in the rain, clutching at weapons, all dripping wet and mad on fear and anger.

By the dead, he wanted to run. He wasn’t sure if he was crying. Just knew he couldn’t fail again. Stand with his crew, that’s what Craw said, weren’t it? Stand with his Chief. He blinked into the storm, saw a flash of Black Dow’s black standard flapping, soaked through. Knew Craw had to be near

it. Pressed towards it between the jerking bodies, boots slithering in the churned-up slop. Thought he caught a glimpse of Drofd's snarling face. Heard a roar and a spear came at him. Not even fast. He moved his head to the side, far as he could, straining with everything he had, and the point slid past his ear. Someone squealed in the other one, dropped against him, warm on his shoulder. Grunting and gurgling. Hot and wet all down his arm. He gasped, wriggled his shoulders, shrugging the corpse off, working it down towards the mud.

Another surge in the crowd and Beck was dragged sliding to the left, mouth open as he fought to stay upright. Warm rain spattered his cheek, the man in front of him suddenly whisked away and he was left blinking at space. A strip of mud, covered with sprawled bodies, and rain-pocked puddles, and broken spears.

And on the other side of it, the enemy.

Dow roared something over his shoulder but Craw couldn't hear him. Could hardly hear anything over the hissing of the rain and the clamour of rough voices, loud as a storm themselves. Too late for orders. Time comes a man just has to stick with the orders he's given, trust in his men to do the right thing, and fight. He thought maybe he saw the hilt of the Father of Swords waving between the spears. Should've been with his dozen. Stood with his crew. Why had he said yes to being Dow's Second? Maybe 'cause he'd been Threetrees' Second once, and he'd somehow thought if he had the place he used to have the world would be like it used to be. An old fool, grabbing at ghosts. Way too late. Should've married Colwen when he had the chance. Asked her, anyway. Given her the chance to turn him down.

He closed his eyes for a moment, breathed in the wet, cold air. 'Should've stayed a carpenter,' he whispered. But the sword had been the easier choice. To work wood you need all manner of tools – chisels and saws, axes great and small, nails and hammers, awls and planes. To be a killer you just need two. A blade and the will. Only Craw wasn't sure he had the will any more. He squeezed his fist tight around his sword's wet grip, the roar of battle growing louder and louder, binding with the roar of his own breath in his ears, the roar of his own heart pumping. Choices made. And he gritted his teeth, and snapped his eyes open.

The crowd split apart like a timber down the grain and the Union boiled from the gap. One barrelled into Craw before he could swing, their shields locked together, boots slithering in the mud. A glimpse of a snarling face, managed to tip his shield forward so the metal rim dug up into a nose, and back, and up, gurgling, whimpering. Dragging at the shield strap with all his strength, jabbing with it, stabbing with it, growling and spitting with it, grinding it into the man's head. It caught the buckle on his helmet, halftore it off. Craw tried to twist his sword free, a blade whipped past him and took a great chunk out of the man's face. Craw left sliding in the muck, nothing to push against.

Black Dow spun his axe around, brought the pick side down on someone's helmet, punching right through to the haft. Left it buried in the corpse's head as it toppled backwards, arms wide.

A mud-splattered Northman tangled with a spear, his arm twisted over it and his war-hammer wafting about uselessly, a clawing hand on his face, forcing his head up while he peered down at the fingers.

A Union soldier came at Craw. Someone tripped him and he went down on one knee in the muck. Craw hit him across the back of the head with a dull clonk and put a dent in his helmet. Hit him again and knocked him sprawling. Hit him again, and again, hammering his face into the mud, spitting curses.

Shivers smashed at someone with his shield, smiling, rain turned the great scar on his face bright red like a fresh wound. War tips everything upside down. Men who are a menace in peacetime become your best hope once the steel starts swinging.

A corpse kicked over from front to back, back to front again. Blood curling out into dirty water, plopping rain. The Father of Swords swung down and split someone open like a chisel splitting a carving of a man. Craw ducked behind his shield again as blood showered across it, rain spattered against it, mist of drops.

Spears pushing every way, a random, rattling, slippery mass. The point of one slid slowly down wood and into a hand, and through it, skewering it into someone's chest and pushing him down into the muck, shaking his head, no, no, fumbling at the shaft with the other hand as the merciless boots thumped over him.

Craw prodded a spear-point away with his shield, stabbing back with his sword, caught someone under the jaw and sent his head jerking up, blood gushing as he fell, making a honking note like the first note of a song he used to know.

Behind him was a Union officer wearing the most beautiful armour Craw ever saw, carved all over with gleaming golden designs. He was beating away stupidly at Black Dow with a muddy sword, had managed to drive him to his knees. Stand by your Chief. Craw stepped up, roaring, boot hammering down in a puddle and showering muddy water. Cut mindlessly across that lovely breastplate, edge scoring a bright groove through all that craftsmanship and sending its owner lurching. Forward again, stabbing as the Union man turned, Craw's blade grating against the bottom edge of his armour, sliding right through him and carrying him backwards.

Craw struggled with the grip of his sword, hot blood sticky all over his hand, up his arm. Holding this bastard up as he wrestled to twist the blade out of him, staggering together in the muck in a mad hug. Face against Craw's cheek, stubble scratching, breath rasping in his ear, and Craw realised he never even got this close to Colwen. Choices made, eh? Choices —

Wanting is not always enough, and however much Gorst wanted to, he could not get there. Too many straining bodies in his way. By the time he had hacked the leg from the last of them and flung him aside, the old Northman had already run Jalenhorm right through the guts. Gorst could see the bloody point of the sword under the gilded rim of his rain-dewed breastplate. The general had the oddest expression as his killer struggled to pull the blade out of him. Almost a smile.

Redeemed.

The old Northman twisted around as he heard Gorst's howl, eyes going wide, bringing his shield up. The long steel chopped deep into it, splitting the timbers, wrenching it around on his arm, driving the metal rim into his head and tossing him tumbling sideways.

Gorst stepped up to finish the job but again there was someone in his way. *As always.* Hardly more than a boy, swinging a hatchet, shouting. *The usual stuff, probably, die, die, blah, blah, blah.* Gorst was happy to die, of course.

But not for this fool's convenience. He jerked his head sideways, let the hatchet bounce harmlessly from his shoulder-plate, spun about, long steel curving after him through the wet air. The boy tried desperately to block it but the heavy blade snatched the hatchet from his hand and split his face wide open, spraying brains.

The point of a sword whispered at him and Gorst whipped back from the waist, felt the wind of it across his cheek, a niggling discomfort under his eye. A space had opened in the screaming crowd, the battle blooming from a single press to mindless clumps of sodden combat at the very centre of the Heroes. All concepts of lines, tactics, directions, orders, of sides even, vanished as though they had never been. *And good riddance, they only confuse things.*

For some reason a half-naked Northman stood facing him, with the biggest sword Gorst had ever seen. *And I have seen a lot.* Absurdly long, as if it had been forged for a giant's use, dull grey metal gleaming with rain, a single letter stamped near the hilt.

He looked like some lurid painting by an artist who never saw a battlefield, but silly-looking people can be just as deadly as silly-sounding ones, and Gorst had coughed out all his arrogance in the smoke of Cardotti's House of Leisure. *A man must treat every fight as though it is his last. Will this be my last? We can hope.*

He rocked back, cautious, as the man's elbow twitched up for a sideways blow, shifted his shield to meet it, steel ready to counter. But instead of swinging the Northman lunged, using the great blade like a spear, the point darting past the edge of Gorst's shield and squealing down his breastplate, sending him stumbling. *A feint.* The instinct to jump back was powerful but he forced himself to keep his eyes fixed on the blade, watched its path curve through the rain, an arc of glistening droplets following after.

Gorst wrenched himself sideways and the great sword hissed past, caught the armour on his elbow and ripped it flapping off. He was already thrusting but the point of his steel caught only falling water as his half-naked opponent slid away. Gorst switched back for a savage head-height cut but the man snaked under it, hefted the great sword up with shocking speed as Gorst's steel swept down, blades ringing together with a finger-numbing clang. They broke apart, watchful, the Northman's eyes calmly focused on Gorst in spite of the hammering rain.

His weapon might have looked like a prop from a bad comedy, but this man was no jester. The stance, the balance, the angle of the long blade gave him all manner of options both in defence and attack. The technique was hardly what one would find in Rubiari's *Forms of Swordsmanship,* but then neither was the sword itself. *We both are masters, nonetheless.*

A Union soldier came tottering between them before Gorst could move, bent over around a wound in his stomach, hands full of his own blood. Gorst smashed him impatiently out of the way with his shield, sprang at the half-naked Northman with a thrust and a slash, but he dodged the thrust and parried the cut faster than Gorst would have thought possible with that weight of metal. Gorst feinted right, switched left, swinging low. The Northman was ready, sprang out of the way, Gorst's steel feathering the mud then hacking a leg out from under a struggling man and bringing him down with a shriek. *Don't stand in the way, then, fool.*

Gorst recovered just in time to see the great sword coming, gasped as he ducked behind his shield. The blade crashed into it, leaving a huge dent in the already battered metal, bending it hard over Gorst's forearm and driving his fist into his mouth. But he kept his feet, drove back, tasting blood, crashed into the Northman's body shield-first and flung him away, lashed backhand and forehand with his steel, high and low. The Northman dodged the high but the low caught him across the leg with the very point, sent blood flying and made his knee buckle. *One to me. And now to finish it.*

Gorst whipped his steel across on the backhand, saw movement at the limit of his vision, changed the angle of his swing and let it go wide, roaring, opening his shoulder, hit a Carl in the side of the helmet so hard he was ripped off his feet and pitched upside down into a tangle of spears. Gorst snapped back, bringing the steel scything over, but the Northman rolled away as nimbly as a squirrel and came up ready even as Gorst's sword sent up a spray of dirty water beside them.

Gorst found he was smiling as they faced each other again, the battle a sodden nightmare around them. *When did I last live like this? Have I ever?* His heart was pumping fire, his skin singing as the rain trickled down it. *All the disappointments, the embarrassments, the failures are nothing now.* Every detail standing out like a flame in the blackness, every moment lasting an age, every tiniest movement of him or his opponent a story of its own. *There is only win or die.* The Northman smiled back as Gorst shook

the ruined shield from his arm and into the mud, and nodded. *And we recognise each other, and understand each other, and meet as equals. As brothers.* There was respect, but there would be no mercy. The slightest hesitation on either side would be an insult to the skill of the other. So Gorst nodded back, but before he was done he was already springing forward.

The Northman caught the sword on his but Gorst still had his free hand, shrieking as he swung it, gloved fist thudding into bare ribs, the Northman twisted grunting sideways. Gorst aimed another lashing punch at his face but he jerked away, the pommel of the great sword shot out of nowhere and Gorst only just wrenched his chin back far enough, the lump of metal missing his nose by a whisker. He looked up to see the Northman leaping at him, sword raised high and already coming down. Gorst forced his aching legs to spring one more time, notched steel gripped in both hands, and caught the long blade with his own. Metal screeched, that grey edge biting into his Calvez-made steel and, with impossible keenness, peeling a bright shaving from the blade.

Gorst was sent sliding back by the force of it, the huge sword held just short of his face, his crossed eyes fixed on the rain-dewed edge. He got purchase as his heels hit a corpse and brought the two of them to a wobbling halt. He tried to kick the Northman's leg away but he blocked it with his knee, lurching closer, only getting them further tangled. They gasped and spat in each other's faces, locked together, blades scraping and squealing as they shifted their balance one way or another, twisted their grips one way or another, jerked with one muscle or another, both searching desperately for some tiniest advantage, neither one able to find it.

The perfect moment. Gorst knew nothing about this man, not even his name. *But we are still bound closer than lovers, because we share this one sublime splinter of time.* Facing each other. *And facing death, the ever-present third in our little party.* Knowing it might all be over in a bloody instant. *Victory and defeat, glory and oblivion, in absolute balance.*

The perfect moment. And though he strained with every sinew to bring it to an end, Gorst wished it would go on for ever. *And we will join the stones, two more Heroes to add to the circle, frozen in conflict, and the grass will grow up around us, a monument to the glory of war, to the dignity of single combat, an eternal meeting of champions on the noble field of-—*

‘Oh,’ said the Northman. The pressure released. The blades slid apart. He stumbled back through the rain, blinking at Gorst, and then down, mouth hanging stupidly open. He still held the great sword in one hand, its point dragging through the mud and leaving a watery groove behind. With the other he reached up and gently touched the spear stuck through his chest, the blood already running down the shaft.

‘Wasn’t expecting that,’ he said. Then he dropped like a stone.

Gorst stood, frowning down. It felt like a while, but probably it was only an instant. No telling from where the spear had come. *It is a battle. There is no shortage of them.* He heaved out a misty sigh. *Ah, well. The dance goes on.* The old man who had killed Jalenhorm was floundering in the muck just a step and a sword-swing away.

He took the step, raising his notched steel.

Then his head exploded with light.

*

Beck saw it all happen, through the straining bodies, barged and battered from all sides, his whole body numb with fear. Saw Craw go down, rolling in the mud. Saw Drofd step over him and be hacked down in turn. Saw Whirrun fight that mad bull of a Union soldier, a fight that only seemed to take a few savage moments, too fast for him to follow. Saw Whirrun fall.

He remembered Craw pointing him out in front of Dow’s Carls. Pointing him out as an example of what to do. A man dropped screaming in front of him and a space opened. Just do what’s right. Stand by your Chief. Keep your head. As the Union man stepped towards Craw, Beck stepped towards the Union man from his blind side.

Do what’s right.

At the last moment he twisted his wrist, and it was the flat of Beck’s sword that hit him on the side of his head and knocked him flopping in the muck. And that was the last Beck saw of him before the trampling boots, tangled weapons, snarling faces surged in again.

Craw blinked, shook his head, then, as puke burned the back of his throat, decided that wasn’t helping. He rolled over, groaning like the dead in hell.

His shield was a shattered wreck, timbers splintered, bloody rim bent over his throbbing arm. He dragged it off. Scraped blood out of one eye.

Boom, boom, boom went his skull, like someone was hammering a great nail into it. Other'n that, it was oddly quiet. Seemed the Northmen had driven the Union off the hill, or the other way around, and Craw found he hardly cared which. The pounding feet had shuffled on, left the hilltop a sea of blood-sprinkled, rain-lashed, boot-churned filth, dead and wounded scattered tight as autumn leaves, the Heroes themselves standing their same useless watch over it all.

'Ah, shit.' Drofd was lying just a stride or two off, pale face turned towards him. Craw tried to stand and nearly puked again. Chose to crawl instead, dragging himself through the muck. 'Drofd, you all right? You—' The other side of the lad's head was all hacked away, Craw couldn't tell where the black mess inside met the black mess outside.

He patted Drofd on his chest. 'Ah. Shit.' He saw Whirrun. On his back, the Father of Swords half-buried in the mud beside him, pommel not far from his right hand. There was a spear through him, bloody shaft sticking straight up.

'Ah, shit,' said Craw again. Didn't know what else to say.

Whirrun grinned up as he crawled close, teeth pink with blood. 'Craw! Hey! I would get up, but …' He lifted his head to peer down at the spear-shaft. 'I'm fucked.' Craw had seen a lifetime of wounds, and he knew right off there was no help for this one.

'Aye.' Craw slowly sat back, hands heavy as anvils in his lap. 'I reckon.'

'Shoglig was talking shit. That old bitch didn't know when I was going to die at all. If I'd known that I'd surely have worn more armour.' Whirrun made a sound somewhere between a cough and a laugh, then winced, coughed, laughed again, winced again. 'Fuck, it hurts. I mean, you know it will, but, fuck, it really does hurt. Guess you showed me my destiny anyway, eh, Craw?'

'Looks that way.' Wasn't much of a destiny the way Craw saw it. Not one anyone would pick out from a set.

'Where's the Father of Swords?' grunted Whirrun, trying to twist around to look for it.

'Who cares?' Blood was tickling at Craw's eyelid, making it flicker.

‘Got to pass it on. Those are the rules. Like Daguf Col passed it on to me, and Yorweel the Mountain to him, and I think it was Four-Faces before that? I’m getting sketchy on the details.’

‘All right.’ Craw leaned over him, head thumping, dug the hilt out of the muck and pressed it into Whirrun’s hand. ‘Who do you want to give it to?’

‘You’ll make sure it’s done?’

‘I’ll make sure.’

‘Good. There ain’t many I’d trust it to, but you’re a straight edge, Craw, like they say. A straight edge.’ Whirrun smiled up at him. ‘Put it in the ground.’

‘Eh?’

‘Bury it with me. Time was I thought it was a blessing and a curse. But it’s only a curse, and I ain’t about to curse some other poor bastard with it. Time was I thought it was reward and punishment both. But this is the only reward for men like us.’ And Whirrun nodded down towards the bloody spear-shaft. ‘This or … just living long enough to become nothing worth talking of. Put it in the mud, Craw.’ And he winced as he heaved the grip into Craw’s limp hand and pressed his dirty fingers around it.

‘I will.’

‘Least I won’t have to carry it no more. You see how bloody heavy it is?’

‘Every sword’s a weight to carry. Men don’t see that when they pick ’em up. But they get heavier with time.’

‘Good words.’ Whirrun bared his bloody teeth for a moment. ‘I really should’ve thought out some good words for this. Words to get folk all damp about the eye. Something for the songs. Thought I had years still, though. Can you think of any?’

‘What, words?’

‘Aye.’

Craw shook his head. ‘Never been any good with ’em. As for the songs … I daresay the bards just make up their own.’

‘Daresay they do at that, the bastards.’ Whirrun blinked up, past Craw’s face into the sky. The rain was finally slacking off. ‘Sun’s coming out, at least.’ He shook his head, still smiling. ‘What do you know? Shoglig was talking shit.’

Then he was still.

Pointed Metal

The rain was hammering down and Calder could hardly see fifty paces. Ahead of him his men were in a mindless tangle with the Union's, spears and pole-arms locked together, arms, legs, faces all crushed up against each other. Roaring, howling, boots sliding in the puddled muck, hands slipping on slick grips, slick pikestaffs, bloody metal, the dead and wounded shoved up like corks in a flood or trampled into the mud beneath. From time to time shafts would flap down, no way of knowing from which side, bounce from helmets or spin from shields and into the slop.

The third pit, or what Calder could see of it, had become a nightmare bog in which filth-caked devils stabbed and wrestled at floundering halfspeed. The Union were across it in quite a few places. More than once they'd made it through and over the wall, and only been pushed back by a desperate effort from White-Eye and his growing mob of fighting wounded.

Calder's throat was raw from shouting and still he couldn't make himself heard. Every man who could hold a weapon was fighting and still the Union kept coming, wave after wave, tramping on endlessly. He'd no idea where Pale-as-Snow had got to. Dead, maybe. A lot of men were. A hand-to-hand fight like this, the enemy close enough to spit in your face, couldn't last long. Men weren't made to stand it. Sooner or later one side would give and, like a dam crumbling, dissolve all at once. That moment wasn't far away now, Calder could feel it. He looked nervously behind him. A few wounded, and a few archers, and beyond them the faint shape of the farm. His horse was there. Probably not too late to—

Men were clambering out of the pit on his left and struggling towards him. For a moment he thought they were his own men, doing the sensible thing and running for their lives. Then, with a cold shock, he realised that under the muck they were Union soldiers, slipped through a gap in the shifting fight.

He stood open-mouthed as they lumbered at him. Too late to run. The leading man was on him, a Union officer who'd lost his helmet, tongue hanging out as he panted for breath. He swung a muddy blade and Calder lurched out of the way, splashing through a puddle. He managed to block the next swing, numbing impact twisting the sword in his grip, making his arm buzz to the shoulder.

He wanted to scream something manly, but what he shouted was, 'Help! Fuck! Help!' All rough and throaty and nobody could hear him or cared a shit, they were all fighting for their own lives.

No one could have guessed that Calder had been dragged into the yard every morning as a boy to train with spear and blade. He remembered none of it. He poked away with both hands like some old matron poking at a spider with a broom, mouth hanging wide, eyes full of wet hair. Should've cut his damn—

He gasped as the officer's sword jabbed at him again, his ankle caught and he tottered, one arm grabbing at nothing, and went down on his arse. It was one of the stolen flags that had tripped him. Oh, the irony. His sodden Styrian boots kicked up mud as he tried to scramble back. The officer took a tired step, sword up, then gave a breathless squeal and fell onto his knees. His head flew off sideways and his body toppled into Calder's lap, squirting blood, leaving him gasping, spitting, blinking.

'Thought I might help you out.' Who should be standing behind, sword in hand, but Brodd Tenways, nasty-looking grin on his rashy face and his chain mail gleaming with rainwater. An unlikely saviour if ever there was one. 'Couldn't leave you to snatch all the glory on your own, could I?'

Calder kicked the leaking body away and floundered up. 'I've half a mind to tell you to get fucked!'

'What about the other half?'

'Shitting itself.' No joke. He wouldn't have been at all surprised if his was the next head Tenways' sword whipped off.

But Tenways only gave him a rotten smile. ‘Might be the first honest thing I’ve ever heard you say.’

‘Probably that’s fair.’

Tenways nodded towards the soaked melee. ‘You coming?’

‘Damn right.’ Calder wondered for a moment whether he should charge in, roaring like a madman, and turn the tide of battle. That’s what Scale would’ve done. But it would hardly have been playing to his strengths. The enthusiasm he’d felt when he saw the cavalry routed had long ago leached away leaving him wet, cold, sore and exhausted. He feigned a grimace as he took a step, clutching at his knee. ‘Ah! Shit! I’ll have to catch you up.’

Tenways grinned. “Course. Why wouldn’t you? With me, you bastards!’ And he led a glowering wedge of his Carls towards the gap in the lines, more of them pouring over the wall on the left and adding their weight to the straining combat.

The rain was thinning. Calder could see a little further and, to his great relief, it looked as if Tenways’ arrival might have shifted the balance back their way. Might have. A few more Union soldiers on the other side of the scales and it could all still come apart. The sun peeped through the clouds for a moment, brought out a faint rainbow that curved down above the heaving mass of wet metal on the right and gently touched the bare rise beyond, and the low wall on top of it.

Those bastards beyond the stream. How long would they just sit still?

Peace in Our Time

There were wounded men everywhere on the slopes of the hill. Dying men. Dead men. Finree thought she saw faces she knew among them, but could not be sure whether they really were dead friends, or dead acquaintances, or just corpses with familiar hair. More than once she saw Hal's slack face leering, gaping, grinning. It hardly seemed to matter. The truly frightening thing about the dead, once she realised it, was that she was used to them.

They passed through a gap in a low wall and into a circle of stones, casualties sprawled on every spare stretch of grass. A man was trying to hold a great wound in his leg together, but when he clamped one end shut the other sagged open, blood welling out. Her father climbed down from his horse, his officers following him, she following them, a pale lad with a bugle clutched in one muddy fist watching her in silence. They picked their way through the madness in a pale procession, virtually ignored, her father staring about him, jaw clenched tight.

A junior officer trampled heedlessly past, waving a bent sword. 'Form up! Form *up*! You! Where the hell—'

'Lord Marshal.' An unmistakable high voice. Gorst stood, somewhat unsteadily, from a group of tattered soldiers, and gave Finree's father a tired-looking salute. Without doubt he had seen a great deal of action. His armour was battered and stained. His scabbard was empty and drooped about his legs in a manner that might have been comical on another day. He had a long, black-scabbed cut under one eye, his cheek, his jaw, the side of his thick neck streaked and crusted with drying blood. When he turned his

head Finree saw the white of the other eye was bruised a sickly red, bandages above it soaked through.

'Colonel Gorst, what happened?'

'We attacked.' Gorst blinked, noticed Finree and seemed to falter, then silently raised his hands and let them fall. 'We lost.'

'The Northmen still hold the Heroes?'

He nodded slowly.

'Where is General Jalenhorm?' asked her father.

'Dead,' piped Gorst.

'Colonel Vinkler?'

'Dead.'

'Who is in command?'

Gorst stood in silence. Finree's father turned away, frowning towards the summit. The rain was slackening off, the long slope leading up to the Heroes starting to take shape out of the grey, and with each stride of trampled grass that became visible, so did more corpses. Dead of both sides, broken weapons and armour, shattered stakes, spent arrows. Then the wall that ringed the summit, rough stones turned black by the storm. More bodies below it, the spears of the Northmen above. Still holding. Still waiting.

'Marshal Kroy!' The First of the Magi had not bothered to dismount. He sat, wrists crossed over the saddle-bow and his thick fingers dangling. As he took in the carnage he had the discerning, slightly disappointed air of a man who has paid for his garden to be weeded but on inspecting the grounds finds there is still a nettle or two about. 'A minor reverse, but reinforcements are arriving all the time and the weather is clearing. Might I suggest you reorganise and prepare your men for another attack? It would appear General Jalenhorm made it all the way up to the Heroes, so a second effort might—'

'No,' said Finree's father.

Bayaz gave the slightest puzzled frown. As at a normally reliable hound who refused to come to heel today. 'No?'

'No. Lieutenant, do you have a flag of parley with you?'

Her father's standard-bearer looked nervously over at Bayaz, then back, then swallowed. 'Of course, Lord Marshal.'

‘I would like you to attach it to your flagstaff, ride carefully up towards the Heroes and see if the Northmen can be prevailed upon to talk.’

A strange mutter went through the men within earshot. Gorst took a step forward. ‘Marshal Kroy, with another effort I think—’

‘You are the king’s observer. Observe.’

Gorst stood frozen for a moment, glanced at Finree, then snapped his mouth shut and stepped back.

The First of the Magi watched the white flag raised, his frown growing ever more thunderous even as the skies cleared. He nudged his horse forwards, causing a couple of exhausted soldiers to scramble from his path.

‘His Majesty will be greatly dismayed, Lord Marshal.’ He managed to project an aura of fearsomeness utterly disproportionate to a thickset old bald man in a soggy coat. ‘He expects every man to do his duty.’

Finree’s father stood before Bayaz’ horse, chest out and chin raised, the overpowering weight of the Magus’ displeasure on him. ‘My duty is to care for the lives of these men. I simply cannot countenance another attack. Not while I am in command.’

‘And how long do you suppose that will be?’

‘Long enough. Go!’ he snapped at his standard-bearer and the man spurred away, his white flag snapping.

‘Lord Marshal.’ Bayaz leaned forward, each syllable dropping like a mighty stone. ‘I earnestly hope that you have weighed the consequences—’

‘I have weighed them and I am content.’ Finree’s father was leaning forward slightly himself, eyes narrowed as if he was facing into a great wind. She thought she could see his hand trembling, but his voice emerged calm and measured. ‘I suspect my great regret will be that I allowed things to go so far.’

The Magus’ brows drew in further, his hissing voice almost painful to the ear. ‘Oh, a man can have greater regrets than that, Lord Marshal—’

‘If I may?’ Bayaz’ servant was striding jauntily through the chaos towards them. He was wet through, as though he had swum a river, dirt-caked as though he had waded a bog, but he showed not the slightest discomfort. Bayaz leaned down towards him and the servant whispered in his ear through a cupped hand. The Magus’ frown slowly faded as he first listened, then sat slowly back in his saddle, considering, and finally shrugged.

‘Very well, Marshal Kroy,’ he said. ‘Yours is the command.’

Finree's father turned away. 'I will need a translator. Who speaks the language?'

An officer with a heavily bandaged arm stepped up. 'The Dogman and some of his Northmen were with us at the start of the attack, sir, but …' He squinted into the milling crowd of wounded and worn-out soldiery. Who could possibly know where anyone was now?

'I have a smattering,' said Gorst.

'A smattering might cause misunderstandings. We cannot afford any.'

'It should be me,' said Finree.

Her father stared at her, as if astonished to find her there, let alone volunteering for duty. 'Absolutely not. I cannot—'

'Afford to wait?' she finished for him. 'I spoke with Black Dow only yesterday. He knows me. He offered me terms. I am the best suited. It should be me.'

He looked at her for a moment longer, then gave the slightest smile. 'Very well.'

'I will accompany you,' piped Gorst with a show of chivalry sickeningly inappropriate among so many dead men. 'Might I borrow your sword, Colonel Felnigg? I left mine at the summit.'

So they set off, the three of them, through the thinning drizzle, the Heroes jutting clearly now from the hilltop ahead. Not far up the slope her father slipped, gasped as he fell awkwardly, catching at the grass. Finree started forward to help him up. He smiled, and patted her hand, but he looked suddenly old. As if his confrontation with Bayaz had sucked ten years out of him. She had always been proud of her father, of course. But she did not think she had ever been so proud of him as she was at that moment. Proud and sad at once.

Wonderful slipped the needle through, pulled the thread after and tied it off. Normally it would've been Whirrun doing it, but Cracknut had sewed his last stitches, more was the pity. 'Just as well you've got a thick head.'

'Served me well my whole life.' Craw made the joke without thinking, no laughter given or expected, just as shouting came up from the wall that faced the Children. Where shouting would come from if the Union came

again. He stood, the world see-sawed wildly for a moment and his skull felt like it was going to burst.

Yon grabbed his elbow. ‘You all right?’

‘Aye, all things considered.’ And Craw swallowed his urge to spew and pushed through the crowd, the valley opening out in front of him, sky stained strange colours as the storm passed off. ‘They coming again?’ He wasn’t sure they could stand another go. He was sure he couldn’t.

Dow was all grin, though. ‘In a manner of speaking.’ He pointed out three figures making their way up the slope towards the Heroes. The very same route Hardbread had taken a few days before when he came to ask for his hill back. When Craw had still had the best part of a dozen, all looking to him to keep ’em safe. ‘Reckon they want to talk.’

‘Talk?’

‘Let’s go.’ And Dow tossed his blood-crusted axe to Shivers, straightened the chain about his shoulders and strode through the gap in the mossy wall and down the hillside.

‘Not too fast,’ called Craw as he set off after. ‘Don’t reckon my knees’ll take it!’

The three figures came closer. Craw felt just the slightest bit happier when he realised one was the woman he’d taken across the bridge yesterday, wearing a soldier’s coat. The relief leaked quick when he saw who the third was, though. The big Union man who’d nearly killed him, a bandage around his thick skull.

They met about half way between the Heroes and the Children. Where the first arrows were prickling the ground. The old man stood with shoulders back, one fist clasped behind him in the other. Clean-shaven, with short grey hair and a sharp look, like he missed nothing. He wore a black coat, stitched with leaves at the collar in silver thread, a sword at his side with a pommel made from some jewel, looked like it had never been drawn. The girl stood at his elbow, the neckless soldier a little further back, his eyes on Craw, the white of one turned all bloody red and a black cut under the other. Looked like he’d left his sword in the mud up on the hill, but he’d found another. You didn’t have to look far for a blade around here. Those were the times.

Dow stopped a couple of paces above them and Craw stopped a pace behind that, hands crossed in front of him. Close enough to get at his sword

quick, though he doubted he'd have had the strength to draw the damn thing. Standing up was enough of a challenge. Dow was chirpier.

'Well, well.' Grinning down at the girl with every tooth and spreading his arms in greeting. 'Never expected to be seeing you again so soon. Do you want to hold me?'

'No,' she said. 'This is my father, Lord Marshal Kroy, commander of his Majesty's—'

'I guessed. And you lied.'

She frowned up at him. 'Lied?'

'He's shorter'n me.' Dow's grin spread even wider. 'Or he looks it from where I'm standing, anyway. Quite the day we're having, ain't it? Quite the red day.' He lifted a fallen Union spear with the toe of his boot, then nudged it away. 'So what can I do for you?'

'My father would like to end the fighting.'

Craw felt such a wave of relief his swollen knees almost went out from under him. Dow was cagier. 'Could've done that yesterday when I offered, given us all a lot less bloody digging to do.'

'He's offering now.'

Dow looked across at Craw, and Craw just about managed to shrug. 'Better tardy than not at all.'

'Huh.' Dow narrowed his eyes at the girl, and at the soldier, and at the marshal, like he was thinking of saying no. Then he put his hands on his hips, and sighed. 'All right. Can't say I wanted any of this in the first place. There's people of my own I could've been killing, 'stead o' wasting my sweat on you bastards.'

The girl said a few words to her father, he said a few back. 'My father is greatly relieved.'

'Then my life's worth living. I've a few things to tidy up before we hammer out the details.' He cast an eye over the carnage on the Children. 'Probably you have too. We'll talk tomorrow. Let's say after lunch, I can't do business with a hollow belly.'

The girl passed it on to her father in Union, and while she did it Craw looked down at the red-eyed soldier, and he looked back. He had a long smear of blood down his neck. His, or Craw's, or one of Craw's dead friends'? Not even an hour ago they'd struggled with every shred of

strength and will to murder each other. Now there was no need. Made him wonder why there ever had been.

'He's a right fucking killer, your man there,' said Dow, more or less summing up Craw's thoughts.

The girl looked over her shoulder. 'He is …' searching for the right words. 'The king's watcher.'

Dow snorted. 'He did a bit more'n fucking watch today. He's got a devil in him, and I mean that as a compliment. Man like him could do well over on our side o' the Whiteflow. He was a Northman he'd be in all the songs. Shit, might be he'd be a king instead o' just watching one.' Dow smiled that killing smile he had. 'Ask him if he wants to work for me.'

The girl opened her mouth but the neckless one spoke first, with a thick accent and the strangest, high, girlish little voice Craw had ever heard on a man. 'I am happy where I am.'

Dow raised one brow. "Course you are. Real happy. Must be why you're so damn good at killing men.'

'What about my friend?' asked the girl. 'The one who was captured with me—'

'Don't give up, do you?' Dow showed his teeth again. 'You really think anyone'll want her back, now?'

She looked him right in the eye. 'I want her back. Didn't I get what you asked for?'

'Too late for some.' Dow ran a careless eye over the carnage scattered across the slope, took in a breath, and blew it out. 'But that's war, eh? There have to be losers. Might be an idea to send some messengers, let everyone know they can all stop fighting and have a big sing-song instead. Be a shame to carry on butchering each other for nothing, wouldn't it?'

The woman blinked, then rendered it into Union again. 'My father would like to recover our dead.'

But the Protector of the North was already turning away. 'Tomorrow. They won't run off.'

Black Dow walked off up the slope, the older man giving her the faintest, apologetic grin before he followed.

Finree took a long breath, held it, then let it out. 'I suppose that's it.'

‘Peace is always an anticlimax,’ said her father, ‘but no less desirable for that.’ He started stiffly back towards the Children and she walked beside him.

A throwaway conversation, a couple of bad jokes that half the gathering of five could not even have understood, and it was done. The battle was over. The war was over. Could they have had that conversation at the start, and would all those men – all these men – still be alive? Still have their arms, or legs? However she turned it around, she could not make it fit. Perhaps she should have been angry at the stupendous waste, but she was too tired, too irritated by the way her damp clothes were chafing her back. And at least it was over now after—

Thunder rolled across the battlefield. Terribly, frighteningly loud. For a moment she thought it must be lightning striking the Heroes. A last, petulant stroke of the storm. Then she saw the mighty ball of fire belching up from Osrung, so large she fancied she could feel the heat of it on her face. Specks flew about it, spun away from it, streaks and spirals of dust following them high into the sky. Pieces of buildings, she realised. Beams,blocks. Men. The flame vanished and a great cloud of black smoke shot up after it, spilling into the sky like a waterfall reversed.

‘Hal,’ she muttered, and before she knew it, she was running.

‘Finree!’ shouted her father.

‘I’ll go.’ Gorst’s voice.

She took no notice, charging on downhill as fast as she could with the tails of Hal’s coat snatching at her legs.

‘What the hell—’ muttered Craw, watching the column of smoke crawl up, the wind already dragging it billowing out towards them, the orange of fires flickering at its base, licking at the jagged wrecks that used to be buildings.

‘Oops,’ said Dow. ‘That’ll be Ishri’s surprise. Shitty timing for all concerned.’

Another day Craw might’ve been horror-struck, but today it was hard to get worked up. A man can only feel so sorry and he was way past his limit. He swallowed, and turned from the giant tree of dirt spreading its branches over the valley, and struggled back up the hillside after Dow.

‘You couldn’t call it a win, exactly,’ he was saying, ‘but not a bad result, all in all. Best send someone off to Reachey, tell him tools down. Tenways and Calder too, if they’re still—’

‘Chief.’ Craw stopped on the wet slope, next to the face-down corpse of a Union soldier. A man has to do the right thing. Has to stand by his Chief, whatever his feelings. He’d stuck to that all his life, and they say an old horse can’t jump new fences.

‘Aye?’ Dow’s grin faded as he looked into Craw’s face. ‘What’s to frown about?’

‘There’s something I need to tell you.’

The Moment of Truth

The deluge had finally come to an end but the leaves were still dripping relentlessly on the soaked, sore, unhappy soldiers of his Majesty's First. Corporal Tunny was the most soaked, sore and unhappy of the lot. Still crouching in the bushes. Still staring towards that same stretch of wall he'd been staring at all day and much of the day before. His eye chafed raw from the brass end of his eyeglass, his neck chafed raw from his constant scratching, his arse and armpits chafed raw from his wet clothes. He'd had some shitty duties in his chequered career, but this was down there among the worst, somehow combining the two awful constants of the army life – terror and tedium. For some time the wall had been lost in the hammering rain but now had taken shape again. The same mossy pile slanting down towards the water. And the same spears bristling above it.

'Can we see yet?' hissed Colonel Vallimir.

'Yes, sir. They're still there.'

'Give me that!' Vallimir snatched the eyeglass, peered towards the wall for a moment, then sulkily let it fall. 'Damn it!' Tunny had mild sympathy. About as much as he could ever have for an officer. Going meant disobeying the letter of Mitterick's order. Staying meant disobeying the tone of it. Either way there was a good chance he'd suffer. Here, if one was needed, was a compelling argument against ever rising beyond corporal.

'We go anyway!' snapped Vallimir, desire for glory evidently having tipped the scales. 'Get the men ready to charge!'

Forest saluted. 'Sir.'

So there it was. No stratagems for delay, no routes to light duty, no feigning of illness or injuries. It was time to fight, and Tunny had to admit he was almost relieved as he did up the buckle on his helmet. Anything but crouching in the bloody bushes any longer. There was a whispering as the order was passed down the line, a rattling and scraping as men stood, adjusted their armour, drew their weapons.

'That it, then?' asked Yolk, eyes wide.

'That's it.' Tunny was strangely light-headed as he undid the ties and slid the canvas cover from the standard. He felt that old, familiar tightness in his throat as he gently unfurled the precious square of red material. Not fear. Not fear at all. That other, much more dangerous thing. The one Tunny had tried over and over to smother, but always sprouted up again as powerful as ever when he wanted it least.

'Oh, here we go,' he whispered. The golden sun of the Union slipped out of hiding as the cloth unrolled. The number one embroidered on it. The standard of Corporal Tunny's regiment, which he'd served with since a boy. Served with in the desert and the snow. The names of a score of old battles stitched in gold thread, glittering in the shadows. The names of battles fought and won by better men than him.

'Oh, here we bloody go.' His nose hurt. He looked up at the branches, at the black leaves and the bright cracks of sky between them, at the glittering beads of water at their edges. His eyelids fluttered, blinking back tears. He stepped forward to the very edge of the trees, trying to swallow the dull pain behind his breastbone as men gathered around him in a long line. His limbs were tingling. Yolk and Worth behind him, the last of his little flock of recruits, both pale as they faced towards the water, and the wall beyond it. As they faced—

'Charge!' roared Forest, and Tunny was away. He burst from the trees and down the long slope, threading between old tree stumps, bounding from one to another. He heard men shouting behind him, men running, but he was too busy holding the standard high in both hands, the wind taking the cloth and dragging it out straight above his head, tugging hard at his hands, his arms, his shoulders.

He splashed out into the stream, floundered through the slow water to the middle, no more than thigh deep. He turned, waving the standard back and forth, its golden sun flashing. 'On, you bastards!' he roared at the crowd of

running men behind him. ‘On, the First! Forward! Forward!’ Something whipped past in the air, just seen out of the corner of his eye.

‘I’m hit!’ shrieked Worth, staggering in the stream, helmet twisted across his stricken face, clutching at his breastplate.

‘By birdshit, idiot!’ Tunny took the standard in one hand and wedged the other under Worth’s armpit, dragged him along a few steps until he had his balance back then plunged on himself, lifting his knees up high, spraying water with every step.

He hauled himself up the mossy bank, free hand clutching at roots, wet boots wrestling at the loose earth, finally clambering onto the overhanging turf. He snatched a look back, all he could hear his own whooping breath echoing in his helmet. The whole regiment, or the few hundred who remained, at any rate, were flooding down the slope and across the stream after him, kicking up sparkling drops.

He shoved the snapping standard high into the air, gave a meaningless roar as he drew his sword and ran on, face locked into a snarling mask, thumping towards the wall, spear-tips showing above it. Two more great strides and he sprang up onto the drystone, screaming like a madman, swinging his sword wildly one way and the other to clatter against the spears and knock them toppling …

There was no one there.

Just old pole-arms leaning loose against the wall, and damp barley shifting in the wind, and the calm, wooded fells rising faint at the north side of the valley very much like they did at the south side.

No one to fight.

No doubt there had been fighting, and plenty of it too. Over to the right the crops were flattened, the ground before the wall trampled to a mass of mud, littered with the bodies of men and horses, the ugly rubbish of victory and defeat.

But the fighting was over now.

Tunny narrowed his eyes. A few hundred strides away, off to the north and east, figures were jogging across the fields, chinks of sunlight through the heavy clouds glinting on armour. The Northmen, presumably. And since no one appeared to be pursuing them, pulling back in their own time, and on their own terms.

‘Yah!’ shrieked Yolk as he ran up, a war cry that could hardly have made a duck nervous. ‘Yah!’ Leaning over the wall to poke away wildly with his sword. ‘Yah?’

‘No one here,’ said Tunny, letting his own blade slowly fall.

‘No one here?’ muttered Worth, trying to straighten his twisted helmet.

Tunny sat down on the wall, the standard between his knees. ‘Only him.’ Not far away a scarecrow had been planted, a spear nailed to each stick arm, a brightly polished helmet on its sack-head. ‘And I reckon the whole regiment can take him.’ It all looked a pathetic ruse now. But then ruses always do, once you’ve seen through them. Tunny ought to have known that. He’d played more than a few himself, though usually on his own officers rather than the enemy.

More soldiers were reaching the wall. Wet through, tired out, mixed up. One clambered over it, walked up to the scarecrow and levelled his sword.

‘Lay down your arms in the name of his Majesty!’ he roared. There was a smattering of laughter, quickly cut off as Colonel Vallimir clambered up onto the drystone with a face like fury, Sergeant Forest beside him.

A horseman was pounding over from the empty gap in the wall on their right. The gap where they’d been sure a furious battle was taking place. A battle they would gloriously turn the tide of. A battle that was already over. He reined in before them, he and his horse breathing hard, dashed with mud from a full gallop.

‘Is General Mitterick here?’ he managed to gasp.

‘Afraid not,’ said Tunny.

‘Do you know where he is?’

‘Afraid not,’ said Tunny.

‘What’s the matter, man?’ snapped Vallimir, getting tangled with his scabbard as he hopped down from the wall and nearly falling on his face.

The messenger snapped out a salute. ‘Sir. Lord Marshal Kroy orders all hostilities to cease at once.’ He smiled, teeth gleaming white in his muddy face. ‘We’ve made peace with the Northmen!’ He turned his horse smartly and rode off, past a pair of stained and tattered flags drooping forgotten from leaning poles and south, towards a line of Union foot advancing across the ruined fields.

‘Peace?’ mumbled Yolk, soaked and shivering.

‘Peace,’ grunted Worth, trying to rub the birdshit from his breastplate.

‘Fuck!’ snarled Vallimir, flinging down his sword.

Tunny raised his brows, and stuck his own blade point-first in the earth. He couldn’t say he felt anywhere near as strongly as Vallimir about it, but he had to admit to feeling a mite disappointed at the way things had turned out.

‘But that’s war, eh, my beauty?’ He started to roll up the standard of his Majesty’s First, smoothing out the kinks with his thumb the way a woman might put away her wedding shawl when the big day was over.

‘That was quite some standard-bearing, Corporal!’ Forest was a stride or two away, foot up on the wall, a grin across his scarred face. ‘Up front, leading the men, in the place of most danger and most glory. ‘‘Forward!’’ cried brave Corporal Tunny, hurling his courage in the teeth of the enemy! I mean, there was no enemy, as it turned out, but still, I always knew you’d come through. You always do. Can’t help yourself, can you? Corporal Tunny, hero of the First!’

‘Fuck yourself, Forest.’

Tunny started to work the standard carefully back into its cover. Looking across the flat land to the north and east, watching the last of the Northmen hurrying away through the sunlit fields.

Luck. Some men have it. Some don’t. Calder could not but conclude, as he bounded through the barley behind his men, exhausted and muddy but very much alive, that he had it. By the dead, he had it.

Mad luck, that Mitterick had done the apparently insane, chosen to charge without checking the ground or waiting for light and doomed his cavalry. Impossible luck, that Brodd Tenways, of all people, would have lent a helping hand, the worst of his many enemies saving his life at the last moment. Even the rain had fought on his side, swept over at just the time to ruin the order of the Union foot and turn their dream ground into a nightmare of mud.

Even then, the men in the woods could still have done for him, but they’d been put off by a bundle of dead men’s spears, a scarecrow and a few boys each slipped a coin to wear a helmet twice too big and stick their heads up once in a while. Deal with them, Dow had said, and somehow bold Prince Calder had found a way.

When he thought of all the luck he'd had that day he felt dizzy. Felt as if the world must've chosen him for something. Must have great plans for him. How else could he have lurched through all this with his life? Him, Calder, who deserved it so bloody little?

There was an old ditch running through the fields up ahead with a low hedgerow behind. A boundary his father hadn't quite managed to tear up, and the perfect place to form a new line. Another little slice of luck. He found himself wishing that Scale had lived to see this. To hug him and thump his back and say how proud he was at last. He'd fought, and what was even more surprising, he'd won. Calder was laughing as he jumped the ditch, slid sideways through a gap in the bushes— And stopped.

A few of his lads were scattered around, most of them sitting or even lying, weapons tossed aside, all the way knackered from a day's hard fighting and a run across the fields. Pale-as-Snow was with them, but they weren't alone. A good score of Dow's Carls stood in a frowning crescent ahead. A grim-looking set of bastards, and the shitty jewel in the midst was Caul Shivers, his one eye fixed on Calder.

There was no reason for them to be there. Unless Curnden Craw had done what he said he would, and told Black Dow the truth. And Curnden Craw was a man famous for always doing what he said he would. Calder licked his lips. Seemed a bit of a foolish decision now, to have gambled against the inevitable. Seemed he was such a good liar he'd managed to trick himself on his chances.

'Prince Calder,' whispered Shivers, taking a step forward.

Way too late to run. He'd only be running at the Union anyway. A mad hope tickled the back of his mind that his father's closest might leap to his defence. But they hadn't lasted as long as they had by pissing into the wind. He glanced at Pale-as-Snow and the old warrior offered him the tiniest shrug. Calder had given them a day to be proud of, but he'd get no suicidal gestures of loyalty and he deserved none. They weren't going to set themselves on fire for his benefit any more than Caul Reachey was. You have to be realistic, as the Bloody-Nine had been so bloody fond of saying.

So Calder could only give a hopeless smile, and stand there trying to get his breath as Shivers took another step towards him, then another. That terrible scar loomed close. Close enough almost to kiss. Close enough so all

Calder could see was his own distorted, unconvincing grin reflected in that dead metal ball of an eye.

‘Dow wants you.’

Luck. Some men have it. Some don’t.

Spoils

The smell, first. Of a kitchen mishap, perhaps. Then of a bonfire.

Then more. An acrid note that niggled at the back of Gorst's throat.

The smell of buildings aflame. Adua had smelled that way, during the siege. So had Cardotti's House of Leisure, as he reeled through the smoke-filled corridors.

Finree rode like a madwoman and, dizzy and aching as he was, she pulled away from him, sending men hopping from the road. Ash started to flutter down as they passed the inn, black snow falling. Rubbish was dotted about as the fence of Osrung loomed from the smoky murk. Scorched wood, broken slates, scraps of cloth raining from the sky.

More wounded here, dotted haphazardly about the town's south gate, burned as well as hacked, stained with soot as well as blood, but the sounds were the same as they had been on the Heroes. As they always were. Gorst gritted his teeth against it. *Help them or kill them, but someone please put an end to their damned bleating.*

Finree was already down from her horse and making for the town. He scrambled after, head pounding, face burning, and caught up with her just inside the gate. He thought the sun might be dropping in the sky, but it hardly mattered. In Osrung it was choking twilight. Fires burned among the wooden buildings. Flames rearing up, the heat of them drying the spit in Gorst's mouth, sucking the sweat out of his face, making the air shimmer. A house hung open like a man gutted, missing one of its walls, floorboards jutting into air, windows from nowhere to nowhere.

Here is war. Here it is, shorn of its fancy trappings. None of the polished buttons, the jaunty bands, the stiff salutes. None of the clenched jaws and clenched buttocks. None of the speeches, the bugles, the lofty ideals. Here it is, stripped bare.

Just ahead someone bent over a man, helping him. He glanced up, sooty-faced. Not helping. He had been trying to get his boots off. As Gorst came close he startled and dashed away into the strange dusk. Gorst looked down at the soldier he left behind, one bare foot pale against the mud. *Oh, flower of our manhood! Oh, the brave boys! Oh, send them to war no more until next time we need a fucking distraction.*

Where should we look?' he croaked.

Finree stared at him for a moment, hair tangled across her face, soot stuck under her nose, eyes wild. *But still as beautiful as ever. More. More.* 'Over there! Near the bridge. He'd have been at the front.' *Such nobility! Such heroism! Lead on, my love, to the bridge!*

They went beneath a row of trees on fire, burning leaves fluttering down around them like confetti. *Sing! All sing for the happy couple!* People called out, voices muffled in the gloom. People looking for help, or looking for men to help, or men to rob. Figures shambled past, leaning on one another, carrying stretchers between them, casting about as though for something they had mislaid, digging at the wreckage with their hands. *How could you find one man in this? Where would you find one man? A whole one, anyway.*

There were bodies all about. There were parts of bodies. Strangely robbed of meaning. Bits of meat. *Someone scrape them up and pack them in gilt coffins back to Adua so the king can stand to attention as they pass and the queen can leave glistening tear-tracks through her powder and the people can tear their hair and ask why, why, while they wonder what to have for dinner or whether they need a new pair of shoes or whatever the fuck.*

'Over here!' shouted Finree, and he hurried to her, hauled a broken beam aside, two corpses underneath, neither one an officer. She shook her head, biting her lip, put one hand on his shoulder. He had to stop himself smiling. Could she know the thrill that touch sent through him? He was wanted. Needed. And by her.

Finree picked her way from one ruined shell to another, coughing, eyes watering, tearing at rubbish with her fingernails, turning over bodies, and he followed. Searching every bit as feverishly as she did. More, even. But for

different reasons. *I will drag aside some fallen trash and there will be his ruined, gaping corpse, not half so fucking handsome now, and she will see it. Oh no! Oh yes. Cruel, vicious, lovely fate. And she will turn to me in her misery, and weep upon my uniform and perhaps thump my chest lightly with her fist, and I will hold her, and whisper insipid consolations, and be the rock for her to founder upon, and we will be together, as we should have been, and would have been had I had the courage to ask her.*

Gorst grinned to himself, teeth bared as he rolled over another body. Another dead officer, arm so broken it was wrapped right around his back. *Taken too soon with all his young life ahead of him and blah, blah, blah. Where is Brock? Show me Brock.*

A few splinters of stone and a great crater, flooded by churning river water, were all that remained to show where Osrung's bridge once stood. Most of the buildings around it were little more than heaps of rubbish, but one stone-built was largely intact, its roof stripped off and some of the bare rafters aflame. Gorst struggled towards it while Finree picked at some bodies, one arm over her face. A doorway with a heavy lintel, and in the doorway a thick door twisted from its hinges, and just showing beneath the door, a boot. Gorst reached down and heaved the door up like the lid of a coffin.

And there was Brock. He did not seem badly injured at a first glance. His face was streaked with blood, but not smashed to pulp as Gorst might have hoped. One leg was folded underneath him at an unnatural angle, but his limbs were all attached.

Gorst bent over him, placed a hand over his mouth. Breath. *Still alive.* He felt a surge of disappointment so strong that his knees nearly buckled, closely followed by a sobering rage. *Cheated. Gorst, the king's squeaking clown, why should he have what he wants? What he needs? What he deserves? Dangle it in his fat face and laugh! Cheated. Just as I was in Sipani. Just as I was at the Heroes. Just as I always am.*

Gorst raised one brow, and he blew out a long, soft breath, and he shifted his hand down, down to Brock's neck. He slid his thumb and his middle finger around it, feeling out the narrowest point, then gently, firmly squeezed.

What's the difference? Fill a hundred pits with dead Northmen, congratulations, have a parade! Kill one man in the same uniform as you?

A crime. A murder. Worse than despicable. Are we not all men? All blood and bone and dreams?

He squeezed a little harder, impatient to be done. Brock did not complain. Did not so much as twitch. He was so nearly dead anyway. *Nothing more than nudging fate in the right direction.*

So much easier than all the others. No steel and screams and mess, just a little pressure and a little time. So much more point than all the others. They had nothing I needed, they simply faced the other way. I should be ashamed of their deaths. But this? This is justice. This is righteous. This is—

'Have you found anything?'

Gorst's hand sprang open and he shifted it slightly so two fingers were pressed up under Brock's jaw, as if feeling for a pulse. 'He's alive,' he croaked.

Finree leaned down beside him, touched Brock's face with a trembling hand, the other pressed to her mouth, gave a gasp of relief that might as well have been a dagger in Gorst's face. He slid one arm under Brock's knees, the other under his back, and scooped him up. *I have failed even at killing a man. It seems my only choice is to save him.*

A surgeon's tent stood near the south gate, canvas turned muddy grey by the falling ash. Wounded waited outside for attention, clutching at assorted injuries, moaning, or whimpering, or silent, eyes empty. Gorst stomped through them and up to the tent. *We can jump the queue, because* I *am the king's observer, and she is the marshal's daughter, and the wounded man is a colonel of the most noble blood, and so it is only fitting that any number of the rank and file can die before bastards like us are inconvenienced.*

Gorst pushed through the flap and set Brock down ever so gently on a stained table, and a tight-faced surgeon listened at his chest and proclaimed him alive. *And all my silly, pretty little hopes strangled. Again.* Gorst stepped back as the assistants crowded in, Finree bending over her husband, holding his sooty hand, looking eagerly down into his face, her eyes shining with hope, and fear, and love.

Gorst watched. *If it was me dying on that table, would anyone care? They would shrug and tip me out with the slops. And why shouldn't they? It would be better than I deserve.* He left them to it, trudged outside and stood there, frowning at the wounded, he did not know how long for.

'They say he is not too badly hurt.'

He turned to look at her. Forcing the smile onto his face was harder work than climbing the Heroes had been. ‘I am … so glad.’

‘They say it is amazing luck.’

‘Too true.’

They stood there in silence a moment longer. ‘I don’t know how I can ever repay you …’

Easy. Abandon that pretty fool and be mine. That’s all I want. That one little thing. Just kiss me, and hold me, and give yourself to me, utterly and completely. That’s all. ‘It’s nothing,’ he whispered.

But she had already turned and hurried into the tent, leaving him alone. He stood for a moment as the ash gently fluttered down, settled across the ground, settled across his shoulders. Beside him a boy lay on a stretcher. On the way to the tent, or while waiting for the surgeon, he had died.

Gorst frowned down at the body. *He is dead and I, self-serving coward that I am, still live.* He sucked in air through his sore nose, blew it out through his sore mouth. *Life is not fair. There is no pattern. People die at random.* Obvious, perhaps. Something that everyone knows. *Something that everyone knows, but no one truly believes. They think when it comes to them there will be a lesson, a meaning, a story worth telling. That death will come to them as a dread scholar, a fell knight, a terrible emperor.* He poked at the boy’s corpse with a toe, rolled it onto its side, then let it flop back. *Death is a bored clerk, with too many orders to fill. There is no reckoning. No profound moment. It creeps up on us from behind, and snatches us away while we shit.*

He stepped over the corpse and walked back towards Osrung, past the shambling grey ghosts that clogged the road. He was no more than a dozen steps inside the gate when he heard a voice calling to him.

‘Over here! Help!’ Gorst saw an arm sticking from a heap of charred rubbish. Saw a desperate, ash-smeared face. He clambered carefully up, undid the buckle under the man’s chin, removed his helmet and tossed it away. The lower half of his body was trapped under a splintered beam. Gorst took one end, heaved it up and swung it away, lifted the soldier as gently as a father might a sleeping child and carried him back towards the gate.

‘Thank you,’ he croaked, one hand pawing at Gorst’s soot-stained jacket. ‘You’re a hero.’

Gorst said nothing. *But if only you knew, my friend. If only you knew.*

Desperate Measures

Time to celebrate.

No doubt the Union would have their own way of looking at it, but Black Dow was calling this a victory and his Carls were minded to agree. So they'd dug new fire-pits, and cracked the kegs, and poured the beer, and every man was looking forward to a double gild, and most of 'em to heading home to plough their fields, or their wives, or both.

They chanted, laughed, staggered about in the gathering darkness, tripping through fires and sending sparks showering, drunker'n shit. All feeling twice as alive for facing death and coming through. They sang old songs, and made up new ones with the names of today's heroes where yesterday's used to be. Black Dow, and Caul Reachey, and Ironhead and Tenways and Golden raised up on high while the Bloody-Nine, and Bethod, and Threetrees and Littlebone and even Skarling Hoodless sank into the past like the sun sinking in the west, the midday glory of their deeds dimming just to washed-out memories, a last flare among the stringy clouds before night swallowed 'em. You didn't hear much about Whirrun of Bligh even. About Shama Heartless, not a peep. Names turned over by time, like the plough turning the soil. Bringing up the new while the old were buried in the mud.

'Beck.' Craw lowered himself stiffly down beside the fire, a wooden ale cup in one hand, and gave Beck's knee an encouraging pat.

'Chief. How's your head?'

The old warrior touched a finger to the fresh stitches above his ear. 'Sore. But I've had worse. Very nearly had a lot worse today, in fact, as you

might've noticed. Scorry told me you saved my life. Most folk wouldn't place a high value on that particular article but I must admit I'm quite attached to it. So. Thanks, I guess. A lot of thanks.'

'Just trying to do the right thing. Like you said.'

'By the dead. Someone was listening. Drink?' And Craw offered out his wooden mug.

'Aye.' Beck took it and a good swallow too. Taste of beer, sour on his tongue.

'You did good today. Bloody good, far as I'm concerned. Scorry told me it was you put that big bastard down. The one who killed Drofd.'

'Did I kill him?'

'No. He's alive.'

'Didn't kill no one today, then.' Beck wasn't sure whether he should be disappointed by that or glad. He wasn't up to feeling much about anything either way. 'I killed a man yesterday,' he found he'd said.

'Flood said you killed four.'

Beck licked his lips. Trying to lick away the sour taste, but it was going nowhere. 'Flood got it wrong and I was too much the coward to put him right. Lad called Reft killed those men.' He took another swallow, too fast, made his voice spill out breathless. 'I hid in a cupboard while they were fighting. Hid in a cupboard and pissed my pants. There's Red Beck for you.'

'Huh.' Craw nodded, his lips pressed thoughtfully together. He didn't seem all that bothered. He didn't seem all that surprised. 'Well, it don't change what you did today. There's far worse a man can do in a battle than hide in a cupboard.'

'I know,' muttered Beck, and his mouth hung open, ready to let it spill. It was like his body needed to say it, to spit out the rot like a sick man might need to puke. His mouth had to do it, however much he might want to keep it hid. 'I need to tell you something, Chief,' his dried-out tongue wrestling with the words.

'I'm listening,' said Craw.

He cast about for the best way to put it, like the sick man casting about for the best thing to spew into. As though there were words pretty enough to make it less ugly. 'The thing is—'

‘Bastard!’ someone shouted, knocked Beck so bad he spilled the dregs of the cup into the fire.

‘Oy!’ growled Craw, wincing as he got up, but whoever it was had already gone. There was a current through the crowd, of a sudden. A new mood, angry, jeering at someone being dragged through their midst. Craw followed on and Beck followed him, more relieved than upset at the distraction, like the sick man realising he don’t have to puke into his wife’s hat after all.

They shouldered through the crowd to the biggest fire-pit, in the centre of the Heroes, where the biggest men were. Black Dow sat in the midst of ’em in Skarling’s Chair, one dangling hand twisting the pommel of his sword round and round. Shivers was there, on the far side of the fire, pushing someone down onto his knees.

‘Shit,’ muttered Craw.

‘Well, well, well.’ And Dow licked his teeth and sat back, grinning. ‘If it ain’t Prince Calder.’

*

Calder tried to look as comfortable as he could on his knees with his hands tied and Shivers looming over him. Which wasn’t all that comfortable. ‘The invitation was hard to refuse,’ he said.

‘I’ll bet,’ answered Dow. ‘Can you guess why I made it?’

Calder took a look around the gathering. All the great men of the North were there. All the bloated fools. Glama Golden, sneering over from the far side of the fire. Cairm Ironhead, watching, one brow raised. Brodd Tenways, a bit less scornful than usual, but a long way from friendly. Caul Reachey, with a ‘my hands are tied’ sort of a wince, and Curnden Craw, with a ‘why didn’t you run?’ sort of a one. Calder gave the pair of them a sheepish nod. ‘I’ve an inkling.’

‘For anyone who hasn’t an inkling, Calder here tried to prevail on my new Second to kill me.’ Some muttering ran through the firelit crowd, but not that much. No one was overly surprised. ‘Ain’t that right, Craw?’

Craw looked at the ground. ‘That’s right.’

‘You going to deny it, even?’ asked Dow.

‘If I did, could we forget the whole thing?’

Dow grinned. ‘Still joking. I like that. Not that the faithlessness surprises me, you’re known for a schemer. The stupidity does, though. Curnden Craw’s a straight edge, everyone knows that.’ Craw winced even harder, and looked away. ‘Stabbing men in the back ain’t his style.’

‘I’ll admit it wasn’t my brightest moment,’ said Calder. ‘How about we notch it up to youthful folly and let it slide?’

‘Don’t see how I can. You’ve pushed my patience too far, and it’s got a spike on the end. Haven’t I treated you like a son?’ A few chuckles ran along both sides of the fire-pit. ‘I mean, not a favourite son. Not a firstborn or nothing. A runty one, down near the end o’ the litter, but still. Didn’t I let you take charge when your brother died, though you haven’t the experience or the name for it? Didn’t I let you have your say around the fire? And when you said too much didn’t I clear you off to Carleon with your wife to cool your head rather than just cut your head off and worry later on the details? Your father weren’t so forgiving to those who disagreed with him, as I recall.’

‘True,’ said Calder. ‘You’ve been generosity itself. Oh. Apart from trying to kill me, of course.’

Dow’s forehead wrinkled. ‘Eh?’

‘Four nights past, at Caul Reachey’s weapontake? Bringing anything back? No? Three men tried to murder me, and when I put one to the question he dropped Brodd Tenways’ name. And everyone knows Brodd Tenways wouldn’t do a thing without your say-so. You denying it?’

‘I am, in fact.’ Dow looked over at Tenways and he gave a little shake of his rashy head. ‘And Tenways too. Might be he’s lying, and has his own reasons, but I can tell you one thing for a fact – any man here can tell I had no part in it.’

‘How’s that?’

Dow leaned forwards. ‘You’re still fucking breathing, boy. You think if I’d a mind to kill you there’s a man could stop me?’ Calder narrowed his eyes. He had to admit there was something to that argument. He looked for Reachey, but the old warrior was steadfastly looking elsewhere.

‘But it don’t much matter who didn’t die yesterday,’ said Dow. ‘I can tell you who’ll die tomorrow.’ Silence stretched out, and never had the word to end it been so horribly clear. ‘You.’ Seemed like everyone was smiling. Everyone except Calder, and Craw, and maybe Caul Shivers, but that was

probably just because his face was so scarred he couldn't get his mouth to curl. 'Anyone got any objections to this?' Aside from the crackling of the fire, there wasn't a sound. Dow stood up on his seat and shouted it. 'Anyone want to speak up for Calder?' None spoke.

How silly his whispers in the dark seemed now. All his seeds had fallen on stony ground all right. Dow was firmer set in Skarling's Chair than ever and Calder hadn't a friend to his name. His brother was dead and he'd somehow found a way to make Curnden Craw his enemy. Some spinner of webs he was.

'No one? No?' Slowly, Dow sat back down. 'Anyone here not happy about this?'

'I'm not fucking delighted,' said Calder.

Dow burst out laughing. 'You got bones, lad, whatever they say. Bones of a rare kind. I'll miss you. You got a preference when it comes to method? We could hang you, or cut your head off, or your father was partial to the bloody cross though I couldn't advise it—'

Maybe the fighting today had gone to Calder's head, or maybe he was sick of treading softly, or maybe it was the cleverest thing to do right then. 'Fuck yourself!' he snarled, and spat into the fire. 'I'd sooner die with a sword in my hand! You and me, Black Dow, in the circle. A challenge.'

Slow, scornful silence. 'Challenge?' sneered Dow. 'Over what? You make a challenge to decide an issue, boy. There's no issue here. Just you turning on your Chief and trying to talk his Second into stabbing him in the back. Would your father have taken a challenge?'

'You're not my father. You're not a fucking shadow of him! He made that chain you're wearing. Forged it link by link, like he forged the North new. You stole it from the Bloody-Nine, and you had to stab him in the back to get it.' Calder smirked like his life depended on it. Which it did. 'All you are is a thief, Black Dow, and a coward, and an oath-breaker, and a fucking idiot besides.'

'That a fact?' Dow tried to smile himself, but it looked more like a scowl. Calder might be a beaten man, but that was just the point. Having a beaten man fling shit at him was souring his day of victory.

'Haven't you got the bones to face me, man to man?'

'Show me a man and we'll see.'

‘I was man enough for Tenways’ daughter.’ Calder got a flutter of laughter of his own. ‘But what?’ And he nodded up to Shivers. ‘You get harder men to do your black work now, do you, Black Dow? Lost your taste for it? Come on! Fight me! The circle!’

Dow had no real reason to say yes. He’d nothing to win. But sometimes it’s more about how it looks than how it is. Calder was famous as the biggest coward and piss-poorest fighter in any given company. Dow’s name was all built on being the very opposite. This was a challenge to everything he was, in front of all the great men of the North. He couldn’t turn it down. Dow saw it, and he slouched back in Skarling’s Chair like a man who’d argued with his wife over whose turn it was to muck out the pigpen, and lost.

‘All right. You want it the hard way you can have it the fucking hard way. Tomorrow at dawn. And no pissing about spinning the shield and choosing weapons. Me and you. A sword each. To the death.’ He angrily waved his hand. ‘Take this bastard somewhere I don’t have to look at him smirk.’

Calder gasped as Shivers jerked him to his feet, twisted him around and marched him off. The crowd closed in behind them. Songs started up again, and laughter, and bragging, and all the business of victory and success. His imminent doom was a distraction hardly worth stopping the party for.

‘I thought I told you to run.’ Craw’s familiar voice in his ear, the old man pushing through the press beside him.

Calder snorted. ‘I thought I told you not to say anything. Seems neither of us can do as we’re told.’

‘I’m sorry it had to be this way.’

‘It didn’t have to be this way.’

He saw Craw’s grimace etched by firelight. ‘You’re right. I’m sorry this is what I chose, then.’

‘Don’t be. You’re a straight edge, everyone knows it. And let’s face the facts, I’ve been hurtling towards the grave ever since my father died. Just a surprise it’s taken me this long to hit mud. Who knows, though?’ he called as Shivers dragged him between two of the Heroes, giving Craw one last smirk over his shoulder. ‘Maybe I’ll beat Dow in the circle!’

He could tell from Craw’s sorry face he didn’t think it likely. Neither did Calder, if he was honest for once. The very reasons for the success of his little plan were also its awful shortcomings. Calder was the biggest coward

and piss-poorest fighter in any given company. Black Dow was the very opposite. They hadn't earned their reputations by accident.

He'd about as much chance in the circle as a side of ham, and everyone knew it.

Stuff Happens

‘I’ve a letter for General Mitterick,’ said Tunny, hooding his lantern as he walked up out of the dusk to the general’s tent.

Even in the limited light, it was plain the guard was a man who nature had favoured better below the neck than above it. ‘He’s with the lord marshal. You’ll have to wait.’

Tunny displayed his sleeve. ‘I’m a full corporal, you know. Don’t I get precedence?’

The guard did not take the joke. ‘Press-a-what?’

‘Never mind.’ Tunny sighed, and stood beside him, and waited. Voices burbled from the tent, gaining in volume.

‘I demand the right to attack!’ one boomed out. Mitterick. There weren’t many soldiers in the army who had the good fortune not to recognise that voice. The guard frowned across at Tunny as though to say, you shouldn’t be listening to this. Tunny held up the letter and shrugged. ‘We’ve forced them back! They’re teetering, exhausted! They’ve no stomach left for it.’ Shadows moved on the side of the tent, perhaps a shaken fist. ‘The slightest push now … I have them just where I want them!’

‘You thought you had them there yesterday and it turned out they had you.’ Marshal Kroy’s more measured tones. ‘And the Northmen aren’t the only ones who’ve run out of stomach.’

‘My men deserve the chance to finish what they’ve started! Lord Marshal, I deserve the—’

‘No!’ Harsh as a whip cracking.

‘Then, sir, I demand the right to resign—’

‘No to that too. No even more to that.’ Mitterick tried to say something but Kroy spoke over him. ‘No! Must you argue every point? You will swallow your damn pride and do your damn duty! You will stand down, you will bring your men back across the bridge and you will prepare your division for the journey south to Uffrith as soon as we have completed negotiations. Do you understand me, General?’

There was a long pause and then, very quietly, ‘We lost.’ Mitterick’s voice, but hardly recognisable. Suddenly shrunk very small, and weak, sounding almost as if there were tears in it. As if some cord held vibrating taut had suddenly snapped, and all Mitterick’s bluster had snapped with it. ‘We lost.’

‘We drew.’ Kroy’s voice was quiet now, but the night was quiet, and few men could drop eaves like Tunny when there was something worth hearing. ‘Sometimes that’s the most one can hope for. The irony of the soldier’s profession. War can only ever pave the way for peace. And it should be no other way. I used to be like you, Mitterick. I thought there was but one right thing to do. One day, probably very soon, you will replace me, and you will learn the world is otherwise.’

Another pause. ‘Replace you?’

‘I suspect the great architect has tired of this particular mason. General Jalenhorm died at the Heroes. You are the only reasonable choice. One that I support in any case.’

‘I am speechless.’

‘If I had known I could achieve that simply by resigning I would have done it years ago.’

A pause. ‘I would like Opker promoted to lead my division.’

‘I see no objection.’

‘And for General Jalenhorm’s I thought—’

‘Colonel Felnigg has been given the command,’ said Kroy. ‘General Felnigg, I should say.’

‘Felnigg?’ came Mitterick’s voice, with a tinge of horror.

‘He has the seniority, and my recommendation to the king is already sent.’

‘I simply cannot work with that man—’

‘You can and you will. Felnigg is sharp, and cautious, and he will balance you out, as you have balanced me. Though you were often, frankly, a pain

in my arse, by and large it has been an honour.' There was a sharp crack, as of polished boot heels snapping together.

Then another. 'Lord Marshal Kroy, the honour has been entirely mine.'

Tunny and the guard both flung themselves to the most rigid attention as the two biggest hats in the army suddenly strode from the tent. Kroy made sharply off into the gathering gloom. Mitterick stayed there, looking after him, one hand opening and closing by his side.

Tunny had a pressing appointment with a bottle and a bedroll. He cleared his throat. 'General Mitterick, sir!'

Mitterick turned, very obviously wiping away a tear while pretending to be clearing dust from his eye. 'Yes?'

'Corporal Tunny, sir, standard-bearer of his Majesty's First Regiment.'

Mitterick frowned. 'The same Tunny who was made colour sergeant after Ulrioch?'

Tunny puffed out his chest. 'The same, sir.'

'The same Tunny who was demoted after Dunbrec?'

Tunny's shoulders slumped. 'The same, sir.'

'The same Tunny who was court-martialled after that business at Shricta?'

And further yet. The same, sir, though I hasten to point out that the tribunal found no evidence of wrongdoing, sir.'

Mitterick snorted. 'So much for tribunals. 'What brings you here, Tunny?'

He held out the letter. 'I have come in my official capacity as standard-bearer, sir, with a letter from my commanding officer, Colonel Vallimir.'

Mitterick looked down at it. What does it say?'

'I wouldn't—'

'I do not believe a soldier with your experience of tribunals would carry a letter without a good idea of the contents. What does it say?'

Tunny conceded the point. 'Sir, I believe the colonel lays out at some length the reasons behind his failure to attack today.'

'Does he.'

'He does, sir, and he furthermore apologises most profusely to you, sir, to Marshal Kroy, to his Majesty, and in fact to the people of the Union in general, and he offers his immediate resignation, sir, but also demands the right to explain himself before a court martial – he was rather vague on that point, sir – he goes on to praise the men and to shoulder the blame entirely himself, and—'

Mitterick took the letter from Tunny's hand, crumpled it up in his fist and tossed it into a puddle.

'Tell Colonel Vallimir not to worry.' He watched the letter for a moment, drifting in the broken reflection of the evening sky, then shrugged. 'It's a battle. We all made mistakes. Would it be pointless, Corporal Tunny, to tell you to stay out of trouble?'

'All advice gratefully considered, sir.'

'What if I make it an order?'

'All orders considered too, sir.'

'Huh. Dismissed.'

Tunny snapped out his most sycophantic salute, turned and quick-marched off into the night before anyone decided to court martial him.

The moments after a battle are a profiteer's dream. Corpses to be picked over, or dug up and picked over, trophies to be traded, booze, and chagga, and husk to be sold to the celebrating or the commiserating at equally outrageous mark-ups. He'd seen men without a bit to their names in the year leading up to an engagement make their fortunes in the hour after. But most of Tunny's stock was still on his horse, which was who knew where, and, besides, his heart just wasn't in it.

So he kept his distance from the fires and the men around them, strolling along behind the lines, heading north across the trampled battlefield. He passed a pair of clerks booking the dead by lamplight, one making notes in a ledger while the other twitched up shrouds to look for corpses worth noting and shipping back to Midderland, men too noble to go in the Northern dirt. As though one dead man's any different from another. He clambered over the wall he'd spent all day watching, become again the unremarkable farmer's folly it had been before the battle, and picked his way through the dusk towards the far left of the line where the remains of the First were stationed.

'I didn't know, I just didn't know, I just didn't see him!'

Two men stood in barley patched with little white flowers, maybe thirty strides from the nearest fire, staring down at something. One was a nervous-looking young lad Tunny didn't recognise, holding an empty flatbow. A new recruit, maybe. The other was Yolk, a torch in one hand, stabbing at the lad with a pointed finger.

‘What’s to do?’ growled Tunny as he walked up, already developing a bad feeling. It got worse when he saw what they were looking at. ‘Oh, no, no.’ Worth lay in a bald patch of earth, his eyes open and his tongue hanging out, a flatbow bolt right through his breastbone.

‘I thought it was Northmen!’ said the lad.

‘The Northmen are on the north side of the lines, you fucking idiot!’ snapped Yolk at him.

‘I thought he had an axe!’

‘A shovel.’ Tunny dug it out of the barley, just beyond the limp fingers of Worth’s left hand. ‘Reckon he’d been off doing what he did best.’

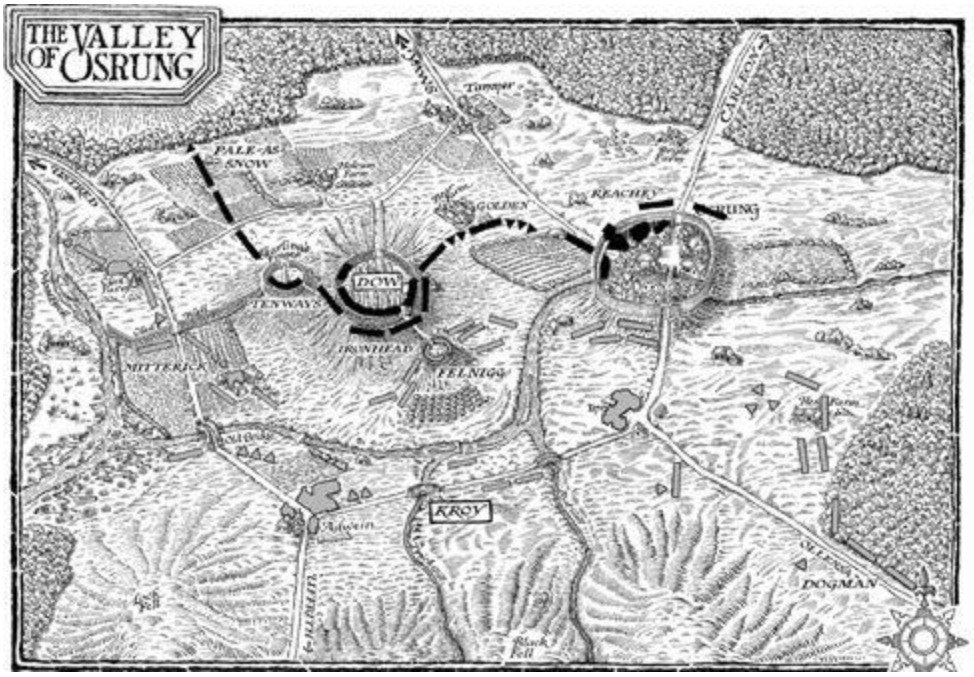
‘I should fucking kill you!’ snarled Yolk, reaching for his sword. The lad gave a helpless squeak, holding his flatbow up in front of him.

‘Leave it.’ Tunny stepped between them, put a restraining palm on Yolk’s chest and gave a long, painful sigh. ‘It’s a battle. We all made mistakes. I’ll go to Sergeant Forest, see what’s to be done.’ He pulled the flatbow from the lad’s limp hands and pushed the shovel into them. ‘In the meantime, you’d better get digging.’ For Worth, the Northern dirt would have to do.

After the Battle

**‘You never have to wait long, or look far,
to be reminded of how thin the line is
between being a hero or a goat’**

Mickey Mantle



End of the Road

‘He in there?’

Shivers gave one slow nod. ‘He’s there.’

‘Alone?’ asked Craw, putting his hand on the rotten handle.

‘He went in alone.’

Meaning, more’n likely, he was with the witch. Craw wasn’t keen to renew his acquaintance with her, especially after seeing her surprise yesterday, but dawn was on the way, and it was past time he was too. About ten years past time. He had to tell his Chief first. That was the right thing to do. He blew out through his puffed cheeks, grimaced at his stitched face, then turned the handle and went in.

Ishri stood in the middle of the dirt floor, hands on her hips, head hanging over on one side. Her long coat was scorched about the hem and up one sleeve, part of the collar burned away, the bandages underneath blackened. But her skin was still so perfect the torch flames were almost reflected in her cheek, like a black mirror.

‘Why fight this fool?’ she was sneering, one long finger pointing up towards the Heroes. ‘There is nothing you can win from him. If you step into the circle I cannot protect you.’

‘Protect me?’ Dow slouched by the dark window, hard face all in shadow, his axe held loose just under the blade. ‘I’ve handled men ten times harder’n Prince bloody Calder in the circle.’ And he gave it a long, screeching lick with a whetstone.

‘Calder.’ Ishri snorted. ‘There are other forces at work here. Ones beyond your understanding—’

‘Ain’t really beyond my understanding. You’re in a feud with this First of the Magi, so you’re using my feud with the Union as a way to fight each other. Am I close to it? Feuds I understand, believe me. You witches and whatever think you live in a world apart, but you’ve got both feet in this one, far as I can tell.’

She lifted her chin. ‘Where there is sharp metal there are risks.’

‘’Course. It’s the appeal o’ the stuff.’ And the whetstone ground down the blade again.

Ishri narrowed her eyes, lip curling. ‘What is it with you damn pink men, and your damn fighting, and your damn pride?’

Dow only grinned, teeth shining as his face tipped out of the darkness. ‘Oh, you’re a clever woman, no doubt, you know all kinds o’ useful things.’ One more lick of the stone, and he held the axe up to the light, edge glittering. ‘But you know less’n naught about the North. I gave my pride up years ago. Didn’t fit me. Chafed all over. This is about my name.’ He tested the edge, sliding his thumb-tip down it gently as you might down a lover’s neck, then shrugged. ‘I’m Black Dow. I can’t get out o’ this any more’n I can fly to the moon.’

Ishri shook her head in disgust. ‘After all the effort I have gone to—’

‘If I get killed your wasted effort will be my great fucking regret, how’s that?’

She scowled at Craw, and then at Dow as he set his axe down by the wall, and gave an angry hiss. ‘I will not miss your weather.’ And she took hold of her singed coat-tail and jerked it savagely in front of her face. There was a snapping of cloth and Ishri was gone, only a shred of blackened bandage fluttering down where she’d stood.

Dow caught it between finger and thumb. ‘She could just use the door, I guess, but it wouldn’t have quite the … drama.’ He blew the scrap of cloth away and watched it twist through the air. ‘Ever wish you could just disappear, Craw?’

Only every day for the last twenty years. ‘Maybe she’s got a point,’ he grunted. ‘You know. About the circle.’

‘You too?’

‘There’s naught to gain. Bethod always used to say there’s nothing shows more power than—’

'Fuck mercy,' growled Dow, sliding his sword from its sheath, fast enough to make it hiss. Craw swallowed, had to stop himself taking a step back. 'I've given that boy all kinds o' chances and he's made me look a prick and a half. You know I've got to kill him.' Dow started polishing the dull, grey blade with a rag, muscles working on the side of his head. 'I got to kill him bad. I got to kill him so much no one'll think to make me look a prick for a hundred years. Got to teach a lesson. That's how this works.' He looked up and Craw found he couldn't meet his eye. Found he was looking down at the dirt floor, and saying nothing. 'Take it you won't be sticking about to hold a shield for me?'

'Said I'd stick 'til the battle's done.'

'You did.'

'The battle's done.'

'The battle ain't ever done, Craw, you know that.' Dow watched him, half his face in the light, the other eye just a gleam in the dark, and Craw started spilling reasons even though he hadn't been asked.

'There are better men for the task. Younger men. Men with better knees, and stronger arms, and harder names.' Dow just kept watching. 'Lost a lot o' my friends the last few days. Too many. Whirrun's dead. Brack's gone.' Desperate not to say he'd no stomach for seeing Dow butcher Calder in the circle. Desperate not to say his loyalty might not stand it. 'Times have changed. Men the likes o' Golden and Ironhead, they got no respect for me in particular, and I got less for them. All that, and … and …'

'And you've had enough,' said Dow.

Craw's shoulders sagged. Hurt him to admit, but that summed it all up pretty well. 'I've had enough.' Had to clench his teeth and curl back his lips to stop the tears. As if saying it made it all catch up with him at once. Whirrun, and Drofd, and Brack, and Athroc and Agrick and all those others. An accusing queue of the dead, stretching back into the gloom of memory. A queue of battles fought, and won, and lost. Of choices made, right and wrong, each one a weight to carry.

Dow just nodded as he slid his sword carefully back into its sheath. 'We all got a limit. Man o' your experience needn't ever be shamed. Not ever.'

Craw just gritted his teeth, and swallowed his tears, and managed to find some dry words to say. 'Daresay you'll soon find someone else to do the job—'

‘Already have.’ And Dow jerked his head towards the door. ‘Waiting outside.’

‘Good.’ Craw reckoned Shivers could handle it, probably better’n he had. He reckoned the man weren’t as far past redemption as folk made out.

‘Here.’ Dow tossed something across the room and Craw caught it, coins snapping inside. ‘A double gild and then some. Get you started, out there.’

‘Thanks, Chief,’ said Craw, and meant it. He’d expected a knife in his back before a purse in his hand.

Dow stood his sword up on its end. ‘What you going to do?’

‘I was a carpenter. A thousand bloody years ago. Thought I might go back to it. Work some wood. You might shape a coffin or two, but you don’t bury many friends in that trade.’

‘Huh.’ Dow twisted the pommel gently between finger and thumb, the end of the sheath twisting into the dirt. ‘Already buried all mine. Except the ones I made my enemies. Maybe that’s where every fighter’s road leads, eh?’

‘If you follow it far enough.’ Craw stood there a moment longer but Dow didn’t answer. So he took a breath, and he turned to go.

‘It was pots for me.’

Craw stopped, hand on the doorknob, hairs prickling all the way up his neck. But Black Dow was just stood there, looking down at his hand. His scarred, and scabbed, and calloused hand.

‘I was apprentice to a potter.’ Dow snorted. ‘A thousand bloody years ago. Then the wars came, and I took up a sword instead. Always thought I’d go back to it, but … things happen.’ He narrowed his eyes, gently rubbing the tip of his thumb against the tips of his fingers. ‘The clay … used to make my hands … so soft. Imagine that.’ And he looked up, and he smiled. ‘Good luck, Craw.’

‘Aye,’ said Craw, and went outside, and shut the door behind him, and breathed out a long breath of relief. A few words and it was done. Sometimes a thing can seem an impossible leap, then when you do it you find it’s just been a little step all along. Shivers was standing where he had been, arms folded, and Craw clapped him on the shoulder. ‘Reckon it’s up to you, now.’

‘Is it?’ Someone else came forward into the torchlight, a long scar through shaved-stubble hair.

‘Wonderful,’ muttered Craw.

‘Hey, hey,’ she said. Somewhat of a surprise to see her here, but it saved him some time. It was her he had to tell next.

‘How’s the dozen?’ he asked.

‘All four of ’em are great.’

Craw winced. ‘Aye. Well. I need to tell you something.’ She raised one brow at him. Nothing for it but just to jump. ‘I’m done. I’m quitting.’

‘I know.’

‘You do?’

‘How else would I be taking your place?’

‘My place?’

‘Dow’s Second.’

Craw’s eyes opened up wide. He looked at Wonderful, then at Shivers, then back to her. ‘You?’

‘Why not me?’

‘Well, I just thought—’

‘When you quit the sun would stop rising for the rest of us? Sorry to disappoint you.’

‘What about your husband, though? Your sons? Thought you were going to—’

‘Last time I went to the farm was four years past.’ She tipped her head back, and there was a hardness in her eye Craw wasn’t used to seeing. ‘They were gone. No sign o’ where.’

‘But you went back not a month ago.’

‘Walked a day, sat by the river and fished. Then I came back to the dozen. Couldn’t face telling you. Couldn’t face the pity. This is all there is for the likes of us. You’ll see.’ She took his hand, and squeezed it, but his stayed limp. ‘Been an honour fighting with you, Craw. Look after yourself.’ And she pushed her way through the door, and shut it with a clatter, and left him behind, blinking at the silent wood.

‘You reckon you know someone, and then …’ Shivers clicked his tongue. ‘No one knows anyone. Not really.’

Craw swallowed. ‘Life’s riddled with surprises all right.’ And he turned his back on the old shack and was off into the gloom.

He'd daydreamed often enough about the grand farewell. Walking down an aisle of well-wishing Named Men and off to his bright future, back sore from all the clapping on it. Striding through a passageway of drawn swords, twinkling in the sunlight. Riding away, fist held high in salute as Carls cheered for him and women wept over his leaving, though where the women might have sprung from was anyone's guess.

Sneaking away in the chill gloom as dawn crept up, unremarked and unremembered, not so much. But it's 'cause real life is what it is that a man needs daydreams.

Most anyone with a name worth knowing was up at the Heroes, waiting to see Calder get slaughtered. Only Jolly Yon, Scorry Tiptoe and Flood were left to see him off. The remains of Craw's dozen. And Beck, dark shadows under his eyes, the Father of Swords held in one pale fist. Craw could see the hurt in their faces, however they tried to plaster smiles over it. Like he was letting 'em down. Maybe he was.

He'd always prided himself on being well liked. Straight edge and that. Even so, his dead friends long ago got his living ones outnumbered, and they'd worked the advantage a good way further the last few days. Three of those that might've given him the warmest send-off were back to the mud at the top of the hill, and two more in the back of his cart.

He tried to drag the old blanket straight, but no tugging at the corners was going to make this square. Whirrun's chin, and Drofd's, and their noses, and their feet making sorry little tents of the threadbare old cloth. Some hero's shroud. But the living could use the good blankets. The dead there was no warming.

'Can't believe you're going,' said Scorry.

'Been saying for years I would.'

'Exactly. You never did.'

Craw could only shrug. 'Now I am.'

In his head saying goodbye to his own crew had always been like pressing hands before a battle. That same fierce tide of comradeship. Only more, because they all knew it was the last time, rather than just fearing it might be. But aside from the feeling of squeezing flesh, it was nothing like that. They seemed strangers, almost. Maybe he was like the corpse of a dead comrade, now. They just wanted him buried, so they could get on. For him there wouldn't even be the worn-down ritual of heads bowed about the

fresh-turned earth. There'd just be a goodbye that felt like a betrayal on both sides.

'Ain't staying for the show, then?' asked Flood.

'The duel?' Or the murder, as it might be better put. 'I seen enough blood, I reckon. The dozen's yours, Yon.'

Yon raised an eyebrow at Scorry, and at Flood, and at Beck. 'All of 'em?'

'You'll find more. We always have. Few days time you won't even notice there's aught missing.' Sad fact was it was more'n likely true. That's how it had always been, when they lost one man or another. Hard to imagine it'd be the same with yourself. That you'd be forgotten the way a pond forgets a stone tossed in. A few ripples and you're gone. It's in the nature of men to forget.

Yon was frowning at the blanket, and what was underneath. 'If I die,' he muttered, 'who'll find my sons for me—'

'Maybe you should find 'em yourself, you thought o' that? Find 'em yourself, Yon, and tell 'em what you are, and make amends, while you've got breath still to do it.'

Yon looked down at his boots. 'Aye. Maybe.' A silence comfortable as a spike up the arse. 'Well, then. We got shields to hold, I reckon, up there with Wonderful.'

'Right y'are,' said Craw. Yon turned and walked off up the hill, shaking his head. Scorry gave a last nod then followed him.

'So long, Chief,' said Flood.

'I guess I'm no one's Chief no more.'

'You'll always be mine.' And he limped off after the other two, leaving just Craw and Beck beside the cart. A lad he hadn't even known two days before to say the last goodbye.

Craw sighed, and he hauled himself up into the seat, wincing at all the bruises he'd gained the last few days. Beck stood below, Father of Swords in both hands, sheathed point on the dirt. 'I've got to hold a shield for Black Dow,' he said. 'Me. You ever done that?'

'More'n once. There's nothing to it. Just hold the circle, make sure no one leaves it. Stand by your Chief. Do the right thing, like you did yesterday.'

'Yesterday,' muttered Beck, staring down at the wheel of the cart, like he was staring right through the ground and didn't like what he saw on the other side. 'I didn't tell you everything, yesterday. I wanted to, but …'

Craw frowned over his shoulder at the two shapes under the blanket. He could've done without hearing anyone's confessions. He was carting enough weight around with his own mistakes. But Beck was already talking. Droning, flat, like a bee trapped in a hot room. 'I killed a man, in Osrung. Not a Union one, though. One of ours. Lad called Reft. He stood, and fought, and I ran, and hid, and I killed him.' Beck was still staring at the cartwheel, wet glistening in his eyes. 'Stabbed him right through with my father's sword. Took him for a Union man.'

Craw wanted just to snap those reins and go. But maybe he could help, and all his years wasted might be some use to someone. So he gritted his teeth, and leaned down, and put his hand on Beck's shoulder. 'I know it burns at you. Probably it always will. But the sad fact is, I've heard a dozen stories just like it in my time. A score. Wouldn't raise much of an eyebrow from any man who's seen a battle. This is the black business. Bakers make bread, and carpenters make houses, and we make dead men. All you can do is take each day as it comes. Try and do the best you can with what you're given. You won't always do the right thing, but you can try. And you can try to do the right thing next time. That, and stay alive.'

Beck shook his head. 'I killed a man. Shouldn't I pay?'

'You killed a man?' Craw raised his arms, helplessly let them drop. 'It's a battle. Everyone's at it. Some live, some die, some pay, some don't. If you've come through all right, be thankful. Try to earn it.'

'I'm a fucking coward.'

'Maybe.' Craw jerked his thumb over his shoulder at Whirrun's corpse. 'There's a hero. Tell me who's better off.'

Beck took a shuddering breath. 'Aye. I guess.' He held up the Father of Swords and Craw took it under the crosspiece, hefted the great length of metal up and slid it carefully down in the back, next to Whirrun's body. 'You taking it now, then? He left it to you?'

'He left it to the ground.' Craw twitched the blanket across so it was out of sight. 'Wanted it buried with him.'

'Why?' asked Beck. 'Ain't it God's sword, fell from the sky? I thought it had to be passed on. Is it cursed?'

Craw took up the reins and turned back to the north. 'Every sword's a curse, boy.' And he gave 'em a snap, and the wagon trundled off.

Away up the road.

Away from the Heroes.

By the Sword

Calder sat, and watched the guttering flames.

It was looking very much as if he'd used up all his cunning for the sake of another few hours alive. And cold, hungry, itchy, increasingly terrified hours at that. Sitting, staring across a fire at Shivers, bound wrists chafed and crossed legs aching and the damp working up through the seat of his trousers and making his arse clammy-cold.

But when a few hours is all you can get, you'll do anything for them. Probably he would've done anything for a few more. Had anyone been offering. They weren't. Like his brilliant ambitions the diamond-bright stars had slowly faded to nothing, crushed out as the first merciless signs of day slunk from the east, behind the Heroes. His last day.

'How long 'til dawn?'

'It'll come when it comes,' said Shivers.

Calder stretched out his neck and wriggled his shoulders, sore from slumping into twisted half-sleep with his hands tied, twitching through nightmares which, when he jerked awake, he felt faintly nostalgic for. 'Don't suppose you could see your way to untying my hands, at least?'

'When it comes.'

How bloody disappointing it all was. What lofty hopes his father had held. 'All for you,' he used to say, a hand on Calder's shoulder and a hand on Scale's, 'you'll rule the North.' What an ending, for a man who'd spent his life dreaming of being king. He'd be remembered, all right. For dying the bloodiest death in the North's bloody history.

Calder sighed, ragged. ‘Things don’t tend to work out the way we imagine, do they?’

With a faint clink, clink, Shivers tapped his ring against his metal eye. ‘Not often.’

‘Life is, basically, fucking shit.’

‘Best to keep your expectations low. Maybe you’ll be pleasantly surprised.’

Calder’s expectations had plunged into an abyss but a pleasant surprise still didn’t seem likely. He flinched at the memory of the duels the Bloody-Nine had fought for his father. The blood-mad shriek of the crowd. The ring of shields about the edge of the circle. The ring of grim Named Men holding them. Making sure no one could leave until enough blood was spilled. He’d never dreamed he’d end up fighting in one. Dying in one.

‘Who’s holding the shields for me?’ he muttered, as much to fill the silence as anything.

‘I heard Pale-as-Snow offered, and old White-Eye Hansul. Caul Reachey too.’

‘He can hardly get out of it, can he, since I’m married to his daughter?’

‘He can hardly get out of it.’

‘Probably they’ve only asked for a shield so they don’t get sprayed with too much of my gore.’

‘Probably.’

‘Funny thing, gore. A sour annoyance to those it goes on and a bitter loss to those it comes out of. Where’s the upside, eh? Tell me that.’

Shivers shrugged. Calder worked his wrists against the rope, trying to keep the blood flowing to his fingers. It would be nice if he could hold on to his sword long enough to get killed with it in his hand, at least. ‘Got any advice for me?’

‘Advice?’

‘Aye, you’re some fighter.’

‘If you get a chance, don’t hesitate.’ Shivers frowned down at the ruby on his little finger. ‘Mercy and cowardice are the same.’

‘My father always used to say that nothing shows greater power than mercy.’

‘Not in the circle.’ And Shivers stood.

Calder held up his wrists. ‘It’s time?’

The knife glimmered pink with the dawn as it darted out and neatly slit the cord. ‘It’s time.’

‘We just wait?’ grunted Beck.

Wonderful turned her frown on him. ‘Unless you fancy doing a little dance out there. Get everyone warmed up.’

Beck didn’t fancy it. The circle of raked-over mud in the very centre of the Heroes looked a lonely place to be right then. Very bare, and very empty, while all about its pebble-marked edge folk were packed in tight. It was in a circle like this one his father had fought the Bloody-Nine. Fought, and died, and bad.

A lot of the great names of the North were holding shields for this one. Beside the leftovers of Craw’s dozen there was Brodd Tenways, Cairm Ironhead and Glama Golden on Dow’s half of the circle, and plenty of their Named Men around ’em.

Caul Reachey stood on the opposite side of the case, a couple of other old boys, none of ’em looking happy to be there. Would’ve been a sorry lot compared to Dow’s side if it hadn’t been for the biggest bastard Beck had ever seen, towering over the rest like a mountain peak above the foothills.

‘Who’s the monster?’ he muttered.

‘Stranger-Come-Knocking,’ Flood whispered back. ‘Chief of all the lands east of the Crinna. Bloody savages out there, and I hear he’s the worst.’

It was a savage pack the giant had at his back. Men all wild hair and wild twitching, pierced with bone and prickled with paint, dressed in skulls and tatters. Men who looked like they’d sprung straight from an old song, maybe the one about how Shubal the Wheel stole the crag lord’s daughter. How had it gone?

‘Here they come,’ grunted Yon. A disapproving mutter, a few sharp words, but mostly thick silence. The men on the other side of the circle parted and Shivers came through, dragging Calder under the arm.

He looked a long stretch less smug than when Beck first saw him, riding up to Reachey’s weapontake on his fine horse, but he was still grinning. A wonky, pale-faced, pink-eyed grin, but a grin still. Shivers let go of him, squelched heedless across the seven strides of empty muck leaving a trail of

gently filling boot-prints, fell in beside Wonderful and took a shield from a man behind her.

Calder nodded across the circle at each man, like they were a set of old friends. He nodded to Beck. When Beck had first seen that smirk it'd looked full of pride, full of mockery, but maybe they'd both changed since. If Calder was laughing now it looked like he was only laughing at himself. Beck nodded back, solemn. He knew what it was to face your death, and he reckoned it took some bones to smile at a time like that. Some bones.

Calder was so scared the faces across the circle were just a dizzying smear. But he was set on meeting the Great Leveller as his father had, and his brother too. With some pride. He kept that in front of him, and he clung on to his smirk, nodding at faces too blurred to recognise as if they'd turned out for his wedding rather than his burial.

He had to talk. Fill the time with blather. Anything to stop him thinking. Calder grabbed Reachey's hand, the one without the battered shield on it. 'You came!'

The old man hardly met his eye. 'Least I could do.'

'Most you could do, far as I'm concerned. Tell Seff for me … well, tell her I'm sorry.'

'I will.'

'And cheer up. This isn't a funeral.' He nudged the old man in the ribs. 'Yet.' The scatter of chuckles he got for that made him feel a little less like shitting his trousers. There was a soft, low laugh among them, too. One that came from very high up. Stranger-Come-Knocking, and by all appearances on Calder's side. 'You're holding a shield for me?'

The giant tapped the tiny-looking circle of wood with his club of a forefinger. 'I am.'

'What's your interest?'

'In the clash of vengeful steel and the blood watering the thirsty earth? In the roar of the victor and the scream of the slaughtered? What could interest me more than seeing men give all and take all, life and death balanced on the edge of a blade?'

Calder swallowed. 'Why on my side, though?'

'There was room.'

‘Right.’ That was about all he had to offer now. A good spot to watch his own murder. ‘Did you come for the room?’ he asked Pale-as-Snow.

‘I came for you, and for Scale, and for your father.’

‘And me,’ said White-Eye Hansul.

After all the hate he’d shrugged off, that bit of loyalty almost cracked his smirk wide open. ‘Means a lot,’ he croaked. The really sad thing was that it was true. He thumped White-Eye’s shield with his fist, squeezed Pale-as-Snow’s shoulder. ‘Means a lot.’

But the time for hugs and damp eyes was fading rapidly into the past. There was noise in the crowd across the circle, then movement, then the shield-carriers stood aside. The Protector of the North strolled through the gap, easy as a gambler who’d already won the big bet, his black standard looming behind him like the shadow of death indeed. He’d stripped down to a leather vest, arms and shoulders heavy with branched vein and twisted sinew, the chain Calder’s father used to wear hanging around his neck, diamond winking.

Hands clapped, weapons rattled, metal clanged on metal, everyone straining to get the faintest approving glance from the man who’d seen off the Union. Everyone cheering, even on Calder’s side of the circle. He could hardly blame them. They’d still have to scratch a living when Dow had carved him into weeping chunks.

‘You made it, then.’ Dow jerked his head towards Shivers. ‘I was worried my dog might’ve eaten you in the night.’ There was a good deal more laughter than the joke deserved but Shivers didn’t so much as twitch, his scarred face a dead blank. Dow grinned around at the Heroes, their lichen-spotted tops peering over the heads of the crowd, and opened his arms, fingers spread. ‘Looks like we got a circle custom made for the purpose, don’t it? Quite the venue!’

‘Aye,’ said Calder. That was about all the bravado he could manage.

‘Normally there’s a form to follow.’ Dow turned one finger round and round. ‘Laying out the matter to decide, listing the pedigree of the champions and so on, but I reckon we can skip that. We all know the matter. We all know you got no pedigree.’ Another laugh, and Dow spread his arms again. ‘And if I start naming all the men I’ve put back in the mud we’ll never get started!’

A flood of thigh-slapping manly amusement. Seemed Dow was intent on proving himself the better wit as well as the better fighter, and it was no fairer a contest. Winners always get the louder laughs and, for once, Calder was out of jokes. Dead men aren't that funny, maybe. So he just stood as the crowd quieted and left only the gentle wind over the muck, the flapping of the black standard, a bird chirruping from the top of one of the stones.

Dow heaved out a sigh. 'Sorry to say I've had to send to Carleon for your wife. She stood hostage for you, didn't she?'

'Let her be, you bastard!' barked Calder, nearly choking on a surge of anger. 'She's got no part in this!'

'You're in no place to tell me what's what, you little shit.' Dow turned his head without taking his eyes off Calder, and spat into the mud. 'I've half a mind to burn her. Give her the bloody cross, just for the fucking lesson. Wasn't that the way your father liked to do it, back in the old days?' Dow held up his open palm. 'But I can afford to be generous. Reckon I'll let it pass. Out of respect to Caul Reachey, since he's the one man in the North who still does what he fucking says he will.'

'I'm right grateful for it,' grunted Reachey, still not meeting Calder's eye.

''Spite of my reputation, I don't much care for hanging women. I get any softer they'll have to call me White Dow!' Another round of laughter, and Dow let go a flurry of punches at the air, so fast Calder could hardly count how many. 'Reckon I'll just have to kill you twice as much to make up for it.'

Something poked him in the ribs. The pommel of his sword, Pale-as-Snow handing it over with a look that said sorry, belt wrapped around the sheath.

'Oh, right. You got any advice?' asked Calder, hoping the old warrior would narrow his eyes and spout some razor observations about how Dow led with the point too much, or dipped his shoulder too low, or was awfully vulnerable to a middle cut.

All he did was puff out his cheeks. 'It's fucking Black Dow,' he muttered.

'Right.' Calder swallowed sour spit. 'Thanks for that.' It was all so disappointing. He drew his sword, held the sheath uncertainly for a moment, then handed it back. Couldn't see why he'd have any need for it again. There was no talking his way out of this. Sometimes you have to fight. He took a long breath and a step forwards, his worn-out Styrian boot

squelching into the muck. Only a little step over a ring of pebbles, but still the hardest he'd ever taken.

Dow stretched his head one way, then the other, then drew his own blade, taking his time about it, metal hissing softly. 'This was the Bloody-Nine's sword. I beat him, man against man. You know. You were there. So what do you reckon your fucking chances are?' Looking at that long grey blade, Calder didn't reckon his chances were very good at all. 'Didn't I warn you? If you tried to play your own games things'd get ugly.' Dow swept the faces around the circle with his scowl. It was true, there were few pretty ones among them. 'But you had to preach peace. Had to spread your little lies around. You had to—'

'Shut your fucking hole and get *on* with it!' screamed Calder. 'You boring old cunt!'

A mutter went up, then some laughter, then another, bowel-loosening round of clattering metal. Dow shrugged, and took his own step forwards.

There was a rattle as men eased inwards, rims of their shields scraping, locking together. Locking them in. A round wall of bright painted wood. Green trees, dragon heads, rivers running, eagles flying, some scarred and beaten from the work of the last few days. A ring of hungry faces, teeth bared in snarls and grins, eyes bright with expectation. Just Calder, and Black Dow, and no way out but blood.

Calder probably should've been thinking about how he might beat the long, long odds, and get out of this alive. Opening gambits, thrust or feint, footwork, all the rest. Because he had a chance, didn't he? Two men fight, there's always a chance. But all he could think about was Seff's face, and how beautiful it was. He wished he'd been able to see it one more time. Tell her that he loved her, or not to worry, or to forget him and live her life or some other useless shit. His father always told him, 'You find out what a man really is, when he's facing death.' It seemed, after all, he was a sentimental little prick. Maybe we all are at the end.

Calder raised his sword, open hand out in front, the way he thought he remembered being taught. Had to attack. That's what Scale would've said. If you're not attacking you're losing. He realised too late his hand was trembling.

Dow looked him up and down, his own blade hanging carelessly at his side, and snorted a joyless chuckle. 'I guess not every duel's worth singing

about.’ And he darted forwards, lashing out underhand with a flick of his wrist.

Calder really shouldn’t have been surprised to see a sword coming at him. That was what a duel was all about, after all. But even so he was pitifully unprepared. He lurched a pace back and Dow’s sword crashed into his with numbing force, near ripping it from his hand, sending the blade flapping sideways and him stumbling, spare arm flailing for balance, all thought of attacking barged away by the overwhelming need to survive just one more moment.

Fortunately White-Eye Hansul’s shield caught his back and spared him the indignity of sprawling in the mud, pushed him up straight in time to reel sideways as Dow sprang again, sword catching Calder’s with a clang and wrenching his wrist the other way, a hearty cheer going up. Calder floundered back, cold with terror, trying to put as much space between them as he could, but the ring of shields was only so big. That was the point of it.

They slowly circled each other, Dow strutting with easy grace, sword swinging loose, as cocky and comfortable in a duel to the death as Calder might’ve been in his own bedchamber. Calder took the doddery, uncertain steps of a child just learning to walk, mouth hanging open, already breathing hard, cringing and stumbling at Dow’s every tiniest taunting movement. The noise was deafening, breath going up in smoky puffs as the onlookers roared and hissed and hooted their support and their hatred and their—

Calder blinked, blinded for a moment. Dow had worked him around so the rising sun stabbed past the ragged edge of the standard and right in Calder’s eyes. He saw metal glint, waved his sword helplessly, felt something thud into his left shoulder and spin him sideways, making a breathless squeal, waiting for the agony. He slid, righted himself, was shocked to see none of his own blood spraying. Dow had only slapped him with the flat. Toying with him. Making a show of it.

Laughter swept through the crowd, enough to sting some anger up in Calder. He gritted his teeth, hefting his sword. If he wasn’t attacking he was losing. He lunged at Dow but it was so slippery underfoot he couldn’t get any snap in it. Dow just turned sideways and caught Calder’s wobbling sword as he laboured past, blades scraping together, hilts locking.

‘Fucking weak,’ hissed Dow, and flung Calder away like a man might swat away a fly, heels kicking hopelessly at the slop as he reeled across the circle.

The men on Dow’s side were less helpful than Hansul had been. A shield cracked Calder in the back of the skull and sent him sprawling. For a moment he couldn’t see, couldn’t breathe, skin fizzing all over. Then he was dragging himself up, limbs feeling like they weighed a ton a piece, the circle of mud tipping wildly about, jeering voices all booming and burbling.

He didn’t have his sword. Reached for it. A boot came down and squashed his hand into the cold mud, spraying flecks of it in his face. He gave a gasp, more shock than pain. Then another, definitely pain as Dow twisted his heel, crushing Calder’s fingers deeper.

‘Prince of the North?’ The point of Dow’s sword pricked into Calder’s neck, twisting his head towards the bright sky, making him slither helplessly up onto all fours. ‘You’re a fucking embarrassment, boy.’ And Calder gasped as the point flicked his head back and left a burning cut up the middle of his chin.

Dow was trotting away, arms up, dragging out the show, a half-circle of leering, gurning, sneering faces showing above the shields behind him, all shouting. ‘Black … Dow … Black … Dow …’ Tenways chanting gleefully along, and Golden, and Shivers just frowning, weapons thrusting at the air behind them in time.

Calder worked his hand trembling out of the mud. From what he could tell as red-black spots pattered onto it from his chin, not all of his finger-joints were where they used to be.

‘Get up!’ An urgent voice behind him. Pale-as-Snow, maybe. ‘Get up!’

‘Why?’ he whispered at the ground. The shame of it. Butchered by an old thug for the amusement of baying morons. He couldn’t say it was undeserved, but that made it no more appealing, and no less painful either. His eyes flickered around the circle, desperately seeking a way out. But there was no way through the thicket of stomping boots, punching fists, twisted mouths, rattling shields. No way out but blood.

He took a few breaths until the world stopped spinning, then fished his sword from the mud with his left hand and got ever so slowly to his feet. Probably he should’ve been feigning weakness, but he didn’t know how he could look any weaker than he felt. He tried to shake the fuzz from his

head. He had a chance, didn't he? Had to attack. But by the dead, he was tired. Already. By the dead, his broken hand hurt, cold all the way to his shoulder.

Dow flicked his sword spinning into the air with a flourish. Left himself open for a moment in a show of warrior's arrogance. The moment for Calder to strike, and save himself, and earn a place in the songs besides. He tensed his leaden legs to spring, but by then Dow had already snatched the sword from the air with his left hand and was standing ready, his warrior's arrogance well deserved. They faced each other as the crowd slowly quieted, and the blood ran from Calder's slit chin and worked its way tickling down his neck.

'Your father died badly, as I remember,' Dow called to him. 'Head smashed to pulp in the circle.' Calder stood in silence, saving his breath for another lunge, trying to judge the space between them. 'Hardly had a face at all once the Bloody-Nine was done with him.' A big step and a swing. Now, while Dow was busy boasting. Two men fight, there's always a chance. Dow grinned. 'A bad death. Don't worry, though—'

Calder sprang, teeth rattling as his left boot thumped down and sprayed wet dirt, his sword going high and slicing hard towards Dow's skull. There was a slapping of skin as Dow caught Calder's left hand in his right, crushing Calder's fist around the hilt of his sword, blade wrenched up to waggle harmlessly at the sky.

'—I'll make sure yours is worse,' Dow finished.

Calder pawed at Dow's shoulder with his broken hand, fingers flopping uselessly at his father's chain. The thumb still worked, though, and he scraped at Dow's pitted cheek with the nail, drawing a little bead of blood, growling as he tried to force it into the hole where Dow's ear used to be along with all his disappointment, and his desperation, and his anger, finding that flap of scar with the tip, baring his teeth as—

The pommel of Dow's sword drove into his ribs with a hollow thud and pain flashed through him to the roots of his hair. He probably would've screamed if he'd had any breath in him, but it was all gone in one ripping, vomiting wheeze. He tottered, bent over, bile washing into his frozen mouth and dangling in a string from his bloody lip.

'Thought you were the big *thinker.'* Dow dragged him up by his left hand so he could hiss it right in his face. 'Thought you could get the better o' me?

In the *circle*? Don't look too clever now, do you?' The pommel crunched into Calder's ribs just as he was taking a shuddering breath and drove it whimpering out again, left him limp as a wet sheepskin. 'Does he?' The crowd heckled and cackled and spat, rattled their shields and shrieked for blood. 'Hold this.' Dow tossed his sword through the air and Shivers caught it by the hilt.

'Stand up, fucker.' Dow's hand thumped shut around Calder's throat, quick and final as a bear trap. 'For once in your life, stand up.' And Dow hauled Calder straight, not able to stand by himself, not able to move his one good hand or the sword still uselessly stuck in it, not able even to breathe. Singularly unpleasant, having your windpipe squeezed shut. Calder squirmed helplessly. His mouth tasted of sick. His face was burning, burning. It always catches people by surprise, the moment of their death, even when they should see it coming. They always think they're special, somehow expect a reprieve. But no one's special. Dow squeezed harder, making the bones in Calder's neck click. His eyes felt like they were going to pop. Everything was getting bright.

'You think this is the end?' Dow grinned as he lifted Calder higher, feet almost leaving the mud. 'I'm just getting started, you fu—'

There was a sharp crack and blood sprayed up, dark streaks against the sky. Calder lurched back clumsily, gasping as his throat and his sword hand came free, near slipping over as Dow fell against him then flopped face down in the filth.

Blood gushed from his split skull, spattering Calder's ruined boots.

Time stopped.

Every voice sputtered out, coughed off, leaving the circle in sudden, breathless silence. Every eye fixed on the bubbling wound in the back of Black Dow's head. Caul Shivers stood glowering down in the midst of those gaping faces, the sword that had been the Bloody-Nine's in his fist, the grey blade dashed and speckled with Black Dow's blood.

'I'm no dog,' he said.

Calder's eyes flicked to Tenways', just as his flicked to Calder's. Both their mouths open, both doing the sums. Tenways was Black Dow's man. But Black Dow was dead, and everything was changed. Tenways' left eye twitched, just a fraction.

You get a chance, don't hesitate. Calder flung himself forward, not much more than falling, his sword coming down as Tenways reached for the hilt of his, eyes going wide. He tried to bring his shield up, got it tangled with the man beside him, and Calder's blade split his rashy face open right down to his nose, blood showering out across the men beside him.

Just goes to show, a poor fighter can beat a great one easily, even with his left hand. As long as he's the one with the drawn sword.

Beck looked around as he felt Shivers move. Saw the blade flash over and stared, skin prickling, as Dow hit the muck. Then he went for his sword. Wonderful caught his wrist before it got there.

'No.'

Beck flinched as Calder lurched at him, blade swinging. There was a hollow click and blood spattered around them, a spot on Beck's face. He tried to shake Wonderful off, get at his sword, but Scorry's hand was on his shield arm, dragging him back. 'The right thing's a different thing for every man,' hissed in his ear.

Calder stood swaying, his mouth wide open, his heart pounding so hard it was on the point of blowing his head apart, his eyes flickering from one stricken face to another. Tenways' blood-speckled Carls. Golden, and Ironhead, and their Named Men. Dow's own guards, Shivers in the midst of them, the sword that had split Dow's head still in his hand. Any moment now the circle would erupt into an orgy of carnage and it was anyone's guess who'd come out of it alive. Only certain thing seemed to be that he wouldn't.

'Come on!' he croaked, taking a wobbling step towards Tenways' men. Just to get it over with. Just to get it done.

But they stumbled back as if Calder was Skarling himself. He couldn't understand why. Until he felt a shadow fall across him, then a great weight on his shoulder. So heavy it almost made his knees buckle.

The huge hand of Stranger-Come-Knocking. 'This was well done,' said the giant, 'and fairly done too, for anything that wins is fair in war, and the greatest victory is the one that takes the fewest blows. Bethod was King of

the Northmen. So should his son be. I, Stranger-Come-Knocking, Chief of a Hundred Tribes, stand with Black Calder.'

Whether the giant thought whoever was in charge stuck Black before his name, or whether he thought Calder claimed it having won, or whether he just thought it suited, who could say? Either way it stuck.

'And I.' Reachey's hand slapped down on Calder's other shoulder, his grinning, grizzled face beside it. 'I stand with my son. With Black Calder.' Now the proud father, nothing but support. Dow was dead, and everything was changed.

'And I.' Pale-as-Snow stepped up on the other side, and suddenly all those words Calder had thought wasted breath, all those seeds he'd thought dead and forgotten, sprouted forth and bore amazing blooms.

'And I.' Ironhead was next, and as he stepped from his men he gave Calder the faintest nod.

'And I.' Golden, desperate not to let his rival get ahead of him. 'I'm for Black Calder!'

'Black Calder!' men were shouting all around, urged on by their Chiefs. 'Black Calder!' All competing to shout it loudest, as though loyalty to this sudden new way of doing things could be proved through volume. 'Black Calder!' As though this had been what everyone wanted all along. What they'd expected.

Shivers squatted down and dragged the tangled chain over Dow's ruined head. He offered it to Calder, dangling from one finger, the diamond his father had worn swinging gently, made half a ruby by blood.

'Looks like you win,' said Shivers.

In spite of the very great pain, Calder found it in himself to smirk.

'Doesn't it, though?'

What was left of Craw's dozen slipped unnoticed back through the press even as most of the crowd were straining forwards.

Wonderful still had Beck's arm, Scorry at his shoulder. They bundled him away from the circle, past a set of wild-eyed men already busy tearing Dow's standard down and ripping it up between 'em, Yon and Flood behind. They weren't the only ones sloping off. Even as Black Dow's War Chiefs were stumbling over his corpse to kiss Black Calder's arse, other

men were drifting away. Men who could feel which way the wind was blowing, and thought if they stuck about it might blow 'em right into the mud. Men who'd stood tight with Dow, or had scores with Bethod and didn't fancy testing his son's mercy.

They stopped in the long shadow of one of the stones, and Wonderful set her shield down against it and took a careful look around. Folk had their own worries though, and no one was paying 'em any mind.

She reached into her coat, pulled something out and slapped it into Yon's hand. 'There's yours.' Yon even had something like a grin as he closed his big fist around it, metal clicking inside. She slipped another into Scorry's hand, a third for Flood. Then she offered one to Beck. A purse. And with plenty in it too, by the way it was bulging. He stood, staring at it, until Wonderful shoved it under his nose. 'You get a half-share.'

'No,' said Beck.

'You're new, boy. A half-share is more'n fair—'

'I don't want it.'

They were all frowning at him now. 'He don't want it,' muttered Scorry.

'We should've done …' Beck weren't at all sure what they should've done. 'The right thing,' he finished, lamely.

'The *what*?' Yon's face screwed up with scorn. 'I hoped to have heard the last of that shit! Spend twenty years in the black business and have naught to show for it but scars, then you can preach to me about the right fucking thing, you little bastard!' He took a step at Beck but Wonderful held her arm out to stop him.

'What kind of right ends up with more men dead than less?' Her voice was soft, no anger in it. 'Well? D'you know how many friends I lost the last few days? What's right about that? Dow was done. One way or another, Dow was done. So we should've fought for him? Why? He's nothing to me. No better'n Calder or anyone else. You saying we should've died for that, Red Beck?'

Beck paused for a moment, mouth open. 'I don't know. But I don't want the money. Whose is it, even?'

'Ours,' she said, looking him right in the eye.

'This ain't right.'

'Straight edge, eh?' She slowly nodded, and her eyes looked tired. 'Well. Good luck with that. You'll need it.'

Flood looked a patch guilty, but he wasn't giving aught back. Scorry had a little smile as he dropped his shield on the grass and sank cross-legged onto it, humming some tune in which noble deeds were done. Yon was frowning as he rooted through the purse, working out how much he'd got.

'What would Craw have made o' this?' muttered Beck.

Wonderful shrugged. 'Who cares? Craw's gone. We got to make our own choices.'

'Aye.' Beck looked from one face to another. 'Aye.' And he walked off.

'Where you going?' Flood called after him.

He didn't answer.

He passed by one of the Heroes, shoulder brushing the ancient rock, and kept moving. He hopped over the drystone wall, heading north down the hillside, shook the shield off his arm and left it in the long grass. Men stood about, talking fast. Arguing. One pulled a knife, another backing off, hands up. Panic spreading along with the news. Panic and anger, fear and delight.

'What happened?' someone asked him, grabbing at his cloak. 'Did Dow win?'

Beck shook his hand off. 'I don't know.' He strode on, almost breaking into a run, down the hill and away. He only knew one thing. This life weren't for him. The songs might be full of heroes, but the only ones here were stones.

The Currents of History

Finree had gone where the wounded lay, to do what women were supposed to do when a battle ended. To soothe parched throats with water tipped to desperate lips. To bind wounds with bandages torn from the hems of their dresses. To calm the dying with soft singing that reminded them of Mother.

Instead of which she stood staring. Appalled by the mindless chorus of weeping, whining, desperate slobbering. By the flies, and the shit, and the blood-soaked sheets. By the calmness of the nurses, floating among the human wreckage as serene as white ghosts. Appalled more than anything else by the numbers. Laid out in ranks on pallets or sheets or cold ground. Companies of them. Battalions.

'There are more than a dozen,' a young surgeon told her.

'There are scores,' she croaked back, struggling not to cover her mouth at the stink.

'No. More than a dozen of these tents. Do you know how to change a dressing?'

If there was such a thing as a romantic wound there was no room for them here. Every peeled-back bandage a grotesque striptease with some fresh oozing nightmare beneath. A hacked-open arse, a caved-in jaw with most of the teeth and half the tongue gone, a hand neatly split leaving only thumb and forefinger, a punctured belly leaking piss. One man had been cut across the back of the neck and could not move, only lie on his face, breath softly wheezing. His eyes followed her as she passed and the look in them made her cold all over. Bodies skinned, burned, ripped open at strange angles,

their secret insides laid open to the world in awful violation. Wounds that would ruin men as long as they lived. Ruin those who loved them.

She tried to keep her eyes on her work, such as it was, chewing her tongue, trembling fingers fumbling with knots and pins. Trying not to listen to the whispers for help that she did not know how to give. That no one could give. Red spots appearing on the new bandages even before she finished, and growing, and growing, and she was forcing down tears, and forcing down sick, and on to the next, who was missing his left arm above the elbow, the left side of his face covered by bandages, and—

'Finree.'

She looked up and realised, to her cold horror, that it was Colonel Brint. They stared at each other for what felt like for ever, in awful silence, in that awful place.

'I didn't know …' There was so much she did not know she hardly knew how to continue.

'Yesterday,' he said, simply.

'Are you …' She almost asked him if he was all right, but managed to bite the words off. The answer was horribly obvious. 'Do you need—'

'Have you heard anything? About Aliz?' The name alone was enough to make her guts cramp up even further. She shook her head. 'You were with her. Where were you held?'

'I don't know. I was hooded. They took me away and sent me back.' And oh, how glad she was that Aliz had been left behind in the dark, and not her. 'I don't know where she'll be now …' Though she could guess. Perhaps Brint could too. Perhaps he was spending all his time guessing.

'Did she say anything?'

'She was … very brave.' Finree managed to force her face into the sickly semblance of a smile. That was what you were supposed to do, wasn't it? Lie? 'She said she loved you.' She put a halting hand on his arm. The one he still had. 'She said … not to worry.'

'Not to worry,' he muttered, staring at her with one bloodshot eye. Whether he was comforted, or outraged, or simply did not believe a word of her blame-shirking platitudes she could not tell. 'If I could just *know.'*

Finree did not think it would help him to know. It was not helping her. 'I'm so sorry,' she whispered, unable even to look at him any longer. 'I tried … I did everything I could, but …' That, at least, was true. Wasn't it? She

gave Brint's limp arm one last squeeze. 'I have to … get some more bandages—'

'Will you come back?'

'Yes,' she said, lurching up, not sure if she was still lying, 'of course I will.' And she almost tripped over her feet in her haste to escape that nightmare, thanking the Fates over and over and over that they had chosen her for saving.

Sick of penance, she wandered up the hillside path towards her father's headquarters. Past a pair of corporals dancing a drunken jig to the music of a squeaky fiddle. Past a row of women washing shirts in a brook. Past a row of soldiers queuing eagerly for the king's gold, gleaming metal in the paymaster's fingers glimpsed through the press of bodies. A small crowd of yammering salesmen, conmen and pimps had already gathered about the far end of the line like gulls about a patch of crumbs, realising, no doubt, that peace would soon put them out of business and give honest men the chance to thrive.

Not far from the barn she passed General Mitterick, chaperoned by a few of his staff, and he gave her a solemn nod. Right away she felt something was wrong. Usually his intolerable smugness was reliable as the dawn. Then she saw Bayaz step from the low doorway, and the feeling grew worse. He stood aside to let her pass with all the smugness Mitterick had been missing.

'Fin.' Her father stood alone in the middle of the dim room. He gave her a puzzled smile. 'Well, there it is.' Then he sat down in a chair, gave a shuddering sigh and undid his top button. She had not seen him do that during the day in twenty years.

She strode back into the open air. Bayaz had made it no more than a few dozen strides, speaking softly to his curly-headed henchman.

'You! I want to speak to you!'

'And I to you, in fact. What a happy chance.' The Magus turned to his servant. 'Take him the money, then, as we agreed, and … send for the plumbers.' The servant bowed and backed respectfully away. 'Now, what can I—'

'You cannot replace him.'

'And we are speaking of?'

'My father!' she snapped. 'As you well know!'

‘I did not replace him.’ Bayaz looked almost amused. ‘Your father had the good grace, and the good sense, to resign.’

‘He is the best man for the task!’ It was an effort to stop herself from grabbing the Magus’ bald head and biting it. ‘The one man who did a thing to limit this pointless bloody slaughter! That puffed-up fool Mitterick? He charged half his division to their deaths yesterday! The king needs men who —’

‘The king needs men who obey.’

‘You do not have the authority!’ Her voice was cracking. ‘My father is a lord marshal with a chair on the Closed Council, only the king himself can remove him!’

‘Oh, the shame! Undone by the very rules of government I myself drafted!’ Bayaz stuck out his bottom lip as he reached into his coat pocket and slid out a scroll with a heavy red seal. ‘Then I suppose this carries no weight either.’ He gently unrolled it, thick parchment crackling faintly. Finree found herself suddenly breathless as the Magus cleared his throat.

‘By royal decree, Harod dan Brock is to be restored to his father’s seat on the Open Council. Some of the family estates near Keln will be returned, along with lands near Ostenhorm from which, it will be hoped, your husband will attend to his new responsibilities as lord governor of Angland.’ Bayaz turned the paper around and brought it closer, her eyes darting over the blocks of masterful calligraphy like a miser’s over a chest of jewels.

‘How could the king not be moved by such loyalty, such bravery, such sacrifice as the young *Lord* Brock displayed?’ Bayaz leaned close. ‘Not to mention the courage and tenacity of his wife who, captured by the Northmen, mark you, poked Black Dow in the eye and demanded the release of sixty prisoners! Why, his August Majesty would have to be made of *stone.* He is not, in case you were wondering. Few men less so, indeed. He wept when he read the despatch that described your husband’s heroic assault upon the bridge. *Wept.* Then he ordered this paper drawn up, and signed it within the hour.’ The Magus leaned closer yet, so she could almost feel his breath upon her face. ‘I daresay … if one were closely to inspect this document … one could see the marks of his Majesty’s earnest tears … staining the vellum.’

For the first time since it had been produced, Finree shifted her eyes from the scroll. She was close enough to see each grey hair of Bayaz' beard, each brown liver spot on his bald pate, each deep, hard crease in his skin. 'It would take a week for the despatch to reach him and another week for the edict to return. It has only been a day since—'

'Call it magic. His Majesty's carcass may be a week away in Adua, but his right hand?' Bayaz held his own up between them. 'His right hand is a little closer by. But none of that matters now.' He stepped back, sighing, and started to roll the parchment up. 'Since you say I have not the authority. I shall burn this worthless paper, shall I?'

'No!' She had to stop herself snatching it from his hand. 'No.'

'You no longer object to your father's replacement?'

She bit her lip for a moment. War is hell, and all that, but it presents opportunities. 'He resigned.'

'Did he?' Bayaz smiled wide, but his green eyes stayed glittering hard. 'You impress me once again. My earnest congratulations on your husband's meteoric rise to power. And your own, of course … Lady Governess.' He held out the scroll by one handle. She took it by the other. He did not let go.

'Remember this, though. People love heroes, but new ones can always be found. With one finger of one hand I make you. With one finger of one hand …' He put his finger under her chin and pushed it up, sending a stab of pain through her stiff neck. 'I can unmake you.'

She swallowed. 'I understand.'

'Then I wish you good day!' And Bayaz released her and the scroll, all smiles again. 'Please convey the happy news to your husband, though I must ask that you keep it between yourselves for the time being. People might not appreciate, as you do, quite how the magic works. I shall convey your husband's acceptance to his Majesty along with the news that he made the offer. Shall I?'

Finree cleared her throat. 'By all means.'

'My colleagues on the Closed Council will be delighted that the matter has been put to rest so swiftly. You must visit Adua when your husband is recovered. The formalities of his appointment. A parade, or some such. Hours of pomp in the Lords' Round. Breakfast with the queen.' Bayaz raised one eyebrow as he turned away. 'You really should procure some better clothes. Something with a heroic air.'

The room was clean and bright, light streaming in through a window and across the bed. No sobbing. No blood. No missing limbs. No awful not knowing. The luck of it. One arm was bound under the covers, the other lying pale on the sheet, knuckles scabbed over, gently rising and falling with his breath.

'Hal.' He grunted, eyelids flickering open. 'Hal, it's me.'

'Fin.' He reached up and touched her cheek with his fingertips. 'You came.'

'Of course.' She folded his hand in hers. 'How are you?'

He shifted, winced, then gave a weak smile. 'Bit stiff, honestly, but lucky. Damn lucky to have you. I heard you dragged me out of the rubble. Shouldn't I be the one rushing to your rescue?'

'If it helps it was Bremer dan Gorst who found you and carried you back. I just ran around crying, really.'

'You've always cried easily, it's one thing I love about you.' His eyes started to drift shut. 'I suppose I can live with Gorst … doing the saving …'

She squeezed his hand tighter. 'Hal, listen to me, something has happened. Something wonderful.'

'I heard.' His eyelids moved lazily. 'Peace.'

She shrugged it off. 'Not that. Well, yes, that, but …' She leaned over him, wrapping her other hand around his. 'Hal, listen to me. You're getting your father's seat in the Open Council.'

'What?'

'Some of his lands, too. They want us … you … the king wants you to take Meed's place.'

Hal blinked. 'As general of his division?'

'As lord governor of Angland.'

For a moment he looked simply stunned then, as he studied her face, worried. 'Why me?'

'Because you're a good man.' And a good compromise. 'A hero, apparently. Your deeds have come to the notice of the king.'

'Hero?' He snorted. 'How did you do it?' He tried to get up onto his elbows but she put a hand on his chest and held him gently down.

Now was the opportunity to tell him the truth. The idea barely crossed her mind. 'You did it. You were right after all. Hard work and loyalty and all those things. Leading from the front. That's how you get on.'

‘But—’

‘Shhhh.’ And she kissed him on one side of the lips, and on the other, and in the middle. His breath was foul, but she did not care. She was not about to let him ruin this. ‘We can talk about it later. You rest, now.’

‘I love you,’ he whispered.

‘I love you too.’ Gently stroking his face as he slipped back into sleep. It was true. He was a good man. One of the best. Honest, brave, loyal to a fault. They were well matched. Optimist and pessimist, dreamer and cynic. And what is love anyway, but finding someone who suits you? Someone who makes up for your shortcomings?

Someone you can work with. Work on.

Terms

‘They’re late,’ grumbled Mitterick.

The table had six chairs around it. His Majesty’s new lord marshal occupied one, stuffed into a dress uniform swaddled with braid and too tight about his neck. Bayaz occupied another, drumming his thick fingers upon the tabletop. The Dogman slumped in the third, frowning up towards the Heroes, a muscle on the side of his head occasionally twitching.

Gorst stood a pace behind Mitterick’s chair, arms folded. Beside him was Bayaz’ servant, a map of the north rolled up in his hands. Behind them, posed stiffly within the ring of stones but out of earshot, were a handful of the most senior remaining officers of the army. *A sadly denuded complement. Meed, and Wetterlant, and Vinkler, and plenty more beside could not be with us. Jalenhorm too.* Gorst frowned up towards the Heroes. *Standing on first name terms with me is as good as a death sentence, it seems.* His Majesty’s Twelfth Regiment were all in attendance, though, arrayed in parade ground order just outside the Children on the south side, their forest of shouldered halberds glittering in the chilly sun. *A little reminder that we seek peace today, but are more than prepared for the alternative.*

In spite of his battered head, burning cheek, a score of other cuts and scrapes and the countless bruises outside and in, Gorst was more than prepared for the alternative as well. Itching for it, in fact. *What employment would I find in peacetime, after all? Teach swordsmanship to sneering young officers? Lurk about the court like a lame dog, hoping for scraps? Sent as royal observer to the sewers of Keln? Or give up training, and run*

to fat, and become an embarrassing drunk trading on old stories of almost-glory. You know that's Bremer dan Gorst, who was once the king's First Guard? Let's buy the squeaking joke a drink! Let's buy him ten so we can watch him piss himself!

Gorst felt his frown grow deeper. *Or … should I take up Black Dow's offer? Should I go where they sing songs about men like me instead of sniggering at their disgrace? Where peace need never come at all? Bremer dan Gorst, hero, champion, the most feared man in the North—*

'Finally,' grunted Bayaz, bringing a sharp end to the fantasy.

There was the unmistakable sound of soldiers on the move and a body of Northmen began to tramp down the long slope from the Heroes, the rims of their painted shields catching the light. *It seems the enemy are prepared for the alternative, too.* Gorst gently loosened his spare long steel in its sheath, watchful for any sign of an ambush. Itching for it, in fact. A single Northern toe too close and he would draw. *And peace would simply be one more thing in my life that failed to happen.*

But to his disappointment the great majority halted on the gently sloping ground outside the Children, no nearer to the centre than the soldiers of the Twelfth. Several more stopped just inside the stones, balancing out the officers on the Union side. A truly vast man, black hair shifting in the breeze, was conspicuous among them. So was the one in gilded armour whose face Gorst had so enthusiastically beaten on the first day of the battle. He clenched his fist at the memory, fervently hoping for the chance to do it again.

Four men approached the table, but of Black Dow there was no sign. The foremost among them had a fine cloak, a very handsome face and the slightest mocking smile. In spite of a bandaged hand and a fresh scar down the middle of his chin, no one had ever looked more carelessly, confidently in charge. *And I hate him already.*

'Who is that?' muttered Mitterick.

'Calder.' The Dogman's frown had grown deeper than ever. 'Bethod's youngest son. And a snake.'

'More of a worm,' said Bayaz, 'but it is Calder.'

Two old warriors flanked him, one pale-skinned, pale-haired, a pale fur around his shoulders, the other heavyset with a broad, weathered face. A fourth followed, axe at his belt, terribly scarred on one cheek. His eye

gleamed as if made of metal, but that was not what made Gorst blink. He felt a creeping sense of recognition. *Did I see him in the battle yesterday? Or the day before? Or was it somewhere before that…*

'You must be Marshal Kroy.' Calder spoke the common tongue with only a trace of the North.

'Marshal Mitterick.'

'Ah!' Calder's smile widened. 'How nice to finally meet you! We faced each other yesterday, across the barley on the right of the battlefield.' He waved his bandaged hand to the west. 'Your left, I should say, I really am no soldier. That charge of yours was … magnificent.'

Mitterick swallowed, his pink neck bulging over his stiff collar.

'In fact, do you know, I think…' Calder rooted through an inside pocket, then positively beamed as he produced a scrap of crumpled, muddied paper. 'I have something of yours!' He tossed it across the table. Gorst saw writing over Mitterick's shoulder as he opened it up. An order, perhaps. Then Mitterick crumpled it again, so tightly his knuckles went white.

'And the First of the Magi! The last time we spoke was a humbling experience for me. Don't worry, though, I've had many others since. You won't find a more humbled man anywhere.' Calder's smirk said otherwise, though, as he pointed out the grizzled old men at his back. 'This is Caul Reachey, my wife's father. And Pale-as-Snow, my Second. Not forgetting my respected champion—'

'Caul Shivers.' The Dogman gave the man with the metal eye a solemn nod. 'It's been a while.'

'Aye,' he whispered back, simply.

'The Dogman, we all know, of course!' said Calder. 'The Bloody-Nine's bosom companion, in all those songs along with him! Are you well?'

The Dogman ignored the question with a masterpiece of slouching disdain. 'Where's Dow?'

'Ah.' Calder grimaced, though it looked feigned. *Everything about him looks feigned.* 'I'm sorry to say he won't be coming. Black Dow is … back to the mud.'

There was a silence that Calder gave every indication of greatly enjoying. 'Dead?' The Dogman slumped back in his chair. *As if he had been informed of the loss of a dear friend rather than a bitter enemy. Truly, the two can sometimes be hard to separate.*

‘The Protector of the North and I had … a disagreement. We settled it in the traditional way. With a duel.’

‘And you won?’ asked the Dogman.

Calder raised his brows and rubbed gently at the stitches on his chin with a fingertip, as if he could not quite believe it either. ‘Well, I’m alive and Dow’s dead so … yes. It’s been a strange morning. They’ve taken to calling me Black Calder.’

‘Is that a fucking fact?’

‘Don’t worry, it’s just a name. I’m all for peace.’ Though Gorst fancied the Carls ranged on the long slope had different feelings. ‘This was Dow’s battle, and a waste of everyone’s time, money and lives as far as I’m concerned. Peace is the best part of any war, if you’re asking me.’

‘I heartily concur.’ Mitterick might have had the new uniform, but it was Bayaz who did the talking now. ‘The settlement I propose is simple.’

‘My father always said that simple things stick best. You remember my father?’

The Magus hesitated for the slightest moment. ‘Of course.’ He snapped his fingers and his servant slipped forward, unrolling the map across the table with faultless dexterity. Bayaz pointed out the curl of a river. ‘The Whiteflow shall remain the northern boundary of Angland. The northern frontier of the Union, as it has for hundreds of years.’

‘Things change,’ said Calder.

‘This one will not.’ The Magus’ thick finger sketched another river, north of the first. ‘The land between the Whiteflow and the Cusk, including the city of Uffrith, shall come under the governorship of the Dogman. It shall become a protectorate of the Union, with six representatives on the Open Council.’

‘All the way to the Cusk?’ Calder gave a sharp little in-breath. ‘Some of the best land in the North.’ He gave the Dogman a pointed look. ‘Sitting on the Open Council? Protected by the Union? What would Skarling Hoodless have said to that? What would my father have said?’

‘Who cares a shit what dead men might have said?’ The Dogman stared evenly back. ‘Things change.’

‘Stabbed with my own knife!’ Calder clutched at his chest, then gave a resigned shrug. ‘But the North needs peace. I am content.’

‘Good.’ Bayaz beckoned to his servant. ‘Then we can sign the articles—’

‘You misunderstand me.’ There was an uneasy pause as Calder shuffled forwards in his chair, as if they at the table were all friends together and the real enemy was at his back, and straining to hear their plans. ‘*I* am content, but I am not alone in this. Dow’s War Chiefs are … a jealous set.’ Calder gave a helpless laugh. ‘And they have all the swords. I can’t just agree to anything or …’ He drew a finger across his bruised throat with a squelching of his tongue. ‘Next time you want to talk you might find some stubborn blowhard like Cairm Ironhead, or some tower of vanity like Glama Golden in this chair. Good luck finding terms then.’ He tapped the map with a fingertip. ‘I’m all for this myself. All for it. But let me take it away and convince my surly brood, then we can meet again to sign the whatevers.’

Bayaz frowned, ever so sourly, at the Northmen standing just inside the Children. ‘Tomorrow, then.’

‘The day after would be better.’

‘Don’t push me, Calder.’

Calder was the picture of injured helplessness. ‘I don’t want to push at all! But I’m not Black Dow. I’m more … spokesman than tyrant.’

‘Spokesman,’ muttered the Dogman, as though the word tasted of piss.

‘That will not be good enough.’

But Calder’s smirk was made of steel. Bayaz’ every effort bounced right off. ‘If only you knew how hard I’ve worked for peace, all this time. The risks I’ve taken for it.’ Calder pressed his injured hand against his heart. ‘Help me! Help me to help us all.’ *Help you to help yourself, more likely.*

As Calder stood he reached across the map and offered his good hand to the Dogman. ‘I know we’ve been on different sides for a long time, one way or another, but if we’re to be neighbours there should be no chill between us.’

‘Different sides. That happens. Time comes you got to bury it.’ The Dogman stood, looking Calder in the eye all the way. ‘But you killed Forley the Weakest. Never did no harm to no one, that lad. Came to give you a warning, and you killed him for it.’

Calder’s smile had turned, for the first time, slightly lopsided. ‘There isn’t a morning comes I don’t regret it.’

‘Then here’s another.’ The Dogman leaned forward, extended his forefinger, pressed one nostril closed with it and blew snot out of the other straight into Calder’s open palm. ‘Set foot south o’ the Cusk, I’ll cut the

bloody cross in you. Then there'll be no chill.' And he gave a scornful sniff, and stalked past Gorst and away.

Mitterick nervously cleared his throat. 'We will reconvene soon, then?' Looking to Bayaz for support that did not arrive.

'Absolutely.' Calder regained most of his grin as he wiped the Dogman's snot off on the edge of the table. 'In three days.' And he turned his back and went to talk to the man with the metal eye. The one called Shivers.

'This Calder seems a slippery bastard,' Mitterick muttered to Bayaz as they left the table. 'I'd rather have dealt with Black Dow. At least with him you knew what you were getting.' Gorst was hardly listening. He was too busy staring at Calder and his scarred henchman. *I know him. I know that face. But from where ... ?*

'Dow was a fighter,' Bayaz was murmuring. 'Calder is a politician. He realises we are keen to leave, and that when the troops go home we will have nothing to bargain with. He knows he can win far more by sitting still and smirking than Dow ever did with all the steel and fury in the North…'

Shivers turned the ruined side of his face away as he spoke to Calder, the unburned side moving into the sun … and Gorst's skin prickled with recognition, and his mouth came open.

Sipani.

That face, in the smoke, before he was sent tumbling down the stairs. *That face.* How could it be the same man? And yet he was almost sure.

Bayaz' voice faded behind him as Gorst strode around the table, jaw clenched, and onto the Northmen's side of the Children. One of Calder's old retainers grunted as Gorst shouldered him out of the way. Probably this was extremely poor, if not potentially fatal, etiquette for peace negotiations. *And I could not care less.* Calder glanced up, and took a worried step back. Shivers turned to look. Not angry. Not afraid.

'Colonel Gorst!' someone shouted, but Gorst ignored it, his hand closing around Shivers' arm and pulling him close. The War Chiefs about the edge of the Children were all frowning. The giant took a huge step forwards. The man with the golden armour was calling out to the body of Carls. Another had put his hand to the hilt of his sword.

'Calm, everyone!' Calder shouted in Northern, one restraining palm up behind him. 'Calm!' But he looked nervous. *As well he should. All our lives are balanced on a razor's edge. And I could not care less.*

Shivers did not look as if he cared overmuch himself. He glanced down at Gorst's gripping hand, then back up at his face, and raised the brow over his good eye.

'Can I help you?' His voice was the very opposite of Gorst's. A gravelly whisper, harsh as millstones grinding. Gorst looked at him. Really looked. As though he could drill into his head with his eyes. That face, in the smoke. He had glimpsed it only for a moment, and masked, and without the scar. *But still.* He had seen it every night since, in his dreams, and in his waking, and in the twisted space between, every detail stamped into his memory. *And I am almost sure.*

He could hear movement behind him. Excited voices. The officers and men of his Majesty's Twelfth. *Probably upset to have missed out on the battle. Probably almost as keen to become involved in a new chapter of it as I am myself.*

'Colonel Gorst!' came Bayaz' warning growl.

Gorst ignored him. 'Have you ever been …' he hissed, 'to Styria?' Every part of him tingling with the desire to do violence.

'Styria?'

'Yes,' snarled Gorst, gripping even harder. Calder's two old men were creeping back in fighting crouches. 'To Sipani.'

'Sipani?'

'Yes.' The giant had taken another immense step, looming taller than the tallest of the Children. *And I could not care less.* 'To Cardotti's House of Leisure.'

'Cardotti's?' Shivers' good eye narrowed as he studied Gorst's face. Time stretched out. All around them tongues licked nervously at lips, hands hovered ready to give their fatal signals, fingertips tickled at the grips of weapons. Then Shivers leaned close. Close enough almost for Gorst to kiss. Closer even than they had been to each other four years ago, in the smoke.

If they had been.

'Never heard of it.' And he slipped his arm out of Gorst's slack grip and strode out of the Children without a backward glance. Calder swiftly followed, and the two old men, and the War Chiefs. All letting their hands drop from their weapons with some relief or, in the case of the giant, great reluctance.

They left Gorst standing there, in front of the table, alone. Frowning up towards the Heroes.

Almost sure.

Family

In many ways the Heroes hadn't changed since the previous night. The old stones were just as they had been, and the lichen crusted to them, and the trampled, muddied, bloodied grass inside their circle. The fires weren't much different, nor the darkness beyond them, nor the men who sat about them. But as far as Calder was concerned, there'd been some big-arsed changes.

Rather than dragging him in shame to his doom, Caul Shivers followed at a respectful distance, watching over his life. There was no scornful laughter as he strolled between the fires, no heckling and no hate. All changed the moment Black Dow's face hit the dirt. The great War Chiefs, and their fearsome Named Men, and their hard-handed, hard-hearted, hard-headed Carls all smiled upon him as if he was the sun rising after a bastard of a winter. How soon they'd adjusted. His father always said men rarely change, except in their loyalties. Those they'll shrug off like an old coat when it suits them.

In spite of his splinted hand and his stitched chin, Calder didn't have to work too hard to get the smirk onto his face now. He didn't have to work at all. He might not have been the tallest man about, but still he was the biggest in the valley. He was the next King of the Northmen, and anyone he told to eat his shit would be doing it with a smile. He'd already decided who'd be getting the first serving.

Caul Reachey's laughter echoed out of the night. He sat on a log beside a fire, pipe in his hand, spluttering smoke at something some woman beside

him had said. She looked around as Calder walked up and he nearly tripped over his own feet.

'Husband.' She stood, awkward from the weight of her belly, and held out one hand.

He took it in his and it felt small, and soft, and strong. He guided it over his shoulder, and slid his arms around her, hardly feeling the pain in his battered ribs as they held each other tight, tight. For a moment it seemed as if there was no one in the Heroes but them. 'You're safe,' he whispered.

'No thanks to you,' rubbing her cheek against his.

His eyelids were stinging. 'I … made some mistakes.'

'Of course. I make all your good decisions.'

'Don't leave me alone again, then.'

'I think I can say it'll be the last time I stand hostage for you.'

'So can I. That's a promise.' He couldn't stop the tears coming. Some biggest man in the valley, stood weeping in front of Reachey and his Named Men. He would've felt a fool if he hadn't been so glad to see her he couldn't feel anything else. He broke away long enough to look at her face, light on one side, dark on the other, eyes with a gleam of firelight to them. Smiling at him, two little moles near the corner of her mouth he'd never noticed before. All he could think was that he didn't deserve this.

'Something wrong?' she asked.

'No. Just … wasn't long ago I thought I'd never see your face again.'

'And are you disappointed?'

'I never saw anything so beautiful.'

She bared her teeth at him. 'Oh, they were right about you. You are a liar.'

'A good liar tells as much truth as he can. That way you never know what you're getting.'

She took his bandaged hand in hers, turning it over, stroking it with her fingertips. 'Are you hurt?'

'Nothing to a famous champion like me.'

She pressed his hand tighter. 'I mean it. Are you hurt?'

Calder winced. 'Doubt I'll be fighting any more duels for a while, but I'll heal. Scale's dead.'

'I heard.'

'You're all my family, now.' And he laid his good hand on her swollen belly. 'Still—'

‘Like a sack of oats on my bladder all the way from Carleon in a lurching bloody cart? Yes.’

He smiled through his tears. ‘The three of us.’

‘And my father too.’

He looked over at Reachey, grinning at them from his log. ‘Aye. And him.’

‘You haven’t put it on, then?’

‘What?’

‘Your father’s chain.’

He slid it from his inside pocket, warm from being pressed close to his heart, and the diamond dropped to one side, full of the colours of fire. ‘Waiting for the right moment, maybe. Once you put it on … you can’t take it off.’ He remembered his father telling him what a weight it was. Near the end.

‘Why would you take it off? You’re king, now.’

‘Then you’re queen.’ He slipped the chain over her head. ‘And it looks better on you.’ He let the diamond drop against her chest while she dragged her hair free.

‘My husband goes away for a week and all he brings me is the North and everything in it?’

‘That’s just half your gift.’ He moved as if to kiss her and held back at the last moment, clicking his teeth together just short of her mouth. ‘I’ll give you the rest later.’

‘Promises, promises.’

‘I need to talk to your father, just for a moment.’

‘Talk, then.’

‘Alone.’

‘Men and their bloody chatter. Don’t keep me waiting too long.’ She leaned close, her lip tickling at his ear, her knee rubbing up against the inside of his leg, his father’s chain brushing against his shoulder. ‘I’ve a mind to kneel before the King of the Northmen.’ One fingertip brushed the scab on his chin as she stepped away, keeping his face towards her, watching him over her shoulder, waddling just a little with the weight of her belly but none the worse for that. None the worse at all. All he could think was that he didn’t deserve this.

He shook himself and clambered to the fire, somewhat bent over since his prick was pressing up hard against the inside of his trousers, and poking a tent in Reachey's face was no way to start a conversation. His wife's father had shooed his grey-bearded henchmen away and was sitting alone, pressing a fresh lump of chagga down into his pipe with one thick thumb. A private little chat. Just like the one they'd had a few nights before. Only now Dow was dead, and everything was changed.

Calder wiped the wet from his eyes as he sat beside the fire-pit. 'She's one of a kind, your daughter.'

'I've heard you called a liar, but there was never a truer word said than that.'

'One of a kind.' As Calder watched her disappear into the darkness.

'You're a lucky man to have her. Remember what I told you? Wait long enough by the sea, everything you want'll just wash up on the beach.' Reachey tapped at the side of his head. 'I've been around a while. You ought to listen to me.'

'I'm listening now, aren't I?'

Reachey wriggled down the log, a little closer to him. 'All right, then. A lot of my boys are restless. Had their swords drawn a long time. I could do with letting some of 'em get home to their own wives. You got a mind to take this wizard's offer?'

'Bayaz?' Calder snorted. 'I've a mind to let the lying bastard simmer. He had a deal with my father, a long time ago, and betrayed him.'

'So it's a question of revenge?'

'A little, but mostly it's good sense. If the Union had pushed on yesterday they might've finished us.'

'Maybe. So?'

'So the only reason I can see for stopping is if they had to. The Union's a big place. Lots of borders. I reckon they've got other worries. I reckon every day I let that bald old fuck sit his terms'll get better.'

'Huh.' Reachey fished a burning stick from the fire, pressed it to the bowl of his pipe, starting to grin as he got it lit. 'You're a clever one, Calder. A thinker. Like your father. Always said you'd make quite a leader.'

Calder had never heard him say it. 'Didn't help me get here, did you?'

'I told you I'd burn if I had to, but I wouldn't set myself on fire. What was it the Bloody-Nine used to say?'

‘You have to be realistic.’

‘That’s right. Realistic. Thought you’d know that better’n most.’ Reachey’s cheeks went hollow as he sucked at his pipe, let the brown smoke curl from his mouth. ‘But now Dow’s dead, and you’ve got the North at your feet.’

‘You must be almost as pleased as I am with how it’s all come out.’

‘’Course,’ as Reachey handed the pipe over.

‘Your grandchildren can rule the North,’ as Calder took it.

‘Once you’re finished with it.’

‘I plan not to finish for a while.’ Calder sucked, bruised ribs aching as he breathed deep and felt the smoke bite.

‘Doubt I’ll live to see it.’

‘Hope not.’ Calder grinned as he blew out, and they both chuckled, though there might’ve been the slightest edge on their laughter. ‘You know, I’ve been thinking about something Dow said. How if he’d wanted me dead I’d have been dead. The more I think on it, the more sense it makes.’

Reachey shrugged. ‘Maybe Tenways tried it on his own.’

Calder frowned at the bowl of the pipe as if thinking it over, though he’d already thought it over and decided it didn’t add. ‘Tenways saved my life in the battle yesterday. If he hated me that much he could’ve let the Union kill me and no one would’ve grumbled.’

‘Who knows why anyone does anything? The world’s a complicated bloody place.’

‘Everyone has their reasons, my father used to tell me. It’s just a question of knowing what they are. Then the world’s simple.’

‘Well, Black Dow’s back to the mud. And from the look o’ your sword in his head, Tenways too. I guess we’ll never know now.’

‘Oh, I reckon I’ve worked it out.’ Calder handed the pipe back and the old man leaned to take it. ‘It was you said Dow wanted me dead.’ Reachey’s eyes flicked up to his, just for an instant, but long enough for Calder to be sure. ‘That wasn’t altogether true, was it? It was what you might call a lie.’

Reachey slowly sat back, puffing out smoke rings. ‘Aye, a little bit, I’ll admit. My daughter has a loving nature, Calder, and she loves you. I’ve tried explaining what a pain in the arse you are but she just ain’t hearing it. There’s naught she wouldn’t do for you. But it was getting so you and Dow weren’t seeing things at all the same way. All your talk of bloody peace

making things hard for everyone. Then my daughter up and stands hostage for you? Just couldn't have my only child at risk like that. Out of you and Dow, one had to go.' He looked evenly at Calder, through the smoke of his pipe. 'I'm sorry, but there it is. If it was you, well, that's a shame, but Seff would've found a new man. Better still, there was always the chance you'd come out on top o' Dow. And I'm happy to say that's how it happened. All I wanted was the best for my blood. So I'm ashamed to admit it, but I stirred the pot between the two o' you.'

'Hoping all along I'd get the better of Dow.'

'Of course.'

'So it wasn't you at all who sent those boys to kill me at your weapon-take?'

The pipe froze half way to Reachey's mouth. 'Why would I do a thing like that?'

'Because Seff was standing hostage, and I was talking big about dealing with Dow, and you decided to stir the pot a bit harder.'

Reachey pressed the end of his tongue between his teeth, lifted the pipe the rest of the way, sucked at it again, but it was dead. He tapped the ashes out on the stones by the fire. 'If you're going to stir the pot, I've always believed in doing it … firmly.'

Calder slowly shook his head. 'Why not just get your old pricks to kill me when we were sat around the fire? Make sure of it?'

'I got a reputation to think on. When it comes to knives in the dark I hire out, keep my name free of it.' Reachey didn't look guilty. He looked annoyed. Offended, even. 'Don't sit there like you're disappointed. Don't pretend you haven't done worse. What about Forley the Weakest, eh? Killed him for nothing, didn't you?'

'I'm me!' said Calder. 'Everyone knows me for a liar! I guess I just …' Sounded stupid now he said it. 'Expected better from you. I thought you were a straight edge. Thought you did things the old way.'

Reachey gave a scornful grunt. 'The old way? Hah! People are apt to get all misty-eyed over how things used to be. Age o' Heroes, and all. Well, I remember the old way. I was there, and it was no different from the new.' He leaned forward, stabbing at Calder with the stem of his pipe. 'Grab what you can, however you can! Folk might like to harp on how your father changed everything. They like someone to blame. But he was just better at

it than the rest. It's the winners sing the songs. And they can pick what tune they please.'

'I'm just picking out what tune they'll play on you!' hissed Calder, the anger flaring up for a moment. But, 'Anger's a luxury the man in the big chair can't afford.' That's what his father used to say. Mercy, mercy, always think about mercy. Calder took in a long, sore breath, and heaved out resignation. 'But maybe I'd have done no different, wearing your coat, and I've too few friends by far. The fact is I need your support.'

Reachey grinned. 'You'll have it. To the death, don't worry about that. You're family, lad. Family don't always get on but, in the end, they're the only ones you can trust.'

'So my father used to tell me.' Calder slowly stood and gave another aching sigh, right from his gut. 'Family.' And he made his way off through the fires, towards the tent that had been Black Dow's.

'And?' croaked Shivers, falling into step beside him.

'You were right. The old fuck tried to kill me.'

'Shall I return the favour?'

'By the dead, no!' He forced his voice softer as they headed away. 'Not until my child's born. I don't want my wife upset. Let things settle then do it quietly. Some way that'll point the finger at someone else. Glama Golden, maybe. Can you do that?'

'When it comes to killing, I can do it any way you want it.'

'I always said Dow should've made better use of you. Now my wife's waiting. Go and have some fun.'

'I just might.'

'What do you do for fun, anyway?'

There was a glint in Shivers' eye as he turned away, but then there always was. 'I sharpen my knives.'

Calder wasn't quite sure if he was joking.

New Hands

Dear Mistress Worth,

With the greatest regret, I must inform you of the death of your son in action on the battlefield near Osrung. It is usual for the commanding officer to write such letters, but I requested the honour as I knew your son personally, and have but rarely in a long career served with so willing, pleasant, able, and courageous a comrade. He embodied all those virtues that one looks for in a soldier. I do not know if it can provide you with any satisfaction in the face of a loss so great, but it is not stretching the truth to say that your son died a hero. I feel honoured to have known him.

With the deepest condolences, Your obedient servant,

Corporal Tunny, Standard-Bearer of His Majesty's First Regiment.

Tunny gave a sigh, folded the letter ever so carefully and pressed two neat creases into it with his thumbnail. Might be the worst letter the poor woman ever got, he owed it to her to put a decent crease in the damn thing. He tucked it inside his jacket next to Mistress Klige's, unscrewed the cap from Yolk's flask and took a nip, then dipped the pen in the ink bottle and started on the next.

Dear Mistress Lederlingen,

With the greatest regret, I must inform you of the death of your son in

—

‘Corporal Tunny!’ Yolk was approaching with a cocky strut somewhere between a pimp and a labourer. His boots were caked with dirt, his stained jacket was hanging open showing a strip of sweaty chest, his sunburned face sported several days’ worth of patchy stubble and instead of a spear over his shoulder he had a worn shovel. He looked, in short, like a proud veteran of his August Majesty’s army. He came to a stop not far from Tunny’s hammock, looking down at the papers. ‘Working out all the debts you’re owed?’

‘The ones I owe, as it goes.’ Tunny seriously doubted Yolk could read, but he pushed a sheet of paper over the unfinished letter even so. If this got out it could ruin his reputation. ‘Everything all right?’

‘Everything’s well enough,’ said Yolk as he set down his shovel, though under his good humour he looked, in fact, a little pensive. ‘The colonel’s had us doing some burying.’

‘Uh.’ Tunny worked the stopper back into the ink bottle. He’d done a fair amount of burying himself and it was never a desirable duty. ‘Always some cleaning up to do after a battle. A lot to put right, here and at home. Might take years to clean up what takes a day or three to dirty.’ He cleaned off his pen on a bit of rag. ‘Might never happen.’

‘Why do it, then?’ asked Yolk, frowning off across the sunlit barley towards the hazy hills. ‘I mean to say, all the effort, and all the men dead, and what’ve we got done here?’

Tunny scratched his head. Never had Yolk down as a philosopher, but he guessed every man has his thoughtful moments. ‘Wars don’t often change much, in my considerable experience. Bit here, bit there, but overall there have to be better ways for men to settle their differences.’ He thought about it for a moment. ‘Kings, and nobles, and Closed Councils, and so forth, I never have quite understood why they keep at it, given how the lessons of history do seem to stack up powerfully against. War is damned uncomfortable work, for minimal rewards, and it’s the soldiers who always bear the worst.’

‘Why be a soldier, then?’

Tunny found himself temporarily at a loss for words. Then he shrugged. ‘Best job in the world, isn’t it.’

A group of horses were being led without urgency up the track nearby, hooves clopping at the mud, a few soldiers trudging along with them. One

detached himself and strolled over, chewing at an apple. Sergeant Forest, and grinning broadly.

'Oh, bloody hell,' muttered Tunny under his breath, quickly clearing the last evidence of letter writing and tossing the shield he'd been leaning on under his hammock.

'What is it?' whispered Yolk.

'When First Sergeant Forest smiles there's rarely good news on the way.'

'When is there good news on the way?'

Tunny had to admit Yolk had a point.

'Corporal Tunny!' Forest stripped his apple and flicked away the core. 'You're awake.'

'Sadly, Sergeant, yes. Any news from our esteemed commanders?'

'Some.' Forest jerked a thumb towards the horses. 'You'll be delighted to learn we're getting our mounts back.'

'Marvellous,' grunted Tunny. 'Just in time to ride them back the way we came.'

'Let it never be said that his August Majesty does not provide his loyal soldiers with everything needful. We're pulling out in the morning. Or the following morning, at the latest. Heading for Uffrith, and a nice warm boat.'

Tunny found a smile of his own. He'd had about enough of the North. 'Homewards, eh? My favourite direction.'

Forest saw Tunny's grin and raised him a tooth on each side. 'Sorry to disappoint you. We're shipping for Styria.'

'Styria?' muttered Yolk, hands on hips.

'For beautiful Westport!' Forest flung an arm around Yolk's shoulders and pushed his other hand out in front of them, as if showing off a magnificent civic vista where there was, in fact, a stand of rotting trees. 'Crossroads of the world! We're to stand alongside our bold allies in Sipani, and take righteous arms against that notorious she-devil Monzcarro Murcatto, the Snake of Talins. She is, by all reports, a fiend in human form, an enemy to freedom and the greatest threat ever to face the Union!'

'Since Black Dow.' Tunny rubbed at the bridge of his nose, his smile a memory. 'Who we made peace with yesterday.'

Forest slapped Yolk on the shoulder. 'The beauty of the soldier's profession, trooper. The world never runs out of villains. And Marshal Mitterick's just the man to make 'em quake!'

‘Marshal… Mitterick?’ Yolk looked baffled. ‘What happened to Kroy?’

‘He’s done,’ grunted Tunny.

‘How many have you outlasted now?’ asked Forest.

‘I’m thinking … eight, at a quick guess.’ Tunny counted them off on his fingers. ‘Frengen, then Altmoyer, then that short one …’

‘Krepsky.’

‘Krepsky. Then the other Frengen.’

‘The other Frengen,’ snorted Forest.

‘A notable fool even for a commander-in-chief. Then there was Varuz, then Burr, then West—’

‘He was a good man, West.’

‘Gone too early, like most good men. Then we had Kroy …’

‘Lord marshals are temporary in nature,’ explained Forest, gesturing at Tunny, ‘but corporals? Corporals are eternal.’

‘Sipani, you say?’ Tunny slid slowly back in his hammock, putting one boot up and rocking himself gently back and forth with the other. ‘Never been there myself.’ Now that he was thinking about it, he was starting to see the advantages. A good soldier always keeps an eye on the advantages. ‘Fine weather, I expect?’

‘Excellent weather,’ said Forest.

‘And I hear they have the best bloody whores in the world.’

‘The ladies of the city have been mentioned once or twice since the orders came down.’

‘Two things to look forward to.’

‘Which is two more than you get in the North.’ Forest was smiling bigger than ever. Bigger than seemed necessary. ‘And in the meantime, since your detail stands so sadly reduced, here’s another.’

‘Oh, no,’ groaned Tunny, all hopes of whores and sunshine quickly wilting.

‘Oh, yes! Up you come, lads!’

And up they came indeed. Four of them. New recruits, fresh off the boat from Midderland by their looks. Seen off at the docks with kisses from Mummy or sweetheart or both. New uniforms pressed, buckles gleaming, and ready for the noble soldiering life, indeed. They stared open-mouthed at Yolk, who could hardly have presented a greater contrast, his face pinched and rat-like, his jacket frayed and mud-smeared from grave-digging, one

strap on his pack broken and repaired with string. Forest gestured towards Tunny like a showman towards his freak, and trotted out that same little speech he always gave.

'Boys, this here is the famous Corporal Tunny, one of the longest serving non-commissioned officers in General Felnigg's division.' Tunny gave a long, hard sigh, right from his stomach. 'A veteran of the Starikland Rebellion, the Gurkish War, the last Northern War, the Siege of Adua, the recent climactic Battle of Osrung and a quantity of peacetime soldiering that would have bored a keener mind to death.' Tunny unscrewed the cap of Yolk's flask, took a pull, then handed it over to its original owner, who shrugged and had a swig of his own. 'He has survived the runs, the rot, the grip, the autumn shudders, the caresses of Northern winds, the buffets of Southern women, thousands of miles of marching, many years of his Majesty's rations and even a tiny bit of actual fighting to stand – or sit – before you now …'

Tunny crossed one ruined boot over the other, sank slowly back into his hammock and closed his eyes, the sun glowing pink through his lids.

Old Hands

It was near sunset when he made it back. Midges swirling in clouds over the marshy little brook, yellowing leaves casting dappled shadows onto the path, boughs stirring in the breeze, low enough he had to duck.

The house looked smaller'n he remembered. It looked small, but it looked beautiful. Looked so beautiful it made him want to cry. The door creaked as he pushed it wide, almost as scared for some reason as he had been in Osrung. There was no one inside. Just the same old smoke-smelling dimness. His cot was packed away to make more space, slashes of pale sunlight across the boards where it had been.

No one here, and his mouth went sour. What if they were packed up and left? Or what if men had come when he was away, deserters turned bandit—

He heard the soft *clock* of an axe splitting logs. He ducked back out into the evening, hurrying past the pen and the staring goats and the five big tree stumps all hacked and scarred from years of his blade practice. Practice that hadn't helped much, as it went. He knew now stabbing a stump ain't much preparation for stabbing a man.

His mother was just over the rise, leaning on the axe by the old chopping block, arching her back while Festen gathered up the split halves and tossed 'em onto the pile. Beck stood there for a moment, watching 'em. Watching his mother's hair stirring in the breeze. Watching the boy struggling with the chunks of wood.

'Ma,' he croaked.

She looked around, blinked at him for a moment. 'You're back.'

'I'm back.'

He walked over to her, and she stuck one corner of the axe in the block for safe keeping and met him half way. Even though she was so much smaller than him she still held his head against her shoulder. Held it with one hand and pressed it to her, wrapped her other arm tight around him, strong enough to make it hard to breathe.

'My son,' she whispered.

He broke away from her, sniffing back his tears, looking down. Saw his cloak, or her cloak, and how muddied, and bloodied, and torn it was. 'I'm sorry. Reckon I got your cloak ruined.'

She touched his face. 'It's a bit of cloth.'

'Guess it is at that.' He squatted down, and ruffled Festen's hair. 'You all right?' He could hardly keep his voice from cracking.

'I'm fine!' Slapping Beck's hand away from his head. 'Did you get yourself a name?'

Beck paused. 'I did.'

'What is it?'

Beck shook his head. 'Don't matter. How's Wenden?'

'Same,' said Beck's mother. 'You weren't gone more'n a few days.'

He hadn't expected that. Felt like years since he was last here. 'I guess I was gone long enough.'

'What happened?'

'Can we … not talk about it?'

'Your father talked about nothing else.'

He looked up at her. 'If there's one thing I learned it's that I'm not my father.'

'Good. That's good.' She patted him gently on the side of the face, wet glimmering in her eyes. 'I'm glad you're here. Don't have the words to tell you how glad I am. You hungry?'

He stood, straightening his legs feeling like quite the effort, and wiped away more tears on the back of his wrist. Realised he hadn't eaten since he left the Heroes, yesterday morning. 'I could eat.'

'I'll get the fire lit!' And Festen trotted off towards the house.

'You coming in?' asked Beck's mother.

Beck blinked out towards the valley. 'Reckon I might stay out here a minute. Split a log or two.'

'All right.'

‘Oh.’ And he slid his father’s sword from his belt, held it for a moment, then offered it out to her. ‘Can you put this away?’

‘Where?’

‘Anywhere I don’t have to look at it.’

She took it from him, and it felt like a weight he didn’t have to carry no more. ‘Seems like good things can come back from the wars,’ she said.

‘Coming back’s the only good thing I could see.’ He leaned down and set a log on the block, spat on one palm and took up the wood axe. The haft felt good in his hands. Familiar. It fitted ’em better than the sword ever had, that was sure. He swung it down and two neat halves went tumbling. He was no hero, and never would be.

He was made to chop logs, not to fight.

And that made him lucky. Luckier’n Reft, or Stodder, or Brait. Luckier’n Drofd or Whirrun of Bligh. Luckier’n Black Dow, even. He worked the axe clear of the block and stood back. They don’t sing many songs about log-splitters, maybe, but the lambs were bleating, up on the fells out of sight, and that sounded like music. Sounded a sweeter song to him then than all the hero’s lays he knew.

He closed his eyes and breathed in the smell of grass and woodsmoke. Then he opened ’em, and looked across the valley. Skin all tingling with the peace of that moment. Couldn’t believe he used to hate this place.

Didn’t seem so bad, now. Didn’t seem so bad at all.

Everyone Serves

‘So you’re standing with me?’ asked Calder, breezy as a spring morning.

‘If there’s still room.’

‘Loyal as Rudd Threetrees, eh?’

Ironhead shrugged. ‘I won’t take you for a fool and say yes. But I know where my best interest lies and it’s at your heels. I’d also point out loyalty’s a dangerous foundation. Tends to wash away in a storm. Self-interest stands in any weather.’

Calder had to nod at that. ‘A sound principle.’ He glanced up at Foss Deep, lately returned to his service following the end of hostilities and an apt display of the power of self-interest in the flesh. Despite his stated distaste for battles he’d somehow acquired, gleaming beneath his shabby coat, a splendid Union breastplate engraved with a golden sun. ‘A man should have some, eh, Deep?’

‘Some what?’

‘Principles.’

‘Oh, I’m a big, big, big believer in ’em. My brother too.’

Shallow took a quick break from furiously picking his fingernails with the point of his knife. ‘I like ’em with milk.’

A slightly uncomfortable silence. Then Calder turned back to Ironhead. ‘Last time we spoke you told me you’d stick with Dow. Then you pissed on my boots.’ He lifted one up, even more battered, gouged and stained from the events of the past few days than Calder was himself. ‘Best bloody boots in the North a week ago. Styrian leather. Now look.’

‘I’ll be more’n happy to buy you a new pair.’

Calder winced at his aching ribs as he stood. ‘Make it two.’

‘Whatever you say. Maybe I’ll get a pair myself and all.’

‘You sure something in steel wouldn’t be more your style?’

Ironhead shrugged. ‘No call for steel boots in peacetime. Anything else?’

‘Just keep your men handy, for now. We need to put a good show on ’til the Union get bored of waiting and slink off. Shouldn’t be long.’

‘Right y’are.’

Calder took a couple of steps away, then turned back. ‘Get a gift for my wife, too. Something beautiful, since my child’s due soon.’

‘Chief.’

‘And don’t feel too bad about it. Everyone serves someone.’

‘Very true.’ Ironhead didn’t so much as twitch. A little disappointing, in fact – Calder had hoped to watch him sweat. But there’d be time for that later, once the Union were gone. There’d be time for all kinds of things. So he gave a lordly nod and smirked off, his two shadows trailing after.

He had Reachey on-side, and Pale-as-Snow. He’d had a little word with Wonderful, and she’d had the same little word with Dow’s Carls, and their loyalty had washed with the rainwater, all right. Most of Tenways’ men had drifted off, and White-Eye Hansul had made his own appeal to self-interest and argued the rest around. Ironhead and Golden still hated each other too much to pose a threat and Stranger-Come-Knocking, for reasons beyond Calder’s ken, was treating him like an old and honoured friend.

Laughing stock to king of the world in the swing of a sword. Luck. Some men have it, some don’t.

‘Time to plumb the depth of Glama Golden’s loyalty,’ said Calder happily. ‘Or his self-interest, anyway.’

They walked down the hillside in the gathering darkness, stars starting to peep out from the inky skies, Calder smirking at the thought of how he’d make Golden squirm. How he’d have that puffed-up bastard tripping over his own tongue trying to ingratiate himself. How much he’d enjoy twisting the screw. They reached a fork in the path and Deep strolled off to the left, around the foot of the Heroes.

‘Golden’s camp is on the right,’ grunted Calder.

‘True,’ said Deep, still walking. ‘You’ve an unchallenged grasp on your rights and lefts, which puts you a firm rung above my brother on the ladder of learning.’

‘They look the bloody same,’ snapped Shallow, and Calder felt something prick at his back. A cold and surprising something, not quite painful but certainly not pleasant. It took him a moment to realise what it was, but when he did all his smugness drained away as though that jabbing point had already made a hole.

How flimsy is arrogance. It only takes a bit of sharp metal to bring it all crashing down.

‘We’re going left.’ Shallow’s point prodded again and Calder set off, hands up, his smirk abandoned in the gloom.

There were plenty of people about. Fires surrounded by half-lit faces. One set playing at dice, another making up ever more bloated lies about their high deeds in the battle, another slapping out stray embers on someone’s cloak. A drunken group of Thralls lurched past but they barely even looked over. No one rushed to Calder’s rescue. They saw nothing to comment on and even if they had, they didn’t care a shit. People don’t, on the whole.

‘Where are we going?’ Though the only real question was whether they’d dug his grave already, or were planning to argue over it after.

‘You’ll find out.’

‘Why?’

‘Because we’ll get there.’

‘No. Why are you doing this?’

They burst out laughing together, as though that was quite the joke. ‘Do you think we were watching you by accident, over at Caul Reachey’s camp?’

‘No, no, no,’ hummed Shallow. ‘No.’

They were moving away from the Heroes, now. Fewer people, fewer fires. Hardly any light but the circle of crops picked out by Deep’s torch. Any hope of help fading into the black behind them along with the bragging and the songs. If Calder was going to be saved he’d have to do it himself. They hadn’t even bothered to take his sword away from him. But who was he fooling? Even if his right hand hadn’t been useless, Shallow could’ve cut his throat a dozen times before he got it drawn. Across the darkened fields he could pick out the line of trees far to the north. Maybe if he ran—

‘No.’ Shallow’s knife pricked at Calder’s side again. ‘No nee no no no.’

‘Really no,’ said Deep.

‘Look, maybe we can come to an arrangement. I’ve got money—’

‘There’s no pockets deep enough to outbid our employer. Your best bet is just to follow along like a good boy.’ Calder rather doubted that but, clever as he liked to think he was, he had no better ideas. ‘We’re sorry about this, you know. We’ve naught but respect for you just as we’d naught but respect for your father.’

‘What good is your sorry going to do me?’

Deep’s shoulders shrugged. ‘A little less than none, but we always make a point of saying it.’

‘He thinks that lends us class,’ said Shallow.

‘A noble air.’

‘Oh, aye,’ said Calder. ‘You’re a right pair of fucking heroes.’

‘It’s a pitiable fellow who ain’t a hero to someone,’ said Deep. ‘Even if it’s only himself.’

‘Or Mummy,’ said Shallow.

‘Or his brother.’ Deep grinned over his shoulder. ‘How did your brother feel about you, my lordling?’

Calder thought about Scale, fighting against the odds on that bridge, waiting for help that never came. ‘I’m guessing he went off me at the end.’

‘Wouldn’t cry too many tears about it. It’s a rare fine fellow who ain’t a villain to someone. Even if it’s only himself.’

‘Or his brother,’ whispered Shallow.

‘And here we are.’

A ramshackle farmhouse had risen out of the darkness. Large and silent, stone covered with rustling creeper, flaking shutters slanting in the windows. Calder realised it was the same one he’d slept in for two nights, but it looked a lot more sinister now. Everything does with a knife at your back.

‘This way, if you please.’ To the porch on the side of the house, lean-to roof missing slates, a rotten table under it, chairs lying on their sides. A lamp swung gently from a hook on one of the flaking columns, its light shifting across a yard scattered with weeds, a slumping fence beyond separating the farm from its fields.

There were a lot of tools leaning against the fence. Shovels, axes, pickaxes, caked in mud, as though they’d been hard used that day by a team of workmen and left there to be used again tomorrow. Tools for digging. Calder felt his fear, faded slightly on the walk, shoot up cold again. Through

a gap in the fence and the light of Deep's torch flared out across trampled crops and fell on fresh-turned earth. A knee-high heap of it, big as the foundations of a barn. Calder opened his mouth, maybe to make some desperate plea, strike some last bargain, but he had no words any more.

'They been working hard,' said Deep, as another mound crept from the night beside the first.

'Slaving away,' said Shallow, as the torchlight fell on a third.

'They say war's an awful affliction, but you'll have a hard time finding a gravedigger to agree.'

The last one hadn't been filled in yet. Calder's skin crawled as the torch found its edges, five strides across, maybe, its far end lost in the sliding shadows. Deep made it to the corner and peered over the edge. 'Phew.' He wedged his torch in the earth, turned and beckoned. 'Up you come, then. Walking slow ain't going to make the difference.'

Shallow gave him a nudge and Calder plodded on, throat tightening with each drawn-out breath, more and more of the sides of the pit crawling into view with each unsteady step.

Earth, and pebbles, and barley roots. Then a pale hand. Then a bare arm. Then corpses. Then more. The pit was full of them, heaped up in a grisly tangle. The refuse of battle.

Most were naked. Stripped of everything. Would some gravedigger end up with Calder's good cloak? The dirt and the blood looked the same in the torchlight. Black smears on dead white skin. Hard to say which twisted legs and arms belonged to which bodies.

Had these been men a couple of days before? Men with ambitions, and hopes, and things they cared for? A mass of stories, cut off in the midst, no ending. The hero's reward.

He felt a warmth down his leg and realised he'd pissed himself.

'Don't worry.' Deep's voice was soft, like a father to a scared child. 'That happens a lot.'

'We've seen it all.'

'And then a little more.'

'You stand here.' Shallow took him by the shoulders and turned him to face the pit, limp and helpless. You never think you'll just meekly do what you're told when you're facing your death. But everyone does. 'A little to the left.' Guiding him a step to the right. 'That's left, right?'

‘That’s right, fool.’

‘Fuck!’ Shallow gave him a harder yank and Calder slipped at the edge, boot heel sending a few lumps of earth down onto the bodies. Shallow pulled him back straight. There?’

‘There,’ said Deep. ‘All right, then.’

Calder stood, looking down, silently starting to cry. Dignity no longer seemed to matter much. He’d have even less soon enough. He wondered how deep the pit was. How many bodies he’d share it with when they picked those tools up in the morning and heaped the earth on top. Five score? Ten score? More?

He stared at the nearest of them, right beneath him, a great black wound in the back of its head. *His* head, Calder supposed, though it was hard to think of it as a man. It was a thing, robbed of all identity. Robbed of all … unless …

The face had been Black Dow’s. His mouth was open, half-full of dirt, but it was the Protector of the North, no doubt. He looked almost as if he was smiling, one arm flung out to welcome Calder, like an old friend, to the land of the dead. Back to the mud indeed. So quickly it can happen. Lord of all to meat in a hole.

Tears crept down Calder’s hot face, glistened in the torchlight as they pattered into the pit, making fresh streaks through the grime on Black Dow’s cold cheek. Death in the circle would’ve been a disappointment. How much worse was this? Tossed in a nameless hole, unmarked by those that loved or even those that hated him.

He was blubbing like a baby, sore ribs heaving, the pit and the corpses glistening through the salt water.

When would they do it? Surely, now, here it came. A breeze wafted up, chilling the tears on his face. He let his head drop back, squeezing his eyes shut, wincing, grunting, as if he could feel the knife sliding into his back. As if the metal was already in him. When would they do it? Surely now …

The wind dropped away, and he thought he heard clinking. Voices from behind him, from the direction of the house. He stood for a while longer, making a racking sob with every breath.

‘Fish to start,’ someone said.

‘Excellent.’

Trembling, cringing, every movement a terrifying effort, Calder slowly turned.

Deep and Shallow had vanished, their torch flickering abandoned at the edge of the pit. Beyond the ramshackle fence, under the ramshackle porch, the old table had been covered with a cloth and set for dinner. A man was unpacking dishes from a large basket. Another sat in one of the chairs. Calder wiped his eyes on the back of his wildly trembling hand, not sure whether to believe the evidence of his senses. The man in the chair was the First of the Magi.

Bayaz smiled over. 'Why, Prince Calder!' As if they'd run into each other by accident in the market. 'Pray join me!'

Calder wiped snot from his top lip, still expecting a knife to dart from the darkness. Then ever so slowly, his knees wobbling so much he could hear them flapping against the inside of his wet trousers, he picked his way back through the gap in the fence and over to the porch.

The servant righted the fallen chair, dusted it off and held his open palm towards it. Calder sagged into it, numb, eyes still gently leaking by themselves, and watched Bayaz fork a piece of fish into his mouth and slowly, deliberately, thoroughly chew, and swallow.

'So. The Whiteflow shall remain the northern boundary of Angland.'

Calder sat for a moment, aware of a faint snorting at the back of his nose with every quick breath but unable to stop it. Then he blinked, and finally nodded.

'The land between the Whiteflow and the Cusk, including the city of Uffrith, shall come under the governorship of the Dogman. It shall become a protectorate of the Union, with six representatives on the Open Council.'

Calder nodded again.

'The rest of the North as far as the Crinna is yours.' Bayaz popped the last piece of fish into his mouth and waved his fork around. 'Beyond the Crinna it belongs to Stranger-Come-Knocking.'

Yesterday's Calder might've snapped out some defiant jibe, but all he could think of now was how very lucky he felt not to be gushing blood into the mud, and how very much he wanted to carry on not gushing blood. 'Yes,' he croaked.

'You don't need time to … chew it over?'

Eternity in a pit full of corpses, perhaps? 'No,' whispered Calder.

‘Pardon me?’

Calder took a shuddering breath. ‘No.’

‘Well.’ Bayaz dabbed his mouth with a cloth, and looked up. ‘This is much better.’

‘A very great improvement.’ The curly-headed servant had a pouty smile as he whisked Bayaz’ plate away and replaced it with a clean one. Probably much the same as Calder’s habitual smirk, but he enjoyed seeing it on another man about as much as he might have enjoyed seeing another man fuck his wife. The servant whipped the cover from a dish with a flourish.

‘Ah, the meat, the meat!’ Bayaz watched the knife flash and flicker as wafer slices were carved with blinding skill. ‘Fish is all very well, but dinner hasn’t really started until you’re served something that bleeds.’ The servant added vegetables with the dexterity of a conjuror, then turned his smirk on Calder.

There was something oddly, irritatingly familiar about him. Like a name at the tip of Calder’s tongue. Had he seen him visit his father once, in a fine cloak? Or at Ironhead’s fire with a Carl’s helmet on? Or at the shoulder of Stranger-Come-Knocking, with paint on his face and splinters of bone through his ear? ‘Meat, sir?’

‘No,’ whispered Calder. All he could think of was all the meat in the pits just a few strides away.

‘You really should try it!’ said Bayaz. ‘Go on, give him some! And help the prince, Yoru, he has an injured right hand.’

The servant doled meat onto Calder’s plate, bloody gravy gleaming in the gloom, then began to cut it up at frightening speed, making Calder flinch with each sweep of the knife.

Across the table, the Magus was already happily chewing. ‘I must admit, I did not entirely enjoy the tenor of our last conversation. It reminded me somewhat of your father.’ Bayaz paused as if expecting a response, but Calder had none to give. ‘That is meant as a very small compliment and a very large warning. For many years your father and I had … an understanding.’

‘Some good it did him.’

The wizard’s brows went up. ‘How short your family’s memory! Indeed it did! Gifts he had of me, and all manner of help and wise counsel and oh, how he thrived! From piss-pot chieftain to King of the Northmen! Forged a

nation where there were only squabbling peasants and pigshit before!' The edge of Bayaz' knife screeched against the plate and his voice sharpened with it. 'But he became arrogant in his glory, and forgot the debts he owed, and sent his puffed-up sons to make demands of me. *Demands,'* hissed the Magus, eyes glittering in the shadows of their sockets. 'Of me.'

Calder's throat felt uncomfortably tight as Bayaz sat back. 'Bethod turned his back on our friendship, and his allies fell away, and all his great achievements withered, and he died in blood and was buried in an unmarked grave. There is a lesson there. Had your father paid his debts, perhaps he would be King of the Northmen still. I have high hopes you will learn from his mistake, and remember what you owe.'

'I've taken nothing from you.'

'Have … you … not?' Bayaz bit off each word with a curl of his lip. 'You will never know, nor could you even understand, the many ways in which I have interceded on your behalf.'

The servant arched one brow. 'The account is lengthy.'

'Do you suppose things run your way because you think yourself charming? Or cunning? Or uncommonly lucky?'

Calder had, in fact, thought exactly that.

'Was it charm that saved you from Reachey's assassins at his weapon-take, or the two colourful Northmen I sent to watch over you?'

Calder had no answer.

'Was it cunning that saved you in the battle, or my instructions to Brodd Tenways that he should keep you from harm?'

Even less to that. 'Tenways?' he whispered.

'Friends and enemies can sometimes be difficult to tell apart. I asked him to act like Black Dow's man. Perhaps he was too good an actor. I heard he died.'

'It happens,' croaked Calder.

'Not to you.' The 'yet' was unsaid, but still deafening. 'Even though you faced Black Dow in a duel to the death! And was it luck that tipped the balance towards you when the Protector of the North lay dead at your feet, or was it my old friend Stranger-Come-Knocking?'

Calder felt as if he was up to his chest in quicksand, and had only just realised. 'He's your man?'

Bayaz did not gloat or cackle. He looked almost bored. ‘I knew him when he was still called Pip. But big men need big names, eh, Black Calder?’

‘Pip,’ he muttered, trying to square the giant with the name.

‘I wouldn’t use it to his face.’

‘I don’t reach his face.’

‘Few do. He wants to bring civilisation to the fens.’

‘I wish him luck.’

‘Keep it for yourself. I gave it to you.’

Calder was too busy trying to think his way through it. ‘But … Stranger-Come-Knocking fought for Dow. Why not have him fight for the Union? You could have won on the second morning and saved us all a—’

‘He was not content with my first offer.’ Bayaz sourly speared some greens with his fork. ‘He demonstrated his value, and so I made a better one.’

‘This was all a disagreement over prices?’

The Magus let his head tip to one side. ‘Just what do you think a war is?’ That sank slowly into the silence between them like a ship with all hands. ‘There are many others who have debts.’

‘Caul Shivers.’

‘No,’ said the servant. ‘His intervention was a happy accident.’

Calder blinked. ‘Without him … Dow would’ve torn me apart.’

‘Good planning does not prevent accidents,’ said Bayaz, ‘it allows for them. It makes sure every accident is a happy one. I am not so careless a gambler as to make only one bet. But the North has ever been short of good material, and I admit you are my preference. You are no hero, Calder. I like that. You see what men are. You have your father’s cunning, and ambition, and ruthlessness, but not his pride.’

‘Pride always struck me as a waste of effort,’ murmured Calder. ‘Everyone serves.’

‘Keep that in mind and you will prosper. Forget it, well …’ Bayaz forked a slice of meat into his mouth and noisily chewed. ‘My advice would be to keep that pit of corpses always at your feet. The feeling as you stared down into it, waiting for death. The awful helplessness. Skin tickling with the expectation of the knife. The regret for everything left undone. The fear for those you leave behind.’ He gave a bright smile. ‘Start every morning and end every day at the brink of that pit. Remember, because forgetfulness is

the curse of power. And you may find yourself once again staring into your own grave, this time with less happy results. You need only defy me.'

'I've spent the last ten years kneeling to one man or another.' Calder didn't have to lie. Black Dow had let him live, then demanded obedience, then made threats. Look how that turned out. 'My knees bend very easily.'

The Magus smacked his lips as he swallowed the last piece of carrot and tossed his cutlery on the plate. 'That gladdens me. You cannot imagine how many similar conversations I have had with stiff-kneed men. I no longer have the slightest patience for them. But I can be generous to those who see reason. It may be that at some point I will send someone to you requesting … favours. When that day comes, I hope you will not disappoint me.'

'What sort of favours?'

'The sort that will prevent you from ever again being taken down the wrong path by men with knives.'

Calder cleared his throat. 'Those kinds of favours I will always be willing to grant.'

'Good. In return you will have gold from me.'

'That's the generosity of Magi? Gold?'

'What were you expecting, a magic codpiece? This is no children's storybook. Gold is everything and anything. Power, love, safety. Sword and shield together. There is no greater gift. But I do, as it happens, have another.' Bayaz paused like a jester about to deliver the joke. 'Your brother's life.'

Calder felt his face twitch. Hope? Or disappointment? 'Scale's dead.'

'No. He lost his right hand at the Old Bridge but he lives. The Union are releasing all prisoners. A gesture of goodwill, as part of the historic peace accord that you have so gratefully agreed to. You can collect the pinhead at midday tomorrow.'

'What should I do with him?'

'Far be it from me to tell you what to do with your gift, but you do not get to be a king without making some sacrifices. You do want to be king, don't you?'

'Yes.' Things had changed a great deal since the evening began, but of that Calder was more sure than ever.

The First of the Magi stood, taking up his staff as his servant began nimbly to clear away the dishes. 'Then an elder brother is a dreadful

encumbrance.'

Calder watched him for a moment, looking calmly off across the darkened fields as though they were full of flowers rather than corpses. 'Have you eaten here, within a long piss of a mass grave … just to show me how ruthless you are?'

'Must everything have some sinister motive? I have eaten here because I was hungry.' Bayaz tipped his head to one side as he looked down at Calder. Like the bird looks at the worm. 'Graves mean nothing to me either way.'

'Knives,' muttered Calder, 'and threats, and bribes, and war?'

Bayaz' eyes shone with the lamplight. 'Yes?'

'What kind of a fucking wizard are you?'

'The kind you obey.'

The servant reached for his plate but Calder caught him by the wrist before he got there. 'Leave it. I might get hungry later.'

The Magus smiled at that. 'What did I say, Yoru? He has a stronger stomach than you'd think.' He waved over his shoulder as he walked away. 'I believe, for now, the North is in safe hands.'

Bayaz' servant took up the basket, took down the lamp, and followed his master.

'Where's dessert?' Calder shouted after them.

The servant gave him one last smirk. 'Black Dow has it.'

The glimmer of the lamp followed them around the side of the house and they were gone, leaving Calder to sink into his rickety chair in the darkness, eyes closed, breathing hard, with a mixture of crushing disappointment and even more crushing relief.

Just Deserts

My dear and trusted friend,

It gives me great pleasure to tell you that the circumstances have arisen in which I can invite you back to Adua, to once again take up your position among the Knights of the Body, and your rightful place as my First Guard.

You have been greatly missed. During your absence your letters have been a constant comfort and delight. For any wrong on your part, I long ago forgave you. For any wrong on mine, I earnestly hope that you can do the same. Please, let me know that we can continue as we were before Sipani.

Your sovereign,

The High King of Angland, Starikland, and Midderland, Protector of Westport and Dagoska, His August Majesty …

Gorst could read no further. He closed his eyes, tears stinging at the inside of the lids, and pressed the crumpled paper against his chest as one might embrace a lover. How often had poor, scorned, exiled Bremer dan Gorst dreamed of this moment? *Am I dreaming now?* He bit his sore tongue and the sweet taste of blood was a relief. Prised his eyelids open again, tears running freely, and stared at the letter through the shimmering water.

Dear and trusted friend … rightful place as First Guard … comfort and delight… as we were before Sipani. As we were before Sipani …

He frowned. Brushed his tears on the back of his wrist and peered down at the date. The letter had been despatched six days ago. *Before I fought at the*

fords, on the bridge, at the Heroes. Before the battle even began. He hardly knew whether to laugh or cry more and in the end did both, shuddering with weepy giggles, spraying the letter with happy specks of spit.

What did it matter why? *I have what I deserve.*

He burst from the tent and it was as if he had never felt the sunlight before. The simple joy of the life-giving warmth on his face, the caress of the breeze. He gazed about in damp-eyed wonder. The patch of ground sloping down to the river, a mud-churned, rubbish-strewn midden when he trudged inside, had become a charming garden, filled with colour. With hopeful faces and pleasing chatter. With laughter and birdsong.

'You all right?' Rurgen looked faintly concerned, as far as Gorst could tell through the wet.

'I have a letter from the king,' he squeaked, no longer caring a damn how he sounded.

'What is it?' asked Younger. 'Bad news?'

'Good news.' And he grabbed Younger around the shoulders and made him groan as he hugged him tight. 'The best.' He gathered up Rurgen with the other arm, lifting their feet clear of the ground, squeezing the pair of them like a loving father might squeeze his sons. 'We're going home.'

Gorst walked with an unaccustomed bounce. Armour off, he felt so light he might suddenly spring into the sunny sky. The very air smelled sweeter, even if it did still carry the faint tang of latrines, and he dragged it in through both nostrils. All his injuries, all his aches and pains, all his petty disappointments, faded in the all-conquering glow.

I am born again.

The road to Osrung – or to the burned-out ruin that had been Osrung a few days before – brimmed with smiling faces. A set of whores blew kisses from the seat of a wagon and Gorst blew them back. A crippled boy gave excited hoots and Gorst jovially ruffled his hair. A column of walking wounded shuffled past, one on crutches at the front nodded and Gorst hugged him, kissed him on the forehead and walked on, smiling.

'Gorst! It's Gorst!' Some cheering went up, and Gorst grinned and shook one scabbed fist in the air. *Bremer dan Gorst, hero of the battlefield! Bremer dan Gorst, confidant of the monarch! Knight of the Body, First*

Guard to the High King of the Union, noble, righteous, loved by all! He could do anything. He could have anything.

Joyous scenes were everywhere. A man with sergeant's stripes was being married by the colonel of his regiment to a pudding-faced woman with flowers in her hair while a gathering of his comrades gave suggestive whistles. A new ensign, absurdly young-looking, beamed in the sunlight as he carried the colours of his regiment by way of initiation, the golden sun of the Union snapping proudly. *Perhaps one of the very flags that Mitterick so carelessly lost only a day ago? How soon some trespasses are forgotten. The incompetent rewarded along with the wronged.*

As if to illustrate that very point, Gorst caught sight of Felnigg beside the road in his new uniform, staff officers in a crowing crowd around him, giving hell to a tearful young lieutenant beside a tipped-over cart, gear, weapons and for some reason a full-sized harp spilled from its torn awning like the guts from a dead sheep.

'General Felnigg!' called Gorst jauntily. 'Congratulations on your promotion!' *It could not have happened to a less deserving drunken pedant.* He briefly considered the possibility of challenging the man to the duel he had been too cowardly to demand a few evenings before. Then to the possibility of backhanding him into the ditch as he passed. *But I have other business.*

'Thank you, Colonel Gorst. I wished to let you know how very much I admire your—'

Gorst could not even be bothered to make excuses. He simply barged past, scattering Felnigg's staff – most of whom had recently been Marshal Kroy's staff – like a plough through muck and left them clucking and puffing in his wake. *And away to fuck with the lot of you, I'm free. Free!* He sprang up and punched the air.

Even the wounded near the charred gates of Osrung looked happy as he passed, tapping shoulders with his fist, muttering banal encouragements. *Share my joy, you crippled and dying! I have plenty to spare!*

And there she stood, among them, giving out water. *Like the Goddess of mercy. Oh, soothe my pain.* He had no fear now. He knew what he had to do.

'Finree!' he called, then cleared his throat and tried again, a little deeper. 'Finree.'

‘Bremer. You look … happy.’ She lifted one enquiring eyebrow, as though a smile on his face was as incongruous as on a horse, or a rock, or a corpse. *But get used to this smile, for it is here to stay!*

‘I am, very happy. I wanted to say …’ *I love you.* ‘Goodbye. I am returning to Adua this evening.’

‘Really? So am I.’ His heart leaped. ‘Well, as soon as my husband is well enough to be moved.’ And plummeted back down. ‘But they say that won’t be long.’ She looked annoyingly delighted about it too.

‘Good. Good.’ *Fuck him.* Gorst realised his fist was clenched, and forced it open. *No, no, forget him. He is nothing. I am the winner, and this is my moment.* ‘I received a letter from the king this morning.’

‘Really? So did we!’ She blurted it out, seizing him by the arm, eyes bright. His heart leaped again, as though her touch was a second letter from his Majesty. ‘Hal is being restored to his seat on the Open Council.’ She looked furtively around, then whispered it in a husky rush. ‘They’re making him lord governor of Angland!’

There was a long, uncomfortable pause while Gorst took that in. *Like a sponge soaking up a puddle of piss.* ‘Lord … governor?’ It seemed a cloud had moved across the sun. It was no longer quite so warm upon his face as it had been.

‘I know! There will be a parade, apparently.’

‘A parade.’ *Of cunts.* A chilly breeze blew up and flapped his loose shirt. ‘He deserves it.’ *He presided over a blown-up bridge and so he gets a parade?* ‘You deserve it.’ *Where’s my fucking parade?*

‘And your letter?’

My letter? My pathetic embarrassment of a letter? ‘Oh … the king has asked me to take up my old position as First Guard.’ Somehow he could no longer muster quite the enthusiasm he had when he opened it. *Not lord governor, oh no! Nothing like lord governor. The king’s first hand-holder. The king’s first cock-taster. Pray don’t wipe your own arse your Majesty, let me!*

‘That’s wonderful news.’ Finree smiled as though everything had turned out just right. ‘War is full of opportunities, after all, however terrible it may be.’

It is pedestrian news. My triumph is all spoiled. My garlands rotted. ‘I thought …’ His face twitched. He could not cling on to his smile any longer.

‘My success seems quite meagre now.’

‘Meagre? Well, of course not, I didn’t mean—’

‘I’ll never have anything worth the having, will I?’

She blinked. ‘I—’

‘I’ll never have you.’

Her eyes went wide. ‘You’ll— What?’

‘I’ll never have you, or anyone like you.’ Colour burned up red under her freckled cheeks. ‘Then let me be honest. War is terrible, you say?’ He hissed it right in her horrified face. ‘*Shit,* I say! I fucking *love* war.’ The unsaid words boiled out of him. He could not stop them, did not want to. ‘In the dreamy yards, and drawing rooms, and pretty parks of Adua, I am a squeaking fucking joke. A falsetto embarrassment. A ridiculous clown-man.’ He leaned even closer, enjoying it that she flinched. *Only this way will she know that I exist. Then let it be this way.* ‘But on the battlefield? On the battlefield I am a god. I love war. The steel, the smell, the corpses. I wish there were more. On the first day I drove the Northmen back alone at the ford. Alone! On the second I carried the bridge! Me! Yesterday I climbed the Heroes! I *love* war! I … I wish it wasn’t over. I wish … I wish …’

But far sooner than he had expected, the well had run dry. He was left standing there, breathing hard, staring down at her. Like a man who has throttled his wife and come suddenly to his senses, he had no idea what to do next. He turned to make his escape, but Finree’s hand was still on his arm and now her fingers dug into him, pulling him back.

The blush of shock was fading now, her face hard with growing anger, jaw muscles clenched. ‘What happened in Sipani?’

And now it was his cheeks that burned. As if the name was a slap. ‘I was betrayed.’ He tried to make the last word stab at her as it stabbed him, but his voice had lost all its edge. ‘I was made the scapegoat.’ A goat’s plaintive bleating, indeed. ‘After all my loyalty, all my diligence …’ He fumbled for more words but his voice was not used to making them, fading into a squeaky whine as she bared her teeth.

‘I heard when they came for the king you were passed out drunk with a whore.’ Gorst swallowed. But he could hardly deny it. Stumbling from that room, head spinning, struggling to fasten his belt and draw his sword at once. ‘I heard it was not the first time you had disgraced yourself, and that

the king had forgiven you before, and that the Closed Council would not let him do it again.' She looked him up and down, and her lip curled. 'God of the battlefield, eh? Gods and devils can look much alike to us little people. You went to a ford, and a bridge, and a hill, and what did you do there except kill? What have you made? Who have you helped?'

He stood there for a moment, all his bravado slithering out. *She is right. And no one knows it better than me.* 'Nothing and no one,' he whispered.

'So you love war. I used to think you were a decent man. But I see now I was mistaken.' She stabbed at his chest with her forefinger. 'You're a hero.'

She turned with one last look of excruciating contempt and left him standing among the wounded. They no longer looked so happy for him as they had done. They looked, on the whole, to be in very great pain. The birdsong was half-dead crowing once more. His elation was a charming sandcastle, washed away by the pitiless tide of reality. He felt as if he was cast from lead.

Am I doomed always to feel like this? A most uncomfortable thought occurred. *Did I feel like this ... before Sipani?* He frowned after Finree as she vanished back into the hospital tent. *Back to her pretty young dolt of a lord governor.* He realised far too late he should have pointed out that he had been the one to save her husband. *One never says the right things at the right time.* A stupendous understatement if ever there was one. He gave an epic, grinding sigh. *This is why I keep my fucking mouth shut.*

Gorst turned and trudged away into the gloomy afternoon, fists clenched, frowning up towards the Heroes, black teeth against the sky at the top of their solemn hill.

By the Fates, I need to fight someone. Anyone.

But the war was over.

Black Calder

‘Just give me the nod.’

‘The nod?’

Shivers turned to look at him, and nodded. ‘The nod. And it’s done.’

‘Simple as that,’ muttered Calder, hunching in his saddle.

‘Simple as that.’

Easy. Just nod, and you can be king. Just nod, and kill your brother.

It was hot, a few shreds of cloud hanging in the blue over the fells, bees floating about some yellow flowers at the edge of the barley, the river glittering silver. The last hot day, maybe, before autumn shooed the summer off and beckoned winter on. It should’ve been a day for lazy dreams and trailing hot toes in the shallows. Perhaps a hundred strides downstream a few Northmen had stripped off and were doing just that. A little further along the opposite bank and a dozen Union soldiers were doing the same. The laughter of both sets would occasionally drift to Calder’s ear over the happy chattering of the water. Sworn enemies one day, now they played like children, close enough almost to splash.

Peace. And that had to be a good thing.

For months he’d been preaching for it, hoping for it, plotting for it, with few allies and fewer rewards, and here it was. If ever there was a day to smirk it was this one, but Calder could’ve lifted one of the Heroes more easily than the corners of his mouth. His meeting with the First of the Magi had been weighing them down all through a sleepless night. That and the thought of the meeting that was coming.

‘Ain’t that him?’ asked Shivers.

‘Where?’ There was only one man on the bridge, and not one he recognised.

‘It is. That’s him.’

Calder narrowed his eyes, then shaded them against the glare. ‘By the …’

Until last night he’d thought his brother killed. He hadn’t been so far wrong. Scale was a ghost, crept from the land of the dead and ready to be snatched back by a breath of wind. Even at this distance he looked withered, shrunken, greasy hair plastered to one side of his head. He’d long had a limp but now he shuffled sideways, left boot dragging over the old stones. He had a threadbare blanket around his shoulders, left hand clutching two corners at his throat while the others flapped about his legs.

Calder slid from his saddle, tossing the reins over his horse’s neck, bruised ribs burning as he hurried to help his brother.

‘Just give me the nod,’ came Shivers’ whisper.

Calder froze, guts clenching. Then he went on.

‘Brother.’

Scale squinted up like a man who hadn’t seen the sun for days, sunken face covered with scabby grazes on one side, a black cut across the swollen bridge of his nose. ‘Calder?’ He gave a weak grin and Calder saw he’d lost his two front teeth, blood dried to his cracked lips. He let go of his blanket to take Calder’s hand and it slid off, left him hunched around the stump of his right arm like a beggar woman around her baby. Calder found his eyes drawn to that horrible absence of limb. Strangely, almost comically shortened, bound to the elbow with grubby bandages, spotted brown at the end.

‘Here.’ He unclasped his cloak and slipped it around his brother’s shoulders, his own broken hand tingling unpleasantly in sympathy.

Scale looked too pained and exhausted even to gesture at stopping him. ‘What happened to your face?’

‘I took your advice about fighting.’

‘How did it work out?’

‘Painfully for all concerned,’ said Calder, fumbling the clasp shut with one hand and one thumb.

Scale stood, swaying as if he might drop at any moment, blinking out across the shifting barley. ‘The battle’s over, then?’ he croaked.

‘It’s over.’

‘Who won?’

Calder paused. ‘We did.’

‘Dow did, you mean?’

‘Dow’s dead.’

Scale’s bloodshot eyes went wide. ‘In the battle?’

‘After.’

‘Back to the mud.’ Scale wriggled his hunched shoulders under the cloak. ‘I guess it was coming.’

All Calder could think of was the pit opening up at the toes of his boots. ‘It’s always coming.’

‘Who’s taken his place?’

Another pause. The swimming soldiers’ laughter drifted over, then faded back into the rustling crops. ‘I have.’ Scale’s scabbed mouth hung gormlessly open. ‘They’ve taken to calling me Black Calder, now.’

‘Black … Calder.’

‘Let’s get you mounted.’ Calder led his brother over to the horses, Shivers watching them all the way.

‘Are you two on the same side now?’ asked Scale.

Shivers put a finger on his scarred cheek and pulled it down so his metal eye bulged from the socket. ‘Just keeping an eye out.’

Scale reached for the saddle-bow with his right arm, stopped himself and took it awkwardly with his left. He found one stirrup with a fishing boot and started to drag himself up. Calder hooked a hand under his knee to help him. When Calder had been a child Scale used to lift him up into the saddle. Fling him up sometimes, none too gently. How things had changed.

The three of them set off up the track. Scale slumped in the saddle, reins dangling from his limp left hand and his head nodding with each hoofbeat. Calder rode grimly beside him. Shivers followed, like a shadow. The Great Leveller, waiting at their backs. Through the fields they went, at an interminable walk, towards the gap in Clail’s Wall where Calder had faced the Union charge a few days before.

His heart was beating just as fast as it had then. The Union had pulled back behind the river that morning and Pale-as-Snow’s boys were up north behind the Heroes, but there were still eyes around. A few nervous pickers combing through the trampled barley, searching for some trifle others might have missed. Scrounging up arrowheads or buckles or anything that could

turn a copper. A couple of men thrashing through the crops off to the east, one with a fishing rod over his shoulder. Strange, how quickly a battlefield turned back to being just a stretch of ground. One day every finger's breadth of it is something men can die over. The next it's just a path from here to there. As he looked about Calder caught Shivers' eye and the killer lifted his chin, silently asking the question. Calder jerked his head away like a hand from a boiling pot.

He'd killed men before. He'd killed Brodd Tenways with his own sword hours after the man had saved his life. He'd ordered Forley the Weakest dead for nothing but his own vanity. Killing a man when Skarling's Chair was the prize shouldn't have made his hand shake on the reins, should it?

'Why didn't you help me, Calder?' Scale had eased his stump out from the gap in the cloak and was frowning down at it, jaw set hard. 'At the bridge. Why didn't you come?'

'I wanted to.' Liar, liar. 'Found out there were Union men in the woods across that stream. Right on our flank. I wanted to go but I couldn't. I'm sorry.' That much was true. He was sorry. For what good that did.

'Well.' Scale's face was a grimacing mask as he slid the stump back under his cloak. 'Looks like you were right. The world needs more thinkers and fewer heroes.' He glanced over for an instant and the look in his eye made Calder wince. 'You always were the clever one.'

'No. It was you who was right. Sometimes you have to fight.'

This was where he'd made his little stand and the land still bore the scars. Crops trodden, broken arrow shafts scattered, scraps of ruined gear around the remains of the trenches. Before Clail's Wall the ground had been churned to mud then baked hard again, smeared bootprints, hoof-prints, handprints stamped into it, all that was left of the men who died there.

'Get what you can with words,' muttered Calder, 'but the words of an armed man ring that much sweeter. Like you said. Like our father said.' And hadn't he said something about family, as well? How nothing is more important? And mercy? Always think about mercy?

'When you're young you think your father knows everything,' said Scale. 'Now I'm starting to realise he might've been wrong on more than one score. Look how he ended up, after all.'

'True.' Every word said was like lifting a great stone. How long had Calder lived with the frustration of having this thick-headed heap of brawn

in his way? How many knocks, and mocks, and insults had he endured from him? His fist closed tight around the metal in his pocket. His father's chain. His chain. Is nothing more important than family? Or is family the lead that weighs you down?

They'd left the pickers behind, and the scene of the fighting too. Down the quiet track near the farmhouse where Scale had woken him a few mornings before. Where Bayaz had given him an even harsher awakening the previous night. Was this a test? To see whether Calder was ruthless enough for the wizard's tastes? He'd been accused of many things, but never too little ruthlessness.

How long had he dreamed of taking back his father's place? Even before his father lost it, and now there was only one last little fence to jump. All it would take was a nod. He looked sideways at Scale, wrung-out wreck that he was. Not much of a fence to trip a man with ambition. Calder had been accused of many things, but never too little ambition.

'You were the one took after our father,' Scale was saying. 'I tried, but … couldn't ever do it. Always thought you'd make a better king.'

'Maybe,' whispered Calder. Definitely.

Shivers was close behind, one hand on the reins, the other resting on his hip. He looked as relaxed as ever a man could, swaying gently with the movements of his horse. But his fingertips just so happened to be brushing the grip of his sword, sheathed beside the saddle in easy reach. The sword that had been Black Dow's. The sword that had been the Bloody-Nine's. Shivers raised one brow, asking the question.

The blood was surging behind Calder's eyes. Now was the time. He could have everything he wanted.

Bayaz had been right. You don't get to be a king without making some sacrifices.

Calder took an endless breath in, and held it. Now.

And he gently shook his head.

Shivers' hand slid away. His horse dropped ever so slowly back.

'Maybe I'm the better brother,' said Calder, 'but you're the elder.' He brought his horse up close, and he pulled their father's chain from his pocket and slipped it over Scale's neck, arranged it carefully across his shoulders. Patted him on the back and left his hand there, wondering when he got to love this stupid bastard. When he got to love anyone besides

himself. He lowered his head. ‘Let me be the first to bow before the new King of the Northmen.’

Scale blinked down at the diamond on his grubby shirt. ‘Never thought things would end up this way.’

Neither had Calder. But he found he was glad they had. ‘End?’ He smirked across at his brother. ‘This is the beginning.’

Retired

The house wasn't by the water. It didn't have a porch. It did have a bench outside with a view of the valley, but when he sat on it of an evening with his pipe he didn't tend to smile, just thought of all the men he'd buried. It leaked somewhat around the western eaves when the rain came down, which it had in quite some measure lately. It had just the one room, and a shelf up a ladder for sleeping on, and when it came to the great divide between sheds and houses, was only just on the right side of the issue. But it was a house, still, with good oak bones and a good stone chimney. And it was his. Dreams don't just spring up by themselves, they need tending to, and you've got to plant that first seed somewhere. Or so Craw told himself.

'Shit!' Hammer and nail clattered to the boards and he was off around the room, spitting and cursing and shaking his hand about.

Working wood was a tough way to earn a living. He might not have been chewing his nails so much, but he'd taken to hammering the bastards into his fingers instead. The sad fact was, now the wounds all over Craw's hands had forced him to face it, he wasn't much of a carpenter. In his dreams of retirement he'd always seen himself crafting things of beauty. Probably while light streamed in through coloured windows and sawdust went up in artful puffs. Gables carved with gilded dragon heads, so lifelike they'd be the wonder of the North, folk flocking from miles around to get a look. But it turned out wood was just as full of split, and warp, and splinters as people were.

'Bloody hell.' Rubbing the life back into his thumb, nail already black from where he caught it yesterday.

They smiled at him in the village, brought him odd jobs, but he reckoned more'n one of the farmers was a good stretch better with a hammer than he was. Certainly they'd got that new barn up without calling on his skills and he had to admit it was likely a finer building for it. He'd started to think they wanted him in the valley more for his sword than his saw. While the war was on, the North's ready supply of scum had the Southerners to kill and rob. Now they just had their own kind, and were taking every chance at it. A Named Man to hand was no bad thing. Those were the times. Those were still the times, and maybe they always would be.

He squatted beside the stricken chair, latest casualty in his war against furniture. He'd split the joint he'd spent the last hour chiselling out and now the new leg stuck at an angle, an ugly gouge where he'd been hammering. Served him right for working as the light was going, but if he didn't get this done tonight he'd—

'Craw!'

His head jerked up. A man's voice, deep and rough.

'You in there, Craw?'

His skin went cold all over. Might be he'd played the straight edge most of his life, but you don't walk free of the black business without some scores however you play it.

He sprang up, or as close to springing as he could get these days, snatched his sword from the bracket above the door, fumbled it and nearly dropped it on his head, hissing more curses. If it was someone come to kill him it didn't seem likely they'd have given him a warning by calling his name. Not unless they were idiots. Idiots can be just as vengeful as anyone else, though, if not more so.

The shutters of the back window were open. He could slip out and off into the wood. But if they were serious they'd have thought of that, and with his knees he'd be outrunning no one. Better to come out the front way and look 'em in the eye. The way he would've done when he was young. He sidled up, swallowing as he drew his sword. Turned the knob, wedged the blade into the gap and gently levered the door open while he peered around the frame.

He'd go out the front way, but he wasn't painting a target on his shirt.

He counted eight at a glance, spread out in a crescent on the damp patch of dirt in front of his house. A couple had torches, light catching mail and

helm and spear's tip and making 'em twinkle in the damp twilight. Carls, and battle-toughened by their looks, though there weren't many men left in the North you couldn't say that about. They all had plenty of weapons, but no blades drawn that he could see. That gave him some measure of comfort.

'That you, Craw?' He got a big measure more when he saw who was in charge, standing closest to the house with palms up.

'That it is.' Craw let his sword point drop and poked his head out a bit further. 'Here's a surprise.'

'Pleasant one, I hope.'

'I guess you'll tell me. What're you after, Hardbread?'

'Can I come in?'

Craw sniffed. 'You can. Your crew might have to enjoy the night air for now.'

'They're used to it.' And Hardbread ambled up to the house alone. He looked prosperous. Beard trimmed back. New mail. Silver on the hilt of his sword. He climbed the steps and ducked past Craw, strolled to the centre of the one room, which didn't take long to get to, and cast an appraising eye around. Took in Craw's pallet on the shelf, his workbench and his tools, the half-finished chair, the broken wood and the shavings scattering the boards. 'This what retirement looks like?' he asked.

'No, I've a fucking palace out back. Why you here?'

Hardbread took a breath. 'Because mighty Scale Ironhand, King of the Northmen, has gone to war with Glama Golden.'

Craw snorted. 'Black Calder has, you mean. Why?'

'Golden killed Caul Reachey.'

'Reachey's dead?'

'Poisoned. And Golden did the deed.'

Craw narrowed his eyes. 'That a fact?'

'Calder says it is, so Scale says it is, so it's close to a fact as anyone's going to get. All the North's lining up behind Bethod's sons, and I've come to see if you want to line up too.'

'Since when did you fight for Calder and Scale?'

'Since the Dogman hung up his sword and stopped paying staples.'

Craw frowned at him. 'Calder would never take me.'

'It was Calder sent me. He's got Pale-as-Snow, and Cairm Ironhead, and your old friend Wonderful as his War Chiefs.'

‘Wonderful?’

‘Canny woman, that one. But Calder’s lacking a Name to stand Second and lead his own Carls. He’s in need of a straight edge, apparently.’ Hardbread cocked a brow at the chair. ‘So I don’t reckon he’ll be hiring you as a carpenter.’

Craw stood there, trying to get his head around it. Offered a place, and a high one. Back among folk he understood, and admired him. Back to the black business, and trying to juggle the right thing, and finding words over graves.

‘Sorry to bring you all this way for nothing, Hardbread, but the answer’s no. Pass my apologies on to Calder. My apologies for this and … for whatever else. But tell him I’m done. Tell him I’m retired.’

Hardbread gave a sigh. ‘All right. It’s a shame, but I’ll pass it on.’ He paused in the doorway, looking back. ‘Look after yourself, eh, Craw? Ain’t many of us left know the difference between the right thing and the wrong.’

‘What difference?’

Hardbread snorted. ‘Aye. Look after yourself, anyway.’ And he stomped down the steps and out into the gathering dark.

Craw looked after him for a moment, wondering whether he was happy the thumping of his heart was softening or sad. Weighing his sword in his hand, remembering how it felt to hold it. Different from a hammer, that was sure. He remembered Threetrees giving it to him. The pride he’d felt, like a fire in him. Smiled in spite of himself to remember what he used to be. How prickly and wild and hungry for glory, not a straight edge on him anywhere.

He looked around at that one room, and the few things in it. He’d always thought retiring would be going back to his life after some nightmare pause. Some stretch of exile in the land of the dead. Now it came to him that all his life worth living had happened while he was holding a sword.

Standing alongside his dozen. Laughing with Whirrun, and Brack, and Wonderful. Clasping hands with his crew before the fight, knowing he’d die for them and they for him. The trust, the brotherhood, the love, knit closer than family. Standing by Threetrees on the walls of Uffrith, roaring their defiance at Bethod’s great army. The day he charged at the Cumnur. And at Dunbrec. And in the High Places, even though they lost. Because they lost. The day he earned his name. Even the day he got his brothers killed. Even

when he'd stood at the top of the Heroes as the rain came down, watching the Union come, knowing every dragged-out moment might be the last.

Like Whirrun had said – you can't live more'n that. Certainly not by fixing a chair.

'Ah, shit,' he muttered, and he grabbed his sword-belt and his coat, threw 'em over his shoulder and strode out, slapping the door shut. Didn't even bother to lock it behind him.

'Hardbread! Wait up!'

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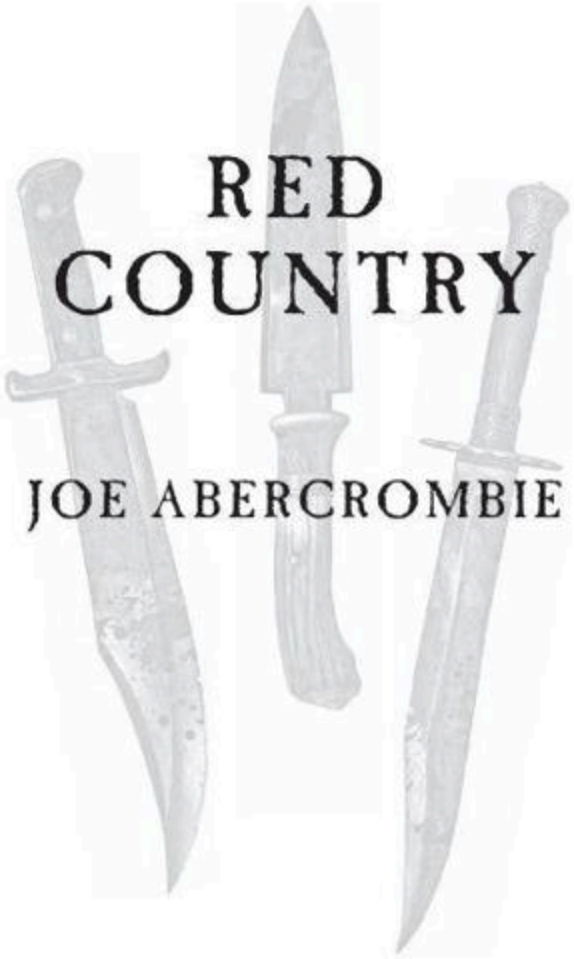


RED COUNTRY

JOE ABERCROMBIE

GOLLANCZ
LONDON

For Teddy

And Clint Eastwood

But since Clint probably ain’t that bothered

Mostly Teddy

CONTENTS

Title Page

Dedication

I: TROUBLE

Some Kind of Coward

The Easy Way

Just Men

The Best Man

All Got a Past

The Stolen

II: FELLOWSHIP

Conscience and the Cock-Rot

New Lives

The Rugged Outdoorsman

Driftwood

Reasons

Oh God, the Dust

Sweet's Crossing

Dreams

The Wrath of God

The Practical Thinkers

The Fair Price

III: CREASE

Hell on the Cheap
Plots
Words and Graces
That Simple
Yesterday's News
Blood Coming
The Sleeping Partner
Fun
High Stakes
Old Friends
Nowhere to Go

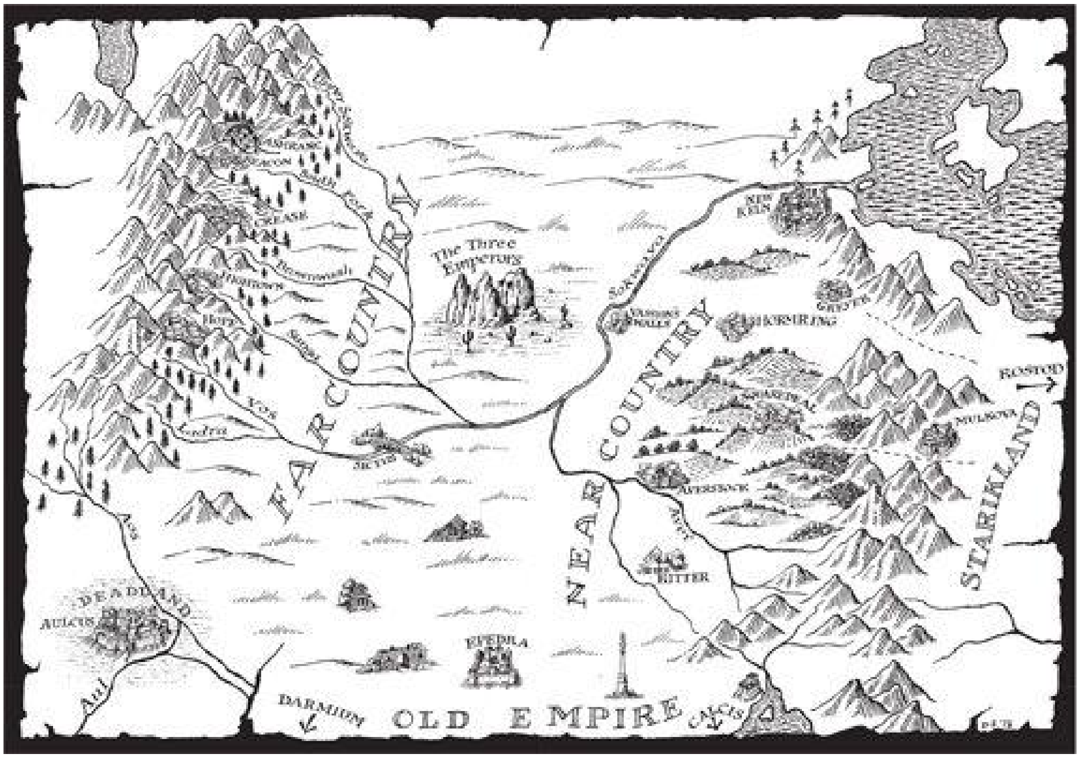
IV: DRAGONS

In Threes
Among the Barbarians
Bait
Savages
The Dragon's Den
Greed

V: TROUBLE

The Tally
Going Back
Answered Prayers
Sharp Ends
Nowhere Fast
Times Change
The Cost
Last Words
Some Kind of Coward

Acknowledgements



The Three Emperors
FAR COUNTRY
NEAR COUNTRY
STARIKLAND
OLD EMPIRE
DEADLAND
AULCUS
DARMIUM
EPEDRA
KITTER
CREASE
Vos

I
TROUBLE

'You, that judge men
by the handle and the sheath,
how can I make you know a good blade?'
Jedediah M. Grant

Some Kind of Coward

‘Gold.’ Wist made the word sound like a mystery there was no solving. ‘Makes men mad.’

Shy nodded. ‘Those that ain’t mad already.’

They sat in front of Stupfer’s Meat House, which might’ve sounded like a brothel but was actually the worst place to eat within fifty miles, and that with some fierce competition. Shy perched on the sacks in her wagon and Wist on the fence, where he always seemed to be, like he’d such a splinter in his arse he’d got stuck there. They watched the crowd.

‘I came here to get away from people,’ said Wist.

Shy nodded. ‘Now look.’

Last summer you could’ve spent all day in town and not seen two people you didn’t know. You could’ve spent some days in town and not seen two people. A lot can change with a few months and a gold find. Now Squaredeal was bursting at its ragged seams with bold pioneers. One-way traffic, headed west towards imagined riches, some charging through fast as the clutter would allow, some stopping off to add their own share of commerce and chaos. Wagon-wheels clattered, mules nickered and horses neighed, livestock honked and oxen bellowed. Men, women and children of all races and stations did plenty of their own honking and bellowing too, in every language and temper. It might’ve been quite the colourful spectacle if everywhere the blown dust hadn’t leached each tone to that same grey ubiquity of dirt.

Wist sucked a noisy mouthful from his bottle. ‘Quite the variety, ain’t there?’

Shy nodded. ‘All set on getting something for nothing.’

All struck with a madness of hope. Or of greed, depending on the observer's faith in humanity, which in Shy's case stood less than brim-full. All drunk on the chance of reaching into some freezing pool out there in the great empty and plucking up a new life with both hands. Leaving their humdrum selves behind on the bank like a shed skin and taking a short cut to happiness.

'Tempted to join 'em?' asked Wist.

Shy pressed her tongue against her front teeth and spat through the gap between. 'Not me.' If they made it across the Far Country alive, the odds were stacked high they'd spend a winter up to their arses in ice water and dig up naught but dirt. And if lightning did strike the end of your spade, what then? Ain't like rich folk got no trouble.

There'd been a time Shy thought she'd get something for nothing. Shed her skin and step away smiling. Turned out sometimes the short cut don't lead quite where you hoped, and cuts through bloody country, too.

'Just the rumour o' gold turns 'em mad.' Wist took another swallow, the knobble on his scrawny neck bobbing, and watched two would-be prospectors wrestle over the last pickaxe at a stall while the trader struggled vainly to calm them. 'Imagine how these bastards'll act if they ever close hands around a nugget.'

Shy didn't have to imagine. She'd seen it, and didn't prize the memories. 'Men don't need much beckoning on to act like animals.'

'Nor women neither,' added Wist.

Shy narrowed her eyes at him. 'Why look at me?'

'You're foremost in my mind.'

'Not sure I like being that close to your face.'

Wist showed her his tombstone teeth as he laughed, and handed her the bottle. 'Why don't you got a man, Shy?'

'Don't like men much, I guess.'

'You don't like anyone much.'

'They started it.'

'All of 'em?'

'Enough of 'em.' She gave the mouth of the bottle a good wipe and made sure she took only a sip. She knew how easy she could turn a sip into a swallow, and the swallow into a bottle, and the bottle into waking up

smelling of piss with one leg in the creek. There were folk counting on her, and she'd had her fill of being a disappointment.

The wrestlers had been dragged apart and were spitting insults each in their own tongue, neither quite catching the details but both getting the gist. Looked like the pick had vanished in the commotion, more'n likely spirited away by a cannier adventurer while eyes were elsewhere.

'Gold surely can turn men mad,' muttered Wist, all wistful as his name implied. 'Still, if the ground opened and offered me the good stuff I don't suppose I'd be turning down a nugget.'

Shy thought of the farm, and all the tasks to do, and all the time she hadn't got for the doing of 'em, and rubbed her roughed-up thumbs against her chewed-up fingers. For the quickest moment a trek into the hills didn't sound such a mad notion after all. What if there really was gold up there? Scattered on some stream bed in priceless abundance, longing for the kiss of her itchy fingertips? Shy South, luckiest woman in the Near Country . . .

'Hah.' She slapped the thought away like a bothersome fly. High hopes were luxuries she couldn't stretch to. 'In my experience, the ground ain't giving aught away. No more'n the rest of us misers.'

'Got a lot, do you?'

'Eh?'

'Experience.'

She winked as she handed his bottle back. 'More'n you can imagine, old man.' A damn stretch more'n most of the pioneers, that was sure. Shy shook her head as she watched the latest crowd coming through – a set of Union worthies, by their looks, dressed for a picnic rather than a slog across a few hundred miles of lawless empty. Folk who should've been satisfied with the comfortable lives they had, suddenly deciding they'd take any chance at grabbing more. Shy wondered how long it'd be before they were limping back the other way, broken and broke. If they made it back.

'Where's Gully at?' asked Wist.

'Back on the farm, looking to my brother and sister.'

'Haven't seen him in a while.'

'He ain't been here in a while. Hurts him to ride, he says.'

'Getting old. Happens to us all. When you see him, tell him I miss him.'

'If he was here he'd have drunk your bottle dry in one swallow and you'd be cursing his name.'

‘I daresay.’ Wist sighed. ‘That’s how it is with things missed.’

By then, Lamb was fording the people-flooded street, shag of grey hair showing above the heads around him for all his stoop, an even sorrier set to his heavy shoulders than usual.

‘What did you get?’ she asked, hopping down from the wagon.

Lamb winced, like he knew what was coming. ‘Twenty-seven?’ His rumble of a voice tweaked high at the end to make a question of it, but what he was really asking was, *How bad did I fuck up?*

Shy shook her head, tongue wedged in her cheek, letting him know he’d fucked up middling to bad. ‘You’re some kind of a bloody coward, Lamb.’ She thumped at the sacks and sent up a puff of grain dust. ‘I didn’t spend two days dragging this up here to give it away.’

He winced a bit more, grey-bearded face creasing around the old scars and laughter lines, all weather-worn and dirt-grained. ‘I’m no good with the bartering, Shy, you know that.’

‘Remind me what it is y’are good with?’ she tossed over her shoulder as she strode for Clay’s Exchange, letting a set of piebald goats bleat past then slipping through the traffic sideways-on. ‘Except hauling the sacks?’

‘That’s something, ain’t it?’ he muttered.

The store was busier even than the street, smelling of sawn wood and spices and hard-working bodies packed tight. She had to shove between a clerk and some blacker’n black Southerner trying to make himself understood in no language she’d ever heard before, then around a washboard hung from the low rafters and set swinging by a careless elbow, then past a frowning Ghost, his red hair all bound up with twigs, leaves still on and everything. All these folk scrambling west meant money to be made, and woe to the merchant tried to put himself between Shy and her share.

‘Clay?’ she bellowed, nothing to be gained by whispering. ‘Clay!’

The trader frowned up, caught in the midst of weighing flour out on his man-high scales. ‘Shy South in Squaredeal. Ain’t this my lucky day.’

‘Looks that way. You got a whole town full o’ saps to *swindle*!’ She gave the last word a bit of air, made a few heads turn and Clay plant his big fists on his hips.

‘No one’s swindling no one,’ he said.

‘Not while I’ve got an eye on business.’

‘Me and your father agreed on twenty-seven, Shy.’

‘You know he ain’t my father. And you know you ain’t agreed shit ’til I’ve agreed it.’

Clay cocked an eyebrow at Lamb and the Northman looked straight to the ground, shifting sideways like he was trying and wholly failing to vanish. For all Lamb’s bulk he’d a weak eye, slapped down by any glance that held it. He could be a loving man, and a hard worker, and he’d been a fair stand-in for a father to Ro and Pit and Shy too, far as she’d given him the chance. A good enough man, but by the dead he was some kind of coward.

Shy felt ashamed for him, and ashamed of him, and that nettled her. She stabbed her finger in Clay’s face like it was a drawn dagger she’d no qualms about using. ‘Squaredeal’s a strange sort o’ name for a town where you’d claw out a business! You paid twenty-eight last season, and you didn’t have a quarter of the customers. I’ll take thirty-eight.’

‘What?’ Clay’s voice squeaking even higher than she’d predicted. ‘Golden grain, is it?’

‘That’s right. Top quality. Threshed with my own blistered bloody hands.’

‘And mine,’ muttered Lamb.

‘Shush,’ said Shy. ‘I’ll take thirty-eight and refuse to be moved.’

‘Don’t do me no favours!’ raged Clay, fat face filling with angry creases. ‘Because I loved your mother I’ll offer twenty nine.’

‘You never loved a thing but your purse. Anything short of thirty-eight and I’d sooner set up next to your store and offer all this through-traffic just a little less than what you’re offering.’

He knew she’d do it, even if it cost her. Never make a threat you aren’t at least halfway sure you’ll carry through on. ‘Thirty-one,’ he grated out.

‘Thirty-five.’

‘You’re holding up all these good folk, you selfish bitch!’ Or rather she was giving the good folk notice of the profits he was chiselling and sooner or later they’d catch on.

‘They’re scum to a man, and I’ll hold ’em up ’til Juvens gets back from the land of the dead if it means thirty-five.’

‘Thirty-two.’

‘Thirty-five.’

‘Thirty-three and you might as well burn my store down on the way out!’

‘Don’t tempt me, fat man. Thirty-three and you can toss in a pair o’ those new shovels and some feed for my oxen. They eat almost as much as you.’

She spat in her palm and held it out.

Clay bitterly worked his mouth, but he spat all the same, and they shook. 'Your mother was no better.'

'Couldn't stand the woman.' Shy elbowed her way back towards the door, leaving Clay to vent his upset on his next customer. 'Not that hard, is it?' she tossed over her shoulder at Lamb.

The big old Northman fussed with the notch out of his ear. 'Think I'd rather have settled for the twenty-seven.'

'That's 'cause you're some kind of a bloody coward. Better to do it than live with the fear of it. Ain't that what you always used to tell me?'

'Time's shown me the downside o' that advice,' muttered Lamb, but Shy was too busy congratulating herself.

Thirty-three was a good price. She'd worked over the sums, and thirty-three would leave something towards Ro's books once they'd fixed the barn's leaking roof and got a breeding pair of pigs to replace the ones they'd butchered in winter. Maybe they could stretch to some seed too, try and nurse the cabbage patch back to health. She was grinning, thinking on what she could put right with that money, what she could build.

You don't need a big dream, her mother used to tell her when she was in a rare good mood, *a little one will do it.*

'Let's get them sacks shifted,' she said.

He might've been getting on in years, might've been slow as an old favourite cow, but Lamb was strong as ever. No weight would bend the man. All Shy had to do was stand on the wagon and heft the sacks one by one onto his shoulders while he stood, complaining less than the wagon had at the load. Then he'd stroll them across, four at a time, and stack them in Clay's yard easy as sacks of feathers. Shy might've been half his weight, but had the easier task and twenty-five years advantage and still, soon enough, she was leaking water faster than a fresh-dug well, vest plastered to her back and hair to her face, arms pink-chafed by canvas and white-powdered with grain dust, tongue wedged in the gap between her teeth while she cursed up a storm.

Lamb stood there, two sacks over one shoulder and one over the other, hardly even breathing hard, those deep laugh lines striking out from the corners of his eyes. 'Need a rest, Shy?'

She gave him a look. 'A rest from your carping.'

‘I could shift some o’ those sacks around and make a little cot for you. Might be there’s a blanket in the back there. I could sing you to sleep like I did when you were young.’

‘I’m still young.’

‘Ish. Sometimes I think about that little girl smiling up at me.’ Lamb looked off into the distance, shaking his head. ‘And I wonder – where did me and your mother go wrong?’

‘She died and you’re useless?’ Shy heaved the last sack up and dropped it on his shoulder from as great a height as she could manage.

Lamb only grinned as he slapped his hand down on top. ‘Maybe that’s it.’ As he turned he nearly barged into another Northman, big as he was and a lot meaner-looking. The man started growling some curse, then stopped in the midst. Lamb kept trudging, head down, how he always did from the least breath of trouble. The Northman frowned up at Shy.

‘What?’ she said, staring right back.

He frowned after Lamb, then walked off, scratching at his beard.

The shadows were getting long and the clouds pink in the west when Shy dumped the last sack under Clay’s grinning face and he held out the money, leather bag dangling from one thick forefinger by the drawstrings. She stretched her back out, wiped her forehead on one glove, then worked the bag open and peered inside.

‘All here?’

‘I’m not going to rob you.’

‘Damn right you’re not.’ And she set to counting it. *You can always tell a thief*, her mother used to say, *on account of all the care they take with their own money.*

‘Maybe I should go through every sack, make sure there’s grain in ’em not shit?’

Shy snorted. ‘If it was shit would that stop you selling it?’

The merchant sighed. ‘Have it your way.’

‘I will.’

‘She does tend to,’ added Lamb.

A pause, with just the clicking of coins and the turning of numbers in her head. ‘Heard Glama Golden won another fight in the pit up near Greyer,’ said Clay. ‘They say he’s the toughest bastard in the Near Country and

there's some tough bastards about. Take a fool to bet against him now, whatever the odds. Take a fool to fight him.'

'No doubt,' muttered Lamb, always quiet when violence was the subject.

'Heard from a man watched it he beat old Stockling Bear so hard his guts came out of his arse.'

'That's entertainment, is it?' asked Shy.

'Beats shitting your own guts.'

'That ain't much of a review.'

Clay shrugged. 'I've heard worse ones. Did you hear about this battle, up near Rostod?'

'Something about it,' she muttered, trying to keep her count straight.

'Rebels got beat again, I heard. Bad, this time. All on the run now. Those the Inquisition didn't get a hold on.'

'Poor bastards,' said Lamb.

Shy paused her count a moment, then carried on. There were a lot of poor bastards about but they couldn't all be her problem. She'd enough worries with her brother and sister, and Lamb, and Gully, and the farm without crying over others' self-made misfortunes.

'Might be they'll make a stand up at Mulkova, but they won't be standing long.' Clay made the fence creak as he leaned his soft bulk back on it, hands tucked under his armpits with the thumbs sticking up. 'War's all but over, if you can call it a war, and there's plenty of people shook off their land. Shook off or burned out or lost what they had. Passes are opened up, ships coming through. Lots of folk seeing their fortune out west all of a sudden.' He nodded at the dusty chaos in the street, still boiling over even as the sun set. 'This here's just the first trickle. There's a flood coming.'

Lamb sniffed. 'Like as not they'll find the mountains ain't one great piece of gold and soon come flooding back the other way.'

'Some will. Some'll put down roots. The Union'll be coming along after. However much land the Union get, they always want more, and what with that find out west they'll smell money. That vicious old bastard Sarmis is sitting on the border and rattling his sword for the Empire, but his sword's always rattling. Won't stop the tide, I reckon.' Clay took a step closer to Shy and spoke soft, like he had secrets to share. 'I heard tell there's already been Union agents in Hormring, talking annexation.'

'They're buying folk out?'

‘They’ll have a coin in one hand, sure, but they’ll have a blade in the other. They always do. We should be thinking about how we’ll play it, if they come to Squaredeal. We should stand together, those of us been here a while.’

‘I ain’t interested in politics.’ Shy wasn’t interested in anything might bring trouble.

‘Most of us aren’t,’ said Clay, ‘but sometimes politics takes an interest in us all the same. The Union’ll be coming, and they’ll bring law with ’em.’

‘Law don’t seem such a bad thing,’ Shy lied.

‘Maybe not. But taxes follow law quick as the cart behind the donkey.’

‘Can’t say I’m an enthusiast for taxes.’

‘Just a fancier way to rob a body, ain’t it? I’d rather be thieved honest with mask and dagger than have some bloodless bastard come at me with pen and paper.’

‘Don’t know about that,’ muttered Shy. None of those she’d robbed had looked too delighted with the experience, and some a lot less than Red others. She let the coins slide back into the bag and drew the string tight.

‘How’s the count?’ asked Clay. ‘Anything missing?’

‘Not this time. But I reckon I’ll keep watching just the same.’

The merchant grinned. ‘I’d expect no less.’

She picked out a few things they needed – salt, vinegar, some sugar since it only came in time to time, a wedge of dried beef, half a bag of nails which brought the predictable joke from Clay that she was half a bag of nails herself, which brought the predictable joke from her that she’d nail his fruits to his leg, which brought the predictable joke from Lamb that Clay’s fruits were so small she might not get a nail through. They had a bit of a chuckle over each other’s quick wits.

She almost got carried away and bought a new shirt for Pit which was more’n they could afford, good price or other price, but Lamb patted her arm with his gloved hand, and she bought needles and thread instead so she could make him a shirt from one of Lamb’s old ones. She probably could’ve made five shirts for Pit from one of Lamb’s, the boy was that skinny. The needles were a new kind, Clay said were stamped out of a machine in Adua, hundreds at a press, and Shy smiled as she thought what Gully would say to that, shaking his white head at them and saying, needles from a machine,

what'll be thought of next, while Ro turned them over and over in her quick fingers, frowning down as she worked out how it was done.

Shy paused in front of the spirits to lick her lips a moment, glass gleaming amber in the darkness, then forced herself on without, haggled harder than ever with Clay over his prices, and they were finished.

'Never come to this store again, you mad bitch!' The trader hurled at her as she climbed up onto the wagon's seat alongside Lamb. 'You've damn near ruined me!'

'Next season?'

He waved a fat hand as he turned back to his customers. 'Aye, see you then.'

She reached to take the brake off and almost put her hand in the beard of the Northman Lamb knocked into earlier. He was standing right beside the wagon, brow all ploughed up like he was trying to bring some foggy memory to mind, thumbs tucked into a sword-belt – big, simple hilt close to hand. A rough style of character, a scar borne near one eye and jagged through his scraggy beard. Shy kept a pleasant look on her face as she eased her knife out, spinning the blade about so it was hidden behind her arm. Better to have steel to hand and find no trouble than find yourself in trouble with no steel to hand.

The Northman said something in his own tongue. Lamb hunched a little lower in his seat, not even turning to look. The Northman spoke again. Lamb grunted something back, then snapped the reins and the wagon rolled off, Shy swaying with the jolting wheels. She snatched a glance over her shoulder when they'd gone a few strides down the rutted street. The Northman was still standing in their dust, frowning after them.

'What'd he want?'

'Nothing.'

She slid her knife into its sheath, stuck one boot on the rail and sat back, settling her hat brim low so the setting sun wasn't in her eyes. 'The world's brimming over with strange people, all right. You spend time worrying what they're thinking, you'll be worrying all your life.'

Lamb was hunched lower than ever, like he was trying to vanish into his own chest.

Shy snorted. 'You're such a bloody coward.'

He gave her a sideways look, then away. 'There's worse a man can be.'

They were laughing when they clattered over the rise and the shallow little valley opened out in front of them. Something Lamb had said. He'd perked up when they left town, as usual. Never at his best in a crowd.

It gave Shy's spirits a lift besides, coming up that track that was hardly more than two faded lines through the long grass. She'd been through black times in her younger years, midnight black times, when she thought she'd be killed out under the sky and left to rot, or caught and hanged and tossed out unburied for the dogs to rip at. More than once, in the midst of nights sweated through with fear, she'd sworn to be grateful every moment of her life if fate gave her the chance to tread this unremarkable path again. Eternal gratitude hadn't quite come about, but that's promises for you. She still felt that bit lighter as the wagon rolled home.

Then they saw the farm, and the laughter choked in her throat and they sat silent while the wind fumbled through the grass around them. Shy couldn't breathe, couldn't speak, couldn't think, all her veins flushed with ice-water. Then she was down from the wagon and running.

'Shy!' Lamb roared at her back, but she hardly heard, head full of her own rattling breath, pounding down the slope, land and sky jolting around her. Through the stubble of the field they'd harvested not a week before. Over the trampled-down fence and the chicken feathers crushed into the mud.

She made it to the yard – what had been the yard – and stood helpless. The house was all dead charred timbers and rubbish and nothing left standing but the tottering chimney-stack. No smoke. The rain must've put out the fires a day or two before. But everything was burned out. She ran around the side of the blacked wreck of the barn, whimpering a little now with each breath.

Gully was hanged from the big tree out back. They'd hanged him over her mother's grave and kicked down the headstone. He was shot through with arrows. Might've been a dozen, might've been more.

Shy felt like she was kicked in the guts and she bent over, arms hugged around herself, and groaned, and the tree groaned with her as the wind shook its leaves and set Gully's corpse gently swinging. Poor old harmless bastard. He'd called to her as they'd rattled off on the wagon. Said she didn't need to worry 'cause he'd look to the children, and she'd laughed at him and said she didn't need to worry 'cause the children would look to him, and she couldn't see nothing for the aching in her eyes and the wind

stinging at them, and she clamped her arms tighter, feeling suddenly so cold nothing could warm her.

She heard Lamb's boots thumping up, then slowing, then coming steady until he stood beside her.

'Where are the children?'

They dug the house over, and the barn. Slow, and steady, and numb to begin with. Lamb dragged the scorched timbers clear while Shy scraped through the ashes, sure she'd scrape up Pit and Ro's bones. But they weren't in the house. Nor in the barn. Nor in the yard. Wilder now, trying to smother her fear, and more frantic, trying to smother her hope, casting through the grass, and clawing at the rubbish, but the closest Shy came to her brother and sister was a charred toy horse Lamb had whittled for Pit years past and the scorched pages of some of Ro's books she let blow through her fingers.

The children were vanished.

She stood there, staring into the wind, back of one raw hand against her mouth and her chest going hard. Only one thing she could think of.

'They're stolen,' she croaked.

Lamb just nodded, his grey hair and his grey beard all streaked with soot.

'Why?'

'I don't know.'

She wiped her blackened hands on the front of her shirt and made fists of them. 'We've got to get after.'

'Aye.'

She squatted down over the chewed-up sod around the tree. Wiped her nose and her eyes. Followed the tracks bent over to another battered patch of ground. She found an empty bottle trampled into the mud, tossed it away. They'd made no effort at hiding their sign. Horse-prints all around, circling the shells of the buildings. 'I'm guessing at about twenty. Might've been forty horses, though. They left the spare mounts over here.'

'To carry the children, maybe?'

'Carry 'em where?'

Lamb just shook his head.

She went on, keen to say anything that might fill the space. Keen to set to work at something so she didn't have to think. 'My way of looking at it, they came in from the west and left going south. Left in a hurry.'

‘I’ll get the shovels. We’ll bury Gully.’

They did it quick. She shinned up the tree, knowing every foot- and handhold. She used to climb it long ago, before Lamb came, while her mother watched and Gully clapped, and now her mother was buried under it and Gully was hanged from it, and she knew somehow she’d made it happen. You can’t bury a past like hers and think you’ll walk away laughing.

She cut him down, and broke the arrows off, and smoothed his bloody hair while Lamb dug out a hole next to her mother. She closed his popping eyes and put her hand on his cheek and it was cold. He looked so small now, and so thin, she wanted to put a coat on him but there was none to hand. Lamb lowered him in a clumsy hug, and they filled the hole together, and they dragged her mother’s stone up straight again and tramped the thrashing grass around it, ash blowing on the cold wind in specks of black and grey, whipping across the land and off to nowhere.

‘Should we say something?’ asked Shy.

‘I’ve nothing to say.’ Lamb swung himself up onto the wagon’s seat. Might still have been an hour of light left.

‘We ain’t taking that,’ said Shy. ‘I can run faster’n those bloody oxen.’

‘Not longer, though, and not with gear, and we’ll do no good rushing at this. They’ve got what? Two, three days’ start on us? And they’ll be riding hard. Twenty men, you said? We have to be realistic, Shy.’

‘Realistic?’ she whispered at him, hardly able to believe it.

‘If we chase after on foot, and don’t starve or get washed away in a storm, and if we catch ’em, what then? We’re not armed, even. Not with more’n your knife. No. We’ll follow on fast as Scale and Calder can take us.’ Nodding at the oxen, grazing a little while they had the chance. ‘See if we can pare a couple off the herd. Work out what they’re about.’

‘Clear enough what they’re about!’ she said, pointing at Gully’s grave. ‘And what happens to Ro and Pit while we’re fucking *following on*?’ She ended up screaming it at him, voice splitting the silence and a couple of hopeful crows taking flight from the tree’s branches.

The corner of Lamb’s mouth twitched but he didn’t look at her. ‘We’ll follow.’ Like it was a fact agreed on. ‘Might be we can talk this out. Buy ’em back.’

‘Buy ’em? They burn your farm, and they hang your friend, and they steal your children and you want to *pay ’em* for the privilege? You’re such a fucking coward!’

Still he didn’t look at her. ‘Sometimes a coward’s what you need.’ His voice was rough. Clicking in his throat. ‘No shed blood’s going to unburn this farm now, nor unhang Gully neither. That’s done. Best we can do is get back the little ones, any way we can. Get ’em back safe.’ This time the twitch started at his mouth and scurried all the way up his scarred cheek to the corner of his eye. ‘Then we’ll see.’

Shy took a last look as they lurched away towards the setting sun. Her home. Her hopes. How a day can change things about. Naught left but a few scorched timbers poking at the pinking sky. You don’t need a big dream. She felt about as low as she ever had in all her life, and she’d been in some bad, dark, low-down places. Hardly had the strength all of a sudden to hold her head up.

‘Why’d they have to burn it all?’ she whispered.

‘Some men just like to burn,’ said Lamb.

Shy looked around at him, the outline of his battered frown showing below his battered hat, the dying sun glimmering in one eye, and thought how strange it was, that he could be so calm. A man who hadn’t the guts to argue over prices, thinking death and kidnap through. Being realistic about the end of all they’d worked for.

‘How can you sit so level?’ she whispered at him. ‘Like . . . like you knew it was coming.’

Still he didn’t look at her. ‘It’s always coming.’

The Easy Way

‘I have suffered many disappointments.’ Nicomo Cosca, captain general of the Company of the Gracious Hand, leaned back stiffly upon one elbow as he spoke. ‘I suppose every great man faces them. Abandons dreams wrecked by betrayal and finds new ones to pursue.’ He frowned towards Mulkova, columns of smoke drifting from the burning city and up into the blue heavens. ‘I have abandoned very many dreams.’

‘That must have taken tremendous courage,’ said Sworbreck, eyeglasses briefly twinkling as he looked up from his notes.

‘Indeed! I lose count of the number of times my death has been prematurely declared by one optimistic enemy or another. Forty years of trials, struggles, challenges, betrayals. Live long enough . . . you see everything ruined.’ Cosca shook himself from his reverie. ‘But it hasn’t been boring, at least! What adventures along the way, eh, Temple?’

Temple winced. He had borne personal witness to five years of occasional fear, frequent tedium, intermittent diarrhoea, failure to avoid the plague, and avoiding fighting as if it was the plague. But he was not paid for the truth. Far from it.

‘Heroic,’ he said.

‘Temple is my notary. He prepares the contracts and sees them honoured. One of the cleverest bastards I ever met. How many languages do you speak, Temple?’

‘Fluently, no more than six.’

‘Most important man in the whole damn Company! Apart from me, of course.’ A breeze washed across the hillside and stirred the wispy white hairs about Cosca’s liver-spotted pate. ‘I so look forward to telling you my

stories, Sworbreck!' Temple restrained another grimace of distaste. 'The Siege of Dagoska!' Which ended in utter disaster. 'The Battle of Afieri!' Shameful debacle. 'The Years of Blood!' Sides changed like shirts. 'The Kadiri Campaign!' Drunken fiasco. 'I even kept a goat for several years. A stubborn beast, but loyal, you'd have to give her that . . .'

Sworbreck achieved the not-inconsiderable feat of performing an obsequious bow while sitting cross-legged against a slab of fallen masonry. 'I have no doubt my readers will thrill to your exploits.'

'Enough to fill twenty volumes!'

'Three will be more than adequate—'

'I was once Grand Duke of Visserine, you know.' Cosca waved down attempts at abasement which had, in fact, not happened. 'Don't worry, you need not call me Excellency – we are all informal here in the Company of the Gracious Hand, are we not, Temple?'

Temple took a long breath. 'We are all informal.' Most of them were liars, all of them were thieves, some of them were killers. Informality was not surprising.

'Sergeant Friendly has been with me even longer than Temple, ever since we deposed Grand Duke Orso and placed Monzcarro Murcatto on the throne of Talins.'

Sworbreck looked up. 'You know the Grand Duchess?'

'Intimately. I consider it no exaggeration to say I was her close friend and mentor. I saved her life at the siege of Muris, and she mine! The story of her rise to power is one I must relate to you at some stage, a noble business. There are precious few persons of quality I have not fought for or against at one time or another. Sergeant Friendly?'

The neckless sergeant looked up, face a blank slab.

'What have you made of your time with me?'

'I preferred prison.' And he returned to rolling his dice, an activity which could fully occupy him for hours at a time.

'He is such a wag, that one!' Cosca waved a bony finger at him, though there was no evidence of a joke. In five years Temple had never heard Sergeant Friendly make a joke. 'Sworbreck, you will find the Company alive with joshing good fun!'

Not to mention simmering feuds, punishing laziness, violence, disease, looting, treachery, drunkenness and debauchery fit to make a devil blush.

‘These five years,’ said Temple, ‘I’ve hardly stopped laughing.’

There was a time he had found the Old Man’s stories hilarious, enchanting, stirring. A magical glimpse of what it was to be without fear. Now they made him feel sick. Whether Temple had learned the truth or Cosca had forgotten it, it was hard to say. Perhaps a little of both.

‘Yes, it’s been quite a career. Many proud moments. Many triumphs. But defeats, too. Every great man has them. Regrets are the cost of the business, Sazine always used to say. People have often accused me of inconsistency but I feel that I have always, at any given junction, done the same thing. Exactly what I pleased.’ The aged mercenary’s fickle attention having wandered back to his imagined glorious past, Temple began to ease away, slipping around a broken column. ‘I had a happy childhood but a wild youth, filled with ugly incidents, and at seventeen I left my birthplace to seek my fortune with only my wits, my courage, and my trusty blade . . .’

The sounds of boasting mercifully faded as Temple retreated down the hillside, stepping from the shadow of the ancient ruin and into the sun. Whatever Cosca might say, there was little joshing good fun going on down here.

Temple had seen wretchedness. He had lived through more than his share. But he had rarely seen people so miserable as the Company’s latest batch of prisoners: a dozen of the fearsome rebels of Starikland chained naked, bloody, filthy and dead-eyed to a stake in the ground. It was hard to imagine them a threat to the greatest nation in the Circle of the World. It was hard to imagine them as humans. Only the tattoos on their forearms showed some last futile defiance.

Fuck the Union. Fuck the King. Read the nearest, a line of bold script from elbow to wrist. A sentiment with which Temple had increasing sympathy. He was developing a sneaking feeling he had found his way onto the wrong side. Again. But it’s not always easy to tell when you’re picking. Perhaps, as Kahdia once told him, you are on the wrong side as soon as you pick one. But it had been Temple’s observation that it was those caught in the middle that always get the worst of it. And he was done with getting the worst.

Sufeen stood by the prisoners, an empty canteen in one hand.

‘What are you about?’ asked Temple.

‘He is wasting water,’ said Bermi, lounging in the sun nearby and scratching at his blond beard.

‘On the contrary,’ said Sufeen. ‘I am trying to administer God’s mercy to our prisoners.’

One had a terrible wound in his side, undressed. His eyes flickered, his lips mouthed meaningless orders or meaningless prayers. Once you could smell a wound there was little hope. But the outlook for the others was no better. ‘If there is a God, He is a smarmy swindler and never to be trusted with anything of importance,’ muttered Temple. ‘Mercy would be to kill them.’

Bermi concurred. ‘I’ve been saying so.’

‘But that would take courage.’ Sufeen lifted his scabbard, offering up the hilt of his sword. ‘Have you courage, Temple?’

Temple snorted.

Sufeen let the weapon drop. ‘Nor I. And so I give them water, and have not enough even of that. What is happening at the top of the hill?’

‘We await our employers. And the Old Man is feeding his vanity.’

‘That’s a hell of an appetite to satisfy,’ said Bermi, picking daisies and flicking them away.

‘Bigger every day. It rivals Sufeen’s guilt.’

‘This is not guilt,’ said Sufeen, frowning towards the prisoners. ‘This is righteousness. Did the priests not teach you that?’

‘Nothing like a religious education to cure a man of righteousness,’ muttered Temple. He thought of Haddish Kahdia speaking the lessons in the plain white room, and his younger self scoffing at them. Charity, mercy, selflessness. How conscience is that piece of Himself that God puts in every man. A splinter of the divine. One that Temple had spent long years struggling to prise out. He caught the eye of one of the rebels. A woman, hair tangled across her face. She reached out as far as the chains would allow. For the water or the sword, he could not say. *Grasp your future!* called the words inked into her skin. He pulled out his own canteen, frowned as he weighed it in his hand.

‘Some guilt of your own?’ asked Sufeen.

It might have been a while since he wore them, but Temple had not forgotten what chains felt like. ‘How long have you been a scout?’ he snapped.

‘Eighteen years.’

‘You should know by now that conscience is a shitty navigator.’

‘It certainly doesn’t know the country out here,’ added Bermi.

Sufeen spread wide his hands. ‘Who then shall show us the way?’

‘Temple!’ Cosca’s cracked howl, floating from above.

‘Your guide calls,’ said Sufeen. ‘You will have to give them water later.’

Temple tossed him the canteen as he headed back up the hillside. ‘You do it. Later, the Inquisition will have them.’

‘Always the easy way, eh, Temple?’ called Sufeen after him.

‘Always,’ muttered Temple. He made no apology for it.

‘Welcome, gentlemen, welcome!’ Cosca swept off his outrageous hat as their illustrious employers approached, riding in tight formation around a great fortified wagon. Even though the Old Man had, thank God, quit spirits yet again a few months before, he still seemed always slightly drunk. There was a floppy flourish to his knobbly hands, a lazy drooping of his withered eyelids, a rambling music to his speech. That and you could never be entirely sure what he would do or say next. There had been a time Temple had found that constant uncertainty thrilling, like watching the lucky wheel spin and wondering if his number would come up. Now it felt more like cowering beneath a storm-cloud and waiting for the lightning.

‘General Cosca.’ Superior Pike, head of his August Majesty’s Inquisition in Starikland and the most powerful man within five hundred miles, was the first to dismount. His face was burned beyond recognition, eyes darkly shadowed in a mask of mottled pink, the corner of his mouth curled up in what was either a smile or a trick of the ravages of fire. A dozen of his hulking Practicals, dressed and masked in black and bristling with weaponry, arranged themselves watchfully about the ruin.

Cosca grinned across the valley towards the smouldering city, unintimidated. ‘Mulkova burns, I see.’

‘Better that it burn in Union hands than prosper under the rebels,’ said Inquisitor Lorsen as he got down: tall and gaunt, his eyes bright with zeal. Temple envied him that. To feel certain in the right no matter what wrongs you took part in.

‘Quite so,’ said Cosca. ‘A sentiment with which her citizens no doubt all agree! Sergeant Friendly you know, and this is Master Temple, notary to my company.’

General Brint dismounted last, the operation rendered considerably more difficult since he had lost most of an arm at the Battle of Osrung along with his entire sense of humour, and wore the left sleeve of his crimson uniform folded and pinned to his shoulder. ‘You are prepared for legal disagreements, then,’ he said, adjusting his sword-belt and eyeing Temple as if he was the morning plague cart.

‘The second thing a mercenary needs is a good weapon.’ Cosca clapped a fatherly hand on Temple’s shoulder. ‘The first is good legal advice.’

‘And where does an utter lack of moral scruple feature?’

‘Number five,’ said Temple. ‘Just behind a short memory and a ready wit.’

Superior Pike was considering Sworbreck, still scribbling notes. ‘And on what does this man advise you?’

‘That is Spillion Sworbreck, my biographer.’

‘No more than a humble teller of tales!’ Sworbreck gave the Superior a flamboyant bow. ‘Though I freely confess that my prose has caused grown men to weep.’

‘In a good way?’ asked Temple.

If he heard, the author was too busy praising himself to respond. ‘I compose stories of heroism and adventure to inspire the Union’s citizens! Widely distributed now, via the wonders of the new Rimaldi printing press. You have heard, perhaps, of my *Tales of Harod the Great* in five volumes?’ Silence. ‘In which I mine the mythic splendour of the origin of the Union itself?’ Silence. ‘Or the eight-volume sequel, *The Life of Casamir, Hero of Angland*?’ Silence. ‘In which I hold up the mirror of past glories to expose the moral collapse of the present day?’

‘No.’ Pike’s melted face betrayed no emotion.

‘I will have copies sent to you, Superior!’

‘You could use readings from them to force confessions from your prisoners,’ murmured Temple, under his breath.

‘Do not trouble yourself,’ said Pike.

‘No trouble! General Cosca has permitted me to accompany him on his latest campaign while he relates the details of his fascinating career as a soldier of fortune! I mean to make him the subject of my most celebrated work to date!’

The echoes of Sworbreck’s words faded into a crushing silence.

‘Remove this man from my presence,’ said Pike. ‘His manner of expression offends me.’

Sworbreck backed down the hillside with an almost reckless speed, shepherded by two Practicals. Cosca continued without the slightest hint of embarrassment.

‘General Brint!’ and he seized the general’s remaining hand in both of his. ‘I understand you have some concerns about our participation in the assault —’

‘It was the lack of it that bothered me!’ snapped Brint, twisting his fingers free.

Cosca pushed out his lips with an air of injured innocence. ‘You feel we fell short of our contractual obligations?’

‘You’ve fallen short of honour, decency, professionalism—’

‘I recall no reference to them in the contract,’ said Temple.

‘You were ordered to attack! Your failure to do so cost the lives of several of my men, one a personal friend!’

Cosca waved a lazy hand, as though personal friends were ephemera that could hardly be expected to bear on an adult discussion. ‘We were engaged here, General Brint, quite hotly.’

‘In a bloodless exchange of arrows!’

‘You speak as though a bloody exchange would be preferable.’ Temple held out his hand to Friendly. The sergeant produced the contract from an inside pocket. ‘Clause eight, I believe.’ He swiftly found the place and presented it for inspection. ‘Technically, any exchange of projectiles constitutes engagement. Each member of the Company is, in fact, due a bonus as a result.’

Brint looked pale. ‘A bonus, too? Despite the fact that not one man was wounded.’

Cosca cleared his throat. ‘We do have a case of dysentery.’

‘Is that a joke?’

‘Not to anyone who has suffered the ravages of dysentery, I assure you!’

‘Clause nineteen . . .’ Paper crackled as Temple thumbed through the densely written document. ‘ “Any man rendered inactive by illness during the discharge of his contractual obligations is to be considered a loss to the Company.” A further payment is therefore due for the replacement of losses. Not to mention those for prisoners taken and delivered—’

‘It all comes down to money, doesn’t it?’

Cosca shrugged so high his gilt epaulettes tickled his earlobes. ‘What else would it come down to? We are mercenaries. Better motives we leave to better men.’

Brint gazed at Temple, positively livid. ‘You must be delighted with your wriggling, you Gurkish worm.’

‘You were happy to put your name to the terms, General.’ Temple flipped over the back page to display Brint’s overwrought signature. ‘My delight or otherwise does not enter the case. Nor does my wriggling. And I am generally agreed to be half-Dagoskan, half-Styrian, since you bring my parentage into—’

‘You’re a brown bastard son of a whore.’

Temple only smiled. ‘My mother was never ashamed of her profession – why should I be?’

The general stared at Superior Pike, who had taken a seat on a lichen-splattered block of masonry, produced a haunch of bread and was trying to entice birds down from the crumbling ruin with faint kissing sounds. ‘Am I to understand that you approve of this licensed banditry, Superior? This contractual cowardice, this outrageous—’

‘General Brint.’ Pike’s voice was gentle, but somewhere in it had a screeching edge which, like the movement of rusty hinges, enforced wincing silence. ‘We all appreciate the diligence you and your men have displayed. But the war is over. We won.’ He tossed some crumbs into the grass and watched a tiny bird flit down and begin to peck. ‘It is not fitting that we quibble over who did what. You signed the contract. We will honour it. We are not barbarians.’

‘*We* are not.’ Brint gave Temple, then Cosca, then Friendly a furious glare. They were all, each in his way, unmoved. ‘I must get some air. There is a sickening *stench* here!’ And with some effort the general hauled himself back into his saddle, turned his horse and thundered away, pursued by several aides-de-camp.

‘I find the air quite pleasant,’ said Temple brightly, somewhat relieved that confrontation at least was over.

‘Pray forgive the general,’ said Pike ‘He is very much committed to his work.’

‘I try always to be forgiving of other men’s foibles,’ said Cosca. ‘I have enough of my own, after all.’

Pike did not attempt to deny it. ‘I have further work for you even so. Inquisitor Lorsen, could you explain?’ And he turned back to his birds, as though his meeting was with them and the rest a troublesome distraction.

Lorsen stepped forward, evidently relishing his moment. ‘The rebellion is at an end. The Inquisition is weeding out all those disloyal to the crown. Some few rebels have escaped, however, scattering through the passes and into the uncivilised west where, no doubt, they will foment new discord.’

‘Cowardly bastards!’ Cosca slapped at his thigh. ‘Could they not stand and be slaughtered like decent men? I’m all for fermentation but fomentation is a damned imposition!’

Lorsen narrowed his eyes as though at a contrary wind, and ploughed on. ‘For political reasons, his Majesty’s armies are unable to pursue them.’

‘Political reasons . . .’ offered Temple, ‘such as a border?’

‘Precisely,’ said Lorsen.

Cosca examined his ridged and yellowed fingernails. ‘Oh, I’ve never taken those very seriously.’

‘Precisely,’ said Pike.

‘We want the Company of the Gracious Hand to cross the mountains and pacify the Near Country as far west as the Sokwaya River. This rot of rebellion must be excised once and for all.’ Lorsen cut at imaginary filth with the edge of his hand, voice rising as he warmed to his subject. ‘We must clean out this sink of depravity which has too long been allowed to fester on our border! This . . . overflowing latrine! This backed-up sewer, endlessly disgorging its ordure of chaos into the Union!’

Temple reflected that, for a man who professed himself opposed to ordure, Inquisitor Lorsen certainly relished a shit-based metaphor.

‘Well, no one enjoys a backed-up sewer,’ conceded Cosca. ‘Except the sewer-men themselves, I suppose, who scratch out their wretched livings in the sludge. Unblocking the drains is a speciality of ours, isn’t it, Sergeant Friendly?’

The big man looked up from his dice long enough to shrug.

‘Temple is the linguist but perhaps I might in this case interpret?’ The Old Man twisted the waxed tips of his grey moustaches between finger and thumb. ‘You wish us to visit a plague upon the settlers of the Near Country.

You wish us to make stern examples of every rebel sheltered and every person who gives them shelter. You wish us to make them understand that their only future is with the grace and favour of his August Majesty. You wish us to force them into the welcoming arms of the Union. Do I come close to the mark?'

'Close enough,' murmured Superior Pike.

Temple found that he was sweating. When he wiped his forehead his hand trembled. But what could he do?

'The Paper of Engagement is already prepared.' Lorsen produced his own sheaf of crackling documents, a heavy seal of red wax upon its bottom corner.

Cosca waved it away. 'My notary will look it over. All the legal fiddle-faddle quite swims before my eyes. I am a simple soldier.'

'Admirable,' said Pike, his hairless brows raised by the slightest fraction.

Temple's ink-spotted forefinger traced through the blocks of calligraphy, eyes flickering from one point of interest to another. He realised he was picking nervously at the corners of the pages and made himself stop.

'I will accompany you on the expedition,' said Lorsen. 'I have a list of settlements suspected of harbouring rebels. Or rebellious sentiment.'

Cosca grinned. 'Nothing more dangerous than sentiment!'

'In particular, his Eminence the Arch Lector offers a bonus of fifty thousand marks for the capture, alive, of the chief instigator of the insurrection, the one the rebels call Conthus. He goes also under the name of Symok. The Ghosts call him Black Grass. At the massacre in Rostod he used the alias—'

'No further aliases, I beg you!' Cosca massaged the sides of his skull as if they pained him. 'Since suffering a head-wound at the Battle of Afieri I have been cursed with an appalling memory for names. It is a source of constant embarrassment. But Sergeant Friendly has all the details. If your man Conshus—'

'Conthus.'

'What did I say?'

'Conshus.'

'There you go! If he's in the Near Country, he'll be yours.'

'Alive,' snapped Lorsen. 'He must answer for his crimes. He must be made a lesson of. He must be put on display!'

‘And he’ll make a most educational show, I’m sure!’

Pike flicked another pinch of crumbs to his gathering flock. ‘The methods we leave to you, captain general. We would only ask that there be something left in the ashes to annex.’

‘As long as you realise a Company of mercenaries is more club than scalpel.’

‘His Eminence has chosen the method and understands its limitations.’

‘An inspirational man, the Arch Lector. We are close friends, you know.’

‘His one firm stipulation, clear in the contract, as you see, is that you avoid any Imperial entanglements. Any and all, am I understood?’ That grating note entered Pike’s voice again. ‘Legate Sarmis still haunts the border like an angry phantom. I do not suppose he will cross it but even so he is a man decidedly not to be trifled with, a most bloody-minded and bloody-handed adversary. His Eminence desires no further wars at present.’

‘Do not concern yourself, I avoid fighting wherever possible.’ Cosca slapped happily at the hilt of his blade. ‘A sword is for rattling, not for drawing, eh?’

‘We have a gift for you, also.’ Superior Pike indicated the fortified wagon, an oaken monster bound in riveted iron and hauled by a team of eight muscular horses. It was halfway between conveyance and castle, with slitted windows and a crenelated parapet about the top, from which defenders might presumably shoot at circling enemies. Far from the most practical of gifts, but then Cosca had never been interested in practicalities.

‘For me?’ The Old Man pressed his withered hands to his gilded breastplate. ‘It shall be my home from home out in the wilderness!’

‘There is a . . . *secret* within,’ said Lorsen. ‘Something his Eminence would very much like to see tested.’

‘I love surprises! Ones that don’t involve armed men behind me, anyway. You may tell his Eminence it will be my honour.’ Cosca stood, wincing as his aged knees audibly clicked. ‘How does the Paper of Engagement appear?’

Temple looked up from the penultimate page. ‘Er . . .’ The contract was closely based on the one he had drawn up for their previous engagement, was watertight in every particular, was even more generous in several. ‘Some issues with supply,’ he stammered, fumbling for objections. ‘Food and weaponry are covered but the clause really should include—’

‘Details. No cause for delay. Let’s get the papers signed and the men ready to move. The longer they sit idle, the harder to get them off their arses. No force of nature so dangerous to life and commerce as mercenaries without employment.’ Except, perhaps, mercenaries with employment.

‘It would be prudent to allow me a little longer to—’

Cosca came close, setting his hand on Temple’s shoulder again. ‘Have you a legal objection?’

Temple paused, clutching for some words which might carry weight with a man with whom nothing carried any weight. ‘Not a legal objection, no.’

‘A financial objection?’ offered Cosca.

‘No, General.’

‘Then . . . ?’

‘Do you remember when we first met?’

Cosca suddenly flashed that luminous smile of which only he was capable, good humour and good intentions radiating from his deep-lined face. ‘Of course. I wore that blue uniform, you the brown rags.’

‘You said . . .’ It hardly felt possible, now. ‘You said we would do good together.’

‘And haven’t we, in the main? Legally *and* financially?’ As though the entire spectrum of goodness ranged between those twin poles.

‘And . . . morally?’

The Old Man’s forehead furrowed as though it was a word in a foreign tongue. ‘Morally?’

‘General, please.’ Temple fixed Cosca with his most earnest expression. And Temple knew he could be earnest, when he truly believed. Or had a great deal to lose. ‘I beg you. Do not sign this paper. This will not be war, it will be murder.’

Cosca’s brows went up. ‘A fine distinction, to the buried.’

‘We are not judges! What happens to the people of these towns once the men get among them, hungry for plunder? Women and children, General, who had no part in any rebellion. We are better than this.’

‘We are? You did not say so in Kadir. You persuaded me to sign that contract, if I recall.’

‘Well—’

‘And in Styria, was it not you who encouraged me to take back what was mine?’

‘You had a valid claim—’

‘Before we took ship to the North, you helped me persuade the men. You can be damned persuasive when you have a mind.’

‘Then let me persuade you now. Please, General Cosca. Do not sign.’

There was a long pause. Cosca heaved in a breath, his forehead creasing yet more deeply. ‘A *conscientious* objection, then.’

‘Conscience is,’ muttered Temple hopefully, ‘a splinter of the divine?’ Not to mention a shitty navigator, and it had led him into some dangerous waters now. He realised he was picking nervously at the hem of his shirt as Cosca gazed upon him. ‘I simply have a feeling this job . . .’ He struggled for words that might turn the tide of inevitability. ‘Will go bad,’ he finished, lamely.

‘Good jobs rarely require the services of mercenaries.’ Cosca’s hand squeezed a little tighter at his shoulder and Temple felt Friendly’s looming presence behind him. Still, and silent, and yet very much *there*. ‘Men of conscience and conviction might find themselves better suited to other lines of work. His Majesty’s Inquisition offers a righteous cause, I understand?’

Temple swallowed as he looked across at Superior Pike, who had now attracted a twittering avian crowd. ‘I’m not sure I care for their brand of righteousness.’

‘Well, that’s the thing about righteousness,’ murmured Cosca, ‘everyone has their own brand. Gold, on the other hand, is universal. In my considerable experience, a man is better off worrying about what is good for his purse than what is simply . . . good.’

‘I just—’

Cosca squeezed still more firmly. ‘Without wishing to be harsh, Temple, it isn’t all about *you*. I have the welfare of the whole company to think of. Five hundred men.’

‘Five hundred and twelve,’ said Friendly.

‘Plus one with dysentery. I cannot inconvenience them for the sake of your *feelings*. That would be . . . *immoral*. I need you, Temple. But if you wish to leave . . .’ Cosca issued a weighty sigh. ‘In spite of all your promises, in spite of my generosity, in spite of everything we have been through together, well . . .’ He held out an arm towards burning Mulkova and raised his brows. ‘I suppose the door is always open.’

Temple swallowed. He could have left. He could have said he wanted no part of this. Enough is enough, damn it! But that would have taken courage. That would have left him with no armed men at his back. Alone, and weak, and a victim once again. That would have been hard to do. And Temple always took the easy way. Even when he knew it was the wrong way. Especially then, in fact, since easy and wrong make such good company. Even when he had a damn good notion it would end up being the hard way, even then. Why think about tomorrow when today is such a thorny business?

Perhaps Kahdia would have found some way to stop this. Something involving supreme self-sacrifice, most likely. Temple, it hardly needed to be said, was not Kahdia. He wiped away a fresh sheen of sweat, forced a queasy smile onto his face and bowed. 'I remain always honoured to serve.'

'Excellent!' And Cosca plucked the contract from Temple's limp hand and spread it out to sign upon a sheered-off column.

Superior Pike stood, brushing crumbs from his shapeless black coat and sending birds scattering. 'Do you know what's out there, in the west?'

He let the question hang a moment. Below them the faint jingling, groaning, snapping could be heard of his Practicals dragging the prisoners away. Then he answered himself.

'The future. And the future does not belong to the Old Empire – their time is a thousand years past. Nor does it belong to the Ghosts, savages that they are. Nor does it belong to the fugitives, adventurers and opportunist scum who have put the first grasping roots into its virgin soil. No. The future belongs to the Union. We must seize it.'

'We must not be afraid to do what is necessary to seize it,' added Lorsen.

'Never fear, gentlemen.' Cosca grinned as he scratched out the parting swirl of his signature. 'We will seize the future together.'

Just Men

The rain had stopped. Shy peered through trees alive with the tap-tap of falling water, past a felled trunk abandoned on its trestles, part-stripped, the drawknife left wedged under a curl of bark, and towards the blackened bones of the house.

'Not hard bastards to follow,' muttered Lamb. 'Leave burned-out buildings wherever they go.'

Probably they thought they'd killed anyone cared enough to follow. What might happen once they noticed Lamb and Shy toddling after in their rickety wagon, she was trying not to think about.

Time was she'd thought out everything, every moment of every day – hers, Lamb's, Gully's, Pit and Ro's, too – all parcelled into its proper place with its proper purpose. Always looking forwards, the future better than the now, its shape clear to her as a house already built. Hard to believe since that time it was just five nights spent under the flapping canvas in the back of the cart. Five mornings waking stiff and sore to a dawn like a pit yawning under her feet. Five days following the sign across the empty grassland and into the woods, one eye on her black past, wondering what part of it had crept from the cold earth's clutches and stolen her life while she was grinning at tomorrow.

Her fingertips rubbed nervously against her palm. 'Shall we take a look?' Truth was she was scared what she might find. Scared of looking and scared of not looking. Worn out and scared of everything with a hollow space where her hopes used to be.

'I'll go round the back.' Lamb brushed his knees off with his hat and started circling the clearing, twigs crunching under his boots, a set of

startled pigeons yammering into the white sky, giving anyone about fair notice of their arrival. Not that there was anyone about. Leastways, no one living.

There was an overgrown vegetable patch out back, stubborn soil scraped away to make a trench no more than ankle-deep. Next to it a soaked blanket was stretched over something lumpy. From the bottom stuck a pair of boots and a pair of bony bare feet with dirt under the bluish nails.

Lamb squatted down, took one corner and peeled it back. A man's face and a woman's, grey and slack, both with throats cut deep. The woman's head lolled, the wound in her neck yawning wet and purple.

'Ah.' Shy pressed her tongue into the gap between her front teeth and stared at the ground. Would've taken quite the optimist to expect anything else, and she by no means qualified, but those faces still tore at something in her. Worry for Pit and Ro, or worry for herself, or just a sick memory of a sick time when bodies weren't such strange things for her to see.

'Leave 'em be, you bastards!'

First thing Shy took in was the gleam on the arrowhead. Next was the hand that held the drawn bow, knuckles white on dark wood. Last was the face behind – a boy maybe sixteen, a mop of sandy hair stuck to pale skin with the wet.

'I'll kill you! I'll do it!' He eased from the bushes, feet fishing for firm earth to tread on, shadows sliding across his tight face and his hand trembling on the bow.

Shy made herself stay still, some trick to manage with her first two burning instincts to get at him or get away. Her every muscle was itching to do one or the other, and there'd been a time Shy had chased off wherever her instincts led. But since they'd usually led her by an unpleasant route right into the shit, she let the bastards run off without her this time and just stood, looking this boy steady in the eyes. Scared eyes, which was no surprise, open wide and shining in the corners. She kept her voice soft, like they'd met at a harvest dance and had no burned-out buildings, dead folk or drawn bows between them.

'What's your name?'

His tongue darted over his lips, point of the arrow wobbling and making her chest horrible itchy about where it was aimed.

'I'm Shy. This is Lamb.'

The boy's eyes flicked across, and his bow too. Lamb didn't flinch, just put the blanket back how he'd found it and slowly stood. Seeing him with the boy's fresh eyes, he looked anything but harmless. Even with that tangle of grey beard you could tell a man would have to be real careless with his razor to pick up scars like Lamb's by accident. Shy had always guessed he'd got them in some war up North, but if he'd been a fighter once there was no fight in him now. Some kind of coward like she'd always said. But this boy wasn't to know.

'We been following some men.' Shy kept her voice soft, soft, coaxing the boy's eyes and his arrow's point back to her. 'They burned our farm, up near Squaredeal. They burned it, and they killed a man worked for us, and they took my sister and my little brother . . .' Her voice cracked and she had to swallow and press it out smooth again. 'We been following on.'

'Reckon they been here, too,' said Lamb.

'We been tracking 'em. Maybe twenty men, moving quick.' The arrow-point started to drift down. 'They stopped off at a couple more farms on the way. Same thing. Then we followed 'em into the woods. And here.'

'I'd been hunting,' said the boy quietly.

Shy nodded. 'We were in town. Selling our crop.'

'I came back, and . . .' That point made it right down to the ground, much to Shy's relief. 'Nothing I could've done.'

'No.'

'They took my brother.'

'What was his name?'

'Evin. He was nine years old.'

Silence, with just the trees still dripping and the gentle creak as the boy let his bowstring go slack.

'You know who they were?' asked Lamb.

'I didn't see 'em.'

'You know why they took your brother?'

'I said I wasn't here, didn't I? I wasn't here.'

'All right,' said Shy, calming. 'I know.'

'You following after 'em?' asked the boy.

'We're just about keeping up,' said Lamb.

'Going to get your sister and your brother back?'

'Count on it,' said Shy, as if sounding certain made it certain.

‘Can you get mine, too?’

Shy looked at Lamb, and he looked back, and he didn’t say nothing. ‘We can try,’ she said.

‘Reckon I’ll be coming along with you, then.’

Another silence. ‘You sure?’ asked Lamb.

‘I can do what needs doing, y’old bastard!’ screamed the boy, veins popping from his neck.

Lamb didn’t twitch a muscle. ‘We don’t know what’ll need doing yet.’

‘There’s room in the wagon, though, if you want to take your part.’ Shy held her hand out to the boy, and he looked at it for a moment, then stepped forward and shook it. He squeezed it too hard, that way men do when they’re trying to prove they’re tougher than they are.

‘My name’s Leef.’

Shy nodded towards the two bodies. ‘These your folks?’

The boy blinked down at them. ‘I been trying to do the burying, but the ground’s hard, and I got nothing to dig with.’ He rubbed at his broken fingernails with his thumb. ‘I been trying.’

‘Need some help?’ she asked.

His face crushed up, and he hung his head, and he nodded, wet hair dangling.

‘We all need some help, time to time,’ said Lamb. ‘I’ll get them shovels down.’

Shy reached out, checked a moment, then gently put her hand on the boy’s shoulder. She felt him tense, thought he’d shake it off, but he didn’t and she was glad. Maybe she needed it there more than he did.

On they went, gone from two to three but otherwise not much changed. Same wind, same sky, same tracks to be followed, same worried silence between them. The wagon was wearing out on the battered tracks, lurching more with each mile rattled behind those patient oxen. One of the wheels had near shook itself to pieces inside its iron tyre. Shy felt some sympathy, behind her frown she was all shook to pieces herself. They loaded out the gear and let the oxen loose to crop grass, and Lamb lifted one side of the wagon with a grunt and a shrug while Shy did the best she could with the tools she had and her half-sack of nails, Leef eager to do his part but that no more than passing her the hammer when she asked.

The tracks led to a river and forded at a shallow spot. Calder and Scale weren't too keen on the crossing but in the end Shy goaded them over to a tall mill-house, stone-built on three stories. Those they were chasing hadn't bothered to try and burn this one and its wheel still slapped around merrily in the chattering water. Two men and a woman were hanged together in a bunch from the attic window. One had a broken neck stretched out way too long, another feet burned raw, dangling a stride above the mud.

Leef stared up big-eyed. 'What kind o' men do a thing like this?'

'Just men,' said Shy. 'Thing like this don't take no one special.' Though at times it felt to her that they were following something else. Some mad storm blowing mindless through this abandoned country, churning up the dirt and leaving bottles and shit and burned buildings and hanged folk scattered in its wake. A storm that snatched away all the children to who knew where and to what purpose? 'You care to go up there, Leef, and cut these folks down?'

He looked like he didn't much care to, but he drew his knife and went inside to do it anyway.

'Feels like we're doing a lot of burying lately,' she muttered.

'Good thing you got Clay to throw them shovels in,' said Lamb.

She laughed at that, then realised what she was laughing at and turned it into an ugly cough. Leef 's head showed at the window and he leaned out, started cutting at the ropes, making the bodies tremble. 'Seems wrong, us having to clean up after these bastards.'

'Someone has to.' Lamb held one of the shovels out to her. 'Or do you want to leave these folks swinging?'

Towards evening, the low sun setting the edges of the clouds to burn and the wind making the trees dance and sweeping patterns in the grass, they came upon a campsite. A big fire had smouldered out under the eaves of a wood, a circle of charred branches and sodden ash three strides across. Shy hopped from the wagon while Lamb was still cooing Scale and Calder to a snorting halt, and she drew her knife and gave the fire a poke, turned up some embers still aglow.

'They were here overnight,' she called.

'We're catching 'em, then?' asked Leef as he jumped down, nocking an arrow loose to his bow.

‘I reckon.’ Though Shy couldn’t help wondering if that was a good thing. She dragged a length of frayed rope from the grass, found a cobweb torn between bushes at the treeline, then a shred of cloth left on a bramble.

‘Someone come this way?’ asked Leef.

‘More’n one. And fast.’ Shy slipped through after, keeping low, crept down a muddy slope, slick dirt and fallen leaves treacherous under her boots, trying to keep her balance and peer into the dimness—

She saw Pit, face down by a fallen tree, looking so small there among the knotted roots. She wanted to scream but had no voice, no breath even. She ran, slid on her side in a shower of dead leaves and ran again. She squatted by him, back of his head a clotted mass, hand trembling as she reached out, not wanting to see his face, having to see it. She held her breath as she wrestled him over, his body small but stiff as a board, brushed away the leaves stuck to his face with fumbling fingers.

‘Is it your brother?’ muttered Leef.

‘No.’ She was almost sick with relief. Then with guilt that she was relieved, when this boy was dead. ‘Is it yours?’

‘No,’ said Leef.

Shy slid her hands under the dead child and picked him up, struggled up the slope, Leef behind her. Lamb stood staring between the trees at the top, a black shape stamped from the glow of sunset.

‘Is it him?’ came his cracking voice. ‘Is it Pit?’

‘No.’ Shy laid him on the flattened grass, arms stuck out wide, head tipped back rigid.

‘By the dead.’ Lamb had his fingers shoved into his grey hair, gripping at his head like it might burst.

‘Might be he tried to get away. They made a lesson of him.’ She hoped Ro didn’t try it. Hoped she was too clever to. Hoped she was cleverer than Shy had been at her age. She leaned on the wagon with her back to the others, squeezed her eyes shut and wiped the tears away. Dug the bastard shovels out and brought them back.

‘More fucking digging,’ spat Leef, hacking at the ground like it was the one stole his brother.

‘Better off digging than getting buried,’ said Lamb.

Shy left them to the graves and the oxen to their grazing and spread out in circles, keeping low, fingers combing at the cold grass, trying to read the

signs in the fading light. Trying to feel out what they'd done, what they'd do next.

'Lamb.'

He grunted as he squatted beside her, slapping the dirt from his gloves. 'What is it?'

'Looks like three of 'em peeled off here, heading south and east. The rest struck on due west. What do you think?'

'I try not to. You're the tracker. Though when you got so damn good at it, I've no notion.'

'Just a question of thinking it through.' Shy didn't want to admit that chasing men and being chased are sides to one coin, and at being chased she'd two years of the harshest practice.

'They split up?' asked Leef.

Lamb fussed at that notch out of his ear as he looked off south. 'Some style of a disagreement?'

'Could be,' said Shy. 'Or maybe they sent 'em to circle around, check if anyone was following.'

Leef fumbled for an arrow, eyes darting about the horizon.

Lamb waved him down. 'If they'd a mind to check, they'd have seen us by now.' He kept looking south, off along the treeline towards a low ridge, the way Shy thought those three had gone. 'No. I reckon they had enough. Maybe it all went too far for 'em. Maybe they started thinking they might be the next left hanging. Either way we'll follow. Hope to catch 'em before the wheels come off this cart for good. Or off me either,' he added as he dragged himself up wincing into the wagon's seat.

'The children ain't with those three,' said Leef, turning sullen.

'No.' Lamb settled his hat back on. 'But they might point us the right way. We need to get this wagon fixed up proper, find some new oxen or get ourselves some horses. We need food. Might be those three—'

'You fucking old coward.'

There was a pause. Then Lamb nodded over at Shy. 'Me and her spent years chewing over that topic and you got naught worth adding to the conversation.' Shy looked at them, the boy stood on the ground glowering up, the big old man looking down calm and even from his seat.

Leef curled his lip. 'We need to keep after the children or—'

'Get up on the wagon, boy, or you'll be keeping after the children alone.'

Leef opened his mouth again but Shy caught him by the arm first. ‘I want to catch ’em just as much as you, but Lamb’s right – there’s twenty men out there, bad men, and armed, and willing. There’s nothing we could do.’

‘We got to catch ’em sooner or later, don’t we?’ snapped Leef, breathing hard. ‘Might as well be now while my brother and yours are still alive!’

Shy had to admit he’d a point but there was no help for it. She held his eye and said it to his face, calm but with no give. ‘Get on the wagon, Leef.’

This time he did as he was told, and clambered up among their gear and sat there silent with his back to them.

Shy perched her bruised arse next to Lamb as he snapped the reins and got Scale and Calder reluctantly on the move. ‘What do we do if we catch these three?’ she muttered, keeping her voice down so Leef wouldn’t hear it. ‘Chances are they’re going to be armed and willing, too. Better armed than us, that’s sure.’

‘Reckon we’ll have to be more willing, then.’

Her brows went up at that. This big, gentle Northman who used to run laughing through the wheat with Pit on one shoulder and Ro on the other, used to sit out at sunset with Gully, passing a bottle between them in silence for hours at a time, who’d never once laid a hand on her growing up in spite of some sore provocations, talking about getting red to the elbows like it was nothing.

Shy knew it wasn’t nothing.

She closed her eyes and remembered Jeg’s face after she stabbed him, bloody hat brim jammed down over his eyes, pitching in the street, still muttering, *Smoke, Smoke*. That clerk in the store, staring at her as his shirt turned black. The look Dodd had as he gawped down at her arrow in his chest. *What did you do that for?*

She rubbed her face hard with one hand, sweating of a sudden, heart banging in her ears hard as it had then, and she twisted inside her greasy clothes like she could twist free of the past. But it had good and caught her up. For Pit and Ro’s sake she had to get her hands red again. She curled her fingers around the grip of her knife, took a hard breath and set her jaw. No choice then. No choice now. And for men the likes of the ones they followed no tears needed shedding.

‘When we find ’em,’ her voice sounding tiny in the gathering darkness, ‘can you follow my lead?’

‘No,’ said Lamb.

‘Eh?’ He’d been following her lead so long she’d never thought he might find some other path.

When she looked at him, his old, scarred face was twisted like he was in pain. ‘I made a promise to your mother. ’Fore she died. Made a promise to look to her children. Pit and Ro . . . and I reckon it covers you too, don’t it?’

‘I guess,’ she muttered, far from reassured.

‘I broke a lot of promises in my life. Let ’em wash away like leaves on the water.’ He rubbed at his eyes with the back of one gloved hand. ‘I mean to keep that one. So when we find ’em . . . you’ll be following my lead. This time.’

‘All right.’ She could say so, if it helped him.

Then she could do what needed doing.

The Best Man

‘I believe this is Squaredeal,’ said Inquisitor Lorsen, frowning at his map.

‘And is Squaredeal on the Superior’s list?’ asked Cosca.

‘It is.’ Lorsen made sure there was nothing in his voice that could be interpreted as uncertainty. He was the only man within a hundred miles in possession of anything resembling a cause. He could entertain no doubts.

Superior Pike had said the future was out here in the west, but the town of Squaredeal did not look like the future through Inquisitor Lorsen’s eyeglass. It did not look like a present anyone with the choice would want a part in. The people scratching a living out of the Near Country were even poorer than he had expected. Fugitives and outcasts, misfits and failures. Poor enough that supporting a rebellion against the world’s most powerful nation was unlikely to be their first priority. But Lorsen could not concern himself with likelihoods. Allowances, explanations and compromises were likewise unaffordable luxuries. He had learned over many painful years managing a prison camp in Angland that people had to be sorted onto the right side or the wrong, and those on the wrong could be given no mercy. He took no pleasure in it, but a better world comes at a price.

He folded his map, scored the sharp crease with the back of his thumbnail and thrust it inside his coat. ‘Get your men ready to attack, General.’

‘Mmmm.’ Lorsen was surprised to see, on glancing sideways, that Cosca was in the midst of sipping from a metal flask.

‘Isn’t it a little early for spirits?’ he forced through clenched teeth. It was, after all, but an hour or two after dawn.

Cosca shrugged. ‘A good thing at teatime is surely a good thing at breakfast, too.’

‘Likewise a bad thing,’ grated Lorsen.

Heedless, Cosca took another taste and noisily smacked his lips. ‘Though it might be best if you didn’t mention this to Temple. He worries, bless him. He thinks of me almost as a father. He was in some extremity when I came upon him, you know—’

‘Fascinating,’ snapped Lorsen. ‘Get your men *ready*.’

‘Right away, Inquisitor.’ The venerable mercenary screwed the cap back on – tightly, as if he was resolved never again to unscrew it – then began, with much stiffness and little dignity, to slither down the hillside.

He gave every impression of being a loathsome man, and one who the rude hand of time had in no way improved: inexpressibly vain, trustworthy as a scorpion and an utter stranger to morality. But after a few days with the Company of the Gracious Hand, Inquisitor Lorsen had regretfully concluded that Cosca, or the Old Man as he was fondly known, might be the best among them. His direct underlings offered no counter-arguments. Captain Brachio was a vile Styrian with an eye made always weepy by an old wound. He was a fine rider but fat as a house, and had turned self-serving indolence into a religion. Captain Jubair, a hulking, tar-black Kantic, had done the opposite and turned religion into self-serving madness. Rumour had it he was an ex-slave who had once fought in a pit. Though now far removed, Lorsen suspected some part of the pit remained within him. Captain Dimbik was at least a Union man, but a reject from the army for incompetence and a weak-chinned, petulant one at that who felt the need to affect a threadbare sash as a reminder of past glories. Though balding he had grown his hair long and, rather than merely bald, he now looked both bald and a fool.

As far as Lorsen could tell, none of them truly believed in anything but their own profit. Notwithstanding Cosca’s affection, the lawyer, Temple, was the worst of the crew, celebrating selfishness, greed and underhanded manipulation as virtues, a man so slimy he could have found employment as axle grease. Lorsen shuddered as he looked across the other faces swarming about Superior Pike’s huge fortified wagon: wretched leavings of every race and mongrel combination, variously scarred, diseased, besmirched, all leering in anticipation of plunder and violence.

But filthy tools can be put to righteous purposes, can they not, and achieve noble ends? He hoped it would prove so. The rebel Conthus was

hiding somewhere in this forsaken land, skulking and plotting more sedition and massacre. He had to be rooted out, whatever the costs. He had to be made an example of, so that Lorsen could reap the glory of his capture. He took one last look through his eyeglass towards Squaredeal – all still quiet – before snapping it closed and working his way down the slope.

Temple was talking softly to Cosca at the bottom, a whining note in his voice which Lorsen found especially aggravating. 'Couldn't we, maybe . . . talk to the townspeople?'

'We will,' said Cosca. 'As soon as we've secured forage.'

'Robbed them, you mean.'

Cosca slapped Temple on the arm. 'You lawyers! You see straight to the heart of things!'

'There must be a better way—'

'I have spent my life searching for one and the search has led me here. We signed a contract, Temple, as you well know, and Inquisitor Lorsen means to see us keep our end of the bargain, eh, Inquisitor?'

'I will insist upon it,' grated Lorsen, treating Temple to a poisonous glare.

'If you wanted to avoid bloodshed,' said Cosca, 'you really should have spoken up beforehand.'

The lawyer blinked. 'I did.'

The Old Man raised helpless palms to indicate the mercenaries arming, mounting, drinking and otherwise preparing themselves for violence. 'Not eloquently enough, evidently. How many men have we fit to fight?'

'Four hundred and thirty-two,' said Friendly, instantly. The neckless sergeant appeared to Lorsen to have two uncanny specialities: silent menace and numbers. 'Aside from the sixty-four who chose not to join the expedition, there have been eleven deserters since we left Mulkova, and five taken ill.'

Cosca shrugged them away. 'Some wastage is inevitable. The fewer our numbers, the greater each share of glory, eh, Sworbreck?'

The writer, a ludicrous indulgence on this expedition, looked anything but convinced. 'I . . . suppose?'

'Glory is hard to count,' said Friendly.

'So true,' lamented Cosca. 'Like honour and virtue and all those other desirable intangibles. But the fewer our numbers, the greater each share of the profits too.'

‘Profits can be counted.’

‘And weighed, and felt, and held up to the light,’ said Captain Brachio, rubbing gently at his capacious belly.

‘The logical extension of the argument,’ Cosca twisted the waxed points of his moustaches sharp, ‘would be that all the high ideals in existence are not worth as much as a single bit.’

Lorsen shivered with the most profound disgust. ‘That is a world I could not bear to live in.’

The Old Man grinned. ‘And yet here you are. Is Jubair in position?’

‘Soon,’ grunted Brachio. ‘We’re waiting for his signal.’

Lorsen took a breath through gritted teeth. A crowd of madmen, awaiting the signal of the maddest.

‘It is not too late.’ Sufeen spoke softly so the others could not hear. ‘We could stop this.’

‘Why should we?’ Jubair drew his sword, and saw the fear in Sufeen’s eyes, and felt a pity and a contempt for him. Fear was born of arrogance. Of a belief that everything was not the will of God, and could be changed. But nothing could be changed. Jubair had accepted that many years ago. Since then, he and fear had been entire strangers to each other. ‘This is what God wants,’ he said.

Most men refused to see the truth. Sufeen stared at him as though he was mad. ‘Why would it be God’s desire to punish the innocent?’

‘Innocence is not for you to judge. Nor is it given to man to understand God’s design. If He desires someone saved, He need only turn my sword aside.’

Sufeen slowly shook his head. ‘If that is your God, I do not believe in Him.’

‘What kind of God would He be if your belief could make the slightest difference? Or mine, or anyone’s?’ Jubair lifted the blade, patchy sunlight shining down the long, straight edge, glinting in the many nicks and notches. ‘Disbelieve this sword, it will still cut you. He is God. We all walk His path regardless.’

Sufeen shook his little head again, as though that might change the way of things. ‘What priest taught you this?’

‘I have seen how the world is and judged for myself how it must be.’ He glanced over his shoulder, his men gathering in the wood, armour and weapons prepared for the work, faces eager. ‘Are we ready to attack?’

‘I’ve been down there.’ Sufeen pointed through the brush towards Squaredeal. ‘They have three constables, and two are idiots. I am not sure anything so vigorous as an attack is really necessary, are you?’

It was true there were few defences. A fence of rough-cut logs had once ringed the town but had been partly torn down to allow for growth. The roof of the wooden watchtower was crusted with moss and someone had secured their washing line to one of its supports. The Ghosts had long ago been driven out of this country and the townsfolk evidently expected no other threat. They would soon discover their error.

Jubair’s eyes slid back to Sufeen. ‘I tire of your carping. Give the signal.’

The scout had reluctance in his eyes, and bitterness, but he obeyed, taking out the mirror and crawling to the edge of the treeline to signal Cosca and the others. That was well for him. If he had not obeyed, Jubair would most likely have killed him, and he would have been right so to do.

He tipped his head back and smiled at the blue sky through the black branches, the black leaves. He could do anything and it would be right, for he had made himself a willing puppet of God’s purpose and in so doing freed himself. He alone free, surrounded by slaves. He was the best man in the Near Country. The best man in the Circle of the World. He had no fear, for God was with him.

God was everywhere, always.

How could it be otherwise?

Checking he wasn’t observed, Brachio tugged the locket from his shirt and snapped it open. The two tiny portraits were blistered and faded ’til anyone else would’ve seen little more than smudges, but Brachio knew them. He touched those faces with a gentle fingertip and in his mind they were as they’d been when he left – soft, perfect and smiling, too long ago.

‘Don’t worry, my babies,’ he cooed to them. ‘I’ll be back soon.’

A man has to choose what matters and leave everything else to the dogs. Worry about all of it and you’ll do no good at all. He was the only man in the Company with any sense. Dimbik was a preening mope. Jubair and sanity were entire strangers to each other. For all his craft and cunning,

Cosca was a dreamer – this shit with the biographer was proof enough of that.

Brachio was the best of them because he knew what he was. No high ideals, no grand delusions. He was a sensible man with sensible ambitions, doing what he had to, and he was content. His daughters were all that mattered. New dresses, and good food, and good dowries, and good lives. Better lives than the hell he'd lived—

'Captain Brachio!' Cosca's braying voice, loud as ever, snatched him back to the now. 'There is the signal!'

Brachio snapped the locket closed, wiped his damp eyes on the back of his fist, and straightened the bandolier that held his knives. Cosca had wedged a boot in one stirrup and now bounced once, twice, three times before dragging on his gilt saddle horn. His bulging eyes came level with it before he froze. 'Could somebody—'

Sergeant Friendly slipped a hand under Cosca's arse and twitched him effortlessly into the saddle. Once there, the Old Man spent a moment getting his wind back, then, with some effort, drew his blade and hefted it high. 'Unsheathe your swords!' He considered that. 'Or cheaper weapons! Let us . . . do some *good*!'

Brachio pointed towards the crest of the hill and bellowed, 'Ride!' With a rousing cheer the front rank spurred their horses and thundered off in a shower of dirt and dry grass. Cosca, Lorsen, Brachio and the rest, as befitted commanders, trotted after.

'That's it?' Brachio heard Sworbreck muttering as the shabby valley, and its patchy fields, and the dusty little settlement came into view below. Maybe he'd been expecting a mile-high fortress with domes of gold and walls of adamant. Maybe it would've become one by the time he'd finished writing the scene. 'It looks . . .'

'Doesn't it?' snapped Temple.

Brachio's Styrians were already streaming across the fields towards the town at a greedy gallop while Jubair's Kantics swarmed at it from the other direction, their horses black dots against a rising storm of dust.

'Look at them go!' Cosca swept off his hat and gave it a wave. 'The brave boys, eh? There's vim and brio for you! How I wish I could still charge in there with the rest of them!'

‘Really?’ Brachio remembered leading a charge and it had been tough, sore, dangerous work, with vim and brio both conspicuous by their absence.

Cosca thought about it for a moment, then jammed his hat back on his balding head and fumbled his sword back into its sheath. ‘No. Not really.’

They made their way down at a walk.

If there had been any resistance, by the time they reached Squaredeal it was over.

A man sat in the dust by the road, bloody hands pressed to his face, blinking at Sworbreck as he rode past. A sheep pen had been broken open and the sheep all needlessly slaughtered, a dog already busy among the fluffy corpses. A wagon had been tipped on its side, one wheel still creaking hopelessly around in the air while a Kantic and a Styrian mercenary argued savagely in terms neither could understand over the scattered contents. Two other Styrians were trying to kick the door of a forge from its hinges. Another had climbed onto the roof and was digging clumsily at it, using his axe like a shovel. Jubair sat on his huge horse in the centre of the street, pointing with his outsize sword and booming orders, along with some incomprehensible utterances about the will of God.

Sworbreck’s pencil hovered, his fingertips worrying at its string binding, but he could think of nothing to write. In the end he scratched out, absurdly, *No heroism apparent.*

‘What are those idiots up to?’ murmured Temple. Several Kantics had roped a team of mules to one of the struts of the town’s moss-crusted watchtower and were whipping them into a lather in an attempt to pull it down. So far they had failed.

Sworbreck had observed that many of the men found it enjoyable simply to break things. The greater the effort required in putting them back together, the greater the pleasure. As if to illustrate this rule, four of Brachio’s men had knocked someone to the ground and were administering a leisurely beating while a fat man in an apron tried without success to calm them.

Sworbreck had rarely observed violence of even the mildest sort. A dispute over narrative structure between two authors of his acquaintance had turned quite ugly, but that scarcely seemed to qualify now. Finding himself suddenly dropped into the midst of battle, as it were, Sworbreck felt

both cold and hot at once. Both terribly fearful and terribly excited. He shied away from the spectacle, yet longed to see more. Was that not what he had come for, after all? To witness blood and ordure and savagery at its most intense? To smell the guts drying and hear the wails of the brutalised? So he could say that he had seen it. So he could bring conviction and authenticity to his work. So he could sit in the fashionable salons of Adua and airily declaim on the dark truths of warfare. Perhaps those were not the highest of motives, but certainly not the lowest on show. He made no claim to be the best man in the Circle of the World, after all.

Merely the best writer.

Cosca swung from his saddle, grunted as he twisted the life into his venerable hips, then, somewhat stiffly, advanced on the would-be peacemaker in the apron. 'Good afternoon! I am Nicomo Cosca, captain general of the Company of the Gracious Hand.' He indicated the four Styrians, elbows and sticks rising and falling as they continued their beating. 'I see you have already met some of my brave companions.'

'Name's Clay,' said the fat man, jowls trembling with fear. 'I own the store here—'

'A store? Excellent! May we browse?' Brachio's men were already carrying supplies out by the armload under the watchful eye of Sergeant Friendly. No doubt ensuring any thieving from the Company remained within acceptable limits. Thieving outside the Company was, it appeared, entirely to be encouraged. Sworbreck shuffled his pencil around. A further note about the lack of heroism seemed superfluous.

'Take whatever you need,' said Clay, showing his flour-dusted palms. 'There's no call for violence.' A pause, broken by the crashing of glass and wood and the whimpering of the man on the ground as he was occasionally and unenthusiastically kicked. 'Might I ask why you're here?'

Lorsen stepped forward. 'We are here to root out disloyalty, Master Clay. We are here to stamp out rebellion.'

'You're . . . from the Inquisition?'

Lorsen said nothing, but his silence spoke volumes.

Clay swallowed. 'There's no rebellion here, I assure you.' Though Sworbreck sensed a falseness in his voice. Something more than understandable nervousness. 'We're not interested in politics—'

‘Really?’ Lorsen’s profession evidently required a keen eye for deception also. ‘Roll up your sleeves!’

‘What?’ The merchant attempted to smile, hoping to defuse the situation with soft movements of his fleshy hands, perhaps, but Lorsen would not be defused. He jerked one hard finger and two of his Practicals hastened forward: burly men, masked and hooded.

‘Strip him.’

Clay tried to twist away. ‘Wait—’

Sworbreck flinched as one of them punched the merchant soundlessly in his gut and doubled him up. The other ripped his sleeve off and wrenched his bare arm around. Bold script was tattooed from his wrist to his elbow, written in the Old Tongue. Somewhat faded with age, but still legible.

Lorsen turned his head slightly sideways so he could read. ‘*Freedom and justice*. Noble ideals, with which we could all agree. How do they sit with those innocent citizens of the Union massacred by the rebels at Rostod, do you suppose?’

The merchant was only just reclaiming his breath. ‘I never killed anyone in my life, I swear!’ His face was beaded with sweat. ‘The tattoo was a folly in my youth! Did it to impress a woman! I haven’t spoken to a rebel for twenty years!’

‘And you supposed you could escape your crimes here, beyond the borders of the Union?’ Sworbreck had not seen Lorsen smile before, and he rather hoped he never did again. ‘His Majesty’s Inquisition has a longer reach than you imagine. And a longer memory. Who else in this miserable collection of hovels has sympathies with the rebels?’

‘I daresay if they didn’t when we arrived,’ Sworbreck heard Temple mutter, ‘they’ll all have them by the time we leave . . .’

‘No one.’ Clay shook his head. ‘No one means any harm, me least of—’

‘Where in the Near Country are the rebels to be found?’

‘How would I know? I’d tell you if I knew!’

‘Where is the rebel leader Conthus?’

‘Who?’ The merchant could only stare. ‘I don’t know.’

‘We will see what you know. Take him inside. Fetch my instruments. Freedom I cannot promise you, but there will be some justice here today, at least.’

The two Practicals dragged the unfortunate merchant towards his own store, now entirely plundered of anything of value. Lorsen stalked after, every bit as eager to begin his work as the mercenaries had been to begin theirs. The last of the Practicals brought up the rear, the polished wooden case containing the instruments in one hand. With the other he swung the door quietly shut. Sworbreck swallowed, and considered putting his notebook away. He was not sure he would have anything to write today.

'Why do these rebels tattoo themselves?' he muttered. 'Makes them damned easy to identify.'

Cosca was squinting up at the sky and fanning himself with his hat, making his sparse hairs flutter. 'Ensures their commitment, though. Ensures there can be no turning back. They take pride in them. The more they fight, the more tattoos they add. I saw a man hanged up near Rostod with a whole armful.' The Old Man sighed. 'But then men do all manner of things in the heat of the moment that turn out, on sober reflection, to be not especially sensible.'

Sworbreck raised his brows, licked his pencil and copied that down in his notebook. A faint cry echoed from behind the closed door, then another. It made it very difficult to concentrate. Undoubtedly the man was guilty, but Sworbreck could not help placing himself in the merchant's position, and he did not at all enjoy being there. He blinked around at the banal robbery, the careless vandalism, the casual violence, looked for somewhere to wipe his sweaty palms, and ended up wiping them on his shirt. All manner of his standards were rapidly lapsing, it seemed.

'I was expecting it all to be a little more . . .'

'Glorious?' asked Temple. The lawyer had an expression of the most profound distaste on his face as he frowned towards the store.

'Glory in war is rare as gold in the ground, my friend!' said Cosca. 'Or constancy in womenfolk, for that matter! You may use that.'

Sworbreck fingered his pencil. 'Er—'

'But you should have been at the Siege of Dagoska with me! There was glory enough for a thousand tales!' Cosca took him by the shoulder and swept his other arm out as if there were a gilded legion approaching, rather than a set of ruffians dragging furniture from a house. 'The numberless Gurkish marching upon our works! We dauntless few ranged at the

battlements of the towering land-walls, hurling our defiance! Then, at the order—'

'General Cosca!' Bermi hurried across the street, lurched back as a pair of horses thundered past, dragging a torn-off door bouncing after them, then came on again, wafting their dust away with his hat. 'We've a problem. Some Northern bastard grabbed Dimbik, put a—'

'Wait.' Cosca frowned. 'Some Northern bastard?'

'That's right.'

'*One* . . . bastard?'

The Styrian scrubbed at his scruffy golden locks and perched the hat on top. 'A big one.'

'How many men has Dimbik?'

Friendly answered while Bermi was thinking about it. 'One hundred and eighteen men in Dimbik's contingent.'

Bermi spread his palms, absolving himself of all responsibility. 'We do anything he'll kill the captain. He said to bring whoever's in charge.'

Cosca pressed the wrinkled bridge of his nose between finger and thumb. 'Where is this mountainous kidnapper? Let us hope he can be reasoned with before he destroys the entire Company.'

'In there.'

The Old Man examined the weathered sign above the doorway. 'Stupfer's Meat House. An unappetising name for a brothel.'

Bermi squinted up. 'I believe it's an inn.'

'Still less appetising.' With a sharp intake of breath, the Old Man stepped over the threshold, gilt spurs clinking.

It took Sworbreck's eyes a moment to adjust. Brightness glimmered through the gaps in the plank walls. Two chairs and a table had been overturned. Several mercenaries stood about, weapons including two spears, two swords, an axe and two flatbows pointed inwards towards the hostage taker, who sat at a table in the centre of the room.

He was the one man who showed no sign of nervousness. A big Northman indeed, hair hanging about his face and mingling with a patchy fur across his shoulders. He sniffed, and calmly chewed, a plate of meat and eggs before him, a fork held clumsily in his left fist in a strangely childlike manner. His right fist held a knife in a much more practised style. It was

pressed against the throat of Captain Dimbik, whose bulge-eyed face was squashed helpless into the tabletop.

Sworbreck snatched a breath. Here, if not heroism, was certainly fearlessness. He had himself published controversial material on occasion, and that took admirable strength of will, but he could scarcely understand how a man could so coolly face such odds as these. To be brave among friends was nothing. To have the world against you and pick your path regardless – there is courage. He licked his pencil to scribble out a note to that effect. The Northman looked over at him and Sworbreck noticed something gleam through the lank hair. He felt a freezing shock. The man's left eye was made of metal, glimmering in the gloom of the benighted eatery, his face disfigured by a giant scar. The other eye held only a terrible willingness. As though he could hardly stop himself from cutting Dimbik's throat just to find out what would happen.

'Well, I never did!' Cosca threw up his arms. 'Sergeant Friendly, it's our old companion-in-arms!'

'Caul Shivers,' said Friendly quietly, never taking his eyes from the Northman. Sworbreck was reasonably sure that looks cannot kill, but even so he was very glad he was not standing between them.

Without taking the blade from Dimbik's throat, Shivers clumsily forked up some eggs, chewed as though none of those present had anything better to do, and swallowed. 'Fucker tried to take my eggs,' he said in a grinding whisper.

'You unmannerly brute, Dimbik!' Cosca righted one of the chairs and dropped into it opposite Shivers, wagging a finger in the captain's flushed face. 'I hope this is a lesson to you. Never take eggs from a metal-eyed man.'

Sworbreck wrote that down, although it struck him as an aphorism of limited application. Dimbik tried to speak, perhaps to make that exact point, and Shivers pressed knuckles and knife a little harder into his throat, cutting him off in a gurgle.

'This a friend of yours?' grunted the Northman, frowning down at his hostage.

Cosca gave a flamboyant shrug. 'Dimbik? He's not without his uses, but I'd hardly say he's the best man in the Company.'

It was difficult for Captain Dimbik to make his disagreement known with the Northman's fist pressed so firmly into his throat he could scarcely breathe, but he did disagree, and most profoundly. He was the only man in the Company with the slightest care for discipline, or dignity, or proper behaviour, and look where it had landed him. Throttled by a barbarian in a wilderness slop-house.

To make matters worse, or at any rate no better, his commanding officer appeared perfectly willing to trade carefree smalltalk with his assailant. 'Whatever are the chances?' Cosca was asking. 'Running into each other after all these years, so many hundreds of miles from where we first met. How many miles, would you say, Friendly?'

Friendly shrugged. 'Wouldn't like to guess.'

'I thought you went back to the North?'

'I went back. I came here.' Evidently Shivers was not a man to embroider the facts.

'Came for what?'

'Looking for a nine-fingered man.'

Cosca shrugged. 'You could cut one off Dimbik and save yourself a search.'

Dimbik spluttered and twisted, tangled with his own sash, and Shivers ground the point of the knife into his neck and forced him helplessly back against the tabletop.

'It's one particular nine-fingered man I'm after,' came his gravelly voice, without the least hint of excitement at the situation. 'Heard a rumour he might be out here. Black Calder's got a score to settle with him. And so have I.'

'You didn't see enough scores settled back in Styria? Revenge is bad for business. And for the soul, eh, Temple?'

'So I hear,' said the lawyer, just visible out of the corner of Dimbik's eye. How Dimbik hated that man. Always agreeing, always confirming, always looking like he knew better, but never saying how.

'I'll leave the souls to the priests,' came Shivers' voice, 'and the business to the merchants. Scores I understand. Fuck!' Dimbik whimpered, expecting the end. Then there was a clatter as the Northman's fumbled fork fell on the table, egg spattering the floor.

‘You might find that easier with both hands.’ Cosca waved at the mercenaries around the walls. ‘Gentlemen, stand down. Shivers is an old friend and not to be harmed.’ The various bows, blades and cudgels drifted gradually from readiness. ‘Do you suppose you could release Captain Dimbik now? One dies and all the others get restless. Like ducklings.’

‘Ducklings got more fight in ’em than this crowd,’ said Shivers.

‘They’re mercenaries. Fighting is the last thing on their minds. Why don’t you fall in with us? It would be just like old times. The camaraderie, the laughter, the excitement!’

‘The poison, the treachery, the greed? I’ve found I work better alone.’ The pressure on Dimbik’s neck was suddenly released. He was taking a whooping breath when he was lifted by the collar and flung reeling across the room. His legs kicked helplessly as he crashed into one of his fellows, the two of them going down tangled with a table.

‘I’ll let you know if I run into any nine-fingered men,’ said Cosca, pressing hands to knees, baring his yellowed teeth and levering himself to his feet.

‘Do that.’ Shivers calmly turned the knife that had been at the point of ending Dimbik’s life to cutting his meat. ‘And shut the door on your way out.’

Dimbik slowly stood, breathing hard, one hand to the sore graze left on his throat, glaring at Shivers. He would have greatly liked to kill this animal. Or at any rate to order him killed. But Cosca had said he was not to be harmed and Cosca, for better or worse, though mostly worse, was his commanding officer. Unlike the rest of this chaff, Dimbik was a soldier. He took such things as respect, and obedience, and procedure seriously. Even if no one else did. It was especially important that he take them seriously because no one else did. He wriggled his rumpled sash back into position, noting with disgust that the worn silk was now sullied with egg. What a fine sash it had been once. One would never know. How he missed the army. The real army, not this twisted mockery of the military life.

He was the best man in the Company, and he was treated with scorn. Given the smallest command, the worst jobs, the meanest share of the plunder. He jerked his threadbare uniform smooth, produced his comb and rearranged his hair, then strode from the scene of his shame and out into the street with the stiffest bearing he could manage.

In the lunatic asylum, he supposed, the one sane man looks mad.

Sufeen could smell burning on the air. It put him in mind of other battles, long ago. Battles that had needed fighting. Or so it seemed, now. He had gone from fighting for his country, to fighting for his friends, to fighting for his life, to fighting for a living, to . . . whatever this was. The men who had been trying to demolish the watchtower had abandoned the project and were sitting around it with bad grace, passing a bottle. Inquisitor Lorsen stood near them, with grace even poorer.

'Your business with the merchant is concluded?' asked Cosca as he came down the steps of the inn.

'It has,' snapped Lorsen.

'And what discoveries?'

'He died.'

A pause. 'Life is a sea of sorrows.'

'Some men cannot endure stern questioning.'

'Weak hearts caused by moral decay, I daresay.'

'The outcome is the same,' said the Inquisitor. 'We have the Superior's list of settlements. Next comes Lobbery, then Averstock. Gather the Company, General.'

Cosca's brow furrowed. It was the most concern Sufeen had seen him display that day. 'Can we not let the men stay overnight, at least? Some time to rest, enjoy the hospitality of the locals—'

'News of our arrival must not reach the rebels. The righteous cannot delay.' Lorsen managed to say it without a trace of irony.

Cosca puffed out his cheeks. 'The righteous work hard, don't they?'

Sufeen felt a withering helplessness. He could hardly lift his arms, he was suddenly so tired. If only there had been righteous men to hand, but he was the nearest thing to one. The best man in the Company. He took no pride in that. Best maggot in the midden would have made a better boast. He was the only man there with the slightest shred of conscience. Except Temple, perhaps, and Temple spent his every waking moment trying to convince himself and everyone else that he had no conscience at all. Sufeen watched him, standing slightly behind Cosca, a little stooped as if he was hiding, fingers fussing, trying to twist the buttons off his shirt. A man who could have been anything, struggling to be nothing. But in the midst of this folly

and destruction, the waste of one man's potential hardly seemed worth commenting on. Could Jubair be right? Was God a vengeful killer, delighting in destruction? It was hard at that moment to argue otherwise.

The big Northman stood on the stoop in front of Stupfer's Meat House and watched them mount up, great fists clenched on the rail, afternoon sun glinting on that dead metal ball of an eye.

'How are you going to write this up?' Temple was asking.

Sworbreck frowned down at his notebook, pencil hovering, then carefully closed it. 'I may gloss over this episode.'

Sufeen snorted. 'I hope you brought a great deal of gloss.'

Though it had to be conceded, the Company of the Gracious Hand had conducted itself with unusual restraint that day. They put Squaredeal behind them with only mild complaints about the poor quality of plunder, leaving the merchant's body hanging naked from the watchtower, a sign about his neck proclaiming his fate a lesson to the rebels of the Near Country. Whether the rebels would hear the lesson, and if they did what they would learn from it, Sufeen could not say. Two other men hung beside the trader.

'Who were they?' asked Temple, frowning back.

'The young one was shot running away, I think. I'm not sure about the other.'

Temple grimaced, and twitched, and fidgeted with a frayed sleeve. 'What can we do, though?'

'Only follow our consciences.'

Temple rounded on him angrily. 'For a mercenary you talk a lot about conscience!'

'Why concern yourself unless yours bothers you?'

'As far as I can tell, you're still taking Cosca's money!'

'If I stopped, would you?'

Temple opened his mouth, then soundlessly shut it and scowled off at the horizon, picking at his sleeve, and picking, and picking.

Sufeen sighed. 'God knows, I never claimed to be a good man.' A couple of the outlying houses had been set ablaze, and he watched the columns of smoke drift up into the blue. 'Merely the best in the Company.'

All Got a Past

The rain came hard. It had filled the wagon ruts and the deep-sucked prints of boot and hoof until they were one morass and the main street lacked only for a current to be declared a river. It drew a grey curtain across the town, the odd lamp dimmed as through a mist, orange rumours dancing ghostly in the hundred thousand puddles. It fell in mud-spattering streams from the backed-up gutters on the roofs, and the roofs with no gutters at all, and from the brim of Lamb's hat as he hunched silent and soggy on the wagon's seat. It ran in miserable beads down the sign hung from an arch of crooked timbers that proclaimed this leavings of a town to be Averstock. It soaked into the dirt-speckled hides of the oxen, Calder proper lurching lame now in a back leg and Scale not much better off. It fell on the horses tethered to the rail before the shack that excused itself for a tavern. Three unhappy horses, their coats turned dark by the wet.

'That them?' asked Leef. 'Those their horses?'

'That's them,' said Shy, cold and clammy in her leaking coat as a woman buried.

'What we going to do?' Leef was trying to hide the tense note in his voice and falling well short.

Lamb didn't answer him. Not right away. Instead he leaned close to Shy, speaking soft. 'Say you're caught between two promises, and you can't keep one without breaking the other. What do you do?'

To Shy's mind that verged on the whimsical, considering the task in hand. She shrugged, shoulders chafing in her wet shirt. 'Keep the one most needs keeping, I guess.'

‘Aye,’ he muttered, staring across that mire of a street. ‘Just leaves on the water, eh? Never any choices.’ They sat a moment longer, no one doing a thing but getting wetter, then Lamb turned in his seat. ‘I’ll go in first. Get the oxen settled then the two of you follow, keeping easy.’ He swung from the wagon, boots splashing into the mud. ‘Unless you’ve a mind to stay here. Might be best all round.’

‘I’ll do my part,’ snapped Leef.

‘You know what your part might be? You ever kill a man?’

‘Have you?’

‘Just don’t get in my way.’ Lamb was different somehow. Not hunched any more. Bigger. Huge. Rain pattering on the shoulders of his coat, hint of light down one side of his rigid frown, the other all in darkness. ‘Stay out of my way. You got to promise me that.’

‘All right,’ said Leef, giving Shy a funny look.

‘All right,’ said Shy.

An odd thing for Lamb to say. You could find meaner lambs than him at every lambing season. But men can be strange that way, with their pride. Shy had never had much use for pride herself. So she guessed she could let him talk his talk, and try and work up to it, and go in first. Worked all right when they had crops to sell, after all. Let him draw the eyes while she slipped up behind. She slid her knife into her sleeve, watching the old Northman struggling to make it across the boggy street with both boots still on, arms wide for balance.

When Lamb faltered, she could do what needed doing. Done it before, hadn’t she, with lighter reasons and to men less deserving? She checked her knife would slip clear of her wet sleeve all right, heart thumping in her skull. She could do it again. Had to do it again.

The tavern looked a broke-down hovel from outside and a step indoors revealed no grand deception. The place made Shy come over nostalgic for Stupfer’s Meat House – a state of mind she’d never thought to entertain. A sorry tongue of fire squirmed in a hearth blackened past the point of rescue, a sour fragrance of woodsmoke and damp and rank bodies unknown to soap. The counter was a slab of old wood full of splits, polished by years of elbows and warped up in the middle. The Tavern-Keep, or maybe in this place the Hovel-Keep, stood over it wiping out cups.

Narrow and low, the place was still far from full, which on a night foul as this was a poor showing. A set of five with two women in the group Shy took for traders, and not prosperous ones, hunched about some stew at the table furthest from her. A bony man sat alone with only a cup and a wore-out look for company. She recognised that from the black-spotted mirror she used to have and figured him for a farmer. Next table a fellow slumped in a fur coat so big it near drowned him, a shock of grey hair above, a hat with a couple of greasy feathers in the band and a half-empty bottle on the wood in front of him. Opposite, upright as a judge at trial, sat an old Ghost woman with a broken sideways nose, grey hair all bound up with what looked like the tatters of an old Imperial flag, and a face so deep-lined you could've used it for a plate rack. If your plates hadn't all been burned up along with your mirror and everything else you owned, that is.

Shy's eyes crawled to the last members of the merry company like she wanted to pretend they weren't there at all. But they were. Three men, huddled to themselves. They looked like Union men, far as you could tell where anyone was born once they were worn down by a few seasons in the dirt and weather of the Near Country. Two were young, one with a mess of red hair and a twitchy way like he'd a fly down his back. The other had a handsome shape to his face, far as Shy could tell standing to his side, a sheepskin coat cinched in with a fancy metal-studded belt. The third was older, bearded and with a tall hat, weather-stained, cocked to the side like he thought a lot of himself. Which most men do, of course, in proportion inverse to their value.

He had a sword – Shy saw the battered brass tip of the sheath poking out the slit in his coat. Handsome had an axe and a heavy knife tucked in his belt along with a coil of rope. Red Hair's back was to her so she couldn't tell for certain, but no doubt he was entertaining a blade or two as well.

She could hardly believe how ordinary they were. How everyday and dirty humdrum and like a thousand other drifters she'd seen floating through Squaredeal. She watched Handsome slide his hand back and tuck the thumb in that fancy belt so his fingers dangled. Just like anyone might, leaning against a counter after a long ride. Except his ride had led right through her burned-out farm, right through her smashed-up hopes, and carried her brother and sister off into who knew what darkness.

She set her jaw hard and eased into the room, sticking to the shadows, not hiding exactly but making no spectacle of herself neither. Wasn't hard, because Lamb was doing the opposite, much against his usual grain. He'd strolled up to the other end of the counter and was leaning over it with his big fists bunched on the split wood.

'Nice night you've laid on for us,' he was saying to the Tavern-Keep, shedding his hat and making a fuss of flapping the water off it so anyone with a mind to look up was watching him. Only the old Ghost's deep-set eyes followed Shy as she slunk around the walls, and she'd nothing to say about it.

'Little on the rainy side, no?' said the Keep.

'Comes down any harder you could have a sideline in a ferry across the street.'

The Keep eyed his guests with scant delight. 'I could do with some sort o' business turns a profit. Hear tell there's crowds coming through the Near Country but they ain't crowding through here. You looking for a drink?'

Lamb pulled his gloves off and tossed them careless on the counter. 'I'll take a beer.'

The tender reached for a metal cup polished bright by his wiping.

'Not that one.' Lamb pointed at a great pottery mug, old-fashioned and dusty on a high shelf. 'I like something I can feel the heft on.'

'We talking about cups or women now?' asked the Keep as he stretched up to fetch it.

'Why not both?' Lamb was grinning. How could he smile, now? Shy's eyes flickered to the three men down the other end of the counter, bent quiet over their drinks.

'Where you in from?' asked the Keep.

'East.' Lamb shrugged his sodden coat off. 'North and east, near Squaredeal.'

One of the three men, the one with the red hair, looked over at Lamb, and sniffed, and looked away.

'That's a distance. Might be a hundred mile.'

'Might be more, the route I've took, and on a bloody ox-cart, too. My old arse is ground to sausage-meat.'

'Well, if you're thinking of heading further west I'd think again. Lots of folks going that way, gold-hungry. I hear they've got the Ghosts all stirred

up.'

'That a fact?'

'A certainty, friend,' threw out the man in the fur coat, sticking his head up like a tortoise from its shell. He'd about the deepest, most gravel-throated voice Shy ever heard, and she'd given ear to some worn-down tones in her time. 'They's stirred up all across the Far Country like you trod on an ant's nest. Riled up and banded up and out looking for ears, just like the old days. I heard Sangeed's even got his sword drawed again.'

'Sangeed?' The Keep wriggled his head around like his collar was too tight.

'The Emperor of the Plains his self.' Shy got the sense the old bastard was quite enjoying his scaremongering. 'His Ghosts massacred a whole fellowship o' prospectors out on the dusty not two weeks ago. Thirty men, maybe. Took their ears and their noses and I shouldn't wonder got their cocks besides.'

'What the hell do they *do* with them?' asked the farmer, staring at the old Ghost woman and giving a shudder. She didn't comment. Didn't even move.

'If you're fixed on going west I'd take plenty of company, and make sure that company has a little good humour and a lot o' good steel, so I would.' And the old-timer sank back into his fur coat.

'Good advice.' Lamb lifted that big mug and took a slow swallow. Shy swallowed with him, suddenly desperate for a beer of her own. Hell, but she wanted to get out of there. Get out or get on with it. But somehow Lamb was just as patient now as when he did the ploughing. 'I ain't sure yet exactly where I'm headed, though.'

'What brought you this far?' asked the Keep.

Lamb had started rolling up his damp shirtsleeves, thick muscles in his grey-haired forearms squirming. 'Followed some men out here.'

Red Hair looked over again, a flurry of twitches slinking through his shoulder and up his face, and this time he kept looking. Shy let the knife slide from her sleeve, out of sight behind her arm, fingers hot and tacky round the grip.

'Why'd you do that?' asked the Keep.

'They burned my farm. Stole my children. Hanged my friend.' Lamb spoke like it wasn't much to comment on, then raised his mug.

The place had fallen so silent of a sudden you could hear him swallow. One of the traders had turned to look over, brow all crinkled up with worry. Tall Hat reached for his cup and Shy saw the tendons start from the back of his hand, he was gripping on so tight. Leef picked out that moment to ease through the door and hover on the threshold, wet and pale and not knowing what to do with himself. But everyone was too fixed on Lamb to pay him any mind.

'Bad men, these, with no scruple,' he went on. 'They been stealing children all across the Near Country and leaving folk hanging in their wake. Might be a dozen I've buried the last few days.'

'How many of the bastards?'

'About twenty.'

'Do we need to get a band up and seek 'em out?' Though the Keep looked like he'd far rather stay and wipe his cups some more, and who could blame him?

Lamb shook his head. 'No point. They'll be long gone.'

'Right. Well. Reckon justice'll be catching up with 'em, sooner or later. Justice is always following, they say.'

'Justice can have what's left when I'm done.' Lamb finally had his sleeves rolled how he wanted and turned sideways, leaning easy against the counter, looking straight at those three men at its far end. Shy hadn't known what to expect, but not this, not Lamb just grinning and chatting like he'd never known a worry. 'When I said they've gone that ain't quite all the truth. Three broke off from the rest.'

'That a fact?' Tall Hat spoke up, snatching the conversation from the Keep like a thief snatching a purse.

Lamb caught his eye and held it. 'A certainty.'

'Three men, you say?' Handsome's fussing hand crept round his belt towards his axe. The mood of the place had shifted fast, the weight of coming violence hanging heavy as a storm cloud in that little room.

'Now look,' said the Keep, 'I don't want no trouble in my—'

'I didn't want no trouble,' said Lamb. 'It blew in anyway. Trouble's got a habit that way.' He pushed his wet hair out of his face, and his eyes were wide open and bright, bright, mouth open too, breathing fast, and he was smiling. Not like a man working his way up to a hard task. Like a man enjoying getting to a pleasant one, taking his time about it like you might

over a fine meal, and of a sudden Shy saw all those scars anew, and felt this coldness creeping up her arms and down her back and every hair on her standing.

'I tracked those three,' said Lamb. 'Picked up their trail and two days I've followed it.'

Another breathless pause, and the Keep took a step back, cup and cloth still limp in his hands, the ghost of a smile still clinging to his face but the rest all doubt. The three had turned to face Lamb, spreading out a little, backs to Shy, and she found herself easing forwards like she was wading through honey, out of the shadows towards them, tingling fingers shifting around the knife's handle. Every moment was a drawn-out age, breath scratching, catching in every throat.

'Where'd the trail lead?' asked Tall Hat, voice cracking at the end and tailing off.

Lamb's smile spread wider. The smile of a man got exactly what he wanted on his birthday. 'The ends o' your fucking legs.'

Tall Hat twitched his coat back, cloth flapping as he went for his sword.

Lamb flung the big mug at him underhand. It bounced off his head and sent him tumbling in a shower of beer.

A chair screeched as the farmer tried to stumble up and ended tripping over it.

The red-haired lad took a step back, making room or just from shock and Shy slipped her knife around his neck and pressed the flat into it, folding him tight with the other arm.

Someone shouted.

Lamb crossed the room in one spring. He caught Handsome's wrist just as he pulled his axe free, wrenched it up and with the other hand snatched the knife from his fancy belt and rammed it in his groin, dragging up the blade, ripping him wide open, blood spraying the pair of them. He gave a gurgling scream appalling loud in that narrow space and dropped to his knees, eyes goggling as he tried to hold his guts in. Lamb smashed him across the back of the head with the pommel of the knife, cut his scream off and laid him out flat.

One of the trader women jumped up, hands over her mouth.

The red-haired one Shy had a hold of squirmed and she squeezed him tighter and whispered, 'Shush,' grinding the point of her knife into his neck.

Tall Hat floundered up, hat forgotten, blood streaming from the gash the mug had made across his forehead. Lamb caught him around the neck, lifting him easily as if he was made of rags, and smashed his face into the counter, again with a crunch like a breaking pot, again head flopping like a doll's, and blood spotted the Keep's apron, and the wall behind him, and the ceiling, too. Lamb lifted the knife high, flash of his face still stretched wide in that crazy grin, then the blade was a metal blur, through the man's back and with an almighty crack left a split down the length of the bar, splinters flying. Lamb left him nailed there, knees just clear of the floor and his boots scraping at the boards, blood tip-tapping around them like a spilled drink.

All took no longer than Shy would've needed to take three good breaths, if she hadn't been holding hers the while. She was hot now, and dizzy, and the world was too bright. She was blinking. Couldn't quite get a hold on what had happened. She hadn't moved. She didn't move. No one did. Only Lamb, walking forward, eyes gleaming with tears and one side of his face black-dashed and speckled and his bared teeth glistening in his mad smile and each breath a soft growl in his throat like a lover's.

Red Hair whimpered, 'Fuck, fuck,' and Shy pushed the flat of the knife harder into his neck and shushed him up again. He'd a big blade halfway to a sword tucked in his belt and with her free hand she slid that out. Then Lamb was looming over the shrinking pair of them, his head near brushing the low rafters, and he twisted a fistful of the lad's shirt and jerked him out of Shy's limp grip.

'Talk to me.' And he hit the lad across the face, open-handed but hard enough to knock him down if he hadn't been held up.

'I . . .' muttered the lad.

Lamb slapped him again, the sound loud as a clap, the traders up the far end flinching at it but not a one moving. 'Talk.'

'What d'you—'

'Who was in charge?'

'Cantliss. That's his name.' The lad started blathering, words tumbling over each other all slobbery like he couldn't say them fast enough. 'Grega Cantliss. Didn't know how bad a crew they was, just wanted to get from here to there and make a bit of money. I was in the ferrying business back east and one day the rain come up and the ferry got swep' away and—' Slap. 'We didn't want it, you got to believe—' Slap. 'There's some evil ones

in with ’em. A Northman called Blackpoint, he shot an old man with arrows. They laughed at it.’

‘See me laughing?’ said Lamb, cuffing him again.

The red-haired lad held up one useless, shaking hand. ‘I didn’t laugh none! We didn’t want no part of all them killings so we split off! Supposed to be just some robbing, Cantliss told us, but turned out it was children we was stealing, and—’

Lamb cut him off with a slap. ‘Why’d he take the children?’ And he set him talking with another, the lad’s freckled face cut and swelling down one side, blood smearing his nose.

‘Said he had a buyer for ’em, and we’d all be rich men if we got ’em there. Said they weren’t to be hurt, not a hair on their heads. Wanted ’em perfect for the journey.’

Lamb slapped him again, opening another cut. ‘Journey where?’

‘To Crease, he said, to begin with.’

‘That’s up at the head of the Sokwaya,’ said Shy. ‘Right the way across the Far Country.’

‘Cantliss got a boat waiting. Take him upriver . . . upriver . . .’

‘To Crease and then where?’

The red-haired lad had slumped in half a faint, lids fluttering. Lamb slapped him again, both sides, shook him by his shirt. ‘To Crease and then where?’

‘Didn’t say. Not to me. Maybe to Taverner.’ Looking towards the man nailed to the counter with the knife handle sticking out his back. Shy didn’t reckon he’d be telling any tales now.

‘Who’s buying children?’ asked Lamb.

Red Hair drunkenly shook his swollen head. Lamb slapped him again, again, again. One of the trader women hid her face. The other stared, standing rigid. The man beside her dragged her back down into her chair.

‘Who’s buying?’

‘Don’t know,’ words mangled and bloody drool dangling from his split lip.

‘Stay there.’ Lamb let the lad go and crossed to Tall Hat, his boots in a bloody puddle, reached around and unbuckled his sword, took a knife from his coat. Then he rolled Handsome over with his foot, left him staring wonky-eyed at the ceiling, a deal less handsome with his insides on the

outside. Lamb took the bloody rope from his belt, walked to the red-haired lad and started tying one end around his neck while Shy just watched, numb and weak all over. Weren't clever knots he tied, but good enough, and he jerked the lad towards the door, following along without complaint like a beaten dog.

Then they stopped. The Keep had come around the counter and was standing in the doorway. Just goes to show you never can quite figure what a man will do, or when. He was holding tight to his wiping cloth like it might be a shield against evil. Shy didn't reckon it'd be a very effective one, but she'd some high respect for his guts. Just hoped Lamb didn't end up adding them to Handsome's, scattered bloody on the boards.

'This ain't right,' said the Keep.

'How's you being dead going to make it any righter?' Lamb's voice flat and quiet like it was no kind of threat, just a question. He didn't have to scream it. Those two dead men were doing it for him.

The Keep's eyes darted around but no heroes leaped to his side. All looked scared as if Lamb was death himself come calling. Except the old Ghost woman, sat tall in her chair just watching, and her companion in the fur coat, who still had his boots crossed and, without any quick movements, was pouring himself another drink.

'Ain't right.' But the Keep's voice was weak as watered beer.

'It's right as it's getting,' said Lamb.

'We should put a panel together and judge him proper, ask some—'

Lamb loomed forward. 'All you got to ask is do you want to be in my way.' The Keep shrank back and Lamb dragged the lad past. Shy hurried after, suddenly unfroze, passing Leef loose-jawed in the doorway.

Outside the rain had slacked to a steady drizzle. Lamb was hauling Red Hair across the mired street towards the arch of crooked timbers the sign hung from. High enough for a mounted man to pass under. Or for one on foot to dangle from.

'Lamb!' Shy hopped down from the tavern's porch, boots sinking to the ankles. 'Lamb!' He weighed the rope then tossed it over the crossbar. 'Lamb!' She struggled across the street, mud sucking at her feet. He caught the loose end of the rope and jerked the slack out, the red-haired lad stumbling as the noose went tight under his chin, bloated face showing dumb like he hadn't worked out yet where he was headed.

‘Ain’t we seen enough folk hanged?’ called Shy as she slopped up. Lamb didn’t answer, didn’t look at her, just wound the free end of the rope about one forearm.

‘It ain’t right,’ she said. Lamb took a sniff and set himself to haul the lad into the air. Shy snatched hold of the rope by the lad’s neck and started sawing at it with the short-sword. It was sharp. Didn’t take a moment to cut it through.

‘Get running.’

The lad blinked at her.

‘Run, you fucking idiot!’ She kicked the seat of his trousers and he sloshed a few steps and went over on his face, struggled up and floundered away into the darkness, still with his rope collar.

Shy turned back to Lamb. He was staring at her, stolen sword in one hand, loose length of rope in the other. But like he was hardly seeing her. Like he was hardly him, even. How could this be the man who’d bent over Ro when she had the fever, and sung to her? Sung badly, but sung still, face all wrinkled with care? Now she looked in those black eyes and suddenly this dread crept on her like she was looking into the void. Standing on the edge of nothing and it took every grain of courage she had not to run.

‘Bring them three horses over!’ she snapped at Leef, who’d wandered out onto the porch with Lamb’s coat and hat in his hands. ‘Bring ’em now!’ And he hopped off to do it. Lamb just stood, staring after the red-haired lad, the rain starting to wash the blood off his face. He took hold of the saddle bow when Leef led the biggest horse over, started to swing himself up and the horse shied, and kicked out, and Lamb gave a grunt as he lost his grip and went over backwards, stirrup flapping as he caught it with a clutching hand, splashing down hard in the mud on his side. Shy knelt by him as he struggled to his hands and knees.

‘You hurt?’

He looked up at her and there were tears in his eyes, and he whispered, ‘By the dead, Shy. By the dead.’ She did her best to drag him up, a bastard of a task since he was a corpse-weight of a sudden. When they finally got him standing he pulled her close by her coat. ‘Promise me,’ he whispered. ‘Promise me you won’t get in my way again.’

‘No.’ She laid a hand on his scarred cheek. ‘I’ll hold your bridle for you, though.’ And she did, and the horse’s face, too, and whispered calm words

to it and wished there was someone to do the same to her while Lamb dragged himself up into the saddle, slow and weary, teeth gritted like it was an effort. When he got up he sat hunched, right hand on the reins, left hand holding his coat closed at his neck. He looked an old man again. Older than ever. An old man with a terrible weight and worry across his hunched shoulders.

'He all right?' Leef 's voice not much above a whisper, like he was scared of being overheard.

'I don't know,' said Shy. Lamb didn't seem like he could hear even, wincing off to the black horizon, almost one with the black sky now.

'You all right?' Leef whispered to her.

'Don't know that either.' She felt the world was all broken up and washed away and she was drifting on strange seas, cut loose from land. 'You?'

Leef just shook his head, and looked down at the mud with eyes all round.

'Best get what we need from the wagon and mount up, eh?'

'What about Scale and Calder?'

'They're blown and we've got to move. Leave 'em.'

The wind dashed rain in her face and she pulled her hat-brim down and set her jaw hard. Her brother and her sister, that's what she'd fix on. They were the stars she'd set her course by, two points of light in the black. They were all that mattered.

So she heeled her new horse and led the three of them out into the gathering night. They hadn't gone far when Shy heard noises beyond the wind and slowed to a walk. Lamb brought his horse about and drew the sword. An old cavalry sword, long and heavy, sharpened on one side.

'Someone's following!' said Leef, fumbling with his bow.

'Put that away! You'll more likely shoot yourself in this light. Or worse yet, me.' Shy heard hooves on the track behind them, and a wagon, too, a glimmer of torchlight through tree-trunks. Folk come out from Averstock to chase them? The Keep firmer set on justice than he'd seemed? She slid the short-sword out by its horn handle, metal glinting with the last red touch of twilight. Shy had no notion what to expect any more. If Juvens himself had trotted from the dark and bid them a good evening she'd have shrugged and asked which way he was headed.

'Hold up!' came a voice as deep and rough as Shy ever heard. Not Juvens himself. The man in the fur coat. He came into sight now, riding with a

torch in his hand. ‘I’m a friend!’ he said, slowing to a walk.

‘You’re no friend o’ mine,’ she said back.

‘Let’s put that right as a first step, then.’ He delved into a saddlebag and tossed a half-full bottle across to Shy. A wagon trundled up with a pair of horses pulling. The old Ghost woman had the reins, creased face as empty as it had been at the inn, a singed old chagga pipe gripped between her teeth, not smoking it, just chewing it.

They all sat a moment, in the dark, then Lamb said, ‘What do you want?’

The stranger reached up slow and tipped his hat back. ‘No need to spill more blood tonight, big man, we’re no enemies o’ yours. And if I was I reckon I’d be reconsidering that position about now. Just want to talk, is all. Make a proposal that might benefit the crowd of us.’

‘Speak your piece, then,’ said Shy, pulling the cork from the bottle with her teeth but keeping the sword handy.

‘Then I will. My name’s Dab Sweet.’

‘What?’ said Leef ‘Like that scout they tell all the stories of?’

‘Exactly like. I’m him.’

Shy paused in her drinking. ‘You’re Dab Sweet? Who was first to lay eyes on the Black Mountains?’ She passed the bottle across to Lamb, who passed it straight to Leef, who took a swig, and coughed.

Sweet gave a dry chuckle. ‘The mountains saw me first, I reckon, but the Ghosts been there a few hundred years before, and the Imperials before that, maybe, and who knows who back when before the Old Time? Who’s to say who’s first to anything out in this country?’

‘But you killed that great red bear up at the head of the Sokwaya with no more than your hands?’ asked Leef, passing the bottle back to Shy.

‘I been to the head of the Sokwaya times enough, that’s true, but I take some offence at that particular tale.’ Sweet grinned, friendly lines spreading out across his weathered face. ‘Fighting even a little bear with your hands don’t sound too clever to me. My preferred approach to bears – alongside most dangers – is to be where they ain’t. But there’s all kind of strange water flowed by down the years, and my memory ain’t all it was, I’ll confess that, too.’

‘Maybe you misremembered your name,’ said Shy, and took another swig. She had a hell of a thirst on her.

‘Woman, I’d accept that for a strong possibility if I didn’t have it stamped into my old saddle here.’ And he gave the battered leather a friendly pat. ‘Dab Sweet.’

‘Felt sure from what I’ve heard you’d be bigger.’

‘From what I’ve heard I should be half a mile high. Folk like to talk. And when they do, ain’t really up to me what size I grow to, is it?’

‘What’s this old Ghost to you?’ asked Shy.

So slow and solemn it might’ve been the eulogy at a funeral, the Ghost said, ‘He’s my wife.’

Sweet gave his grinding laugh again. ‘Sometimes it do feel that way, I’ll concede. That there Ghost is Crying Rock. We been up and down every speck o’ the Far Country and the Near Country and plenty o’ country don’t got no names. Right now we’re signed on as scouts, hunters and pilots to take a Fellowship of prospectors across the plains to Crease.’

Shy narrowed her eyes. ‘That so?’

‘From what I heard back there, you’ll be headed the same way. You’ll be finding no keelboat of your own, not one stopping off to pick you up leastways, and that means out on the lone and level by hoof or wheel or boot. With the Ghosts on the rampage you’ll be needing company.’

‘Meaning yours.’

‘I may not be throttling any bears on the way, but I know the Far Country. Few better. Anyone’s going to get you to Crease with your ears still on your head, it’s me.’

Crying Rock cleared her throat, shifting her dead pipe from one side of her mouth to the other with her tongue.

‘It’s me and Crying Rock.’

‘And what’d possess you to do us such a favour?’ asked Shy. Specially after what they’d just seen.

Sweet scratched at his stubbly beard. ‘This expedition got put together before the trouble started on the plains and we’ve got all sorts along. A few with iron in ’em, but not enough experience and too much cargo.’ He was looking over at Lamb with an estimating expression. The way Clay might’ve sized up a haul of grain. ‘Now there’s trouble in the Far Country we could use another man don’t get sickly at the sight o’ blood.’ His eyes moved over to Shy. ‘And I’ve a sense you can hold a blade steady too when it’s called for.’

She weighed the sword. ‘I can just about keep myself from dropping one. What’s your offer?’

‘Normally folk bring a skill to the company or pay their way. Then everyone shares supplies, helps each other out where they can. The big man —’

‘Lamb.’

Sweet raised a brow. ‘Really?’

‘One name’s good as another,’ said Lamb.

‘I won’t deny it, and you go free. I’ve stood witness to your usefulness. You can pay a half-share, woman, and a full share for the lad, that comes to . . .’ Sweet crunched his face up, working the sums.

Shy might’ve seen two men killed and saved another that night, her stomach still sick and her head still spinning from it, but she wasn’t going to let a deal go wandering past.

‘We’ll all be going free.’

‘What?’

‘Leef here’s the best damn shot with a bow you ever saw. He’s an asset.’

Sweet looked less than convinced. ‘He is?’

‘I am?’ muttered Leef.

‘We’ll all be going free.’ Shy took another swig and tossed the bottle back. ‘It’s that way or no way.’

Sweet narrowed his eyes as he took his own long, slow drink, then he looked over at Lamb again, sat still in the darkness, just the glimmer of the torch in the corners of his eyes, and sighed. ‘You like to drive a bargain, don’t you?’

‘My preferred approach to bad deals is to be where they ain’t.’

Sweet gave another chuckle, and he nosed his horse forward, and he stuck the bottle in the crook of his arm, pulled off his glove with his teeth and slapped his hand into hers. ‘Deal. Reckon I’m going to like you, girl. What’s your name?’

‘Shy South.’

Sweet raised that brow again. ‘Shy?’

‘It’s a name, old man, not a description. Now hand me back that bottle.’

And so they headed off into the night, Dab Sweet telling tales in his grinding bass, talking a lot and saying nothing and laughing a fair bit too just as though they hadn’t left two men murdered not an hour before,

passing the bottle about 'til it was done and Shy tossed it away into the night with a warmth in her belly. When Averstock was just a few lights behind she reined her horse back to a walk and dropped in beside the closest thing she'd ever had to a father.

'Your name hasn't always been Lamb, has it?'

He looked at her, and then away. Hunching down further. Pulling his coat tighter. Thumb slipping out between his fingers over and over, rubbing at the stump of the middle one. The missing one. 'We all got a past,' he said.

Too true, that.

The Stolen

The children were left in a silent huddle each time Cantliss went to round up more. Rounding ’em up, that’s what he called it, like they was just unclaimed cattle and no killing was needed. No doing what they’d done at the farm. No laughing about it after when they brought more staring little ones. Blackpoint was always laughing, a lopsided laugh with two of the front teeth missing. Like he’d never heard a joke so funny as murder.

At first Ro tried to guess at where they were. Maybe even leave some sign for those who must be coming after. But the woods and the fields gave way to just a scrubby emptiness in which a bush was quite the landmark. They were headed west, she gathered that much, but no more. She had Pit to think about and the other children too and she tried to keep them fed and cleaned and quiet the best she could.

The children were all kinds, none older than ten. There’d been twenty-one ’til that boy Care had tried to run and Blackpoint came back from chasing him all bloody. So they were down to twenty and no one tried to run after that.

There was a woman with them called Bee who was all right even if she did have scars on her arms from surviving the pox. She held the children sometimes. Not Ro, ’cause she didn’t need holding, and not Pit, ’cause he had Ro to hold, but some of the younger ones, and she whispered at them to hush when they cried ’cause she was scared as piss of Cantliss. He’d hit her time to time, and after when she was wiping the blood from her nose she’d make excuses for him. She’d say how he’d had a hard life and been abandoned by his folks and beaten as a child and other such. That sounded

to Ro like it should make you slower rather'n quicker to beat others, but she guessed everyone's got their excuses. Even if they're feeble ones.

The way Ro saw it, Cantliss had nothing in him worth a damn. He rode up front in his fancy tailored clothes like he was some big man with important doings to be about, 'stead of a child-thief and murderer and lowest of the low, aiming to make himself look special by gathering even lower scum about him for a backdrop. At night he'd get a great big fire built 'cause he loved to watch things burn, and he'd drink, and once he'd set to drinking his mouth would get a bitter twist and he'd complain. About how life weren't fair and how he'd been tricked out of an inheritance by a banker and how things never seemed to go his way.

They stopped for a day beside wide water flowing and Ro asked him, 'Where are you taking us?' and he just said, 'Upstream.' A keelboat had tied off at the bank and upstream they'd gone, poled and roped and rowed by a set of men all sinew while the flat land slid by, and way, way off north through the haze three blue peaks showed against the sky.

Ro thought at first it would be a mercy, not to have to ride no more, but now all they could do was sit. Sit under a canopy up front and watch the water and the land drift past and feel their old lives dwindle further and further off, the faces of the folks they'd known harder to bring to mind, until the past all felt like a dream and the future an unknown nightmare.

Blackpoint would get off now and again with his bow, a couple of the others with him, and they'd come back later with meat they'd hunted up. Rest of the time he sat smoking, and watched the children, and grinned for hours at a spell. When Ro saw the missing teeth in that grin she thought about him shooting Gully and leaving him swinging there on the tree full of arrows. When she thought about that she wanted to cry, but she knew she couldn't because she was one of the oldest and the little ones were looking to her to be strong and that's what she meant to be. She reckoned if she didn't cry that was her way of beating them. A little victory, maybe, but Shy always said a win's a win.

Few days on the boat and they saw something burning far off across the grass, plumes of smoke trickling up and fading in that vastness of above and the black dots of birds circling, circling. The chief boatman said they should turn back and he was worried about Ghosts and Cantliss just laughed, and

shifted the knife in his belt, and said there was things closer at hand for a man to worry on and that was all the conversation.

That evening one of the men had shaken her wakeful and started talking about how she reminded him of someone, smiling though there was something wrong in his eye and his breath sour with spirits, and he'd caught hold of her arm and Pit had hit him hard as he could which wasn't that hard. Bee woke and screamed and Cantliss came and dragged the man away and Blackpoint kicked him 'til he stopped moving and tossed him in the river. Cantliss shouted at the others to leave the goods well alone and just use their fucking hands, 'cause no bastard would be costing him money, you could bet on that.

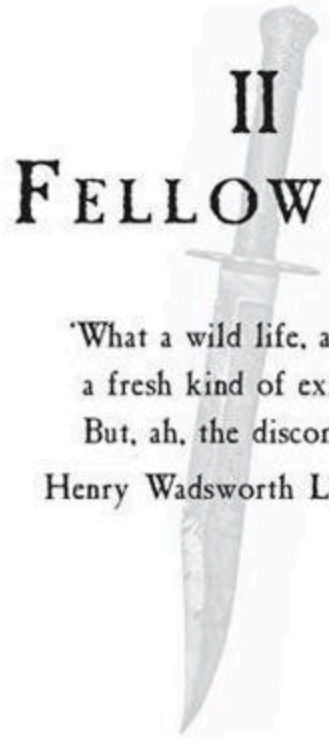
She knew she should never have said nothing about it but she couldn't help herself then and she'd burst out, 'My sister's following, you can bet on that if you want to bet! She'll find you out!'

She'd thought Cantliss might hit her then but all he'd done was look at her like she was the latest of many afflictions fate had forced upon him and said, 'Little one, the past is gone, like to that water flowing by. The sooner you put it from your pinprick of a mind the happier you'll be. You got no sister now. No one's following.' And he went off to stand on the prow, tutting as he tried to rub the spotted blood out of his fancy clothes with a damp rag.

'Is it true?' Pit asked her. 'Is no one following?'

'Shy's following.' Ro never doubted it because, you'd best believe, Shy was not a person to be told how things would be. But what Ro didn't say was that she half-hoped Shy wasn't following, because she didn't want to see her sister shot through with arrows, and didn't really know what she could do about all this, 'cause even with the three that left, and the two that took most of the horses off to sell when they got on the boat, and the one that Blackpoint killed, Cantliss still had thirteen men. She didn't see what anyone could do about it.

She wished Lamb was with them, though, because he could've smiled and said, 'It's all right. Don't worry none,' like he did when there was a storm and she couldn't sleep. That would've been fine.



II
FELLOWSHIP

'What a wild life, and what
a fresh kind of existence!
But, ah, the discomforts!'
Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

Conscience and the Cock-Rot

‘Praying?’

Sufeen sighed. ‘No, I am kneeling here with my eyes closed cooking porridge. Yes, I am praying.’ He opened one eye a crack and aimed it at Temple. ‘Care to join me?’

‘I don’t believe in God, remember?’ Temple realised he was picking at the hem of his shirt again and stopped himself. ‘Can you honestly say He ever raised a finger to help you?’

‘You don’t have to *like* God to believe. Besides, I know I am past help.’

‘What do you pray for, then?’

Sufeen dabbed his face with his prayer cloth, eyeing Temple over the fringe. ‘I pray for you, brother. You look as if you need it.’

‘I’ve been feeling . . . a little jumpy.’ Temple realised he was worrying at his sleeve now, and tore his hand away. For God’s sake, would his fingers not be happy until they had unravelled every shirt he possessed? ‘Do you ever feel as if there is a dreadful weight hanging over you . . .’

‘Often.’

‘. . . and that it might fall at any moment . . .’

‘All the time.’

‘. . . and you just don’t know how to get out from under it?’

‘But you *do* know.’ There was a pause while they watched each other.

‘No,’ said Temple, taking a step away. ‘No, no.’

‘The Old Man listens to you.’

‘No!’

‘You could talk to him, get him to stop this—’

‘I tried, he didn’t want to hear!’

‘Perhaps you didn’t try hard enough.’ Temple clapped his hands over his ears and Sufeen dragged them away. ‘The easy way leads nowhere!’

‘You talk to him, then!’

‘I’m just a scout!’

‘I’m just a lawyer! I never claimed to be a righteous man.’

‘No righteous man does.’

Temple tore himself free and strode off through the trees. ‘If God wants this stopped, let Him stop it! Isn’t He all-powerful?’

‘Never leave to God what you can do yourself!’ he heard Sufeen call, and hunched his shoulders as though the words were sling-stones. The man was starting to sound like Kahdia. Temple only hoped things didn’t end the same way.

Certainly no one else in the Company appeared keen to avoid violence. The woods were alive with eager fighting men, tightening worn-out straps, sharpening weapons, stringing bows. A pair of Northmen were slapping each other to pink-faced heights of excitement. A pair of Kantics were at prayers of their own, kneeling before a blessing stone they had placed with great care on a tree-stump, the wrong way up. Every man takes God for his ally, regardless of which way he faces.

The towering wagon had been drawn up in a clearing, its hardworking horses at their nosebags. Cosca was draped against one of its wheels, outlining his vision for the attack on Averstock to an assembly of the Company’s foremost members, switching smoothly between Styrian and common and with expressive gestures of hand and hat for the benefit of those who spoke neither. Sworbreck crouched over a boulder beside him with pencil poised to record the great man at work.

‘. . . so that Captain Dimbik’s Union contingent can sweep in from the west, alongside the river!’

‘Yes, sir,’ pronounced Dimbik, sweeping a few well-greased hairs back into position with a licked little finger.

‘Brachio will simultaneously bring his men charging in from the east!’

‘Simulta what now?’ grunted the Styrian, tonguing at a rotten tooth.

‘At the same time,’ said Friendly.

‘Ah.’

‘And Jubair will thrust downhill from the trees, completing the encirclement!’ The feather on Cosca’s hat thrashed as it achieved a

metaphorical total victory over the forces of darkness.

'Let no one escape,' ground out Lorsen. 'Everyone must be examined.'

'Of course.' Cosca pushed out his lower jaw and scratched thoughtfully at his neck, where a faint speckling of pink rash was appearing. 'And all plunder declared, assessed and properly noted so that it may be divided according to the Rule of Quarters. Any questions?'

'How many men will Inquisitor Lorsen torture to death today?' demanded Sufeen in ringing tones. Temple stared at him open-mouthed, and he was not alone.

Cosca went on scratching. 'I was thinking of questions relating to our tactics—'

'As many as is necessary,' interrupted the Inquisitor. 'You think I revel in this? The world is a grey place. A place of half-truths. Of half-wrongs and half-rights. Yet there are things worth fighting for, and they must be pursued with all our vigour and commitment. Half-measures achieve nothing.'

'What if there are no rebels down there?' Sufeen shook off Temple's frantic tugging at his sleeve. 'What if you are wrong?'

'Sometimes I will be,' said Lorsen simply. 'Courage lies in bearing the costs. We all have our regrets, but not all of us can afford to be crippled by them. Sometimes it takes small crimes to prevent bigger ones. Sometimes the lesser evil is the greater good. A man of principle must make hard choices and suffer the consequences. Or you could sit and cry over how unfair it all is.'

'Works for me,' said Temple with a laugh of choking falseness.

'It will not work for me.' Sufeen wore a strange expression, as if he was looking through the gathering to something in the far distance, and Temple felt an awful foreboding. Even more awful than usual. 'General Cosca, I want to go down into Averstock.'

'So do we all! Did you not hear my address?'

'Before the attack.'

'Why?' demanded Lorsen.

'To talk to the townsfolk,' said Sufeen. 'To give them a chance to surrender any rebels.' Temple winced. God, it sounded ridiculous. Noble, righteous, courageous and ridiculous. 'To avoid what happened in Squaredeal—'

Cosca was taken aback. ‘I thought we were remarkably well behaved in Squaredeal. A company of kittens could have been no gentler! Would you not say so, Sworbreck?’

The writer adjusted his eyeglasses and stammered out, ‘Admirable restraint.’

‘This is a poor town.’ Sufeen pointed into the trees with a faintly shaking finger. ‘They have nothing worth taking.’

Dimbik frowned as he scraped at a stain on his sash with a fingernail. ‘You can’t know that until you look.’

‘Just give me a chance. I’m begging you.’ Sufeen clasped his hands and looked Cosca in his eye. ‘I’m praying.’

‘Prayer is arrogance,’ intoned Jubair. ‘The hope of man to change the will of God. But God’s plan is set and His words already spoken.’

‘Fuck Him, then!’ snapped Sufeen.

Jubair mildly raised one brow. ‘Oh, you will find it is God who does the fucking.’

There was a pause, the metallic notes of martial preparations drifting between the tree-trunks along with the morning birdsong.

The Old Man sighed and rubbed at the bridge of his nose. ‘You sound determined.’

Sufeen echoed Lorsen’s words. ‘A man of principle must make hard choices and suffer the consequences.’

‘And if I agree to this, what then? Will your conscience continue to prick at our arses all the way across the Near Country and back? Because that could become decidedly tiresome. Conscience can be painful but so can the cock-rot. A grown-up should suffer his afflictions privately and not allow them to become an inconvenience for friends and colleagues.’

‘Conscience and the cock-rot are hardly equivalent,’ snapped Lorsen.

‘Indeed,’ said Cosca, significantly. ‘The cock-rot is rarely fatal.’

The Inquisitor’s face had turned even more livid than usual. ‘Am I to understand you are considering this folly?’

‘You are, and I am. The town is surrounded, after all, no one is going anywhere. Perhaps this can make all our lives a little easier. What do you think, Temple?’

Temple blinked. ‘Me?’

‘I am looking at you and using your name.’

‘Yes, but . . . me?’ There was a good reason why he had stopped making hard choices. He always made the wrong ones. Thirty years of scraping through the poverty and fear between disasters to end up in this fix was proof enough of that. He looked from Sufeen, to Cosca, to Lorsen, and back. Where was the greatest profit? Where the least danger? Who was actually . . . right? It was damned difficult to pick the easy way from this tangle. ‘Well . . .’

Cosca puffed out his cheeks. ‘The man of conscience and the man of doubts. God help us indeed. You have one hour.’

‘I must protest!’ barked Lorsen.

‘If you must, you must, but I won’t be able to hear you with all this noise.’

‘What noise?’

Cosca stuck his fingers in his ears. ‘Blah-lee-lah-lee-lah-lee-lah-lee-lah . . . !’

He was still doing it as Temple hurried away through the towering trees after Sufeen, their boots crunching on fallen sticks, rotten cones, browned pine needles, the sound of the men fading to leave only the rustling of the branches high above, the twitter and warble of birds.

‘Have you gone mad?’ hissed Temple, struggling to keep up.

‘I have gone sane.’

‘What will you do?’

‘Talk to them.’

‘To who?’

‘Whoever will listen.’

‘You won’t put the world right with talk!’

‘What will you use, then? Fire and sword? Papers of Engagement?’

They passed the last group of puzzled sentries, Bermi giving a questioning look from among them and Temple offering only a helpless shrug in return, then they were out into the open, sunlight suddenly bright on their faces. The few dozen houses of Averstock clung to a curve in the river below. ‘Houses’ was being generous to most of them. They were little better than shacks, with dirt between. They were no better than shacks, with shit between, and Sufeen was already striding purposefully downhill in their direction.

‘What the hell is he up to?’ hissed Bermi from the shadowy safety of the trees.

‘I think he’s following his conscience,’ said Temple.

The Styrian looked unconvinced. ‘Conscience is a shitty navigator.’

‘I’ve often told him so.’ Yet Sufeen showed no sign of slowing in his pursuit of it. ‘Oh God,’ muttered Temple, wincing up at the blue heavens. ‘Oh God, oh God.’ And he bounded after, grass thrashing about his calves, patched with little white flowers the name of which he did not know.

‘Self-sacrifice is not a noble thing!’ he called as he caught up. ‘I have seen it, and it’s an ugly, pointless thing, and nobody thanks you for it!’

‘Perhaps God will.’

‘If there is a God, He has bigger things to worry about than the likes of us!’

Sufeen pressed on, looking neither left or right. ‘Go back, Temple. This is not the easy way.’

‘That I fucking realise!’ He caught a fistful of Sufeen’s sleeve. ‘Let’s both go back!’

Sufeen shook him off and carried on. ‘No.’

‘Then I’m coming!’

‘Good.’

‘Fuck!’ Temple hurried to catch up again, the town getting steadily closer and looking less and less like a thing he wished to risk his life for. ‘What’s your plan? There is a plan, yes?’

‘There is . . . part of one.’

‘That’s not very reassuring.’

‘Reassuring you was not my aim.’

‘Then you have *fucking* succeeded, my friend.’ They passed under the arch of rough-trimmed timbers that served for a gate, a sign creaking beneath it that read *Averstock*. They skirted around the boggiest parts of the boggy main street, between the slumping little buildings, most of warped pine, all on one storey and some barely that.

‘God, this is a poor place,’ muttered Sufeen.

‘It puts me in mind of home,’ whispered Temple. Which was far from a good thing. The sun-baked lower city of Dagoska, the seething slums of Styria, the hard-scrabble villages of the Near Country. Every nation was rich in its own way, but poor in the same.

A woman skinned a fly-blown carcass that might have been rabbit or cat and Temple got the feeling she was not bothered which. A pair of half-naked children mindlessly banged wooden swords together in the street. A long-haired ancient whittled a stick on the stoop of one of the few stone-built houses, a sword that was definitely not a toy leaning against the wall behind him. They all watched Temple and Sufeen with sulky suspicion. Some shutters clattered closed and Temple's heart started to pound. Then a dog barked and he nearly shat, sweat standing cold on his brow as a stinking breeze swept past. He wondered if this was the stupidest thing he had ever done in a life littered with idiocy. High on the list, he decided, and still with ample time to bully its way to the top.

Averstock's glittering heart was a shed with a tankard painted on a board above the entrance and a luckless clientele. A pair who looked like a farmer and his son, both red-haired and bony, the boy with a satchel over his shoulder, sat at one table eating bread and cheese far from the freshest. A tragic fellow decked in fraying ribbons was bent over a cup. Temple took him for a travelling bard, and hoped he specialised in sad songs because the sight of him was enough to bring on tears. A woman was cooking over a fire in the blackened hearth, and spared Temple one sour look as he entered.

The counter was a warped slab with a fresh split down its length and a large stain worked into the grain that looked unpleasantly like blood. Behind it the Tavern-Keep was carefully wiping cups with a rag.

'It's not too late,' whispered Temple. 'We could just choke down a cup of whatever piss they sell here, walk straight on through and no harm done.'

'Until the rest of the Company get here.'

'I meant no harm to *us* . . .' But Sufeen was already approaching the counter leaving Temple to curse silently in the doorway for a moment before following with the greatest reluctance.

'What can I get you?' asked the Keep.

'There are some four hundred mercenaries surrounding your town, with every intention of attacking,' said Sufeen, and Temple's hopes of avoiding catastrophe were dealt a shattering blow.

There was a pregnant pause. Heavily pregnant.

'This hasn't been my best week,' grunted the Keep. 'I'm in no mood for jokes.'

‘If we were set on laughter I think we could come up with better,’ muttered Temple.

Sufeen spoke over him. ‘They are the Company of the Gracious Hand, led by the infamous mercenary Nicomo Cosca, and they have been employed by his Majesty’s Inquisition to root out rebels in the Near Country. Unless they receive your fullest cooperation, your bad week will get a great deal worse.’

They had the Keep’s attention now. They had the attention of every person in the tavern and were not likely to lose it. Whether that was a good thing remained very much to be seen, but Temple was not optimistic. He could not remember the last time he had been.

‘And if there is rebels in town?’ The farmer leaned against the counter beside them, pointedly rolling up his sleeve. There was a tattoo on his sinewy forearm. *Freedom, liberty, justice.* Here, then, was the scourge of the mighty Union, Lorsen’s insidious enemy, the terrifying rebel in the flesh. Temple looked into his eyes. If this was the face of evil, it was a haggard one.

Sufeen chose his words carefully. ‘Then they have less than an hour to surrender, and spare the people of this town bloodshed.’

The bony man gave a smile missing several of the teeth and all of the joy. ‘I can take you to Sheel. He can choose what to believe.’ Clearly he did not believe any of it. Or perhaps even entirely comprehend.

‘Take us to Sheel, then,’ said Sufeen. ‘Good.’

‘Is it?’ muttered Temple. The feeling of impending disaster was almost choking him now. Or perhaps that was the rebel’s breath. He certainly had the breath of evil, if nothing else.

‘You’ll have to give up your weapons,’ he said.

‘With the greatest respect,’ said Temple, ‘I’m not convinced—’

‘Hand ’em over.’ Temple was surprised to see the woman at the fire had produced a loaded flatbow and was pointing it unwavering at him.

‘I am convinced,’ he croaked, pulling his knife from his belt between finger and thumb. ‘It’s only a very small one.’

‘Ain’t the size,’ said the bony man as he plucked it from Temple’s hand, ‘so much as where you stick it.’ Sufeen unbuckled his sword-belt and he took that, too. ‘Let’s go. And it’d be an idea not to make no sudden moves.’

Temple raised his palms. ‘I try always to avoid them.’

‘You made one when you followed me down here, as I recall,’ said Sufeen.

‘And how I regret it now.’

‘Shut up.’ The bony rebel herded them towards the door, the woman following at a cautious distance, bow levelled. Temple caught the blue of a tattoo on the inside of her wrist. The boy lurched along at the back, one of his legs in a brace and his satchel clutched tight to his chest. It might have been a laughable procession without the threat of death. Temple had always found the threat of death to be a sure antidote to comedy.

Sheel turned out to be the old man who had watched them walk into town a few moments before. What happy times those seemed now. He stiffly stood, waving away a fly, then, almost as an afterthought, even more stiffly bent for his sword before stepping from his porch.

‘What’s to do, Danard?’ he asked in a voice croaky with phlegm.

‘Caught these two in the inn,’ said the bony man.

‘Caught?’ asked Temple. ‘We walked in and asked for you.’

‘Shut up,’ said Danard.

‘You shut up,’ said Sufeen.

Sheel did something between vomiting and clearing his throat, then effortfully swallowed the results. ‘Let’s all see if we can split thedifference between talking too much and not at all. I’m Sheel. I speak for the rebels hereabouts.’

‘All four of them?’ asked Temple.

‘There were more.’ He looked sad rather than angry. He looked all squeezed out and, one could only hope, ready to give up.

‘My name is Sufeen, and I have come to warn you—’

‘We’re surrounded, apparently,’ sneered Danard. ‘Surrender to the Inquisition and Averstock stands another day.’

Sheel turned his watered-down grey eyes on Temple. ‘You’d have to agree it’s a far-fetched story.’

Easy, hard, it mattered not what crooked path they’d followed here, there was only one way through this now, and that was to convince this man of what they said. Temple fixed him with his most earnest expression. The one with which he had convinced Kahdia he would not steal again, with which he had convinced his wife that everything would be well, with which he had told Cosca he could be trusted. Had they not all believed him?

‘My friend is telling you the truth.’ He spoke slowly, carefully, as if there were only the two of them there. ‘Come with us and we can save lives.’

‘He’s lying.’ The bony man poked Temple in the side with the pommel of Sufeen’s sword. ‘There ain’t no one up there.’

‘Why would we come here just to lie?’ Temple ignored the prodding and kept his eyes fixed on the old man’s wasted face. ‘What would we gain?’

‘Why do it at all?’ asked Sheel.

Temple paused for a moment, his mouth half-open. Why not the truth? At least it was novel. ‘We got sick of not doing it.’

‘Huh.’ That appeared to touch something. The old man’s hand drifted from his sword-hilt. Not surrender. A long way from surrender, but something. ‘If you’re telling the truth and we give up, what then?’

Too much truth is always a mistake. Temple stuck to earnest. ‘The people of Averstock will be spared, that I promise you.’

The old man cleared his throat again. God, his lungs sounded bad. Could it be that he was starting to believe? Could it be that this might actually work? Might they not only live out the day, but save lives into the bargain? Might he do something that Kahdia would have been proud of? The thought made Temple proud, just for a moment. He ventured a smile. When did he last feel proud? Had he ever?

Sheel opened his mouth to speak, to concede, to surrender . . . then paused, frowning off over Temple’s shoulder.

A sound carried on the wind ever so faintly. Hooves. Horses’ hooves. Temple followed the old rebel’s gaze and saw, up on the grassy side of the valley, a rider coming down at a full gallop. Sheel saw him, too, and his forehead furrowed with puzzlement. More riders appeared behind the first, pouring down the slope, now a dozen, now more.

‘No,’ muttered Temple.

‘Temple!’ hissed Sufeen.

Sheel’s eyes widened. ‘You bastards!’

Temple held up his hand. ‘No!’

He heard grunting in his ear, and when Temple turned to tell Sufeen this was hardly the time saw his friend and Danard lurching about in a snarling embrace. He stared at them, open mouthed.

They should have had an hour.

Sheel clumsily drew his sword, metal scraping, and Temple caught his hand before he could swing it and butted him in the face.

There was no thought, it just happened.

The world jolted, Sheel's crackly breath warm on his cheek. They tussled and tore and a fist hit the side of Temple's face and made his ears ring. He butted again, felt nose-bone pop against his forehead and suddenly Sheel was stumbling back and Sufeen was standing beside Temple with the sword in his hands, and looking very surprised that he had it.

Temple stood a moment, trying to work out how they had got here. Then what they should do now.

He heard a flatbow string, the whisper of a bolt passing, maybe.

Then he saw Danard struggling up. 'You fucking—' And his head came apart.

Temple blinked, blood across his face. Saw Sheel reaching for a knife. Sufeen stabbed at him and the old man gave a croaking cough as the metal slid into his side, clutched at himself, face twisted, blood leaking between his fingers.

He muttered something Temple couldn't understand, and tried to draw his knife again, and the sword caught him just above the eye. 'Oh,' he said, blood washing out of the big slit in his forehead and down his face. 'Oh.' Drops sprinkled the mud as he staggered sideways, bounced off his own porch and fell, rolling over, back arching, one hand flapping.

Sufeen stared down at him. 'We were going to save people,' he muttered. There was blood on his lips. He dropped to his knees and the sword bounced out of his limp hand.

Temple grabbed at him. 'What . . .' The knife he had handed over to Danard was buried in Sufeen's ribs to the grip, his shirt quickly turning black. A very small knife, by most standards. But more than big enough.

That dog was still barking. Sufeen toppled forward onto his face. The woman with the flatbow had gone. Was she reloading somewhere, would she pop up ready to shoot again? Temple should probably have taken cover.

He didn't move.

The sound of hooves grew louder. Blood spread out in a muddy puddle around Sheel's split head. The boy slowly backed away, broke into a waddling trot, dragging his crippled leg after. Temple watched him go.

Then Jubair rounded the side of the inn, mud flicking from the hooves of his great horse, sword raised high. The boy tried to turn again, lurched one more desperate step before the blade caught him in the shoulder and spun him across the street. Jubair tore past, shouting something. More horsemen followed. People were running. Screaming. Faint over the rumble of hooves.

They should have had an hour.

Temple knelt beside Sufeen, reached out to turn him over, check his wounds, tear off a bandage, do those things Kahdia had taught him, long ago. But as soon as he saw Sufeen's face he knew he was dead.

Mercenaries charged through the town, howling like a pack of dogs, waving weapons as though they were the winning cards in a game. He could smell smoke.

Temple picked up Sheel's sword, notched blade red-speckled now, stood and walked over to the lame boy. He was crawling towards the inn, one arm useless. He saw Temple and whimpered, clutching handfuls of muck with his good hand. His satchel had come open and coins were spilling out. Silver scattered in the mud.

'Help me,' whispered the boy. 'Help me!'

'No.'

'They'll kill me! They'll—'

'Shut your fucking mouth!' Temple poked the boy in the back with the sword and he gulped, and cowered, and the more he cowered the more Temple wanted to stick the sword through him. It was surprisingly light. It would have been so easy to do. The boy saw it in his face and whined and cringed more, and Temple poked him again.

'Shut your mouth, fucker! Shut your mouth!'

'Temple! Are you all right?' Cosca loomed over him on his tall grey. 'You're bleeding.'

Temple looked down and saw his shirtsleeve was ripped, blood trickling down the back of his hand. He was not sure how that had happened. 'Sufeen is dead,' he mumbled.

'Why do the Fates always take the best of us . . . ?' But Cosca's attention had been hooked by the glint of money in the mud. He held out a hand to Friendly and the sergeant helped him down from his gilt saddle. The Old Man stooped, fishing one of the coins up between two fingers, eagerly

rubbing the muck away, and he produced that luminous smile of which only he was capable, good humour and good intentions radiating from his deep-lined face.

'Yes,' Temple heard him whisper.

Friendly tore the satchel from the boy's back and jerked it open. A faint jingle spoke of more coins inside.

Thump, thump, thump, as a group of mercenaries kicked at the door of the inn. One hopped away cursing, pulling his filthy boot off to nurse his toes. Cosca squatted down. 'Where did this money come from?'

'We went on a raid,' muttered the boy. 'All went wrong.' There was a crash as the inn's door gave, a volley of cheering as men poured through the open doorway.

'All went wrong?'

'Only four of us made it back. So we had two dozen horses to trade. Man called Grega Cantliss bought 'em off us, up in Greyer.'

'Cantliss?' Shutters shattered as a chair was flung through the window of the inn and tumbled across the street beside them. Friendly frowned towards the hole it left but Cosca did not so much as twitch. As though there was nothing in the world but him, and the boy, and the coins. 'What sort of man was this Cantliss? A rebel?'

'No. He had nice clothes. Some crazy-eyed Northman with him. He took the horses and he paid with those coins.'

'Where did he get them?'

'Didn't say.'

Cosca peeled up the sleeve on the boy's limp arm to show his tattoo. 'But he definitely wasn't one of you rebels?'

The boy only shook his head.

'That answer will not make Inquisitor Lorsen happy.' Cosca gave a nod so gentle it was almost imperceptible. Friendly put his hands around the boy's neck. That dog was still barking somewhere. Bark, bark, bark. Temple wished someone would shut it up. Across the street three Kantics were savagely beating a man while a pair of children watched.

'We should stop them,' muttered Temple, but all he did was sit down in the road.

'How?' Cosca had more of the coins in his hand, was carefully sorting through them. 'I'm a general, not a God. Many generals get mixed up on

that point, but I was cured of the misapprehension long ago, believe me.' A woman was dragged screaming from a nearby house by her hair. 'The men are upset. Like a flood, it's safer to wash with the current than try to dam it up. If they don't have a channel for their anger, why, it could flow anywhere. Even over me.' He grunted as Friendly helped him up to standing. 'And it's not as though any of this was my fault, is it?'

Temple's head was throbbing. He felt so tired he could hardly move. 'It was mine?'

'I know you meant well.' Flames were already hungrily licking at the eaves of the inn's roof. 'But that's how it is with good intentions. Hopefully we've all learned a lesson here today.' Cosca produced a flask and started thoughtfully unscrewing the cap. 'I, about indulging you. You, about indulging yourself.' And he upended it and steadily swallowed.

'You're drinking again?' muttered Temple.

'You fuss too much. A nip never hurt anyone.' Cosca sucked the last drops out and tossed the empty flask to Friendly for a refill. 'Inquisitor Lorsen! So glad you could join us!'

'I hold you responsible for this debacle!' snapped Lorsen as he reined his horse up savagely in the street.

'It's far from my first,' said the Old Man. 'I shall have to live with the shame.'

'This hardly seems a moment for jokes!'

Cosca chuckled. 'My old commander Sazine once told me you should laugh every moment you live, for you'll find it decidedly difficult afterward. These things happen in war. I've a feeling there was some confusion with the signals. However carefully you plan, there are always surprises.' As if to illustrate the point, a Gurkish mercenary capered across the street wearing the bard's beribboned jacket. 'But this boy was able to tell us something before he died.' Silver glinted in Cosca's gloved palm. 'Imperial coins. Given to these rebels by a man called . . .'

'Grega Cantliss,' put in Friendly.

'That was it, in the town of Greyer.'

Lorsen frowned hard. 'Are you saying the rebels have Imperial funding? Superior Pike was very clear that we avoid any entanglements with the Empire.'

Cosca held a coin up to the light. ‘You see this face? Emperor Ostus the Second. He died some fourteen hundred years ago.’

‘I did not know you were such a keen devotee of history,’ said Lorsen.

‘I am a keen devotee of money. These are ancient coins. Perhaps the rebels stumbled upon a tomb. The great men of old were sometimes buried with their riches.’

‘The great men of old do not concern us,’ said Lorsen. ‘It’s today’s rebels we’re after.’

A pair of Union mercenaries were screaming at a man on his knees. Asking him where the money was. One of them hit him with a length of wood torn from his own shattered door and when he got groggily up there was blood running down his face. They asked him again. They hit him again, slap, slap, slap.

Sworbreck, the biographer, watched them with one hand over his mouth. ‘Dear me,’ he muttered between his fingers.

‘Like everything else,’ Cosca was explaining, ‘rebellion costs money. Food, clothes, weapons, shelter. Fanatics still need what the rest of us need. A little less of it, since they have their high ideals to nourish them, but the point stands. Follow the money, find the leaders. Greyer appears on Superior Pike’s list anyway, does it not? And perhaps this Cantliss can lead us to this . . . Contus of yours.’

Lorsen perked up at that. ‘Conthus.’

‘Besides.’ Cosca gestured at the rebels’ corpses with a loose waft of his sword that nearly took Sworbreck’s nose off. ‘I doubt we’ll be getting any further clues from these three. Life rarely turns out the way we expect. We must bend with the circumstances.’

Lorsen gave a disgusted grunt. ‘Very well. For now we follow the money.’ He turned his horse about and shouted to one of his Practicals. ‘Search the corpses for tattoos, damn it, find me any rebels still alive!’

Three doors down, a man had climbed onto the roof of a house and was stuffing bedding down the chimney while others clustered about the door. Cosca, meanwhile, was holding forth to Sworbreck. ‘I share your distaste for this, believe me. I have been closely involved in the burning of some of the world’s most ancient and beautiful cities. You should have seen Oprile in flames, it lit the sky for miles! This is scarcely a career highlight.’

Jubair had dragged some corpses into a line and was expressionlessly cutting their heads off. Thud, thud, thud, went his heavy sword. Two of his men had torn apart the arch over the road and were whittling the ends of the timbers to points. One was already rammed into the ground and had Sheel's head on it, mouth strangely pouting.

'Dear me,' muttered Sworbreck again.

'Severed heads,' Cosca was explaining, 'never go out of fashion. Used sparingly and with artistic sensibility, they can make a point a great deal more eloquently than those still attached. Make a note of that. Why aren't you writing?'

An old woman had crawled from the burning house, face stained with soot, and now some of the men had formed a circle and were shoving her tottering back and forth.

'What a waste,' Lorsen was bitterly complaining to one of his Practicals. 'How fine this land could be with the proper management. With firm governance, and the latest techniques of agriculture and forestry. They have a threshing machine now in Midderland which can do in a day with one operator what used to take a dozen peasants a week.'

'What do the other eleven do?' asked Temple, his mouth seeming to move by itself.

'Find other employment,' snarled the Practical.

Behind him another head went up on its stick, long hair stirring. Temple did not recognise the face. The smoked-out house was burning merrily now, flames whipping, air shimmering, the men backing off with hands up against the heat, letting the old woman crawl away.

'Find other employment,' muttered Temple to himself.

Cosca had Brachio by the elbow and was shouting in his ear over the noise. 'You need to round up your men! We must head north and east towards Greyer and seek out news of this Grega Cantliss.'

'It might take a while to calm 'em.'

'One hour, then I ask Sergeant Friendly to bring in the stragglers, in pieces if necessary. Discipline, Sworbreck, is vital to a body of fighting men!'

Temple closed his eyes. God, it stank. Smoke, and blood, and fury, and smoke. He needed water. He turned to ask Sufeen for some and saw his

corpse in the mud a few strides away. A man of principle must make hard choices and suffer the consequences.

'We brought your horse down,' said Cosca, as though that should make up for at least some of the day's reverses. 'If you want my advice, keep busy. Put this place at your back as swiftly as possible.'

'How do I forget this?'

'Oh, that's too much to ask. The trick is in learning to just . . .' Cosca stepped carefully back as one of the Styrians rode whooping past, a man's corpse bouncing after his horse. 'Not care.'

'I have to bury Sufeen.'

'Yes, I suppose so. But quickly. We have daylight and not a moment to waste. Jubair! Put that down!' And the Old Man started across the street, waving his sword. 'Burn anything that still needs burning and mount up! We're moving east!'

When Temple turned, Friendly was wordlessly offering him a shovel. The dog had finally stopped barking. A big Northman, a tattooed brute from past the Crinna, had spiked its head on a spear beside the heads of the rebels and was pointing up at it, chuckling.

Temple took Sufeen by the wrists and hauled him onto his shoulder, then up and over the saddle of his scared horse. Not an easy task, but easier than he had expected. Living, Sufeen had been big with talk and movement and laughter. Dead he was hardly any weight at all.

'Are you all right?' Bermi, touching him on the arm.

His concern made Temple want to cry. 'I'm not hurt. But Sufeen is dead.' There was justice.

Two of the Northmen had smashed open a chest of drawers and were fighting over the clothes inside, leaving torn cloth scattered across the muddy street. The tattooed man had tied a stick below the dog's head and was carefully arranging a best shirt with a frilly front upon it, face fixed with artist's concentration.

'You sure you're all right?' Bermi called after him from the midst of the rubbish-strewn street.

'Never better.'

Temple led the horse out of town, then off the track, or the two strips of rutted mud that passed for one, the sounds of barked orders, and burning, and the men reluctantly making ready to leave fading behind him to be

replaced by chattering water. He followed the river upstream until he found a pleasant enough spot between two trees, their hanging boughs trailing in the water. He slid Sufeen's body down and rolled it over onto its back.

'I'm sorry,' he said, and tossed the shovel into the river. Then he pulled himself up into his saddle.

Sufeen would not have cared where he was laid out, or how. If there was a God, he was with Him now, probably demanding to know why He had so conspicuously failed as yet to put the world to rights. North and east, Cosca had said. Temple turned his horse towards the west, and gave it his heels, and galloped off, away from the greasy pall of smoke rising from the ruins of Averstock.

Away from the Company of the Gracious Hand. Away from Dimbik, and Brachio, and Jubair. Away from Inquisitor Lorsen and his righteous mission.

He had no destination in mind. Anywhere but with Nicomo Cosca.

New Lives

‘And there’s the Fellowship,’ said Sweet, reining in with forearms on saddle horn and fingers dangling.

The wagons were strung out for a mile or so along the bottom of the valley. Thirty or more, some covered with stained canvas, some painted bright colours, dots of orange and purple and twinkling gilt jumping from the dusty brown landscape. Specks of walkers alongside them, riders up ahead. At the back came the beasts – horses, spare oxen, a good-sized herd of cattle – and following hard after a swelling cloud of dust, tugged by the breeze and up into the blue to announce the Fellowship’s coming to the world.

‘Will you look at that!’ Leef kicked his horse forward, standing in his stirrups with a grin all the way across his face. ‘D’you see *that*?’ Shy hadn’t seen him smile before and it made him look young. More boy than man, which he probably was. Made her smile herself.

‘I see it,’ she said.

‘A whole town on the move!’

‘True, it’s a fair cross section through society,’ said Sweet, shifting his old arse in his saddle. ‘Some honest, some sharp, some rich, some poor, some clever, some not so much. Lot of prospectors. Some herders and some farmers. Few merchants. All set on a new life out there beyond the horizon. We even got the First of the Magi down there.’

Lamb’s head jerked around. ‘What?’

‘A famous actor. Iosiv Lestek. His Bayaz mesmerised the crowds in Adua, apparently.’ Sweet gave his gravelly chuckle. ‘About a hundred bloody years ago. He’s hoping to bring theatre to the Far Country, I hear, but

between you, me and half the population of the Union, his powers are well on the wane.'

'Don't convince as Bayaz any more, eh?' asked Shy.

'He scarcely convinces me as Iosiv Lestek.' Sweet shrugged. 'But what do I know about acting?'

'Even your Dab Sweet's no better'n passable.'

'Let's go down there!' said Leef. 'Get us a better look!'

There was a less romantic feel to the business at close quarters. Isn't there to every business? That number of warm bodies, man and beast, produced a quantity of waste hardly to be credited and certainly not to be smelled without good cause. The smaller and less glamorous animals – dogs and flies, chiefly, though undoubtedly lice, too – didn't stand out from a distance but made double the impression once you were in the midst. Shy was forced to wonder whether the Fellowship might, in fact, be a brave but foolhardy effort to export the worst evils of city-living into the middle of the unspoiled wilderness.

Not blind to this, some of the senior Fellows had removed themselves a good fifty strides from the main body in order to consider the course, meaning argue over it and grab a drink, and were now scratching their heads over a big map.

'Step away from that map 'fore you hurt yourselves!' called Sweet as they rode up. 'I'm back and you're three valleys south o' the course.'

'Only three? Better than I dared hope.' A tall, sinewy Kantic with a fine-shaped skull bald as an egg stepped up, giving Shy and Lamb and Leef a careful look-over on the way. 'You have friends along.'

'This here is Lamb and his daughter Shy.' She didn't bother to correct him on the technicality. 'This lad's name, I must confess, has for the time being slipped from my clutches—'

'Leef.'

'That was it! This here is my . . . *employer*.' Sweet said the word like even admitting its existence was too much cramping of his freedoms. 'An unrepentant criminal by the name of Abram Majud.'

'A pleasure to make your acquaintances.' Majud displayed much good humour and a golden front tooth as he bowed to each of them. 'And I assure you I have been repenting ever since I formed this Fellowship.' His dark eyes took on a faraway look, as though he was gazing back across the long

miles travelled. ‘Back in Keln along with my partner, Curnsbick. A hard man, but a clever one. He has invented a portable forge, among other things. I am taking it to Crease, with the intention of founding a metalwork business. We might also look into staking some mining claims in the mountains.’

‘Gold?’ asked Shy.

‘Iron and copper.’ Majud leaned in to speak softly. ‘In my most humble opinion, only fools think there is gold in gold. Are the three of you minded to join up with our Fellowship?’

‘That we are,’ said Shy. ‘We’ve business of our own in Crease.’

‘All are welcome! The rate for buying in—’

‘Lamb here is a serious fighting man,’ cut in Sweet.

Majud paused, lips pressed into an appraising line. ‘Without offence, he looks a little . . . *old*.’

‘No one’ll be arguing on that score,’ said Lamb

‘I lack the freshest bloom myself,’ added Sweet. ‘You’re no toddler if it comes to that. If it’s youth you want, the lad with him is well supplied.’

Majud looked still less impressed by Leef. ‘I seek a happy medium.’

Sweet snorted. ‘Well you won’t find many o’ them out here. We don’t got enough fighters. With the Ghosts fixed on blood it’s no time to be cutting costs. Believe me, old Sangeed won’t stop to argue prices with you. Lamb’s in or I’m out and you can scout your way around in circles ’til your wagons fall apart.’

Majud looked up at Lamb, and Lamb looked back, still and steady. Seemed he’d left his weak eye back in Squaredeal. A few moments to consider, and Majud had seen what he needed to. ‘Then Master Lamb goes free. Two paid shares comes to—’

Sweet scratched wincing at the back of his neck. ‘I made a deal with Shy they’d all three come free.’

Majud’s eyes shifted to her with what might have been grudging respect. ‘It would appear she got the better of that particular negotiation.’

‘I’m a scout, not a trader.’

‘Perhaps you should be leaving the trading to those of us who are.’

‘I traded a damn sight better than you’ve scouted, by all appearances.’

Majud shook his fine-shaped head. ‘I have no notion of how I will explain this to my partner Curnsbick.’ He walked off, wagging one long finger.

‘Curnsbick is not a man to be trifled with on expenses!’

‘By the dead,’ grumbled Sweet, ‘did you ever hear such carping? Anyone would think we’d set out with a company o’ women.’

‘Looks like you have,’ said Shy. One of the brightest of the wagons – scarlet with gilt fixtures – was rattling past with two women in its seat. One was in full whore’s get-up, hat clasped on with one hand and a smile gripped no less precariously to her painted face. Presumably advertising her availability for commerce in spite of the ongoing trek. The other was more soberly dressed for travel, handling the reins calmly as a coachman. A man sat between them in a jacket that matched the wagon, bearded and hard-eyed. Shy took him for the pimp. He had a pimpy look about him, sure enough. She leaned over and spat through the gap in her teeth.

The idea of getting to business in a lurching wagon, half-full of rattling pans and the other of someone else getting to business hardly stoked the fires of passion in Shy. But then those particular embers had been burning so low for so long she’d a notion they’d smouldered out all together. Working a farm with two children and two old men surely can wither the romance in you.

Sweet gave the ladies a wave, and pushed his hat brim up with a knobby knuckle, and under his breath said, ‘Bloody hell but nothing’s how it used to be. Women, and dandified tailoring, and ploughs and portable forges and who knows what horrors’ll be next. Time was there was naught out here but earth and sky and beasts and Ghosts, and far wild spaces you could breathe in. Why, I’ve spent twelve months at a time with only a horse for company.’

Shy spat again. ‘I never in my life felt so sorry for a horse. Reckon I’ll take a ride round and greet the Fellowship. See if anyone’s heard a whisper of the children.’

‘Or Grega Cantliss.’ And Lamb frowned hard as he said the name.

‘All right,’ said Sweet. ‘You watch out, though, you hear?’

‘I can look after myself,’ said Shy.

The old scout’s weathered face creased up as he smiled. ‘It’s everyone else I’m worried for.’

The nearest wagon belonged to a man called Gentili, an ancient Styrian with four cousins along he called the boys, though they weren’t much younger than he was and hadn’t a word of common between them. He was set stubborn on digging a new life out of the mountains and must’ve been

quite the optimist, since he could scarcely stand up in the dry, let alone to his waist in a freezing torrent. He'd heard of no stolen children. She wasn't even sure he heard the question. As a parting shot he asked Shy if she fancied sharing his new life with him as his fifth wife. She politely declined.

Lord Ingelstad had suffered misfortunes, apparently. When he used the word, Lady Ingelstad – a woman not born to hardships but determined to stomp them all to pieces even so – scowled at him as though she felt she'd suffered all his misfortunes plus one extra, and that her choice of husband. To Shy his misfortunes smelled like dice and debts, but since her own course through life had hardly been the straightest she thought she'd hold off on criticism and let misfortunes stand. Of child-stealing bandits, among many other things, he was entirely ignorant. As his parting shot he invited her and Lamb to a hand of cards that night. Stakes would be small, he promised, though in Shy's experience they always begin that way and don't have to rise far to land everyone in trouble. She politely declined that, too, and suggested a man who'd suffered so much misfortune might take pains not to court any more. He took the point with ruddy-faced good humour and called the same offer to Gentili and the boys. Lady Ingelstad looked like she'd be killing the lot of them with her teeth before she saw a hand dealt.

The next wagon might have been the biggest in the Fellowship, with glass windows and *The Famous Iosiv Lestek* written along the side in already peeling purple paint. Seemed to Shy that if a man was that famous he wouldn't have to paint his name on a wagon, but since her own brush with fame had been through bills widely posted for her arrest she hardly considered herself an expert.

A scratty-haired boy was driving and the great man sat swaying beside him, old and gaunt and leached of all colour, swaddled in a threadbare Ghost blanket. He perked up at the opportunity to boast as Shy and Lamb trotted over.

'I . . . am Iosiv Lestek.' It was a shock to hear the voice of a king boom from that withered head, rich and deep and fruity as plum sauce. 'I daresay the name is familiar.'

'Sorry to say we don't get often to the theatre,' said Lamb.

'What brings you to the Far Country?' asked Shy.

‘I was forced to abandon a role at Adua’s House of Drama due to illness. The ensemble was crushed to lose me, of course, quite *crushed*, but I am fully recovered.’

‘Good news.’ She dreaded to picture him before his recovery. He seemed a corpse raised by sorcery now.

‘I am in transit to Crease to take a leading part in a cultural extravaganza!’

‘Culture?’ Shy eased up her hat brim to survey the empty country ahead, grey grass and ill scrub and parched slopes of baked brown boulder, no sign of life but for a couple of hopeful hawks circling on high. ‘Out there?’

‘Even the meanest hearts hunger for a glimpse of the sublime,’ he informed them.

‘I’ll take your word on that,’ said Lamb.

Lestek was busy smiling out at the reddening horizon, a hand so pale as almost to be see-through clutched against his chest. She got the feeling he was one of those men didn’t really see the need for two sides to a conversation. ‘My greatest performance is yet ahead of me, that much I know.’

‘Something to look forward to,’ muttered Shy, turning her horse.

A group of a dozen or so Suljuks watched the exchange, clustered to themselves around a rotten-looking wagon. They spoke no common, and Shy could barely recognise a word of Suljuk let alone understand one, so she just nodded to them as she rode by and they nodded back, pleasantly inscrutable to each other.

Ashjid was a Gurkish priest, fixed on being the first to spread the word of the Prophet west to Crease. Or actually the second, since a man called Oktaadi had given up after three months there and been skinned by the Ghosts on the return trip. Ashjid was having a good stab at spreading the word to the Fellowship in the meantime through daily blessings, though so far his only convert was a curious retard responsible for collecting drinking water. He had no information for them beyond the revelation of the scripture, but he asked God to smile upon their search and Shy thanked him for that. Seemed better to her to have blessings than curses, for all time’s plough would more’n likely turn up what it turned regardless.

The priest pointed out a stern-looking type on a neatly kept wagon as Savian, a man not to be fiddled with. He’d a long sword at his side looked

like it had seen plenty of action and a grey-stubbled face looked like it had seen plenty more, eyes narrowed to slits in the shadow of his low hat-brim.

'My name's Shy South, this is Lamb.' Savian just nodded, like he accepted that was a possibility but had no set opinion on it. 'I'm looking for my brother and sister. Six years and ten.' He didn't even nod to that. A tight-mouthed bastard, and no mistake. 'They were stole by a man named Grega Cantliss.'

'Can't help you.' A trace of an Imperial accent, and all the while Savian looked at her long and level, like he'd got just her measure and wasn't moved by it. Then his eyes shifted to Lamb, and took his measure, too, and wasn't moved by that either. He put a fist over his mouth and gave a long, gravelly cough.

'That cough sounds bad,' she said.

'When's a cough good?'

Shy noticed a flatbow hooked to the seat beside him. Not loaded, but full-drawn and with a wedge in the trigger. Exactly as ready as it needed to be. 'You along to fight?'

'Hoping I won't have to.' Though the whole set of him said his hopes hadn't always washed out in that regard.

'What kind of a fool hopes for a fight, eh?'

'Sad to say there's always one or two about.'

Lamb snorted. 'There's the sorry truth.'

'What's your business in the Far Country?' asked Shy, trying to chisel something more from that hardwood block of a face.

'My business.' And he coughed again. Even when he did that his mouth hardly moved. Made her wonder if he'd any muscles in his head.

'Thought we might try our hand at prospecting.' A woman had poked her face out from the wagon. Lean and strong, hair cut short and with these blue, blue eyes looked like they saw a long way. 'I'm Corlin.'

'My niece,' added Savian, though there was something odd about the way they looked at each other. Shy couldn't quite get it pegged.

'Prospecting?' she asked, pushing her hat back. 'Don't see a lot of women at that business.'

'Are you saying there's a limit on what a woman can do?' asked Corlin.

Shy raised her brows. 'Might be one on what she's dumb enough to try.'

'It seems neither sex has a monopoly on hubris.'

‘Seems not,’ said Shy, adding, under her breath, ‘whatever the fuck that means.’ She gave the two of them a nod and pulled her horse about. ‘Be seeing you on the trail.’

Neither Corlin nor her uncle answered, just gave each other some deadly competition at who could stare after her the hardest.

‘Something odd about them two,’ she muttered to Lamb as they rode off. ‘Didn’t see no mining gear.’

‘Maybe they mean to buy it in Crease.’

‘And pay five times the going rate? You look in their eyes? Don’t reckon they’re a pair used to making fool deals.’

‘You don’t miss a trick, do you?’

‘I try to be aware of ’em, at least, in case they end up being played on me. You think they’re trouble?’

Lamb shrugged. ‘I think you’re best off treating folk the way you’d want to be treated and leaving their choices to them. We’re all of us trouble o’ one kind or another. Half this whole crowd probably got a sad story to tell. Why else would they be plodding across the long and level nowhere with the likes of us for company?’

All Raynault Buckhorm had to tell about was hopes, though he did it with something of a stutter. He owned half the cattle with the Fellowship, employed a good few of the men to drive ’em, and was making his fifth trip to Crease where he said there was always call for meat, this time bringing his wife and children and planning to stay. The exact number of children was hard to reckon but the impression was of many. Buckhorm asked Lamb if he’d seen the grass out there in the Far Country. Best damn grass in the Circle of the World, he thought. Best water, too. Worth facing the weather and the Ghosts and the murderous distance for that grass and that water. When Shy told him about Grega Cantliss and his band he shook his head and said he could still be surprised by how low men could sink. Buckhorm’s wife Luline – possessed of a giant smile but a tiny body you could hardly believe had produced such a brood – shook her head too, and said it was the most awful thing she’d ever heard, and she wished there was something she could do, and probably would’ve hugged her if they hadn’t had the height of a horse between them. Then she gave Shy a little pie and asked if she’d spoken to Hedges.

Hedges was a shifty sort with a wore-out mule, not enough gear and a charmless habit of talking to her from the neck down. He'd never heard of Grega Cantliss but he did point out his ruined leg, which he said he'd got leading a charge at the battle of Osrung. Shy had her doubts about that story. Still, her mother used to say, *you're best off looking for the best in people*, and it was good advice even if the woman never had taken it herself. So Shy offered Hedges Luline Buckhorm's pie and he looked her in the eye finally and said, 'You're all right.'

'Don't let a pie fool you.' But when she rode off he was still looking down at it in his dirty hand, like it meant so much he couldn't bring himself to eat it.

Shy went on around them 'til her voice was sore from sharing her troubles and her ears from lending them to others' dreams. A Fellowship was a good name for it, she reckoned, 'cause they were a good-humoured and a giving company, in the main. Raw and strange and foolish, some of them, but all fixed on finding a better tomorrow. Even Shy felt it, time and trouble-toughened, work and weather-worn, weighed down with worries about Pit and Ro's future and Lamb's past. The new wind on her face and the new hopes ringing in her ears and she found a dopey smile creeping under her nose as she threaded between the wagons, nodding to folks she didn't know, slapping the backs of those she'd only just met. Soon as she'd remember why she was there and wipe that smile away she'd find it was back, like pigeons shouted off a new-sown field.

Soon enough she stopped trying. Pigeons'll ruin your crop, but what harm will smiles do, really?

So she let it sit there. Felt good on her.

'Lots of sympathy,' she said, once they'd talked to most everyone, and the sun had sunk to a gilt sliver ahead of them, the first torches lit so the Fellowship could slog another mile before making camp. 'Lots of sympathy but not much help.'

'I guess sympathy's something,' said Lamb. She waited for more but he just sat hunched, nodding along to the slow walk of his horse.

'They seem all right, though, mostly.' Gabbing just to fill the hole, and feeling annoyed that she had to. 'Don't know how they'll fare if the Ghosts come and things get ugly, but they're all right.'

'Guess you never know how folk'll fare if things get ugly.'

She looked across at him. ‘You’re damn right there.’

He caught her eye for a moment, then guiltily looked away. She opened her mouth but before she could say more, Sweet’s deep voice echoed through the dusk, calling halt for the day.

The Rugged Outdoorsman

Temple wrenched himself around in his saddle, heart suddenly bursting—

And saw nothing but moonlight on shifting branches. It was so dark he could scarcely see that. He might have heard a twig torn loose by the wind, or a rabbit about its harmless nocturnal business in the brush, or a murderous Ghost savage daubed with the blood of slaughtered innocents, fixed on skinning him alive and wearing his face as a hat.

He hunched his shoulders as another chilly gust whipped up, shook the pines and chilled him to his marrow. The Company of the Gracious Hand had enveloped him in its foul embrace for so long he had come to take the physical safety it provided entirely for granted. Now he keenly felt its loss. There were many things in life one did not fully appreciate until one had cavalierly tossed them aside. Like a good coat. Or a very small knife. Or a few-score hardened killers and an affable geriatric villain.

The first day he had ridden hard and worried only that they would catch him. Then, when the second morning dawned chill and vastly empty, that they wouldn't. By the third morning he was feeling deeply aggrieved at the thought that they might not even have tried. Fleeing the Company, directionless and unequipped, into the unmapped wasteland, was looking less and less like the easy way to anything.

Temple had played many parts during his thirty ill-starred years alive. Beggar, thief, unwilling trainee priest, ineffective surgeon, disgusted butcher, sore-handed carpenter, briefly a loving husband and even more briefly a doting father followed closely by a wretched mourner and bitter drunk, overconfident confidence trickster, prisoner of the Inquisition then informant for them, translator, accountant and lawyer, collaborator with a

whole range of different wrong sides, accomplice to mass murder, of course, and, most recently and disastrously, man of conscience. But rugged outdoorsman made no appearance on the list.

Temple did not even have the equipment to make a fire. Or, had he had it, known how to use it. He had nothing to cook anyway. And now he was lost in every sense of the word. The barbs of hunger, cold and fear had quickly come to bother him vastly more than the feeble prodding of his conscience ever had. He should probably have thought more carefully before fleeing, but flight and careful thought are like oil and water, ever reluctant to mix. He blamed Cosca. He blamed Lorsen. He blamed Jubair, and Sheel, and Sufeen. He blamed every fucker available excepting, of course, the one who was actually to blame, the one sitting in his saddle and getting colder, hungrier, and more lost with every unpleasant moment.

'Shit!' he roared at nothing.

His horse checked, ears swivelling, then plodded on. It was becoming resignedly immune to his outbursts. Temple peered up through the crooked branches, the moon casting a glow through the fast-moving streaks of cloud.

'God?' he muttered, too desperate to feel a fool. 'Can you hear me?' No answer, of course. God does not answer, especially not the likes of him. 'I know I haven't been the best man. Or even a particularly good one . . .' He winced. Once you accept He's up there, and all-knowing and all-seeing and so on, you probably have to accept that there's no point gilding the truth for Him. 'All right, I'm a pretty poor one, but . . . far from the worst about?' A proud boast, that. What a headstone it would make. Except, of course, there would be no one to carve it when he died out here alone and rotted in the open. 'I am sure I could improve, though, if you could just see your way to giving me . . . one more chance?' Wheedling, wheedling. 'Just . . . *one* more?'

No reply but another chill gust filling the trees with whispers. If there was a God, He was a tight-mouthed bastard, and no—

Temple caught the faintest glimmer of flickering orange through the trees.

A fire! Jubilation sprang to life in his breast!

Then caution smothered it.

Whose fire? Ear-collecting barbarians, but a step above wild animals?

He caught a whiff of cooking meat and his stomach gave a long, squelching growl, so loud he worried it might give him away. Temple had spent a great deal of his early life hungry and become quite adept at it, but, as with so many things, to do it well one has to stay in practice.

He gently reined in his horse, slid as quietly as he could from the saddle and looped the reins around a branch. Keeping low, he eased through the brush, tree-limbs casting clawing shadows towards him, breathing curses as he caught his clothes, his boots, his face on snatching twigs.

The fire had been built in the middle of a narrow clearing, a small animal neatly skinned and spitted on sticks above it. Temple suppressed a powerful impulse to dive at it teeth first. A single blanket was spread out between the fire and a worn saddle. A round shield leaned against a tree, metal rim and wooden front marked with the scars of hard use. Next to it was an axe with a heavy bearded head. It took no expert in the use of weapons to see this was a tool not for chopping wood but people.

The gear of one man, but clearly a man it would be a bad idea to be caught stealing the dinner of.

Temple's eyes crawled from meat to axe and back, and his mouth watered with an intensity almost painful. Possible death by axe loomed large at any time, but at that moment certain death from hunger loomed larger yet. He slowly straightened, preparing to—

'Nice night for it.' Northern words in a throaty whisper of a voice, just behind Temple's ear.

He froze, small hairs tingling up his neck. 'Bit windy,' he managed to croak.

'I've seen worse.' A cold and terrible point pricked at the small of Temple's back. 'Let's see your weapons, slow as snails in winter.'

'I am . . . unarmed.'

A pause. 'You're what?'

'I had a knife, but . . .' He had given it to a bony farmer who killed his best friend with it. 'I lost it.'

'Out in the big empty without a blade?' As though it was strange as to be without a nose. Temple gave a girlish squeak as a big hand slipped under his arm and started to pat him down. 'Nor have you, 'less you're hiding one up your arse.' An unpleasing notion. 'I ain't looking there.' That was some relief. 'You a madman?'

‘I am a lawyer.’

‘Can’t a man be both?’

Self-evidently. ‘I . . . suppose.’

Another pause. ‘Cosca’s lawyer?’

‘I was.’

‘Huh.’ The point slipped away, its absence leaving a prickling spot in Temple’s back. Even unpleasant things can be sorely missed, apparently, if you have lived with them long enough.

A man stepped past Temple. A great, black, shaggy shape, knife-blade glinting in one hand. He dragged a long sword from his belt and tossed it on the blanket, then lowered himself cross-legged, firelight twinkling red and yellow in the mirror of his metal eye.

‘Life takes you down some strange paths, don’t it?’ he said.

‘Caul Shivers,’ muttered Temple, not at all sure whether to feel better or worse.

Shivers reached out and turned the spit between finger and thumb, fat dripping into the flames. ‘Hungry?’

Temple licked his lips. ‘Is that just a question . . . or an invitation?’

‘I’ve got more’n I can eat. You’d best bring that horse up before it shakes loose. Watch your step, though.’ The Northman jerked his head back into the trees. ‘There’s a gorge that way might be twenty strides deep, and with some angry water at the bottom.’

Temple brought the horse up and hobbled it, stripped its saddle and the damp blanket beneath, abandoned it to nuzzle at whatever grass it could find. A sad fact, but the hungrier a man is the less he tends to care about the hunger of others. Shivers had carved the carcass down to the bones and was eating from a tin plate with the point of his knife. More meat lay gleaming on some torn-off bark on the other side of the fire. Temple sank to his knees before it as though it were a most hallowed altar.

‘My very great thanks.’ He closed his eyes as he began to eat, sucking the juice from every morsel. ‘I was starting to think I’d die out here.’

‘Who says you won’t?’

A shred of meat caught in Temple’s throat and he gave an awkward cough. ‘Are you alone?’ he managed to gasp out – anything but more of the crushing silence.

‘I’ve learned I make poor company.’

‘You aren’t worried about the Ghosts?’

The Northman shook his head.

‘I hear they’ve killed a lot of people in the Far Country.’

‘Once they’ve killed me I’ll worry.’ Shivers tossed down his plate and leaned back on one elbow, his ruined face shifting further into the darkness. ‘A man can spend the time he’s given crapping his arse out over what might be, but where does it get you?’

Where indeed? ‘Still hunting for your nine-fingered man?’

‘He killed my brother.’

Temple paused with another piece of meat halfway to his mouth. ‘I’m sorry.’

‘You’re sorrier’n me, then. My brother was a shit. But family is family.’

‘I wouldn’t know.’ Temple’s relatives had rarely stayed long in his life. A dead mother, a dead wife, a dead daughter. ‘Closest thing I have to family is . . .’ He realised he had been about to say Sufeen, and now he was dead as well. ‘Nicomo Cosca.’

Shivers grunted. Almost a chuckle. ‘In my experience, he ain’t the safest man to have at your back.’

‘What is your experience?’

‘We were both hired to kill some men. In Styria, ten years ago or so. Friendly, too. Some others. A poisoner. A torturer.’

‘Sounds quite the merry company.’

‘I ain’t the wag I seem. Things got . . .’ Shivers scratched ever so gently at the great scar under his metal eye. ‘A bit unpleasant.’

‘Things tend to get unpleasant when Cosca’s involved.’

‘They can get plenty unpleasant without him.’

‘More so with,’ muttered Temple, looking into the fire. ‘He never cared much, but he used to care a little. He’s got worse.’

‘That’s what men do.’

‘Not all of them.’

‘Ah.’ Shivers showed his teeth. ‘You’re one of them optimists I’ve heard about.’

‘No, no, not me,’ said Temple. ‘I always take the easy way.’

‘Very wise. I find hoping for a thing tends to bring on the opposite.’ The Northman slowly turned the ring on his little finger round and around, the

stone glittering the colour of blood. ‘I had my dreams of being a better man, once upon a time.’

‘What happened?’

Shivers stretched out beside the fire, boots up on his saddle, and started to shake a blanket over himself. ‘I woke up.’

Temple woke to that first washed out, grey-blue touch of dawn, and found himself smiling. The ground was cold and hard, the blanket was far too small and smelled powerfully of horse, the evening meal had been inadequate, and yet it was a long time since he had slept so soundly. Birds twittered, wind whispered and through the trees he could hear the faint rushing of water.

Fleeing the Company suddenly seemed a masterful plan, boldly executed. He wriggled over under his blanket. If there was a God, it turned out He was the forgiving fellow Kahdia had always—

Shivers’ sword and shield had gone and another man squatted on his blanket.

He was stripped to the waist, his pale body a twisted mass of sinew. Over his bottom half he wore a filthy woman’s dress, slit up the middle then stitched with twine to make loose trousers. One side of his head was shaved, the orange hair on the other scraped up into stiff spikes with some kind of fat. In one dangling hand he held a hatchet, in the other a bright knife.

A Ghost, then.

He stared unblinking across the dead fire at Temple with piercing blue eyes and Temple stared back, considerably less piercingly, and found he had gently pulled his horse-stinking blanket up under his chin in both fists.

Two more men slipped silently from the trees. One wore as a kind of helmet, though presumably not for protection against any earthly weapon, an open box of sticks joined at the corners with feathers and secured to a collar made from an old belt. The other’s cheeks were striped with self-inflicted scars. In different circumstances – on stage, perhaps, at a Styrian carnival – they might have raised quite the laugh. Here, in the untracked depths of the Far Country and with Temple their only audience, merriment was notable by its absence.

‘Noy.’ A fourth Ghost had appeared as if from nowhere, between man and boy with yellow hair about his pale face and a line of dried-out brown paint under his eyes. Temple hoped it was paint. The bones of some small animal, stitched to the front of a shirt made from a sack, rattled as he danced from one foot to the other, smiling radiantly all the while. He beckoned Temple up.

‘Noy.’

Temple very slowly got to his feet, smiling back at the boy, and then at the others. Keep smiling, keep smiling, everything on a friendly footing. ‘Noy?’ he ventured.

The boy hit him across the side of the head.

It was the shock more than the force that put Temple down. So he told himself. The shock, and some kind of primitive understanding that there was nothing to be gained by staying up. The world swayed as he lay there. His hair was tickly. He touched his scalp and there was blood on his fingers.

Then he saw the boy had a rock in his hand. A rock painted with blue rings. And now with just a few spots of Temple’s red blood.

‘Noy!’ called the boy, beckoning again.

Temple was in no particular rush to rise. ‘Look,’ he said, trying common first. The boy slapped him with his empty hand. ‘Look!’ Giving Styrian a go. The boy slapped him a second time. He tried Kantic. ‘I do not have any —’ The boy hit him with the rock again, caught him across the cheek and put him on his side.

Temple shook his head. Groggy. Couldn’t hear that well.

He grabbed at the nearest thing. The boy’s leg, maybe.

He clambered up as far as his knees. His knees or the boy’s knees. Someone’s knees.

His mouth tasted of blood. His face was throbbing. Not hurting exactly. Numb.

The boy was saying something to the others, raising his arms as if asking for approval.

The one with the spikes of hair nodded gravely and opened his mouth to speak, and his head flew off.

The one beside him turned, slightly impeded by his stick helmet. Shivers’ sword cut his arm off above the elbow and thudded deep into his chest,

blood flooding from the wound. He stumbled wordlessly back, the blade lodged in his ribs.

The one with the scarred face flew at Shivers, stabbing at him, clawing at his shield, the two of them lurching about the clearing, feet kicking sparks from the embers of the fire.

All this in a disbelieving, wobbly breath or two, then the boy hit Temple over the head again. That seemed ridiculously unfair. As if Temple was the main threat. He dragged himself up the leg with a surge of outraged innocence. Shivers had forced the scarred Ghost onto his knees now and was smashing his head apart with the rim of his shield. The boy hit Temple again but he clung on, caught a fistful of bone-stitched shirt as his knees buckled.

They went down, scratching, punching, gouging. Temple was on the bottom, teeth bared, and he forced his thumb up the Ghost's nose and wrestled him over and all the while he could not help thinking how amazingly silly and wasteful this all was, and then that effective fighters probably leave the philosophising until after the fight.

The Ghost kneed at him, screaming in his own language, and they were rolling between the trees, sliding downhill, and Temple was punching at the Ghost's bloody face with his bloody knuckles, screeching as the Ghost caught his forearm and bit it, and then there were no trees, only loose earth under them, then the sound of the river grew very loud, and there was no earth at all, and they were falling.

He vaguely remembered Shivers saying something about a gorge.

Wind rushed, and turning weightlessness, and rock and leaf and white water. Temple let go of the Ghost, both of them falling without a sound. It all felt so unlikely. Dreamlike. Would he wake soon with a jolt, back with the Company of the—

The jolt came when he hit the water.

Feet-first, by blind luck, and then he was under, gripped by cold, crushed by the surging weight of it, ripped five ways at once in a current so strong it felt as though it would tear his arms from their sockets. Over and over, a leaf in the torrent, helpless.

His head left the flood and he heaved in a shuddering breath, spray in his face, roar of the furious water. Dragged under again and something thumped hard at his shoulder and twisted him over, showed him the sky for

just a moment. Limbs so heavy now, a sore temptation to stop fighting. Temple had never been much of a fighter.

He caught a glimpse of driftwood, dried-out and bleached bone-white by sun and water. He snatched at it, lungs bursting, clawed at it as he came right-side-up. It was part of a tree. A whole tree-trunk with leafless branches still attached. He managed to heave his chest over it, coughing, spitting, face scraping against rotten wood.

He breathed. A few breaths. An hour. A hundred years.

Water lapped at him, tickled him. He raised his head so he could see the sky. A mighty effort. Clouds shifted across the deep and careless blue.

'Is this your idea of a fucking joke?' he croaked, before a wave slapped him in the face and made him swallow water. No joke, then. He lay still. Too tired and hurting for anything else. The water had calmed now, at least. The river wider, slower, the banks lower, long grass shelving down to the shingle.

He let it all slide by. He trusted to God, since there was no one else. He hoped for heaven.

But he fully expected the alternative.

Driftwood

‘Whoa!’ called Shy. ‘Whoa!’

Maybe it was the noise of the river, or maybe they somehow sensed she’d done some low-down things in her life, but, as usual, the oxen didn’t take a shred of notice and kept on veering for the deeper water. Dumb stubborn bloody animals. Once they’d an idea in mind they’d keep towards it regardless of all urgings to the contrary. Nature giving her a taste of her own cooking, maybe. Nature was prone to grudges that way.

‘Whoa, I said, you bastards!’ She gripped at her soaked saddle with her soaked legs, wound the rope a couple of times around her right forearm and gave a good haul. The other end was tight-knotted to the lead yoke and the line snapped taut and sprayed water. Same time Leef nudged his pony up from the downstream side and snapped out a neat little flick with his goad. He’d turned out to have quite a knack as a drover. One of the front pair gave an outraged snort but its blunt nose shifted left, back to the chosen course, towards the stretch of wheel-scarred shingle on the far bank where the half of the Fellowship already across was gathered.

Ashjid the priest was one of them, arms thrust up to heaven like his was the most important job around, chanting a prayer to calm the waters. Shy had observed no becalming. Not of the waters, and for damn sure not of her.

‘Keep ’em straight!’ growled Sweet, who’d reined his dripping horse up on a sandbar and was taking his ease – something he took an aggravating amount of.

‘Keep them straight!’ echoed Majud from behind, gripping so hard to the seat of his wagon it was a wonder he didn’t rip it off. He wasn’t comfortable with water, apparently, which was quite an inconvenience in a frontiersman.

‘What d’you think I’m aiming to do, you idle old fucks?’ hissed Shy, digging her horse out left and giving the rope another heave. ‘See us all flushed out to sea?’

It didn’t look unlikely. They’d doubled up the oxen, teams of six or eight or even a dozen hitched to the heaviest loads, but still it was far from easy going. If the wagons weren’t hitting deep water and threatening to float away, they were doing the opposite and getting bogged in the shallows.

One of Buckhorm’s wagons was stranded now and Lamb was in the river to his waist, straining at the back axle while Savian leaned from his horse to smack at the lead oxen’s rump. He hit it that hard Shy was worried he’d break the beast’s back, but in the end he got it floundering on and Lamb sloshed back wearily to his horse. Unless your name was Dab Sweet, it was hard work all round.

But then work had never scared Shy. She’d learned early that once you were stuck with a task you were best off giving it your all. The hours passed quicker then, and you were less likely to get a belting, too. So she’d worked hard at errands soon as she could run, at farming when a woman grown, and between the two at robbing folk and been damn good at it, though that was probably better not dwelt on. Her work now was finding her brother and sister, but since fate had allotted her oxen to drive through a river in the meantime, she reckoned she’d try her hardest at that in spite of the smell and the strain on her sore arms and the freezing water washing at her arse-crack.

They finally floundered out onto the sandbar, animals streaming and blowing, cartwheels crunching in the shingle, Shy’s horse trembling under her and that the second one she’d blowed out that day.

‘Call this a damn ford?’ she shouted at Sweet over the noise of the water.

He grinned back at her, leathery face creased up with good humour. ‘What’d you call it?’

‘A stretch of river ’bout the same as any other, and just as apt to be drowned in.’

‘You should’ve told me if you couldn’t swim.’

‘I can, but this wagon’s no fucking salmon, I can tell you that.’

Sweet turned his horse about with the slightest twist of his heel. ‘You disappoint me, girl. I had you marked for an adventurer!’

‘Never by choice. You ready?’ she called out to Leef. The lad nodded. ‘How about you?’

Majud waved a weak hand. ‘I fear I will never be ready. Go. Go.’

So Shy wound the rope tight again, heaved in a good breath, gave herself a thought of Ro’s face and Pit’s, and set off after Sweet. Cold gripped her calves, then her thighs, oxen peering nervous towards the far bank, her horse snorting and tossing its head, none of them any keener on another dip than she was, Leef working the goad and calling out, ‘Easy, easy.’

The last stretch was the deepest, water surging around the oxen and making white bow-waves on their upstream flanks. Shy hauled at the rope, making them strain into the current at a diagonal just to end up with a straight course, while the wagon jolted over the broken stream-bed, wheels half-under, then squealing axles under, then the whole thing halfway to floating and a damn poor shape for a boat.

She saw one of the oxen was swimming, neck stretched as it struggled to keep its flaring nostrils above the water, then two, scared eyes rolling towards her, then three, and Shy felt the rope tugging hard, and she wound it tighter about her forearm and put all her weight into it, hemp gripping at her leather glove, biting at the skin above it.

‘Leef!’ she growled through her gritted teeth, ‘Get it over to—’

One of the leaders slipped, craggy shoulder-blades poking up hard as it struggled for a footing, and then it veered off to the right and took its neighbour’s legs away too and the pair of them were torn sideways by the river. The rope jerked Shy’s right arm straight like it would rip her muscles joint from joint, dragging her half-out of the saddle before she knew a thing about it.

Now the front two oxen were thrashing, sending up spray, dragging the next yoke out of true while Leef screeched and lashed at them. Might as well have been lashing at the river, which he mostly was. Shy dragged with all her strength. Might as well have been dragging at a dozen dead oxen. Which she soon would be.

‘Fuck!’ she gasped, rope slipping suddenly through her right hand and zipping around her forearm, just managing to hold on, blood in the hemp and mixing with the beaded water, spray in her face and wet hair and the terrified lowing of the animals and the terrified wailing of Majud.

The wagon was skidding, grinding, near to floating, near to tipping. The first animal had found ground again somehow and Savian was smacking at it and snarling, Shy with neck stretched back and dragging, dragging, rope ripping at her arm and her horse shuddering under her. Glimpse of the far bank, people waving, their shouts and her breath and the thrashing of the beasts making just one echoing throb in her skull.

'Shy.' Lamb's voice. And there was a strong arm around her and she knew she could let go.

Like when she fell off the barn roof and Lamb had lifted her up. 'All right, now. Quiet, now.' Sun flickering through her lids and her mouth tasting like blood, but not scared any more. Later, years later, him bandaging the burns on her back. 'It'll pass. It'll pass.' And her walking up to the farm after that black time gone, not knowing what she'd find there, or who, and seeing him sat by the door with that same smile as always. 'Good to have you back,' like she'd only left a moment before, hugging her tight and feeling that prickle of tears under her closed lids . . .

'Shy?'

'Uh.' Lamb was setting her down on the bank, blurred faces flickering into focus around her.

'You all right, Shy?' Leef was calling. 'She all right?'

'Give her some room.'

'Let her breathe, now.'

'I'm breathing,' she grunted, waving their pawing hands away, fighting up to sitting though she wasn't sure what'd happen when she got there.

'Hadn't you better stay still a while?' asked Lamb. 'You have to be—'

'I'm fine,' she snapped, swallowing the need to puke. 'Grazed my pride a little, but that'll scab over.' It had scars enough on it already, after all. 'Gave my arm a scrape.' She winced as she pulled her glove off with her teeth, every joint in her right arm throbbing, grunted as she worked the trembling fingers. The raw rope-burn coiled bloody around her forearm like a snake up a branch.

'Scraped it bad.' Leef slapped at his forehead. 'My fault! If I'd just—'

'No one's fault but my own. Should've let go the damn rope.'

'I for one am grateful you did not.' Majud must've finally prised his fingers free of his wagon-seat. Now he draped a blanket over Shy's shoulders. 'I am far from a strong swimmer.'

Shy squinted at him and that brought the burning to the back of her throat again, so she looked to the wet shingle between her knees instead. ‘You ever think a journey over twenty unbridged rivers might’ve been a mistake?’

‘Every time we cross one, but what can a merchant do when he smells opportunity at the other side? Much as I detest hardship, I love profit more.’

‘Just what we need out here.’ Sweet twisted his hat back firm onto his head as he stood. ‘More greed. All right! Drama’s done, everyone, she yet lives! Let’s get these teams unhitched and back across, the rest of them wagons ain’t going to fly over!’

Corlin shoved between Lamb and Leef with a bag in one hand and knelt next to Shy, taking her arm and frowning down at it. She’d such a manner of knowing exactly what she was about made you hardly even think to ask whether she did.

‘You going to be all right?’ asked Leef.

Shy waved him away. ‘You can go on. You all can.’ She’d known some folks couldn’t get enough pity, but it’d always made her feel uncomfortable right into her arse.

‘You’re sure?’ asked Lamb, looking down at her from what seemed a great height.

‘I daresay you’ve got better places to be than in my way,’ snapped Corlin, already cleaning the cuts.

They drifted off, back towards the ford, Lamb with one last worried look over his shoulder, leaving Corlin to bind Shy’s arm with quick, deft hands, wasting no time and making no mistakes.

‘Thought they’d never leave.’ And she slipped a little bottle out of her bag and into Shy’s free hand.

‘Now that’s good doctoring.’ Shy took a sneaky swig and curled her lips back at the burning.

‘Why do a thing badly?’

‘I’m always amazed how some folk can’t help themselves.’

‘True enough.’ Corlin glanced up from her work towards the ford, where they were manhandling Gentili’s rickety wagon to the far bank, one of the ancient prospectors waving his spindly arms as a wheel caught in the shallows. ‘There’s a few like that along on this trip.’

‘I guess most of ’em mean well.’

‘Someday you can build a boat from meaning well and see how it floats.’

‘Tried that. Sank with me on it.’

The corner of Corlin’s mouth twitched up. ‘I think I might have been on that voyage. Icy water, wasn’t it?’ Lamb had dropped in beside Savian, the two old men straining at the stuck wheel, the whole wagon rocking with their efforts. ‘You see a lot of strong men out here in the wilderness. Trappers and hunters hardly spent a night of their lives under a roof. Men made of wood and leather. Not sure I ever saw one stronger than your father, though.’

‘He ain’t my father,’ muttered Shy, taking another swig from the bottle. ‘And your uncle’s no weakling neither.’

Corlin cut a bandage from the roll with a flick of a bright little knife. ‘Maybe we should give up on oxen and get those two old bastards to haul the wagons.’

‘Expect we’d get there faster.’

‘You reckon you could get Lamb into a yoke?’

‘Easily, but I don’t know how Savian might respond to a whipping.’

‘You’d probably break your whip on him.’

The wagon finally ground free and lurched on, Gentili’s old cousin flailing about in the seat. Behind in the water, Savian gave Lamb an approving thump on the shoulder.

‘They’ve struck up quite the friendship,’ said Shy. ‘For two men never say a word.’

‘Ah, the unspoken camaraderie of veterans.’

‘What makes you think Lamb’s a veteran?’

‘Everything.’ And Corlin slid a pin neatly through the bandage to hold it closed. ‘You’re done.’ She glanced towards the river, the men calling out as they splashed around in the water, and suddenly she sprang up and shouted, ‘Uncle, your shirt!’

Seemed like mad over-modesty to panic about a torn sleeve when half the men in the Fellowship were stripped to the waist and a couple all the way to their bare arses. Then, as Savian twisted to look, Shy caught a glimpse of his bare forearm. It was blue-black with tattooed letters.

No need to ask what he was a veteran of. He was a rebel. More than likely he’d been fighting in Starikland and was on the run, for all Shy knew hotly pursued by his Majesty’s Inquisition.

She looked up, and Corlin looked down, and neither one of them quite managed to hide what they were thinking.

'Just a torn shirt. Nothing to worry about.' But Corlin's blue, blue eyes were narrowed and Shy realised she still had that bright little knife in her hand and of a sudden felt the need to pick her words with care.

'I daresay we've all got a rip or two behind us.' Shy handed the bottle back to Corlin and slowly stood. 'Ain't none of my affair to go picking at other folks' stitches. Their business is their business.'

Corlin took a swig of her own, looking at Shy all the while over the bottle. 'That's a fine policy.'

'And this a fine bandage.' Shy grinned as she worked her fingers. 'Can't say I've ever had a better.'

'You had a lot?'

'Been cut enough, but mostly I just had to let 'em bleed. No one interested in doing the bandaging, I guess.'

'Sad story.'

'Oh, I can tell 'em all day long . . .' She frowned towards the river. 'What's that?'

A dead tree was washing slowly towards them, snagging in the shallows then drifting on, tangles of foamy grass caught up in its branches. There was something draped over the trunk. Someone, limbs trailing. Shy threw her blanket off and hurried to the bank, slid into the water, cold gripping her legs again and making her shiver.

She waded out and caught hold of a branch, winced as pain shot through all the joints of her right arm and into her ribs, had to flounder around to use her left instead.

The passenger was a man, head turned so she couldn't see his face, only a mass of black hair, wet shirt rucked up to show a patch of brown midriff.

'That's a funny-looking fish,' said Corlin, looking down from the bank with hands on hips.

'You want to leave the jokes 'til you've helped me land him?'

'Who is he?'

'He's the Emperor of fucking Gurkhul! How should I know who he is?'

'That's exactly my point.'

'Maybe we can ask once we've dragged him out?'

'That might be too late.'

‘Once he’s washed out to sea it surely will be!’

Corlin sucked sourly at her teeth, then stomped down the bank and into the river without breaking stride. ‘On your head be it if he turns out a murderer.’

‘No doubt it will be.’ Together they heaved the tree and its human cargo grinding onto the bank, broken branches leaving grooves through the gravel, and stood looking down, soaked through, Shy’s stomach sticking unpleasantly to her wet shirt with each shivering in-breath.

‘All right, then.’ Corlin reached down to take the man under his arms. ‘Keep your knife handy, though.’

‘My knife’s always handy,’ said Shy.

With a grunt and a heave, Corlin twisted him over and onto his back, one leg flopping after. ‘Any idea what the Emperor of Gurkhul looks like?’

‘Better fed,’ muttered Shy. He had a lean look to him, fibres in his stretched-out neck, sharp cheekbones, one with an ugly cut down it.

‘Better dressed,’ said Corlin. He had nothing but the torn clothes he was tangled with, and one boot. ‘Older, too.’ He couldn’t have been much over thirty, short black beard on his cheeks, grey scattered in his hair.

‘Less . . . earnest,’ said Shy. It was the best word she could think of for that face. He looked almost peaceful in spite of the cut. Like he’d just closed his eyes to philosophise a moment.

‘It’s the earnest-looking bastards need the most watching.’ Corlin tipped his face one way, then the other. ‘But he is pretty. For flotsam.’ She leaned further to put her ear over his mouth, then rocked back on her haunches, considering.

‘He alive?’ asked Shy.

‘One way to find out.’ Corlin slapped him across the face, and none too gently.

When Temple opened his eyes he saw only a blinding brightness.

Heaven!

But should heaven hurt so much?

Hell, then.

But surely hell would be hot?

And he felt very cold.

He tried to lift his head and decided it was far too much effort. Tried to move his tongue and decided that was no better. A wraith-like figure floated into view, surrounded by a nimbus of sparkling light, painful to look upon.

'God?' Temple croaked.

The slap made a hollow boom in his head, brought fire to the side of his face and snapped everything into focus.

Not God.

Or not the way He was usually portrayed.

This was a woman, and a pale-skinned one. Not old in years, but Temple got the feeling those years had been testing. A long, pointed face, made to look longer by the red-brown hair hanging about it, stuck to pale cheeks with wet, wedged under a ragged hat salt-stained about the band. Her mouth was set in a suspicious frown, with faint lines at the corners that suggested it often was. She looked used tohard work and hard choices, but there was a soft dusting of freckles across the narrow bridge of her nose.

Another woman's face hovered behind. Older and squarer with short hair stirred by the wind and blue eyes that looked as if they were stirred by nothing.

Both women were wet. So was Temple. So was the shingle under him. He could hear the washing of a river and, fainter in the background, the calls of men and beasts. There was only one explanation, reached gradually and by a process of ponderous elimination.

He was still alive.

These two women could scarcely have seen as weak, watery and unconvincing a smile as he mustered at that moment. 'Hello,' he croaked.

'I'm Shy,' said the younger.

'You needn't be,' said Temple. 'I feel we know each other quite well already.'

Under the circumstances he thought it a solid effort, but she did not smile. People rarely find jokes based on their own name amusing. They, after all, have heard them a thousand times.

'My name is Temple.' He tried to rise again, and this time made it as far as his elbows before giving up.

'Not the Emperor of Gurkhul, then,' muttered the older woman, for some reason.

‘I am . . .’ Trying to make up his mind exactly what he was now. ‘A lawyer.’

‘So much for earnest.’

‘Don’t know that I ever been this close to a lawyer before,’ said Shy.

‘Is it all you hoped for?’ asked the other woman.

‘So far it’s middling.’

‘You’re not catching me at my best.’ With a little help from the two women he dragged himself to sitting, noting with a pang of nervousness that Shy kept one hand on the grip of a knife. Not a shy knife, judging by the sheath, and that hard set to her mouth made him think she would not be shy about using it.

He was careful to make no sudden moves. Not that it was difficult. Painstaking ones were enough of a challenge.

‘How does a lawyer get into a river?’ asked the older woman. ‘Give bad advice?’

‘It’s good advice usually lands you in trouble.’ He tried another smile, somewhat closer to his usual winning formula. ‘You did not tell me your name.’

It won nothing from her. ‘No. You weren’t pushed, then?’

‘Me and another man sort of . . . pushed each other.’

‘What happened to him?’

Temple gave a helpless shrug. ‘For all I know he’ll float by presently.’

‘You armed?’

‘He ain’t even shod,’ said Shy.

Temple peered down at his bare foot, tendons standing stark from the skin as he wriggled the toes. ‘I used to have a very small knife but . . . that didn’t turn out too well. I think it’s fair to say . . . I’ve had a bad week.’

‘Some days work out.’ Shy started to help him up. ‘Some don’t.’

‘You sure about this?’ asked her companion.

‘What’s the choice, throw him back in the water?’

‘I’ve heard worse ideas.’

‘You can stay here, then.’ And Shy dragged Temple’s arm around her neck and hauled him to his feet.

God, he was hurting. His head felt like a melon someone had taken a hammer to. God, he was cold. He could hardly have been colder if he had died in the river. God, he was weak. His knees trembled so badly he could

hear them flapping at the insides of his wet trousers. Just as well he had Shy to lean on. She did not feel like she would collapse any time soon. Her shoulder was firm as wood under his hand.

'Thank you,' he said, and meant it, too. 'Thank you so much.' He had always been at his best with someone strong to lean on. Like a flowering creeper adorning a deep-rooted tree. Or a songbird perched on a bull's horn. Or a leech on a horse's arse.

They struggled up the bank, his booted foot and his bare foot scraping at the mud. Behind them, cattle were being driven across the river, riders leaning from saddles to wave their hats or their ropes, yipping and calling, the beasts swarming, swimming, clambering one over another, thrashing up clouds of spray.

'Welcome to our little Fellowship,' said Shy.

A mass of wagons, animals and people were gathered in the lee of a wind-bent copse just beyond the river. Some worked timber for repairs. Some struggled to get stubborn oxen into yokes. Some were busy changing clothes soaked in the crossing, sharp tan-lines on bare limbs. A pair of women were heating soup over a fire, Temple's stomach giving a painful grumble at the smell of it. Two children laughed as they chased a three-legged dog around and around.

He did his best to smile, and nod, and ingratiate himself as Shy helped him through their midst with her strong hand under his armpit, but a few curious frowns were his whole harvest. Mostly these people were fixed on their work, all of them aimed squarely at grinding a profit out of this unforgiving new land with one kind of hard labour or another. Temple winced, and not just from the pain and the cold. When he'd signed up with Nicomo Cosca, it had been on the understanding that he'd never come this close to hard work again.

'Where is the Fellowship heading?' he asked. It would be just his luck to hear Squaredeal or Averstock, settlements whose remaining citizens he rather hoped never to be reacquainted with.

'West,' said Shy. 'Right across the Far Country to Crease. That suit?'

Temple had never heard of Crease. Which was the highest recommendation for the place. 'Anywhere but where I came from suits well enough. West will be wonderful. If you'll have me.'

'Ain't me you got to convince. It's these old bastards.'

There were five of them, standing in a loose group at the head of the column. Temple was slightly unnerved to see the nearest was a Ghost woman, long and lean with a face worn tough as saddle-leather, bright eyes looking straight through Temple and off to the far horizon. Next to her, swaddled in a huge fur coat and with a pair of knives and a gilt-sheathed hunting sword at his belt, a smallish man with a shag of grey hair and beard and a curl to his mouth as if Temple was a joke he didn't find funny but was too polite to frown at.

'This here is the famous scout Dab Sweet and his associate Crying Rock. And this the leader of our merry Fellowship, Abram Majud.' A bald, sinewy Kantic, face composed of unforgiving angles with two careful, slanted eyes in the midst. 'This is Savian.' A tall man, with iron grey stubble and a stare like a hammer. 'And this is . . .' Shy paused, as though trying to think up the right word. 'Lamb.'

Lamb was a huge old Northman, slightly hunched as if he was trying to look smaller than he was, a piece missing from his ear and a face that, through a tangle of hair and beard, looked as if it had seen long use as a millstone. Temple wanted to wince just looking at that collection of breaks, nicks and scars, but he grinned through it like the professional he was, and smiled at each of these geriatric adventurers as though he never saw in one place such a collection of the beautiful and promising.

'Gentlemen, and . . .' He glanced at Crying Rock, realised the word hardly seemed to fit but had entirely backed himself into a corner. 'Lady . . . it is my honour to meet you. My name is Temple.'

'Speaks nice, don't he?' rumbled Sweet, as though that was a black mark against him already.

'Where did you find him?' growled Savian. Temple had not failed at as many professions as he had without learning to recognise a dangerous man, and he feared this one straight away.

'Fished him out of the river,' said Shy.

'You got a reason not to throw him back?'

'Didn't want to kill him, I guess.'

Savian looked straight at Temple, flint-eyed, and shrugged. 'Wouldn't be killing him. Just letting him drown.'

There was a moment of silence for Temple to consider that, while the wind blew chill through his soaked trousers and the five old worthies

treated him each to their own style of appraisal, suspicion or scorn.

It was Majud who spoke first. ‘And where did you float in from, Master Temple? You do not appear to be native to these parts.’

‘No more than you, sir. I was born in Dagoska.’

‘An excellent city for commerce in its day, rather less so since the demise of the Guild of Spicers. And how does a Dagoskan come to be out here?’

Here is the perennial trouble with burying your past. Others are forever trying to dig it up. ‘I must confess . . . I had fallen in with some bad company.’

Majud indicated his companions with a graceful gesture. ‘It happens to the best of us.’

‘Bandits?’ asked Savian.

All that and worse. ‘Soldiers,’ said Temple, putting it in the best light possible short of an outright lie. ‘I left them and struck out on my own. I was set upon by Ghosts, and in the struggle rolled down a slope and . . . into a gorge.’ He pressed gently at his battered face, remembering that sickening moment when he ran out of ground. ‘Followed by a long fall into water.’

‘I been there,’ murmured Lamb, with a faraway look.

Sweet puffed up his chest and adjusted his sword-belt. ‘Whereabouts did you run across these Ghosts?’

Temple could only shrug. ‘Upriver?’

‘How far and how many?’

‘I saw four. It happened at dawn and I’ve been floating since.’

‘Might be no more’n twenty miles south.’ Sweet and Crying Rock exchanged a long glance, grizzled concern on his part, stony blankness on hers. ‘We’d best ride out and take a look that way.’

‘Hmm,’ murmured the old Ghost.

‘Do you expect trouble?’ asked Majud.

‘Always. That way you’ll only be pleasantly surprised.’ Sweet walked between Lamb and Savian, giving each of them a slap on the shoulder as he passed. ‘Good work at the river. Hope I’m as useful when I reach your age.’ He slapped Shy, too. ‘And you, girl. Might want to let go the rope next time, though, eh?’ It was only then that Temple noticed the bloody bandage around her limp arm. He had never been particularly sensitive to the hurts of others.

Majud showed off a gold front tooth as he smiled. ‘I imagine you would be grateful to travel with our Fellowship?’

Temple sagged with relief. ‘Beyond grateful.’

‘Every member has either paid for their passage or contributes their skills.’

Temple unsagged. ‘Ah.’

‘Do you have a profession?’

‘I have had several.’ He thought quickly through the list for those that were least likely to land him immediately back in the river. ‘Trainee priest, amateur surgeon—’

‘We’ve got a surgeon,’ said Savian.

‘And a priest, more’s the pity,’ added Shy.

‘Butcher—’

‘We have hunters,’ said Majud.

‘—carpenter—’

‘A wagon-man?’

Temple winced. ‘House-builder.’

‘We need no houses out here. Your most recent work?’

Mercenary usually won few friends. ‘I was a lawyer,’ he said, before realising that often won still fewer.

Savian was certainly not one of them. ‘There’s no law out here but what a man brings with him.’

‘Have you ever driven oxen?’ asked Majud.

‘I am afraid not.’

‘Herded cattle?’

‘Sadly, no.’

‘Handled horses?’

‘One at a time?’

‘Experience in combat?’ grated Savian.

‘Very little, and that far more than I’d like.’ He feared this interview was not showing him in his best light, if there was such a thing. ‘But . . . I am determined to start fresh, to earn my place, to work as hard as any man – or woman – here and . . . keen to learn,’ he finished, wondering if so many exaggerations had ever been worked into one sentence.

‘I wish you every success with your education,’ said Majud, ‘but passengers pay one hundred and fifty marks.’

A brief silence as they all, particularly Temple, considered the likelihood of his producing such a sum. Then he patted at his wet trouser-pockets. ‘I find myself a little short.’

‘How short?’

‘One hundred and fifty marks-ish?’

‘You let us join for nothing and I reckon you’re getting your money’s worth,’ said Shy.

‘Sweet made that deal.’ Majud ran an appraising eye over Temple and he found himself trying to hide his bare foot behind the other. Without success. ‘And you at least brought two boots apiece. This one will need clothes, and footwear, and a mount. We simply cannot afford to take in every stray that happens across our path.’

Temple blinked, not entirely sure where this left him.

‘Where does that leave him?’ asked Shy.

‘Waiting at the ford for a Fellowship with different requirements.’

‘Or another set of Ghosts, I guess?’

Majud spread his hands. ‘If it were up to me I would not hesitate before helping you, but I have the feelings of my partner Curnsbick to consider, and he has a heart of iron where business is concerned. I am sorry.’ He did look a little sorry. But he did not look like he would be changing his mind.

Shy glanced sideways at Temple. All he could do was stare back as earnestly as possible.

‘Shit.’ She planted her hands on her hips and shook her head at the sky for a moment, then curled back her top lip to show a noticeable gap between her front teeth and neatly spat through it. ‘I’ll buy him in, then.’

‘Really?’ asked Majud, brows going up.

‘Really?’ asked Temple, no less shocked.

‘That’s right,’ she snapped. ‘You want the money now?’

‘Oh, don’t trouble yourself.’ Majud had the trace of a smile about his lips. ‘I know your touch with figures.’

‘I don’t like this.’ Savian propped the heel of his hand on the grip of one of his knives. ‘This bastard could be anyone.’

‘So could you,’ said Shy. ‘I’ve no notion what you were doing last month, or what you’ll get to next, and for a fact it’s none o’ my business. I’m paying, he’s staying. You don’t like it, you can float off downriver, how’s

that?' She glared right into Savian's stony face all the while and Temple found he was liking her more and more.

Savian pursed his thin lips a fraction. 'Got anything to say about this, Lamb?'

The old Northman looked slowly from Temple to Shy and back. It appeared he did nothing quickly. 'I reckon everyone should get a chance,' he said.

'Even those don't deserve it?'

'Especially them, maybe.'

'You can trust me,' said Temple, treating the old men to his most earnest look. 'I won't let you down, I promise.' He had left a trail of broken promises across half the Circle of the World, after all. One extra would hardly keep him out of heaven.

'You saying so don't necessarily make it so, does it?' Savian leaned forward, narrowing his eyes even further, a feat that might have been considered impossible but a moment before. 'I'm watching you, boy.'

'That is . . . a tremendous comfort,' squeaked Temple as he backed slowly away. Shy had already turned on her heel and he hurried to catch her up.

'Thank you,' he said. 'Truly. I'm not sure what I can do to repay you.'

'Repay me.'

He cleared his throat. 'Yes. Of course.'

'With one-quarter interest. I ain't no charity.'

Now he was liking her less. 'I begin to see that. Principal plus a quarter. Far more than fair. I always pay my debts.' Except, perhaps, the financial ones.

'Is it true you're keen to learn?'

He was keener to forget. 'I am.'

'And to work as hard as any man here?'

Judging by the dustiness, sweatiness, sunburn and generally ruined appearance of most of the men, that claim seemed now rather rash. 'Yes?'

'Good, 'cause I'll work you, don't worry on that score.'

He was worrying on several scores, but the lack of hard labour had not been among them. 'I can . . . hardly wait to start.' He was getting the distinct sensation that he had whisked his neck from one noose only to have another whipped tight around it. Looked at with the benefit of hindsight, his life, which at the time had felt like a series of ingenious escapes, resembled

rather more closely a succession of nooses, most of them self-tied. The self-tied ones will still hang you, though.

Shy was busy kneading at her injured arm and planning strategy. ‘Might be Hedges has some clothes’ll fit. Gentili’s got an old saddle will serve and Buckhorm’s got a mule I believe he’d sell.’

‘A mule?’

‘If that’s too fucking lowly you can always walk to Crease.’

Temple thought it unlikely he would make it as far as the mule on foot, so he smiled through the pain and consoled himself with the thought that he would repay her. For the indignity, if not the money.

‘I shall feel grateful for every moment spent astride the noble beast,’ he forced out.

‘You should feel grateful,’ she snapped.

‘I will,’ he snapped back.

‘Good,’ she said.

‘Good.’

A pause. ‘Good.’

Reasons

‘Some country, ain’t it?’

‘Looks like quite a bloody lot of country to me,’ said Leef.

Sweet spread his arms and pulled in such a breath you’d have thought he could suck the whole world through his nose. ‘It’s the Far Country, true enough! Far ’cause it’s so damn far from anywhere a civilised man would care to go. And Far ’cause it’s so damn far from here to anywhere else he’d want to go.’

‘Far ’cause it’s so damn far to anything at all,’ said Shy, staring out across that blank expanse of grass, gently shifting with the wind. A long, long way off, so pale they might’ve been no more’n wishes, the grey outline of hills.

‘But damn civilised men, eh, Lamb?’

Lamb raised a mild eyebrow. ‘We can’t just let ’em be?’

‘Maybe even borrow some hot water off ’em once in a while,’ muttered Shy, scratching at her armpit. She’d a fair few passengers along for the ride now, not to mention dust crusted to every bit of her and her teeth tasting of salt dirt and dry death.

‘Damn ’em, say I, and hot water, too! You can strike off south to the Empire and ask old Legate Sarmis for a bath if that’s your style. Or trek back east to the Union and ask the Inquisition.’

‘Their water might be too hot for comfort,’ she muttered.

‘Just tell me where a body can feel as free as this!’

‘Can’t think of nowhere,’ she admitted, though to her mind there was something savage in all that endless empty. You could come to feel squashed by all that room.

But not Dab Sweet. He filled his lungs to bursting one more time. ‘She’s easy to fall in love with, the Far Country, but she’s a cruel mistress. Always leading you on. That’s how it’s been with me, ever since I was younger’n Leef here. The best grass is always just past the horizon. The sweetest water’s in the next river. The bluest sky over some other mountain.’ He gave a long sigh. ‘Afore you know it, your joints snap of a morning and you can’t sleep two hours together without needing to piss and of a sudden you realise your best country’s all behind you, never even appreciated as you passed it by, eyes fixed ahead.’

‘Summers past love company,’ mused Lamb, scratching at the star-shaped scar on his stubbled cheek. ‘Seems every time you turn around there’s more o’ the bastards at your back.’

‘Comes to be everything reminds you of something past. Somewhere past. Someone. Yourself, maybe, how you were. The now gets fainter and the past more and more real. The future worn down to but a stub.’

Lamb had a little smile at his mouth’s corner as he stared into the distance. ‘The happy valleys o’ the past,’ he murmured.

‘I love old-bastard talk, don’t you?’ Shy cocked a brow at Leef. ‘Makes me feel healthy.’

‘You young shrimps think tomorrow can be put off for ever,’ grumbled Sweet. ‘More time got like money from a bank. You’ll learn.’

‘If the Ghosts don’t kill us all first,’ said Leef.

‘Thanks for raising that happy possibility,’ said Sweet. ‘If philosophy don’t suit, I do have other occupation for you.’

‘Which is?’

The old scout nodded down. Scattered across the grass, flat and white and dry, were a bumper harvest of cow-leavings, fond mementoes of some wild herd roving the grassland. ‘Collecting bullshit.’

Shy snorted. ‘Ain’t he collected bullshit enough listening to you and Lamb sing the glories o’ yesteryear?’

‘You can’t burn fond remembrances, more’s the pity, or I’d be toasty warm every night.’ Sweet stuck an arm out to the level sameness in every direction, the endless expanse of earth and sky and sky and earth away to nowhere. ‘Ain’t a stick of timber for a hundred miles. We’ll be burning cow flats ’til after we cross the bridge at Sictus.’

‘And cooking over ’em, too?’

‘Might improve the flavour o’ what we been eating,’ said Lamb.

‘All part o’ the charm,’ said Sweet. ‘Either way, all the young ’uns are gathering fuel.’

Leef ’s eyes flickered to Shy. ‘I ain’t that young.’ And as though to prove it he fingered his chin where he’d started to lovingly cultivate a meagre harvest of blond hairs.

Shy wasn’t sure she couldn’t have fielded more beard and Sweet was unmoved. ‘You’re young enough to get shitty-handed in service of the Fellowship, lad!’ And he slapped Leef on the back, much to the lad’s hunch-shouldered upset. ‘Why, brown palms are a mark of high courage and distinction! The medal of the plains!’

‘You want the lawyer to lend you a hand?’ asked Shy. ‘For three bits he’s yours for the afternoon.’

Sweet narrowed his eyes. ‘I’ll give you two for him.’

‘Done,’ she said. It was hardly worth haggling when the prices were so small.

‘Reckon he’ll enjoy that, the lawyer,’ said Lamb, as Leef and Sweet headed back towards the Fellowship, the scout holding forth again on how fine things used to be.

‘He ain’t along for his amusement.’

‘I guess none of us are.’

They rode in silence for a moment, just the two of them and the sky, so big and deep it seemed any moment there might be nothing holding you to the ground any more and you’d just fall into it and never stop. Shy worked her right arm a little, shoulder and elbow still weak and sore, grumbles up into her neck and down into her ribs but getting looser each day. For sure she’d lived through worse.

‘I’m sorry,’ said Lamb, out of nowhere.

Shy looked over at him, hunched and sagging like he’d an anchor chained around his neck. ‘I’ve always thought so.’

‘I mean it, Shy. I’m sorry. For what happened back there in Averstock. For what I did. And what I didn’t do.’ He spoke slower and slower until Shy got the feeling each word was a battle to fight. ‘Sorry that I never told you what I was . . . before I came to your mother’s farm . . .’ She watched him all the while, mouth dry, but he just frowned down at his left hand, thumb rubbing

at that stump of a finger over and over. ‘All I wanted was to leave the past buried. Be nothing and nobody. Can you understand that?’

Shy swallowed. She’d a few memories at her back she wouldn’t have minded sinking in a bog. ‘I reckon.’

‘But the seeds of the past bear fruit in the present, my father used to say. I’m that much of a fool I got to teach myself the same lesson over and over, always pissing into the wind. The past never stays buried. Not one like mine, leastways. Blood’ll always find you out.’

‘What were you?’ Her voice sounded a tiny croak in all that space. ‘A soldier?’

That frown of his got harder still. ‘A killer. Let’s call it what it is.’

‘You fought in the wars? Up in the North?’

‘In wars, in skirmishes, in duels, in anything offered, and when I ran out of fights I made my own, and when I ran out of enemies I turned my friends into more.’

She’d thought any answers would be better than none. Now she wasn’t so sure. ‘I guess you had your reasons,’ she muttered, so weak it turned into a wheedling question.

‘Good ones, at first. Then poor ones. Then I found you could still shed blood without ’em and gave up on the bastards altogether.’

‘You got a reason now, though.’

‘Aye. I’ve a reason now.’ He took a breath and drew himself up straighter. ‘Those children . . . they’re all the good I done in my life. Ro and Pit. And you.’

Shy snorted. ‘If you’re counting me in your good works you got to be desperate.’

‘I am.’ He looked across at her, so fixed and searching she’d trouble meeting his eye. ‘But as it happens you’re about the best person I know.’

She looked away, working that stiff shoulder again. She’d always found soft words a lot tougher to swallow than hard. A question of what you’re used to, maybe. ‘You got a damn limited circle of friends.’

‘Enemies always came more natural to me. But even so. I don’t know where you got it, but you’ve a good heart, Shy.’

She thought of him carrying her from that tree, singing to the children, putting the bandages on her back. ‘So have you.’

‘Oh, I can fool folk. The dead know I can fool myself.’ He looked back to the flat horizon. ‘But no, Shy, I don’t have a good heart. Where we’re going, there’ll be trouble. If we’re lucky, just a little, but luck ain’t exactly stuck to me down the years. So listen. When I next tell you to stay out of my way, you stay out, you hear?’

‘Why? Would you kill me?’ She meant it half as a joke, but his cold voice struck her laughter dead.

‘There’s no telling what I’ll do.’

The wind gusted into the silence and swept the long grass in waves and Shy thought she heard shouting sifting on it. An unmistakable note of panic.

‘You hear that?’

Lamb turned his horse towards the Fellowship. ‘What did I say about luck?’

They were in quite the spin, all bunched up and shouting over or riding into each other, wagons tangled and dogs darting under the wheels and children crying and a mood of terror like Glustrod had risen from the grave up ahead and was fixed on their destruction.

‘Ghosts!’ Shy heard someone wail. ‘They’ll have our ears!’

‘Calm down!’ Sweet was shouting. ‘It ain’t bloody Ghosts and they don’t want your ears! Travellers like us, is all!’

Peering off to the north Shy saw a line of slow-moving riders, wriggling little specks between the vast black earth and the vast white sky.

‘How can you be sure?’ shrieked Lord Ingelstad, clutching a few prized possessions to his chest as if he was about to make a dash for it, though where he’d dash to was anyone’s guess.

‘’Cause Ghosts fixed on blood don’t just trot across the horizon! You lot sit tight here and try not to injure yourselves. Me and Crying Rock’ll go parley.’

‘Might be these travellers know something about the children,’ said Lamb, and he spurred his horse after the two scouts, Shy following.

She’d thought their own Fellowship worn down and dirty, but they were a crowd of royalty beside the threadbare column of beggars they came upon, broken-down and feverish in the eyes, their horses lean round the rib and yellow at the tooth, a handful of wagons lurching after and a few flyblown cattle dragging at the rear. A Fellowship of the damned and no mistake.

‘How do,’ said Sweet.

‘How do?’ Their leader reined in, a big bastard in a tattered Union soldier’s coat, gold braid around the sleeves all torn and dangling.

‘How do?’ He leaned from his horse and spat. ‘A year older’n when we come the other way and not a fucking hour richer, that’s how we do. Enough of the Far Country for these boys. We’re heading back to Starikland. You want our advice, you’ll do the same.’

‘No gold up there?’ asked Shy.

‘Maybe there’s some, girl, but I ain’t dying for it.’

‘No one’s ever giving aught away,’ said Sweet. ‘There’s always risks.’

The man snorted. ‘I was laughing at the risks when I came out last year. You see me laughing now?’ Shy didn’t, much. ‘Crease is at bloody war, killings every night and new folk piling in every day. They hardly even bother to bury the bodies any more.’

‘They were always keener there on digging than filling in, as I recall,’ said Sweet.

‘Well, they got worse. We pushed on up to Beacon, into the hills, to find us a claim to work. Place was crawling with men hoping for the same.’

‘Beacon was?’ Sweet snorted. ‘It weren’t more’n three tents last time I was there.’

‘Well, it’s a whole town now. Or was, at least.’

‘Was?’

‘We stopped there a night or two then off into the wilds. Come back to town after we’d checked a few creeks and found naught but cold mud . . .’ He ran out of words, just staring at nothing. One of his fellows took his hat off, the brim half-torn away, and looked into it. Strange to see in that hammered-out face, but there were tears in his eyes.

‘And?’ asked Sweet.

‘Everyone gone. Two hundred people in that camp, or more. Just gone, you understand?’

‘Gone where?’

‘To fucking hell was our guess, and we ain’t planning on joining ’em. The place empty, mark you. Meals still on the table and washing still hung out and all. And in the square we find the Dragon Circle painted ten strides across.’ The man shivered. ‘Fuck that, is what I’m saying.’

‘Fuck it to hell,’ agreed his neighbour, jamming his ruined hat back on.

‘Ain’t been no Dragon People seen in years,’ said Sweet, but looking a little worried. He never looked worried.

‘Dragon People?’ asked Shy. ‘What are they? A kind of Ghosts?’

‘A kind,’ grunted Crying Rock.

‘They live way up north,’ said Sweet. ‘High in the mountains. They ain’t to be dabbled with.’

‘I’d sooner dabble with Glustrod his self,’ said the man in the Union coat. ‘I fought Northmen in the war and I fought Ghosts on the plains and I fought Papa Ring’s men in Crease and I gave not a stride to any of ’em.’ He shook his head. ‘But I ain’t fighting those Dragon bastards. Not if the mountains was made of gold. Sorcerers, that’s what they are. Wizards and devils and I’ll have none of it.’

‘We appreciate the warning,’ said Sweet, ‘but we’ve come this far and I reckon we’ll go on.’

‘May you all get rich as Valint and Balk combined, but you’ll be doing it without me.’ He waved on his slumping companions. ‘Let’s go!’

Lamb caught him by the arm as he was turning back. ‘You heard of Grega Cantliss?’

The man tugged his sleeve free. ‘He works for Papa Ring, and you won’t find a blacker bastard in the Far Country. A Fellowship of thirty got killed and robbed up in the hills near Crease last summer, ears cut off and skinned and interfered with, and Papa Ring said it must be Ghosts and no one proved it otherwise. But I heard a whisper it was Cantliss did it.’

‘Him and us got business,’ said Shy.

The man turned his sunken eyes on her. ‘Then I’m sorry for you, but I ain’t seen him in months and I don’t plan to lay eyes on the bastard ever again. Not him, not Crease, not any part of this blasted country.’ And he clicked his tongue and rode away, heading eastwards.

They sat there a moment and watched the defeated shamble back the long way to civilisation. Not a sight to make anyone too optimistic about the destination, even if they’d been prone to optimism, which Shy wasn’t.

‘Thought you knew everyone in the Far Country?’ she said to Sweet.

The old scout shrugged. ‘Those who been about a while.’

‘Not this Grega Cantliss, though?’

His shrug rose higher. ‘Crease is crawling with killers like a tree-stump with woodlice. I ain’t out there often enough to tell one from another. We

both get there alive, I can make you an introduction to the Mayor. Then you can get some answers.'

'The Mayor?'

'The Mayor runs things in Crease. Well, the Mayor and Papa Ring run things, and it's been that way ever since there was two planks nailed together in that place, and all that time neither one's been too friendly with the other. Sounds like they're getting no friendlier.'

'The Mayor can help us find Cantliss?' asked Lamb.

Sweet's shrug went higher yet. Any further and it'd knock his hat off. 'The Mayor can always help you. If you can help the Mayor.' And he gave his horse his heels and trotted back towards the Fellowship.

Oh God, the Dust

‘Wake up.’

‘No.’ Temple strove to pull his miserable scrap of blanket over his face. ‘Please, God, no.’

‘You owe me one hundred and fifty-three marks,’ said Shy, looking down. Every morning the same. If you could even call it morning. In the Company of the Gracious Hand, unless there was booty in the offing, few would stir until the sun was well up, and the notary stirred last of all. In the Fellowship they did things differently. Above Shy the brighter stars still twinkled, the sky about them only a shade lighter than pitch.

‘Where did the debt begin?’ he croaked, trying to clear yesterday’s dust from his throat.

‘One hundred and fifty-six.’

‘What?’ Nine days of back-breaking, lung-shredding, buttock-skinning labour and he had shaved a mere three marks from the bill. Say what you will about Nicomo Cosca, the old bastard had been a handsome payer.

‘Buckhorm docked you three for that cow you lost yesterday.’

‘I am no better than a slave,’ Temple murmured bitterly.

‘You’re worse. A slave I could sell.’ Shy poked him with her foot and he struggled grumbling up, pulled his oversized boots onto feet dewy from sticking out beyond the bottom of his undersized blanket, shrugged his fourth-hand coat over his one sweat-stiffened shirt and limped for the cook’s wagon, clutching at his saddle-bludgeoned backside. He badly wanted to weep but refused to give Shy the satisfaction. Not that anything satisfied her.

He stood, sore and miserable, choking down cold water and half-raw meat that had been buried under the fire the previous night. Around him men readied themselves for the day's labours and spoke in hushed tones, words smoking on the dawn chill, of the gold that awaited them at trail's end, eyes wide with wonder as if, instead of yellow metal, it was the secret of existence they hoped to find written in the rocks of those unmapped places.

'You're riding drag again,' said Shy.

Many of Temple's previous professions had involved dirty, dangerous, desperate work but none had approached, for its excruciating mixture of tedium, discomfort, and minute wages, the task of riding drag behind a Fellowship.

'Again?' His shoulders slumped as if he had been told he would be spending the morning in hell. Which he more or less had been.

'No, I'm joking. Your legal skills are in high demand. Hedges wants you to petition the King of the Union on his behalf, Lestek's decided to form a new country and needs advice on the constitution and Crying Rock's asked for another codicil to her will.'

They stood there in the almost-darkness, the wind cutting across the emptiness and finding out the hole near his armpit.

'I'm riding drag.'

'Yes.'

Temple was tempted to beg, but this time his pride held out. Perhaps at lunch he would beg. Instead he took up the mass of decayed leather that served him for saddle and pillow both and limped for his mule. It watched him approach, eyes inflamed with hatred.

He had made every effort to cast the mule as a partner in this unfortunate business but the beast could not be persuaded to see it that way. He was its arch-enemy and it took every opportunity to bite or buck him, and had on one occasion most memorably pissed on his ill-fitting boots while he was trying to mount. By the time he had finally saddled and turned the stubborn animal towards the back of the column, the lead wagons were already rolling, their grinding wheels already sending up dust.

Oh God, the dust.

Concerned about Ghosts after Temple's encounter, Dab Sweet had led the Fellowship into a dry expanse of parched grass and sun-bleached bramble, where you only had to look at the desiccated ground to stir up dust. The

further back in the column you were, the closer companions you and dust became, and Temple had spent six days at the very back. Much of the time it blotted out the sun and entombed him in a perpetual soupy gloom, landscape expunged, wagons vanished, often the cattle just ahead made insubstantial phantoms. Every part of him was dried out by wind and impregnated by dirt. And if the dust did not choke you the stink of the animals would finish the job.

He could have achieved the same effect by rubbing his arse with wire wool for fourteen hours while eating a mixture of sand and cow-shit.

No doubt he should have been revelling in his luck and thanking God that he was alive, yet he found it hard to be grateful for this purgatory of dust. Gratitude and resentment are brothers eternal, after all. Time and again he considered how he might escape, slip from beneath his smothering debt and be free, but there was no way out, let alone an easy one. Surrounded by hundreds of miles of open country and he was imprisoned as surely as if he had been in a cage. He complained bitterly to everyone who would listen, which was no one. Leef was the nearest rider, and the boy was self-evidently in the throes of an adolescent infatuation with Shy, had cast her somewhere between lover and mother, and exhibited almost comical extremes of jealousy whenever she talked or laughed with another man, which, alas for him, was often. Still, he need not have worried. Temple had no romantic designs on the ringleader of his tormentors.

Though he had to concede there was something oddly interesting about that swift, strong, certain way she had, always on the move, first to work and last to rest, standing when others sat, fiddling with her hat, or her belt, or her knife, or the buttons on her shirt. He did occasionally catch himself wondering whether she was as hard all over as her shoulder had been under his hand. As her side had been pressed up against his. Would she kiss as fiercely as she haggled . . . ?

When Sweet finally brought them to a miserable trickle of a stream, it was the best they could do to stop a stampede from cattle and people both. The animals wedged in and clambered over each other, churning the bitter water brown. Buckhorm's children frolicked and splashed. Ashjid thanked God for His bounty while his idiot nodded and chuckled and filled the drinking barrels. Iosiv Lestek dabbed his pale face and quoted pastoral poetry at length. Temple found a spot upstream and flopped down on his back in the

mossy grass, smiling wide as the damp soaked gently through his clothes. His standard for a pleasurable sensation had decidedly lowered over the past few weeks. In fact he was greatly enjoying the sun's warmth on his face, until it was suddenly blotted out.

'My daughter getting her money's worth out of you?' Lamb stood over him. Luline Buckhorm had cut her childrens' hair that morning and the Northman had reluctantly allowed himself to be put at the back of the queue. He looked bigger, and harder, and even more scarred with his grey hair and beard clipped short.

'I daresay she'll turn a profit if she has to sell me for meat.'

'I wouldn't put it past her,' said Lamb, offering a canteen.

'She's a hard woman,' said Temple as he took it.

'Not all through. Saved you, didn't she?'

'She did,' he was forced to admit, though he wondered whether death would have been kinder.

'Reckon she's just soft enough, then, don't you?'

Temple swilled water around his mouth. 'She certainly seems angry about something.'

'She's been often disappointed.'

'Sad to say I doubt I'll be reversing that trend. I've always been a deeply disappointing man.'

'I know that feeling.' Lamb scratched slowly at his shortened beard. 'But there's always tomorrow. Doing better next time. That's what life is.'

'Is that why you two are out here?' asked Temple, handing back the canteen. 'For a fresh beginning?'

Lamb's eyes twitched towards him. 'Didn't Shy tell you?'

'When she talks to me it's mostly about our debt and how slowly I'm clearing it.'

'I hear that ain't moving too quick.'

'Every mark feels like a year off my life.'

Lamb squatted beside the stream. 'Shy has a brother and a sister. They were . . . taken.' He held the canteen under the water, bubbles popping. 'Bandits stole 'em, and burned our farm, and killed a friend of ours. They stole maybe twenty children all told and took them up the river towards Crease. We're following on.'

'What happens when you find them?'

He pushed the cork back into the canteen, hard enough that the scarred knuckles of his big right hand turned white. ‘Whatever needs to. I made a promise to their mother to keep those children safe. I broken a lot of promises in my time. This one I mean to keep.’ He took a long breath. ‘And what brought you floating down the river? I’ve always been a poor judge of men, but you don’t look the type to carve a new life from the wilderness.’

‘I was running away. One way and another I’ve made quite a habit of it.’

‘Done a fair bit myself. I find the trouble is, though, wherever you run to . . . there y’are.’ He offered out his hand to pull Temple up, and Temple reached to take it, and stopped.

‘You have nine fingers.’

Suddenly Lamb was frowning at him, and he didn’t look like such a slow and friendly old fellow any more. ‘You a missing-finger enthusiast?’

‘No, but . . . I may have met one. He said he’d been sent to the Far Country to find a nine-fingered man.’

‘I probably ain’t the only man in the Far Country missing a finger.’

Temple felt the need to pick his words carefully. ‘I have a feeling you’re the sort of man that sort of man might be looking for. He had a metal eye.’

No flash of recognition. ‘A man with a missing eye after a man with a missing finger. There’s a song in there somewhere, I reckon. He give a name?’

‘Caul Shivers.’

Lamb’s scarred face twisted as though he’d bitten into something sour. ‘By the dead. The past just won’t stay where you put it.’

‘You do know him, then?’

‘I did. Long time back. But you know what they say – old milk turns sour but old scores just get sweeter.’

‘Talking of scores.’ A second shadow fell across him and Temple squinted around. Shy stood over him again, hands on her hips. ‘One hundred and fifty-two marks. And eight bits.’

‘Oh God! Why didn’t you just leave me in the river?’

‘It’s a question I ask myself every morning.’ That pointed boot of hers poked at his back. ‘Now up you get. Majud wants a Bill of Ownership drawn up on a set of horses.’

‘Really?’ he asked, hope flickering in his breast.

‘No.’

‘I’m riding drag again.’

Shy only grinned, and turned, and walked way.

‘Just soft enough, did you say?’ Temple muttered.

Lamb stood, wiping his hands dry on the seat of his trousers. ‘There’s always tomorrow.’

Sweet's Crossing

'Did I exaggerate?' asked Sweet.

'For once,' said Corlin, 'no.'

'It surely is a big one,' muttered Lamb.

'No doubt,' added Shy. She wasn't a woman easily impressed, but the Imperial bridge at Sictus was some sight, specially for those who'd scarcely seen a thing you could call a building in weeks. It crossed the wide, slow river in five soaring spans, so high above the water you could hardly fathom the monstrous scale of it. The sculptures on its pitted pedestals were wind-worn to melted lumps, its stonework sprouted with pink-flowered weeds and ivy and even whole spreading trees, and all along its length and in clusters at both ends it was infested with itinerant humanity. Even so diminished by time it was a thing of majesty and awe, more like some wonder of the landscape than a structure man's ambition could ever have contemplated, let alone his hands assembled.

'Been standing more'n a thousand years,' said Sweet.

Shy snorted. 'Almost as long as you been sitting that saddle.'

'And in all that time I've changed my trousers but twice.'

Lamb shook his head. 'Ain't something I can endorse.'

'Changing 'em so rarely?' asked Shy.

'Changing 'em at all.'

'This'll be our last chance to trade before Crease,' said Sweet. ' 'Less we have the good luck to run into a friendly party.'

'Good luck's never a thing to count on,' said Lamb.

'Specially not in the Far Country. So make sure and buy what you need, and make sure you don't buy what you don't.' Sweet nodded at a polished

chest of drawers left abandoned beside the way, fine joints all sprung open from the rain, in which a colony of huge ants appeared to have taken up residence. They'd been passing all kinds of weighty possessions over the past few miles, scattered like driftwood after a flood. Things folk had thought they couldn't live without when they and civilisation parted. Fine furniture looked a deal less appealing when you had to carry it. 'Never own a thing you couldn't swim a river with, old Corley Ball used to tell me.'

'What happened to him?' asked Shy.

'Drowned, as I understand.'

'Men rarely live by their own lessons,' murmured Lamb, hand resting on the hilt of his sword.

'No, they don't,' snapped Shy, giving him a look. 'Let's get on down there, hope to make a start on the other side before nightfall.' And she turned and waved the signal to the Fellowship to move on.

'Ain't long before she takes charge, is it?' she heard Sweet mutter.

'Not if you're lucky,' said Lamb.

Folk had swarmed to the bridge like flies to a midden, sucked in from across the wild and windy country to trade and drink, fight and fuck, laugh and cry and do whatever else folk did when they found themselves with company after weeks or months or even years without. There were trappers and hunters and adventurers, all with their own wild clothes and hair but the same wild smell and that quite ripe. There were peaceable Ghosts set on selling furs or begging up scraps or tottering about drunk as shit on their profits. There were hopeful folk on their way to the gold-fields seeking to strike it rich and bitter folk on the way back looking to forget their failures, and merchants and gamblers and whores aiming to build their fortunes on the backs of both sets and each other. All as boisterous as if the world was ending tomorrow, crowded at smoky fires among the furs staked out to dry and the furs being pressed for the long trip back where they'd make some rich fool in Adua a hat to burn their neighbours up with jealousy.

'Dab Sweet!' growled a fellow with a beard like a carpet.

'Dab Sweet!' called a tiny woman skinning a carcass five times her size.

'Dab Sweet!' shrieked a half-naked old man building a fire out of smashed picture-frames, and the old scout nodded back and gave a how-do to each, by all appearances known intimately to half the plains.

Enterprising traders had draped wagons with gaudy cloth for stalls, lining the buckled flags of the Imperial road leading up to the bridge and making a bazaar of it, ringing with shouted prices and the complaints of livestock and the rattle of goods and coinage of every stamp. A woman with eyeglasses sat behind a table made from an old door with a set of dried-out, stitched up heads arranged on it. Above a sign read *Ghost Skulls Bought and Sold.* Food, weapons, clothing, horses, spare wagon parts and anything else that might keep a man alive out in the Far Country was going for five times its value. Treasured possessions from cutlery to windowpanes, abandoned by naïve colonists, were hawked off by cannier opportunists for next to nothing.

'Reckon there'd be quite a profit in bringing swords out here and hauling furniture back,' muttered Shy.

'You've always got your eye open for a deal,' said Corlin, grinning sideways at her. You couldn't find a calmer head in a crisis but the woman had a sticky habit the rest of the time of always seeming to know better.

'They won't seek you out.' Shy dodged back in her saddle as a streak of bird shit spattered the road beside her horse. There were crowds of birds everywhere, from the huge to the tiny, squawking and twittering, circling high above, sitting in beady-eyed rows, pecking at each other over the flyblown rubbish heaps, waddling up to thieve every crumb not currently held on to and a few that were, leaving bridge, and tents, and even a fair few of the people all streaked and crusted with grey droppings.

'You'll be needing one o' these!' a merchant screamed at them, thrusting a disgruntled tomcat at Shy by the scruff of the neck while all around him from tottering towers of cages other mangy specimens stared out with the haunted look of the long-imprisoned. 'Crease is crawling with rats the size o' horses!'

'Then you'd best get some bigger cats!' Corlin shouted back, and then to Shy, 'Where's your slave got to?'

'Helping Buckhorm drive his cattle through this shambles, I daresay. And he ain't a slave,' she added, further niggled. She seemed to be forever calling upon herself to defend from others a man she'd sooner have been attacking herself.

'All right, your man-whore.'

‘Ain’t that either, far as I’m aware.’ Shy frowned at one example of the type, peering from a greasy tent-flap with his shirt open to his belly. ‘Though he does often say he’s had a lot of professions . . .’

‘He might want to think about going back to that one. It’s about the only way I can see him clearing that debt of yours out here.’

‘We’ll see,’ said Shy. Though she was starting to think Temple wasn’t much of an investment. He’d be paying that debt ’til doomsday if he didn’t die first – which looked likely – or find some other fool to stick to and slip away into the night – which looked even more likely. All those times she’d called Lamb a coward. He’d never been scared of work, at least. Never once complained, that she could recall. Temple could hardly open his mouth without bitching on the dust or the weather or the debt or his sore arse.

‘I’ll give him a sore arse,’ she muttered, ‘useless bastard . . .’

Maybe you’re best off looking for the best in people but if Temple had one he was keeping it well hid. Still. What can you expect when you fish men out of the river? Heroes?

Two towers had once stood watch at each end of the bridge. At the near side they were broken off a few strides up and the fallen stone scattered and overgrown. A makeshift gate had been rigged between them – as shoddy a piece of joinery as Shy ever saw and she’d done some injuries to wood herself – bits of old wagon, crate and cask bristling with scavenged nails and even a wheel lashed to the front. A boy was perched on a sheared-off column to one side, menacing the crowds with about the most warlike expression Shy ever saw.

‘Customers, Pa!’ he called as Lamb and Sweet and Shy approached, the wagons of the Fellowship spread out in the crush and jolting after.

‘I see ’em, son. Good work.’ The one who spoke was a hulking man, bigger’n Lamb even and with a riot of ginger beard. For company he had a stringy type with the knobbliest cheeks you ever saw and a helmet looked like it had been made for a man with cheeks of only average knobbliness. It fit him like a teacup on a mace end. Another worthy made himself known on top of one of the towers, bow in hand. Red Beard stepped in front of the gate, his spear not quite pointed at them, but surely not pointed away.

‘This here’s our bridge,’ he said.

‘It’s quite something.’ Lamb pulled off his hat and wiped his forehead. ‘Wouldn’t have pegged you boys for masonry on this scale.’

Ginger Beard frowned, not sure whether he was being insulted. ‘We didn’t build it.’

‘But it’s ours!’ shouted Knobbly, as though it was the shouting of it made it true.

‘You big idiot!’ added the boy from his pillar.

‘Who says it’s yours?’ asked Sweet.

‘Who says it isn’t?’ snapped Knobbly. ‘Possession is most o’ the law.’

Shy glanced over her shoulder but Temple was still back with the herd. ‘Huh. When you actually want a bloody lawyer there’s never one to hand . . .’

‘You want to cross, there’s a toll. A mark a body, two marks a beast, three marks a wagon.’

‘Aye!’ snarled the boy.

‘Some doings.’ Sweet shook his head as if at the decay of all things worthy. ‘Charging a man just to roll where he pleases.’

‘Some people will turn a profit from anything.’ Temple had finally arrived astride his mule. He’d pulled the rag from his dark face and the dusty yellow stripe around his eyes lent him a clownish look. He offered up a watery smile, like it was a gift Shy should feel grateful for.

‘One hundred and forty-four marks,’ she said. His smile slipped and that made her feel a little better.

‘Guess we’d better have a word with Majud,’ said Sweet. ‘See about a whip-around for the toll.’

‘Hold up there,’ said Shy, waving him down. ‘That gate don’t look up to much. Even I could kick that in.’

Red Beard planted the butt of his spear on the ground and frowned up at her. ‘You want to try it, woman?’

‘Try it, bitch!’ shouted the boy, his voice starting somewhat to grate at Shy’s nerves.

She held up her palms. ‘We’ve no violent intentions at all, but the Ghosts ain’t so peaceful lately, I hear . . .’ She took a breath, and let the silence do her work for her. ‘Sangeed’s got his sword drawed again.’

Red Beard shifted nervously. ‘Sangeed?’

‘The very same.’ Temple hopped aboard the plan with some nimbleness of mind. ‘The Terror of the Far Country! A Fellowship of fifty was massacred

not a day's ride from here.' He opened his eyes very wide and drew his fingers down his ears. 'Not an ear left between them.'

'Saw it ourselves,' threw in Sweet. 'They done outrages upon those corpses it pains me to remember.'

'Outrages,' said Lamb. 'I was sick.'

'Him,' said Shy, 'sick. Things as they are I'd want a decent gate to hide behind. The one at the other end bad as this?'

'We don't got a gate at the other end,' said the boy, before Red Beard shut him up with a dirty look.

The damage was done, though. Shy took a sharper breath. 'Well, that's up to you, I reckon. It is your bridge. But . . .'

'What?' snapped Knobbly.

'It so happens we got a man along by the name of Abram Majud. A wonder of a smith, among other things.'

Red Beard snorted. 'And he brought his forge with him, did he?'

'Why, that he did,' said Shy. 'His Curnsbick patent portable forge.'

'His what?'

'As wondrous a creation of the modern age as your bridge is one of the ancient,' said Temple, earnest as you like.

'Half a day,' said Shy, 'and he'll have you a set of bands, bolts and hinges both ends of this bridge it'd take an army to get through.'

Red Beard licked his lips, and looked at Knobbly, and he licked his lips, too. 'All right, I tell you what, then. Half price if you fix up our gates—'

'We go free or not at all.'

'Half-price,' growled Red Beard.

'Bitch!' added his son.'

Shy narrowed her eyes at him. 'What do you reckon, Sweet?'

'I reckon I've been robbed before and at least they didn't dress it up any, the—'

'Sweet?' Red Beard's tone switched from bullying to wheedling. 'You're Dab Sweet, the scout?'

'The one killed that there red bear?' asked Knobbly.

Sweet drew himself up in his saddle. 'Twisted that furry fucker's head off with these very fingers.'

'Him?' called the boy. 'He's a bloody midget!'

His father shut him up with a wave. ‘No one cares how big he is. Tell you what, could we use your name on the bridge?’ He swept one hand through the air, like he could see the sign already. ‘We’ll call it Sweet’s Crossing.’

The celebrated frontiersman was all bafflement. ‘It’s been here a thousand years, friend. Ain’t no one going to believe I built it.’

‘They’ll believe you use it, though. Every time you cross this river you come this way.’

‘I come whatever way makes best sense on that occasion. Reckon I’d be a piss-poor pilot were it any other how, now, wouldn’t I?’

‘But we’ll say you come this way!’

Sweet sighed. ‘Sounds a damn fool notion to me but I guess it’s just a name.’

‘He usually charges five hundred marks for the usage of it,’ put in Shy.

‘What?’ said Red Beard.

‘What?’ said Sweet.

‘Why,’ said Temple, nimble with this notion, too, ‘there is a manufacturer of biscuits in Adua who pays him a thousand marks a year just to put his face on the box.’

‘What?’ said Knobbly.

‘What?’ said Sweet.

‘But,’ went on Shy, ‘seeing as we’re using your bridge ourselves—’

‘And it is a wonder of the ancient age,’ put in Temple.

‘—we can do you a cut-price deal. One hundred and fifty only, our Fellowship cross free and you can put his name to the bridge. How’s that? You’ve made three hundred and fifty marks today and you didn’t even move!’

Knobbly looked delighted with his profit. Red Beard yet doubted. ‘We pay you that, what’s to stop you selling his name to every other bridge, ford and ferry across the Far Country?’

‘We’ll draw up a contract, good and proper, and all make our marks to it.’

‘A con . . . tract?’ He could hardly speak the word, it was that unfamiliar. ‘Where the hell you going to find a lawyer out here?’

Some days don’t work out. Some days do. Shy slapped a hand down on Temple’s shoulder, and he grinned at her, and she grinned back. ‘We’ve got the good fortune to be travelling with the best damn lawyer west of Starikland!’

‘He looks like a fucking beggar to me,’ sneered the boy.

‘Looks can lie,’ said Lamb.

‘So can lawyers,’ said Sweet. ‘It’s halfway a habit with those bastards.’

‘He can draw up the papers,’ said Shy. ‘Just twenty-five marks.’ She spat in her free hand and offered it down.

‘All right, then.’ Red Beard smiled, or at least it looked like he might’ve in the midst of all that beard, and he spat, and they shook.

‘In what language shall I draft the papers?’ asked Temple.

Red Beard looked at Knobbly and shrugged. ‘Don’t matter. None of us can read.’ And they turned away to see about getting the gate open.

‘One hundred and nineteen marks,’ muttered Temple in her ear, and while no one was looking nudged his mule forward, stood in his stirrups and shoved the boy off his perch, sending him sprawling in the mud next to the gate. ‘My humble apologies,’ he said. ‘I did not see you there.’

He probably shouldn’t have, just for that, but Shy found afterwards he’d moved up quite considerably in her estimation.

Dreams

Hedges hated this Fellowship. That stinking brown bastard Majud and that stuttering fuck Buckhorm and that old fake Sweet and their little-minded rules. Rules about when to eat and when to stop and what to drink and where to shit and what size of dog you could have along. It was worse'n being in the bloody army. Strange thing about the army – when he was in it he couldn't wait to get out, but soon as he was out he missed it.

He winced as he rubbed at his leg, trying to knead out the aches, but they was always there, laughing at him. Damn, but he was sick of being laughed at. If he'd known the wound would go bad he never would've stabbed himself. Thinking he was the clever one as he watched the rest of the battalion charge off after that arsehole Tunny. Little stab in the leg was a whole lot better than the big one through the heart, wasn't it? Except the enemy had left the wall the night before and they hadn't even had to fight. The battle over and him the only casualty, kicked out of the army with one good leg and no prospects. Misfortunes. He'd always been dogged by 'em.

The Fellowship weren't all bad, though. He turned in his battered saddle and picked out Shy South, riding back there near the cattle. She wasn't what you'd call a beauty but there was something to her, not caring about nothing, shirt dark with sweat so you could get a notion of her shape – and there was nothing wrong with it, far as he could tell. He'd always liked a strong woman. She weren't lazy either, always busy at something. No notion why she was laughing with that spice-eating arsehole Temple, worthless brown fuck if ever there was, she should've come over to him, he'd have given her something to smile at.

Hedges rubbed at his leg again, and shifted in his saddle, and spat. She was all right, but most of 'em were bastards. His eyes found Savian, swaying on his wagon-seat next to that sneering bitch of his, sharp chin up like she was better'n everyone else and Hedges in particular. He spat again. Spit was free so he might as well use plenty.

People spoke over him, looked through him, and when they passed a bottle round it never got to him, but he had eyes, and he had ears, and he'd seen that Savian in Rostod, after the massacre, dishing out orders like he was the big man, that hard-faced bitch of a niece loitering, too, maybe, and he'd heard the name *Conthus*. Heard it spoken soft and the rebels scraping the bloodstained ground with their noses like he was great Euz his self. He'd seen what he'd seen and he'd heard what he'd heard and that old bastard weren't just some other wanderer with dreams of gold. His dreams were bloodier. The worst of rebels, and no notion anyone knew it. Look at him sitting there like the last word in the argument, but Hedges would be the one had the last word. He'd had his misfortunes but he could smell an opportunity, all right. Just a case of finding out the moment to turn his secret into gold.

In the meantime, wait, and smile, and think about how much he hated that stuttering fuck Buckhorm.

He knew it was a waste of strength he didn't have, but sometimes Raynault Buckhorm hated his horse. He hated his horse, and he hated his saddle, and his canteen and his boots and his hat and his face-rag. But he knew his life depended on them sure as a climber's on his rope. There were plenty of spectacular ways to die out in the Far Country, skinned by a Ghost or struck by lightning or swept away in a flood. But most deaths out here would make a dull story. A mean horse in your string could kill you. A broken saddle-girth could kill you. A snake under your bare foot could kill you. He'd known this would be hard. Everyone had said so, shaking their heads and clucking like he was mad to go. But hearing it's one thing, and living it another. The work, the sheer graft of it, and the weather always wrong. You were burned by the sun or chafed by the rain and forever torn at by the wind, ripping across the plains to nowhere.

Sometimes he'd look out at the punishing emptiness ahead and wonder – has anyone else ever stood here? The thought would make him dizzy. How

far had they come? How far still to go? What happened if Sweet didn't come back from one of his three-day scouts? Could they find their way through this ocean of grass without him?

He had to appear fixed, though, had to stay cheerful, had to be strong. Like Lamb. He took a look sideways at the big Northman, who'd got down to roll Lord Ingelstad's wagon out of a rut. Buckhorm didn't think him and all his sons could've managed it, but Lamb just shrugged it free without a word. Ten years Buckhorm's senior at the least, but might as well have been carved out of rock still, never tiring, never complaining. Folk were looking to Buckhorm for an example, and if he weakened everyone might, and then what? Turn back? He glanced over his shoulder, and though every direction looked about the same, saw failure that way.

He saw his wife, too, plodding away from the column with some of the other women to make water. He'd a sense she wasn't happy, which was a heavy burden and a sore confusion to him. Wasn't as if all this was for his benefit, was it? He'd been happy enough in Hormring, but a man should work to give his wife and children the things they haven't got, grab them a better future, and out there in the west was where he'd seen it. He didn't know what to do to make her happy. Did his husband's duties every night, didn't he, sore or not, tired or not?

Sometimes he felt like asking her – what do you want? The question sitting on his clumsy tongue but his bloody stutter would come on hard then and he never could spit it free. He'd have liked to get down and walk with her a spell, talk like they used to, but then who'd keep the cattle moving? Temple? He barked a joyless laugh at that, turned his eyes on the drifter. There was one of those fellows thought the world owed him an easy ride. One of those men floats from one disaster to another pretty as a butterfly leaving others to clean up his spillings. He wasn't even minding the task he was being paid for, just toddling along on his mule clowning with Shy South. Buckhorm shook his head at that odd couple. Out of the two of them, no doubt she was the better man.

Luline Buckhorm took her place in the circle, studiously looking outwards.

Her wagon was at a halt, as it always was unless she was on hand to shift it by force of will, three of her older children fighting over the reins, their mindless bickering floating out over the grass.

Sometimes she hated her children, with their whining and their sore spots and their endless, gripping, crushing needs. When do we stop? When do we eat? When do we get to Crease? Their impatience all the harder to bear because of her own. All desperate for anything to break up the endless plodding sameness of the trek. Must have been well into autumn now, but except for the wind having an even chillier slap to it, how could you even tell the time of year out here? So flat, so endlessly flat, and yet she still felt they were toiling always uphill, the incline greater with every day trudged by.

She heard Lady Ingelstad dropping her skirts and felt her push into place beside. It was a great equaliser, the Far Country. A woman who wouldn't have deigned to look at her back in civilisation, whose husband had sat on the Open Council of the Union, fool though he was, and here they were making piss together. Sisbet Peg took up her place in the middle of the circle, squatting over the bucket, safe from prying eyes, no more than sixteen and just married, still fresh in love and talking like her husband was the answer to every question, bless her. She'd learn.

Luline caught that slime Hedges peering over as he swayed past on his mangy mule, and she gave him a stern frown back and closed up tight to Lady Ingelstad's shoulder, planted hands on hips and made herself big, or as big as she got at least, making sure he'd catch sight of nothing but disapproval. Then Raynault trotted up and put himself between Hedges and the women, striking up some halting conversation.

'A good man, your husband,' said Lady Ingelstad approvingly. 'You can always rely on him to do the decent thing.'

'That you can,' said Luline, making sure she sounded proud as any wife could be.

Sometimes she hated her husband, with his grinding ignorance of her struggles, and his chafing assumptions of what was woman's work and what was man's. Like knocking in a fence-post then getting drunk was real labour, but minding a crowd of children all day and night was fun to feel grateful for. She looked up and saw white birds high in the sky, flying in a great arrow to who knew where, and wished she could join them. How many steps had she trudged beside that wagon, now?

She'd liked it in Hormring, good friends and a house she'd spent years getting just so. But no one ever asked what her dream was, oh no, she was

just expected to sell her good chair and the good fire it had stood beside and chase off after his. She watched him trot up to the head of the column, pointing something out to Majud. The big men, with the big dreams to discuss.

Did it never occur to him that she might want to ride, and feel the fresh wind, and smile at the wide-open country, and rope cattle, and consider the route, and speak up in the meetings while he trudged beside the squealing wagon, and changed the shitty wrappings on their youngest, and shouted at the next three in line to stop shouting, and had his nipples chewed raw every hour or two while still being expected to have a good dinner ready and do the wifely duties every bloody night, sore or not, tired or not?

A fool question. It never did occur to him. And when it occurred to her, which was plenty, there was always something stopped her tongue sure as if she had the stutter, and made her just shrug and be sulky silent.

'Will you look at that?' murmured Lady Ingelstad. Shy South had swung down from her saddle not a dozen strides from the column and was squatting in the long grass in the shadow of her horse making a spatter, reins in her teeth and trousers around ankles, the side of her pale arse plain to see.

'Incredible,' someone muttered.

She pulled her trousers up, gave a friendly wave, then closed her belt, spat the reins into her hand and was straight back in the saddle. The whole business had taken no time at all, and been done exactly when and how she wanted. Luline Buckhorm frowned around at the outward-facing circle of women, changing over so that one of the whores could take her turn above the bucket. 'There a reason we can't do the same?' she muttered.

Lady Ingelstad turned an iron frown upon her. 'There most certainly is!' They watched Shy South ride off, shouting something to Sweet about closing the wagons up. 'Although, at present, I must confess it eludes me.'

A sharp cry from the column that sounded like her eldest daughter and Luline's heart near leaped from her chest. She took a lurching step, wild with panic, then saw the children were just fighting on the wagon's seat again, shrieking and laughing.

'Don't you worry,' said Lady Ingelstad, patting her hand as she stepped back into place in the circle. 'All's well.'

‘Just so many dangers out here.’ Luline took a breath and tried to calm her beating heart. ‘So much could go wrong.’ Sometimes she hated her family, and sometimes her love for them was like a pain in her. Probably it was a puzzle there was no solving.

‘Your turn,’ said Lady Ingelstad.

‘Right.’ Luline started hitching up her skirts as the circle closed around her. Damn, had there ever been so much trouble taken over making piss?

The famous Iosiv Lestek grunted, and squeezed, and finally spattered a few more drops into the can. ‘Yes . . . yes . . .’ But then the wagon jolted, pans and chests all rattling, he released his prick to grab the rail, and when he steadied himself the tap of joy was turned firmly off.

‘Why is man cursed with such a thing as age?’ he murmured, quoting the last line of *The Beggar’s Demise*. Oh, the silence into which he had murmured those words at the peak of his powers! Oh, the applause that had flooded after! Tremendous acclaim. And now? He had supposed himself in the wilderness when his company had toured the provinces of Midderland, never guessing what real wilderness might look like. He peered out of the window at the endless grass. A great ruin hove into view, some forgotten fragment of the Empire, countless years abandoned. Toppled columns, grass-seeded walls. There were many of them scattered across this part of the Far Country, their glories faded, their stories unknown, their remains scarcely arousing interest. Relics of an age long past. Just as he was.

He remembered, with powerful nostalgia, a time in his life when he had pissed bucket-loads. Sprayed like a handpump without even considering it, then whisked onstage to bask in the glow of the sweet-smelling whale-oil lamps, to coax the sighs from the audience, to wallow in the fevered applause. That ugly pair of little trolls, playwright and manager, entreating him to stay on another season, and begging, and grovelling, and offering more while he refused to dignify them with a reply, busy with his powder. He had been invited to the Agriont to tread the stage of the palace itself before his August Majesty and the entire Closed Council! He had played the First of the Magi before the First of the Magi – how many actors could say the same? He had pranced upon a pavement of abject critics, of ruined competitors, of adoring enthusiasts and scarcely even noticed them beneath his feet. Failure was for other men to consider.

And then his knees failed him, then his guts, then his bladder, then the audiences. The playwright smirking as he suggested a younger man for the lead – but still a worthy part in support for him, of course, just while he gathered his strength. Lurching on stage, stuttering his lines, sweating in the glare of the stinking lamps. Then the manager smirking as he suggested they part ways. Such a wonderful collaboration for them both, how many years had it been, such reviews, such audiences, but time for them both to seek new successes, to follow new dreams . . .

'Oh, treachery, thy noisome visage shown—'

The wagon lurched and the miserable dribblings he had laboured the last hour for slopped from the can and over his hand. He scarcely even noticed. He rubbed at his sweaty jaw. He needed to shave. Some standards had to be maintained. He was bringing culture to the wasteland, was he not? He picked up Camling's letter and scanned it once again, mouthing the words to himself. He was possessed of an excessively ornamented style, this Camling, but was pleasingly abject in his praise and appreciation, in his promises of fine treatment, in his plans for an epoch-making event to be staged within the ancient Imperial amphitheatre of Crease. A show for the ages, as he put it. A cultural extravaganza!

Iosiv Lestek was not finished yet. Not he! Redemption can come in the most unlooked-for places. And it was some while since his last hallucinatory episode. Definitely on the mend! Lestek set down the letter and boldly took up prick once again, gazing through the window at the slowly passing ruins.

'My best performance is ahead of me . . .' he grunted, gritting his teeth as he squeezed a few more drops into the can.

'Wonder what it's like,' said Sallit, staring wistfully at that bright-coloured wagon, *The Famous Iosiv Lestek* written along the side in purple letters. Not that she could read it. But that was what Luline Buckhorm had told her it said.

'What what's like?' asked Goldy, twitching the reins.

'Being an actor. Up on stage in front of an audience and all.' She'd seen some players once. Her mother and father took her. Before they died. Of course before that. Not big-city actors, but even so. She'd clapped until her hands hurt.

Goldy scraped a loose lock of hair back under her battered hat. ‘Don’t you play a role every time you get a customer?’

‘Not quite the same, is it?’

‘Smaller audience, but otherwise not much different.’ They could hear Najis seeing to one of Gentili’s old cousins in the back of the wagon, moaning away. ‘Seem to like it, might be a tip in it.’ At least there was the chance it would finish quicker. That had to be a good thing.

‘Never been that good at pretending,’ Sallit muttered. Not pretending to like it, anyway. Got in the way of pretending not to be there at all.

‘Ain’t always about the fucking. Not always. Not just the fucking, anyway.’ Goldy had been around. She was hellish practical. Sallit wished she could be practical. Maybe she’d get there. ‘Just treat ’em like they’re somebody. That’s all anyone wants, ain’t it?’

‘I suppose.’ Sallit would’ve liked to be treated like somebody, instead of a thing. Folk looked at her, they just saw a whore. She wondered if anyone in the Fellowship knew her name. Less feeling than for cattle, and less value placed on you, too. What would her parents have made of this, their girl a whore? But they lost their say when they died, and it seemed Sallit had lost her say as well. She guessed there was worse.

‘Just a living. That’s the way to look at it. You’re young, love. You’ve got time to work.’ A heated bitch was trotting along beside the column and a crowd of a dozen or more dogs of every shape and size were loping hopefully after. ‘Way o’ the world,’ said Goldy, watching them pass. ‘Put the work in, you can come out rich. Rich enough to retire comfortable, anyway. That’s the dream.’

‘Is it?’ Sounded like a pretty poor kind of dream to Sallit. To not have the worst.

‘Not much action now, that’s true, but we get to Crease, you’ll see the money come in. Lanklan knows what he’s about, don’t you worry on that score.’

Everyone wanted to get to Crease. They’d wake up talking of the route, begging Sweet to know how many miles they’d gone, how many still to go, counting them off like days of a hard sentence. But Sallit dreaded the place. Sometimes Lanklan would talk about how many lonely men were out there, eyes aglitter, and how they’d have fifty clients a day like that was

something to look forward to. Sounded like hell to Sallit. Sometimes she didn't much like Lanklan, but Goldy said as pimps went he was a keeper.

Najis' squealing was building to a peak now, impossible to ignore.

'How far is it still to go?' asked Sallit, trying to cover over it with talk.

Goldy frowned out towards the horizon. 'Lot of ground and a lot of rivers.'

'That's what you said weeks back.'

'It was true then and it's true now. Don't worry, love. Dab Sweet'll get us there.'

Sallit hoped he didn't. She hoped the old scout led 'em round in a great circle and all the way back to New Keln and her mother and father smiling in the doorway of the old house. That was all she wanted. But they were dead of the shudders, and out here in the great empty was no place for dreams. She took a hard breath, rubbed the pain out of her nose, making sure not to cry. That wasn't fair on the rest. Didn't help her when they cried, did it?

'Good old Dab Sweet.' Goldy snapped the reins and clucked at the oxen. 'Never been lost in his life, I hear.'

'Not lost, then,' said Crying Rock.

Sweet took his eyes off the coming rider to squint up at her, perched on top of one of the broken walls with the sinking sun behind, swinging a loose leg, that old flag unwrapped from her head for once and her hair shook out long, silver with a few streaks of gold still in it.

'When have you ever known me to be lost?'

'When I'm not there to point the way?'

He gave a sorry grin at that. Only a couple of times on this trip he'd needed to slip off in the darkness on a clear night to fiddle at his astrolabe and take a proper bearing. He'd won it off a retired sea-captain in a card game and it had proved damned useful down the years. It was like being at sea, sometimes, the plains. Naught but the sky and the horizon and the moaning bloody cargo. A man needed a trick or two to keep pace with his legend.

That red bear? It was a spear he'd killed it with, not his bare hands, and it had been old, and slow, and not that big. But it had been a bear, and he'd killed it, all right. Why couldn't folk be satisfied with that? Dab Sweet

killed a bear! But no, they had to paint a taller picture with every telling – bare hands, then saving a woman, then there were three bears – until he himself could only disappoint beside it. He leaned back against a broken pillar, arms folded, and watched that horseman coming at a gallop, no saddle, Ghost fashion, with a sour, sour feeling in his gut.

'Who made me fucking admirable?' he muttered. 'Not me, that's sure.'

'Huh,' said Crying Rock.

'I never had an elevated motive in my life.'

'Uh.'

There was a time he'd heard tales of Dab Sweet and he'd stuck thumbs in his belt and chin to the sky and tricked himself that was how his life had been. But the years scraped by hard as ever and he got less and the stories more 'til they were tales of a man he'd never met succeeding at what he'd never have dreamed of attempting. Sometimes they'd stir some splinter of remembrance of mad and desperate fights or tedious slogs to nowhere or withering passages of cold and hunger and he'd shake his head and wonder by what fucking alchemy these episodes of rank necessity were made noble adventures.

'What do they get?' he asked. 'A parcel o' stories to nod their heads to. What do I got? Naught to retire on, that's sure. Just a worn-out saddle and a sack full of other men's lies to carry.'

'Uh,' said Crying Rock, like that was just the way of things.

'Ain't fair. Just ain't fair.'

'Why would it be fair?'

He grunted his agreement to that. He wasn't getting old no more. He *was* old. His legs ached when he woke and his chest ached when he lay down and the cold got in him deep and he looked at the days behind and saw how heavily they outnumbered those ahead. He'd set to wondering how many more nights he could sleep under the pitiless sky, yet still men looked at him awestruck like he was great Juvens, and if they landed in a real fix he'd sing a storm to sleep or shoot down Ghosts with lightning from his arse. He had no lightning, not he, and sometimes after he'd talked to Majud and played that role of knows-it-all-and-never-shirks better than Iosiv Lestek himself could have managed, he'd mount his horse and his hands would be all atremble and his eye dim and he'd say to Crying Rock, 'I've lost my nerve,' and she'd just nod like that was the way of things.

‘I was something once, wasn’t I?’ he muttered.

‘You’re still something,’ said Crying Rock.

‘What, though?’

The rider reined in a few strides distant, frowning at Sweet, and at Crying Rock, and at the ruins they were waiting in, suspicious as a spooked stag. After a moment he swung a leg over and slid down.

‘Dab Sweet,’ said the Ghost.

‘Locway,’ said Sweet. It’d have to be him. He was one of the new type, sulky-like, just saw the bad in everything. ‘Why ain’t Sangeed here?’

‘You can speak to me.’

‘I can, but why should I?’

Locway bristled up, all chafe and pout like the young ones always were. Most likely Sweet had been no different in his youth. Most likely he’d been worse, but damn if all the posturing didn’t make him tired these days. He waved the Ghost down. ‘All right, all right, we’ll talk.’ He took a breath, that sour feeling getting no sweeter. He’d been planning this a long time, argued every side of it and picked his path, but taking the last step was still proving an effort.

‘Talk, then,’ said Locway.

‘I’m bringing a Fellowship, might be a day’s quick ride south of us. They’ve got money.’

‘Then we will take it,’ said Locway.

‘You’ll do as you’re fucking told is what you’ll do,’ snapped Sweet. ‘Tell Sangeed to be at the place we agreed on. They’re jumpy as all hell as it is. Just show yourselves in fighting style, do some riding round, shout a lot and shoot an arrow or two and they’ll be keen to pay you off. Keep things easy, you understand?’

‘I understand,’ said Locway, but Sweet had his doubts that he knew what easy looked like.

He went close to the Ghost, their faces level since he was fortunately standing upslope, and put his thumbs in his sword-belt and jutted his jaw out. ‘No killing, you hear? Nice and simple and everyone gets paid. Half for you, half for me. You tell Sangeed that.’

‘I will,’ said Locway, staring back, challenging him. Sweet had a sore temptation to stab him and damn the whole business. But better sense prevailed. ‘What do you say to this?’ Locway called to Crying Rock.

She looked down at him, hair shifting with the breeze, and kept swinging that loose leg. Just as if he hadn't spoke at all. Sweet had himself a bit of a chuckle.

'Are you laughing at me, little man?' snapped Locway.

'I'm laughing and you're here,' said Sweet. 'Draw your own fucking conclusions. Now off and tell Sangeed what I said.'

He frowned after Locway for a long time, watching him and his horse dwindle to a black spot in the sunset and thinking how this particular episode weren't likely to show up in the legend of Dab Sweet. That sour feeling was worse'n ever. But what could he do? Couldn't be guiding Fellowships for ever, could he?

'Got to have something to retire on,' he muttered. 'Ain't too greedy a dream, is it?'

He squinted up at Crying Rock, binding her hair back into that twisted flag again. Most men would've seen nothing, maybe. But he who'd known her so many years caught the disappointment in her face. Or maybe just his own, reflected back like in a still pool.

'I never been no fucking hero,' he snapped. 'Whatever they say.'

She just nodded, like that was the way of things.

The Folk were camped among the ruins, Sangeed's tall dwelling built in the angle of the fallen arm of a great statue. No one knew now who the statue had been. An old God, died and fallen away into the past, and it seemed to Locway that the Folk would soon join him.

The camp was quiet and the dwellings few, the young men ranging far to hunt. On the racks only lean shreds of meat drying. The shuttles of the blanket weavers clacked and rattled, chopping the time up into ugly moments. Brought to this, they who had ruled the plains. Weaving for a pittance, and stealing money so they could buy from their destroyers the things that should have been theirs already.

The black spots had come in the winter and carried away half the children, moaning and sweating. They had burned their dwellings and drawn the sacred circles in the earth and said the proper words but it made no difference. The world was changing, and the old rituals held no power. The children had still died, the women had still dug, the men had still wept, and Locway had wept most bitterly of all.

Sangeed had put his hand upon his shoulder and said, ‘I fear not for myself. I had my time. I fear for you and the young ones, who must walk after me, and will see the end of things.’ Locway feared, too. Sometimes he felt that all his life was fear. What way was that for a warrior?

He left his horse and picked his way through the camp. Sangeed was brought from his lodge, his arms across the shoulders of his two strong daughters. His spirit was being taken piece by piece. Each morning there was less of him, that mighty frame before which the world had trembled withered to a shell.

‘What did Sweet say?’ he whispered.

‘That a Fellowship is coming, and will pay. I do not trust him.’

‘He has been a friend to the Folk.’ One of Sangeed’s daughters wiped the spit from the corner of his slack mouth. ‘We will meet him.’ And already he was starting to sleep.

‘We will meet him,’ said Locway, but he feared what might happen.

He feared for his baby son, who only three nights before had given his first laugh and so become one of the Folk. It should have been a moment for rejoicing, but Locway had only fear in him. What world was this to be born into? In his youth the Folk’s flocks and herds had been strong and numerous, and now they were stolen by the newcomers, and the good grazing cropped away by the passing Fellowships, and the beasts hunted to nothing, and the Folk scattered and taken to shameful ways. Before, the future had always looked like the past. Now he knew the past was a better place, and the future full of fear and death.

But the Folk would not fade without a fight. And so Locway sat beside his wife and son as the stars were opened, and dreamed of a better tomorrow he knew would never come.

The Wrath of God

‘Don’t much care for the look o’ that cloud!’ called Leef, pushing hair out of his face that the wind straight away snatched back into it.

‘If hell has clouds,’ muttered Temple, ‘they look like that one.’ It was a grey-black mountain on the horizon, a dark tower boiling into the very heavens, making of the sun a feeble smudge and staining the sky about it strange, warlike colours. Every time Temple checked it was closer. All the endless, shelterless Far Country to cast into shadow and where else would it go but directly over his head? Truly, he exerted an uncanny magnetism on anything dangerous.

‘Let’s get these fires lit and back to the wagons!’ he called, as though some planks and canvas would be sure protection against the impending fury of the skies. The wind was not helping with the task. Nor did the drizzle, when it began to fall a moment later. Nor did the rain that came soon after that, whipping from everywhere at once, cutting through Temple’s threadbare coat as if he was wearing nothing. He bent cursing over his little heap of cow-leavings, dissolving rapidly in his wet hands into their original, more fragrant state while he fumbled with a smouldering stick of wood.

‘Ain’t much fun trying to set fire to wet shit, is it?’ shouted Leef.

‘I’ve had better jobs!’ Though the same sense of distasteful futility had applied to most of them, now Temple considered it.

He heard hooves and saw Shy swing from her saddle, hat clasped to her head. She had to come close and shout over the rising wind and Temple found himself momentarily distracted by her shirt, which had stuck tight to her with wet and come open a button, showing a small tanned triangle of

skin below her throat and a paler one around it, sharp lines of her collarbones faintly glistening, perhaps just the suggestion of—

'I said, where's the herd?' she bellowed in his face.

'Er . . .' Temple jerked a thumb over his shoulder. 'Might be a mile behind us!'

'Storm was making 'em restless.' Leef 's eyes were narrowed against the wind, or possibly at Temple, it was hard to say which.

'Buckhorm was worried they might scatter. He sent us to light some fires around the camp.' Temple pointed out the crescent of nine or ten they had managed to set a flame to before the rain came. 'Maybe steer the herd away if they panic!' Though their smouldering efforts did not look capable of diverting a herd of lambs. The wind was blowing up hard, ripping the smoke from the fires and off across the plain, making the long grass thrash, dragging the dancing seed heads out in waves and spirals. 'Where's Sweet?'

'No telling. We'll have to work this one out ourselves.' She dragged him up by his wet coat. 'You'll get no more fires lit in this! We need to get back to the wagons!'

The three of them struggled through what was now lashing rain, stung and buffeted by gusts, Shy tugging her nervous horse by the bridle. A strange gloom had settled over the plain and they scarcely saw the wagons until they stumbled upon them in a mass, folk tugging desperately at oxen, trying to hobble panicked horses and tether snapping livestock or wrestling with their own coats or oilskins, turned into thrashing adversaries by the wind.

Ashjid stood in the midst, eyes bulging with fervour, sinewy arms stretched up to the pouring heavens, the Fellowship's idiot kneeling at his feet, the whole like a sculpture of some martyred Prophet. 'There is no running from the sky!' he was shrieking, finger outstretched. 'There is no hiding from God! God is always watching!'

It seemed to Temple he was that most dangerous kind of priest – one who really believes. 'Have you ever noticed that God is wonderful at watching,' he called, 'but quite poor when it comes to helping out?'

'We got bigger worries than that fool and his idiot,' snapped Shy. 'Got to get the wagons closed up – if the herd charges through here there's no telling what'll happen!'

The rain was coming in sheets now, Temple was as wet as if he had been dunked in the bath. His first in several weeks, come to think of it. He saw

Corlin, teeth gritted and her hair plastered to her skull, struggling with ropes as she tried to get some snapping canvas lashed. Lamb was near her, heavy shoulder set to a wagon and straining as if he might move it on his own. He even was, a little. Then a couple of bedraggled Suljuks jumped in beside him and between them got it rolling. Luline Buckhorm was lifting her children up into a wagon and Temple went to help them, scraping the hair from his eyes.

'Repent!' shrieked Ashjid. 'This is no storm, this is the wrath of God!'

Savian dragged him close by his torn robe. 'This is a storm. Keep talking and I'll show you the wrath of God!' And he flung the old man on the ground.

'We need to get . . .' Shy's mouth went on but the wind stole her words. She tugged at Temple and he staggered after, no more than a few steps but they might as well have been miles. It was black as night, water coursing down his face, and he was shivering with cold and fear, hands helplessly dangling. He turned, bearings suddenly fled and panic gripping him.

Which way were the wagons? Where was Shy?

One of his fires still smouldered nearby, sparks showering out into the dark, and he tottered towards it. The wind came up like a door slamming on him and he pushed and struggled, grappling at it like one drunkard with another. Then, suddenly, a sharper trickster than he, it came at him the other way and bowled him over, left him thrashing in the grass, Ashjid's mad shrieking echoing in his ears, calling on God to smite the unbeliever.

Seemed harsh. You can't just choose to believe, can you?

He crawled on hands and knees, hardly daring to stand in case he was whisked into the sky and dashed down in some distant place, bones left to bleach on earth that had never known men's footsteps. A flash split the darkness, raindrops frozen streaks and the wagons edged with white, figures caught straining as if in some mad tableau then all sunk again in rain-lashed darkness.

A moment later thunder ripped and rattled, turning Temple's knees to jelly and seeming to shake the very earth. But thunder should end and this only drummed louder and louder, the ground trembling now for certain, and Temple realised it was not thunder but hooves. Hundreds of hooves battering the earth, the cattle driven mad by the storm, so many dozen tons of meat hurtling at him where he knelt helpless. Another flash and he saw

them, rendered devilish by the darkness, one heaving animal with hundreds of goring horns, a furious mass boiling across the plain towards him.

'Oh God,' he whispered, sure that, slippery as he was, death's icy grip was on him at last. 'Oh God.'

'Come on, you fucking idiot!'

Someone tugged at him and another flash showed Shy's face, hatless with hair flattened and her lips curled back, all dogged determination, and he had never been so glad to be insulted in his life. He stumbled with her, the pair of them jerked and buffeted by the wind like corks in a flood, the rain become a scriptural downpour, like to the fabled flood with which God punished the arrogance of old Sippot, the thunder of hooves merged with the thunder of the angry sky to make one terrifying din.

A double blink of lightning lit the back of a wagon, canvas awning madly jerking, and below it Leef's face, wide-eyed, shouting encouragements drowned in the wind, one arm stretched starkly out.

And suddenly that hand closed around Temple's and he was dragged inside. Another flash showed him Luline Buckhorm and some of her children, huddled together amongst the sacks and barrels along with two of the whores and one of Gentili's cousins, all wet as swimmers. Shy slithered into the wagon beside him, Leef dragging her under the arms, while outside he could hear a veritable river flowing around the wheels. Together they wrestled the flapping canvas down.

Temple fell back, in the pitch darkness, and someone sagged against him. He could hear their breath. It might have been Shy, or it might have been Leef, or it might have been Gentili's cousin, and he hardly cared which.

'God's teeth,' he muttered, 'but you get some weather out here.'

No one answered. Nothing to say, or too drained to say it, or perhaps they could not hear him for the hammering of the passing cattle and the hail battering the waxed canvas just above their heads.

The path the herd had taken wasn't hard to follow – a stretch of muddied, trampled earth veering around the camp and spreading out beyond as the cattle had scattered, here or there the corpse of a dead cow huddled, all gleaming and glistening in the bright wet morning.

'The good people of Crease may have to wait a little longer for the word of God,' said Corlin.

‘Seems so.’ Shy had taken it at first for a heap of wet rags. But crouching beside it she’d seen a corner of black cloth flapping with some white embroidery, and recognised Ashjid’s robe. She took off her hat. Felt like the respectful thing to do. ‘Ain’t much left of him.’

‘I suppose that’s what happens when a few hundred cattle trample a man.’

‘Remind me not to try it.’ Shy stood and jammed her hat back on. ‘Guess we’d best tell the others.’

It was all activity in the camp, folk putting right what the storm spoiled, gathering what the storm scattered. Some of the livestock might’ve wandered miles, Leef and a few others off rounding them up. Lamb, Savian, Majud and Temple were busy mending a wagon that the wind had dragged over and into a ditch. Well, Lamb and Savian were doing the lifting while Majud was tending to the axle with grip and hammer. Temple was holding the nails.

‘Everything all right?’ he asked as they walked up.

‘Ashjid’s dead,’ said Shy.

‘Dead?’ grunted Lamb, setting the wagon down and slapping his hands together.

‘Pretty sure,’ said Corlin. ‘The herd went over him.’

‘Told him to stay put,’ growled Savian. That man was all sentiment.

‘Who’s going to pray for us now?’ Majud even looked worried about it.

‘You need praying for?’ asked Shy. ‘Didn’t pick you for piety.’

The merchant stroked at his pointed chin. ‘Heaven is at the bottom of a full purse, but . . . I have become used to a morning prayer.’

‘And me,’ said Buckhorm, who’d drifted over to join the conversation with a couple of his several sons.

‘What do you know,’ muttered Temple. ‘He made some converts after all.’

‘Say, lawyer!’ Shy called at him. ‘Wasn’t priest among your past professions?’

Temple winced and leaned in to speak quietly. ‘Yes, but of all the many shameful episodes in my past, that is perhaps the one that shames me most.’

Shy shrugged. ‘There’s always a place for you behind the herd if that suits you better.’

Temple thought a moment, then turned to Majud. ‘I was given personal instruction over the course of several years by Kahdia, High Haddish of the Great Temple in Dagoska and world-renowned orator and theologist.’

‘So . . .’ Buckhorm pushed his hat back with a long finger. ‘Cuh . . . can you say a prayer or can’t you?’

Temple sighed. ‘Yes. Yes, I can.’ He added in a mutter to Shy. ‘A prayer from an unbelieving preacher to an unbelieving congregation from a score of nations where they all disbelieve in different things.’

Shy shrugged. ‘We’re in the Far Country now. Guess folk need something new to doubt.’ Then, to the rest, ‘He’ll say the best damn prayer you ever heard! His name’s Temple, ain’t it? How religious can you get?’

Majud and Buckhorm traded sceptical glances. ‘If a Prophet can fall from the sky, I suppose one can wash from a river, too.’

‘Ain’t exactly raining . . . other options.’

‘It’s rained everything else,’ said Lamb, peering up at the heavens.

‘And what shall be my fee?’ asked Temple.

Majud frowned. ‘We did not pay Ashjid.’

‘Ashjid’s only care was for God. I have myself to consider also.’

‘Not to mention your debts,’ added Shy.

‘Not to mention those.’ Temple gave Majud an admonishing glance. ‘And, after all, your support for charity was clearly demonstrated when you refused to offer help to a drowning man.’

‘I assure you I am as charitable as anyone, but I have the feelings of my partner Curnsbick to consider and Curnsbick has an eye on every bit.’

‘So you often tell us.’

‘And you were not drowning at the time, only wet.’

‘One can still be charitable to the wet.’

‘You weren’t,’ added Shy.

Majud shook his head. ‘You two would sell eyeglasses to a blind man.’

‘No less use than prayers to a villain,’ put in Temple, with a pious fluttering of his lashes.

The merchant rubbed at his bald scalp. ‘Very well. But I buy nothing without a sample. A prayer now, and if the words convince me I will pay a fair price this morning and every morning. I will hope to write it off to sundry expenses.’

‘Sundry it is.’ Shy leaned close to Temple. ‘You wanted a break from riding drag, this could be a steady earner. Give it some belief, lawyer.’

‘All right,’ Temple muttered back. ‘But if I’m the new priest, I want the old one’s boots.’ He clambered up onto one of the wagons, makeshift

congregation shuffling into an awkward crescent. To Shy's surprise it was nearly half the Fellowship. Nothing moves people to prayer like death, she guessed, and last night's demonstration of God's wrath didn't hurt attendance either. All the Suljuks were there. Lady Ingelstad tall and curious. Gentili with his ancient family. Buckhorm with his young one. Most of the whores and their pimp, too, though Shy had a suspicion he was keeping an eye on his goods rather than moved by love of the Almighty.

There was a silence, punctuated only by the scraping of Hedges' knife as he salvaged the dead cattle for meat, and the scraping of Savian's shovel as he put the remains of the Fellowship's previous spiritual advisor to rest. Without his boots. Temple held one hand in the other and humbly turned his face towards the heavens. Deep and clear now, with no trace of last night's fury.

'God—'

'Close, but no!' And at that moment old Dab Sweet came riding up, reins dangling between two fingers. 'Morning, my brave companions!'

'Where the hell have you been?' called Majud.

'Scouting. It's what you pay me for, ain't it?'

'That and help in storms.'

'I can't hold your hand across every mile o' the Far Country. We been out north,' jerking his thumb over his shoulder.

'Out north,' echoed Crying Rock, who had somehow managed to ride into the encampment from the opposite direction in total silence.

'Following some Ghost signs, trying to guide you clear of any nasty surprises.'

'Ghost signs?' asked Temple, looking a little sick.

Sweet held up a calming hand. 'No need for anyone to shit their britches yet. This is the Far Country, there's always Ghosts around. Question is which ones and how many. We was worried those tracks might belong to some o' Sangeed's people.'

'And?' asked Corlin.

''Fore we could get a sight of 'em, that storm blew in. Best thing we could do was find a rock to shelter by and let it blow along.'

'Hah huh,' grunted Crying Rock, presumably in agreement.

'You should have been here,' grumbled Lord Ingelstad.

‘Even I can’t be everywhere, your Lordship. But keep complaining, by all means. Scorn is the scout’s portion. Everyone’s got a better way of doing things ’til they’re called on to actually tell you what it might be. It was our surmise that among the whole Fellowship you’d enough stout hearts and level heads to see it through – not that I’d count your Lordship with either party – and what do you know?’ Sweet stuck out his bottom lip and nodded around at the dripping camp and its bedraggled occupants. ‘Few head of cattle lost but that was quite a storm last night. Could’ve been plenty worse.’

‘Shall I get down?’ asked Temple.

‘Not on my account. What you doing up there, anyhow?’

‘He was about to say the morning prayer,’ said Shy.

‘He was? What happened to the other God-tickler? What’s his name?’

‘Herd ran over him in the night,’ said Corlin, without emotion wasted on the fact.

‘I guess that’ll do it.’ Sweet reached into his saddlebag and eased out a half-full bottle. ‘Well, then, have at it, lawyer.’ And he treated himself to a long swig.

Temple sighed, and looked at Shy. She shrugged, and mouthed, ‘Drag,’ at him. He sighed again and turned his eyes skywards.

‘God,’ he began for a second time. ‘For reasons best known to yourself, you have chosen to put a lot of bad people in the world. People who would rather steal a thing than make it. Who would rather break a thing than grow it. People who will set fire to a thing just to watch it burn. I know. I’ve run across a few of them. I’ve ridden with them.’ Temple looked down for a moment. ‘I suppose I’ve been one of them.’

‘Oh, he’s good,’ muttered Sweet, handing the bottle to Shy. She took a taste, making sure it wasn’t too deep.

‘Perhaps they seem like monsters, these people.’ Temple’s voice rose high and fell low, hands stroking and plucking and pointing in a fashion Shy had to concede was quite arresting. ‘But the truth is, it takes no sorcery to make a man do bad things. Bad company. Bad choices. Bad luck. A no more than average level of cowardice.’ Shy offered the bottle to Lamb but he was fixed so tight to the sermon he didn’t notice. Corlin took it instead.

‘But gathered here today, humbly seeking your blessing, you see a different kind of people.’ Quite a few of them, in fact, as the flock was

steadily swelling. ‘Not perfect, surely. Each with their faults. Some uncharitable.’ And Temple gave Majud a stern look. ‘Some prone to drink.’ Corlin paused with the bottle halfway to her mouth. ‘Some just a little on the grasping side.’ His eye fell on Shy, and damn it if she didn’t even feel a little shamed for a moment, and that took some heavy doing.

‘But every one of these people came out here to make something!’ A ripple of agreement went through the Fellowship, heads bobbing as they nodded along. ‘Every one of them chose to take the hard way! The right way!’ He really was good. Shy could hardly believe it was the same man who moaned ten times a day about dust, pouring out his heart like he’d God’s words in him after all. ‘To brave the perils of the wilderness so they could build new lives with their hands and their sweat and their righteous effort!’ Temple spread his own hands wide to encompass the gathering. ‘These are the good people, God! Your children, ranged before you, hopeful and persevering! Shield them from the storm! Guide them through the trials of this day, and every day!’

‘Hurrah!’ cried the idiot, leaping up and punching the air, faith switched smoothly to a new Prophet, whooping and capering and shouting, ‘Good people! Good people!’ until Corlin caught hold of him and managed to shut him up.

‘Good words,’ said Lamb as Temple hopped down from the wagon. ‘By the dead, those were some good words.’

‘Mostly another man’s, if I’m honest.’

‘Well, you surely say ’em like you believe ’em,’ said Shy.

‘A few days riding drag and you’ll believe in anything,’ he muttered. The congregation was drifting apart, heading to their morning tasks, a couple of them thanking Temple as they moved off to get under way. Majud was left, lips appraisingly pressed together.

‘Convinced?’ asked Shy.

The merchant reached into his purse – which wasn’t far from a miracle in itself – and pulled out what looked like a two mark piece. ‘You should have stuck to prayers,’ he said to Temple. ‘They’re in greater demand than laws out here.’ And he flicked the coin spinning into the air, flashing with the morning sun.

Temple grinned, reaching out to catch it.

Shy snatched it from the air first.

‘One hundred and twelve,’ she said.

The Practical Thinkers

‘You owe me—’

‘One hundred and two marks,’ said Temple, turning over.

He was already awake. He had started waking before dawn, lately, ready the moment his eyes came open.

‘That’s right. Get up. You’re wanted.’

‘I’ve always had that effect on women. It’s a curse.’

‘For them, no doubt.’

Temple sighed as he started to roll up his blanket. He was a little sore, but it would wear off. He was getting hard from the work. Tough in places that had been soft a long time. He had been obliged to tighten his belt by a couple of notches. Well, not notches exactly, but he had twice shifted the bent nail that served for a buckle in the old saddle-girth that served for a belt.

‘Don’t tell me,’ he said. ‘I’m riding drag.’

‘No. Once you’ve led the Fellowship in prayer, Lamb’s lending you his horse. You’re coming hunting with me and Sweet today.’

‘Do you have to taunt me like this every morning?’ he asked as he pulled his boots on. ‘What happened to make you this way?’

She stood looking at him, hands on hips. ‘Sweet found a stretch of timber over yonder and reckons there might be game. If you’d rather ride drag, you can ride drag. Thought you might appreciate the break is all, but have it your way.’ And she turned and started to walk off.

‘Wait, you’re serious?’ Trying to hurry after her and pull on his other boot at the same time.

‘Would I toy with your feelings?’

‘I’m going hunting?’ Sufeen had asked him to go hunting a hundred times and he had always said he could not imagine anything more boring. After a few weeks with the dust, had he been the quarry he would have dashed off laughing across the plains.

‘Calm down,’ said Shy. ‘No one’s fool enough to give you a bow. Me and Sweet’ll do the shooting while Crying Rock scares up the game. You and Leef can follow on and skin, butcher and cart. Wouldn’t be a bad idea to grab some wood for a shitless fire or two either.’

‘Skinning, butchering and shitless fires! Yes, my Queen!’ He remembered those few months butchering cattle in the sweltering meat district of Dagoska, the stink and the flies, the back-breaking effort and horrible clamour. He had thought it like hell. Now he dropped to his knees, and grabbed her hand, and kissed it in thanks for the chance.

She jerked it free. ‘Stop embarrassing yourself.’ It was still too dark to see her face, but he thought he could hear a smile in her voice. She slid her sheathed knife from her belt. ‘You’ll need this.’

‘A knife of my own! And quite a large one!’ He stayed on his knees and thrust his fists into the sky. ‘I’m going hunting!’

One of Gentili’s venerable cousins, on his way shambling past to empty his bladder, shook his head and grumbled, ‘Who gives a fuck?’

As the first signs of dawn streaked the sky and the wheels of the Fellowship began to turn, the five of them rode off across the scrubby grass, Leef on an empty wagon for carrying the carcasses, Temple trying to persuade Lamb’s horse that they were on the same side. They crested the edge of what passed for a valley out here but would barely have qualified as a ditch anywhere else, some ill-looking trees huddling in its base, browned and broken. Sweet sat slumped in his saddle, scanning those unpromising woods. God only knew what for.

‘Look about right?’ he grunted to Crying Rock.

‘About.’ The Ghost gave her old grey a tap with her heels and they were off down the long slope.

The lean deer that came bouncing from the trees and straight into Sweet’s bolts and Shy’s arrows were a different prospect from the big, soft oxen that had swung from the hooks in Dagoska’s stinking warehouses, but the principles came back quickly enough. Soon Temple was making a few swift slits with the blade then peeling the skins off whole while Leef held the

front hooves. He even took a sprinkling of pride in the way he got the guts sliding out in one mass, steaming in the chill morning. He showed Leef the trick of it and soon they were bloody to their elbows, and laughing, and flicking bits of gut at each other like a pair of boys.

Soon enough they had five tough little carcasses stretched out and glistening in the back of the wagon and the last skinned and headed, the offal in a flyblown heap and the hides in a red and brown tangle like clothes discarded by a set of eager swimmers.

Temple wiped Shy's knife on one of them and nodded off up the rise. 'I'd best see what's keeping those two.'

'I'll get this last one gutted.' Leef grinned up at him as he dragged himself onto Lamb's horse. 'Thanks for the pointers.'

'Teaching is the noblest of callings, Haddish Kahdia used to tell me.'

'Who's he?'

Temple thought about that. 'A good, dead man, who gave his life for mine.'

'Sounds like a shitty trade,' said Leef.

Temple snorted. 'Even I think so. I'll be back before you know it.' He pushed up the valley, following the treeline, enjoying the turn of speed he got from Lamb's horse and congratulating himself that he was finally making some progress with that boy. A hundred strides further on and he saw Sweet and Shy watching the trees from horseback.

'Can't you sluggards kill any faster?' he called at them.

'You finish that lot already?' asked Shy.

'Skinned, gutted and eager for the pot.'

'I'll be damned,' grunted Sweet, ivory-stocked flatbow propped on his thigh. 'Reckon someone who knows the difference better check up on the lawyer's handiwork. Make sure he hasn't skinned Leef by mistake.'

Shy brought her horse around and they rode back towards the wagon. 'Not bad,' she said, giving him an approving nod. It might well have been the first he had received from her, and he found he quite liked having one. 'Reckon we might make a plainsman o' you yet.'

'That or I'll make snivelling townsfolk of the lot of you.'

'Take stronger stuff than you're made of to get that done.'

'I'm made of pretty weak stuff, all in all.'

‘I don’t know.’ She was looking sideways at him, one appraising brow up. ‘I’m starting to think there might be some metal under all that paper.’

He tapped his chest with a fist. ‘Tin, maybe.’

‘Well, you wouldn’t forge a sword from it, but tin’ll make a decent bucket.’

‘Or a bath.’

She closed her eyes. ‘By the dead, a bath.’

‘Or a roof.’

‘By the dead, a roof,’ as they crested the rise and looked down towards the trees, ‘can you remember what a roof—’

The wagon came into view below, and the heap of skins, and next to them Leef lying on the ground. Temple knew it was him because of his boots. He couldn’t see the rest, because two figures knelt over him. His first thought was that the lad must have had a fall and the other two were helping him up.

Then one turned towards them, and he was dressed in a dozen different skins all patchwork-stitched and carried a red knife. He gave a hellish shriek, tongue sticking stiff from his yawning mouth, high and heedless as a wolf at the moon, and started to bound up the slope towards them.

Temple could only sit and gawp as the Ghost rushed closer, until he could see the eyes bulging in his red-painted face. Then Shy’s bowstring hummed just by his ear, and the arrow flickered across the few strides between them and into the Ghost’s bare chest, stopped him cold like a slap in the face.

Temple’s eyes darted to the other Ghost, standing now in a cloak of grass and bones, slipping his own bow off his back and reaching for an arrow from a skin quiver tied to his bare leg. Shy rode down the hill, giving a scream hardly more human than the Ghost’s had been, tugging out that short-sword she wore.

The Ghost got his arrow free, then spun around and sat down. Temple looked over to see Sweet lowering his flatbow. ‘There’ll be more!’ he shouted, hooking the stirrup on the end of his bow over one boot and hauling the string back with one hand, turning his horse with a twitch of the other and scanning the treeline.

The Ghost tried to lift his arrow and fumbled it, tried to reach for another, couldn’t straighten his arm because of the bolt in it. He screamed something at Shy as she rode up, and she hit him across the face with her sword and sent him tumbling.

Temple spurred down the slope after her and slid from his saddle near Leef. One of the boy's legs kicked as if he was trying to get up. Shy leaned over him and he touched her hand and opened his mouth but only blood came. Blood from his mouth and from his nose and from the jagged leavings where his ear used to be and the knife-cuts in his arms and the arrow wound in his chest. Temple stared down, hands twitching in dumb helplessness.

'Get him on your horse!' snarled Shy, and Temple came alive of a sudden and seized Leef under his arms. Crying Rock had come from somewhere and was beating the Ghost Shy had shot with a club. Temple could hear the crunching of it as he started dragging Leef towards his horse, stumbled and fell, struggled up and on again.

'Leave him!' shouted Sweet. 'He's all done, a fool can see it!'

Temple ignored him, teeth gritted, trying to haul Leef up onto the horse by belt and bloody shirt. For a skinny lad he was quite the weight. 'Not leaving him,' hissed Temple. 'Not leaving him . . . not leaving him . . .'

The world was just him and Leef and the horse, just his aching muscles and the boy's dead weight and his mindless, bubbling groan. He heard the hooves of Sweet's horse thumping away. Heard shouting in no language he knew, voices hardly human. Leef lolled, and slipped, and the horse shifted, then Shy was there next to him, growling in her throat, effort and fear and anger, and together they hauled Leef up over the saddle horn, broken arrow-shaft sticking black into the air.

Temple's hands were covered in blood. He stood looking at them for a moment.

'Go!' shrieked Shy. 'Go you fucking idiot!'

He scrambled into the saddle, fumbling for the reins with sticky fingers, hammering with his heels, almost falling off as his horse – Lamb's horse – leaped into life, and he was riding, riding, wind whipping in his face, whipping the garbled shouting from his mouth, whipping the tears from his eyes. The flat horizon bounced and shuddered and Leef jolted over the saddle horn, Sweet and Crying Rock two wriggling specks against the sky. Shy up ahead, bent low over the saddle, tail of her horse streaming, and she snatched a look behind, and he saw the fear in her face, didn't want to look, had to look.

There they were at his heels like messengers from hell. Painted faces, painted horses, childishly daubed and stuck with skins, feathers, bones, teeth and one with a human hand dried and shrunken bouncing around his neck and one with a headdress made of bulls' horns and one wearing a great copper dish as a breastplate, shining and flashing with the afternoon sun, a mess of flying red and yellow hair and brandished weapons hooked and beaked and jagged-edged all screaming furiously and fixed on his most horrible murder and Temple went freezing cold right into his arse.

'Oh God oh God oh fuck oh God . . .'

His brainless swearing drumming away like the hooves of his horse – Lamb's horse – and an arrow flickered past and into the grass. Shy screamed at him over her shoulder but the words were gone in the wind. He clung to the reins, clung to the back of Leef 's shirt, his breath whooping and his shoulders itching and knowing for sure that he was a dead man and worse than dead and all he could think was that he should have ridden drag after all. Should have stayed on the hill above Averstock. Should have stepped forward when the Gurkish came for Kahdia instead of standing in that silent, helpless line of shame with all the others.

Then he saw movement up ahead and realised it was the Fellowship, shapes of wagons and cattle on the flat horizon, riders coming out to meet them. He glanced over his shoulder and saw the Ghosts were dropping back, peeling away, could hear their whooping calls, one of them sending an arrow looping towards him and falling well short and he sobbed with relief, had just the presence of mind left to rein in as he came close, his horse – Lamb's horse – quivering almost as much as he was.

Chaos among the wagons, panic spreading as if there had been six hundred Ghosts instead of six, Luline Buckhorm screaming for a missing child, Gentili all tangled up with a rust-stained breastplate even older than he was, a couple of cattle loose and charging through the midst and Majud standing on his wagon's seat and yelling demands for calm no one could hear.

'What happened?' growled Lamb, steady as ever, and Temple could only shake his head. No words in him. Had to force his aching hand open to let go of Leef 's shirt as Lamb slid him from the horse and lowered him to the ground.

‘Where’s Corlin?’ Shy was shouting, and Temple slithered from the saddle, legs numb as two dry sticks. Lamb was cutting Leef ’s shirt, fabric ripping under the blade, and Temple leaned down, wiping the blood away from the arrow shaft, wiping the blood but as soon as he wiped it there was more, Leef ’s body all slick with it.

‘Give me the knife,’ snapping his fingers, and Lamb pushed it into his hand and he stared at that arrow, what to do, what to do, pull it out, or cut it out, or push it through, and trying to remember what Kahdia had told him about arrow-wounds, something about what the best chance was, the best chance, but he couldn’t fix on anything, and Leef ’s eyes were crossed, his mouth hanging open and his hair all matted with blood.

Shy scrambled down next to him and said, ‘Leef? Leef?’ And Lamb gently laid him flat, and Temple stuck the knife in the earth and rocked back on his heels. They came to him then in a strange rush, all the things he knew about the boy. That he’d been in love with Shy, and that Temple had been starting to win him round, that he’d lost his parents, that he’d been trying to find his brother stolen by bandits, that he’d been a good man with oxen and a hard worker . . . but all that now was hacked off in the midst and would never be resolved, all his dreams and hopes and fears ended here on the trampled grass and cut out from the world forever.

Hell of a thing.

Savian was roaring, and coughing, and pointing everywhere with his flatbow, trying to get the wagons dragged into some kind of fort with barrels and clothes-chests and rope coils stacked up to hide behind, the cattle corralled inside and the women and children to the safest place, though Shy had no notion where that might be. Folk were scrambling about like the idea of Ghosts had never been discussed before, running to do what they were told or exactly what they hadn’t been, to tug at stubborn animals or find stowed weapons or save their gear or their children or just to stare and clutch at themselves like they were stabbed and their ears off already.

Iosiv Lestek’s big wagon had run into a ditch and a couple of men were struggling to rock it free. ‘Leave it!’ shouted Savian. ‘We ain’t going to act our way out o’ this!’ And they left it colourfully advertising the world’s finest theatrical entertainment to the empty plains.

Shy shouldered her way through the madness and up onto Majud's wagon. Away to the south, across the waving, shifting grass, three Ghosts rode around in circles, one shaking a horned lance at the sky, and Shy thought she could hear them singing, high and joyful. Sweet watched, his loaded flatbow propped on one knee, rubbing at his bearded jaw, and it felt like there was a small piece of calm around him she gratefully squatted in.

'How's the boy?'

'Dead,' said Shy, and it made her sick that was all she had to say.

'Ah, damn it.' Sweet gave a bitter grimace, and closed his eyes and pressed them with finger and thumb. 'Damn it.' Then he trained them on the mounted Ghosts on the horizon, shaking his head. 'Best fix ourselves on making sure the rest of us don't go the same way.'

Savian's cracked voice shouted on and all around folk were clambering onto the wagons with bows in unpractised hands, new ones never drawn with purpose and antiques long out of service.

'What are they singing of?' asked Shy, pulling an arrow from her quiver and slowly turning it round and round, feeling the roughness against her fingertips like wood was a new thing never felt before.

Sweet snorted. 'Our violent demise. They reckon it's near at hand.'

'Is it?' she couldn't help asking.

'Depends.' Sweet's jaw muscles worked under his beard, then he slowly, calmly spat. 'On whether those three are some of Sangeed's main warband or he's split it up into smaller parties.'

'And which is it?'

'Guess we can count 'em when they arrive, and if there's a few dozen we'll know we've a chance, and if there's a few hundred we'll have our profound fucking doubts.'

Buckhorm had clambered up on the wagon, a mail shirt flapping at his thighs that suited him even worse than it fitted him. 'Why are we just waiting?' he hissed, the Ghosts chased his stutter away for now. 'Why don't we move?'

Sweet turned his slow grey eyes on him. 'Move where? Ain't no castles nearby.' He looked back to the plains, empty in every direction, and the three Ghosts circling at the edge of that shallow valley, faint singing keening across the empty grass. 'One patch of nowhere's as good to die on as another.'

‘Our time’s better spent getting ready for what’s coming than running from it.’ Lamb stood tall on the next wagon. He’d built up quite the collection of knives the last few weeks and now he was checking them one by one, calm as if he was getting ready to plough a field back on the farm instead of fight for his life in wild and lawless country. More than calm, now Shy thought about it. Like it was a field he’d long dreamed of ploughing but was only now getting the chance at.

‘Who are you?’ she said.

He looked up from his blades for a moment. ‘You know me.’

‘I know a big, soft Northman scared to whip a mule. I know a beggar turned up to our farm in the night to work for crusts. I know a man used to hold my brother and sing when he had the fever. You ain’t that man.’

‘I am.’ He stepped across the gap between the wagons, and he put his arms around her crushing tight, and she heard him whisper in her ear. ‘But that’s not all I am. Stay out of my way, Shy.’ Then he hopped down from the wagon. ‘You’d better keep her safe!’ he called to Sweet.

‘You joking?’ The old scout was busy sighting down his bow. ‘I’m counting on her to save me!’

Just then Crying Rock gave a high shout and pointed off to the south, and over the crest they boiled as if from some nightmare, relics of a savage age long past, toothed with a hundred jagged stolen blades and chipped-stone axes and sharp arrows glinting and a lifetime of laughed-at stories of massacre came boiling with them and stole Shy’s breath.

‘We’re all going to lose our ears!’ someone whimpered.

‘Ain’t like you use ’em now, is it? Sweet levelled his flatbow with a grim smile. ‘Looks like a few dozen to me.’

Shy knelt there trying to count them but some horses had other horses painted on their sides and some had no riders and some had two or carried scarecrow figures made to look like men and others flapping canvas stretched on sticks to make them giants bloated like bodies drowned, all swimming and blurring before her leaking eyes, mindless and deadly and unknowable as a plague.

Shy thought she could hear Temple praying. She wished she knew how.

‘Easy!’ Savian was shouting. ‘Easy!’ Shy hardly knew what he meant. One Ghost wore a hood crusted with fragments of broken glass that sparkled like jewels, mouth yawning in a spit-stringed scream. ‘Stand and

live! Run and die!' She'd always had a knack for running and no stomach for standing, and if there'd ever been a time to run, her whole body was telling her that time was now. 'Under that fucking paint they're just men!' A Ghost stood in his or her or its stirrups and shook a feathered lance, naked but for paint and a necklace of ears bouncing and swinging around its neck.

'Stand together or die alone!' roared Savian, and one of the whores whose name Shy had forgotten stood with a bow in her hand and her yellow hair stirred by the wind, and she nodded to Shy and Shy nodded back. Goldy, that was it. Stand together. That's why they call it a Fellowship, ain't it?

The first bowstring went, panicky and pointless, arrow falling well short, then more and Shy shot her own, barely picking out one target there were so many. Arrows flickered down and fell among the waving grass and the heaving flesh and here or there a shape tumbled from a saddle or a horse veered. The Ghost with the hood slumped back, Savian's bolt through its painted chest, but the rest swarmed up to the feeble ring of wagons and swallowed it whole, whirling and rearing and sending up a murk of dust until they and their painted horses were phantoms indeed, their screams and shrieks and animal howls disembodied and treacherous as the voices a madman hears.

Arrows dropped around Shy, zip and clatter as one tumbled from a crate, another lodged in a sack just beside her, a third left trembling in the wagon's seat. She nocked a shaft and shot again, and again, and again, shot at nothing, at anything, crying with fear and anger and her teeth crushed together and her ears full of joyous wailing and her own spat curses. Lestek's mired wagon was a red hump with shapes crawling over it, hacking it with axes, stabbing it with spears like hunters that had brought down some great beast.

A pony stuck with arrows tottered sideways past, biting at its neighbour and, while Shy stared at it, a ragged shape came hurtling over the side of the wagon. She saw just a bulging eye in a face red-painted like an eye and she grabbed at it, her finger in a mouth and ripping at a cheek and together they tumbled off the wagon, rolling in the dust. There were strong hands around her head, lifting it and twisting it while she snarled and tried to find her knife and suddenly her head burst with light and the world was quiet and strange all shuffling feet and choking dust and she felt a burning, ripping

pain under her ear and she screamed and thrashed and bit at nothing but couldn't get free.

Then the weight was off and she saw Temple wrestling with the Ghost, both gripping a red knife and she clambered up, slow as corn growing, fumbled her sword free and took a step through the rocking world and stabbed the Ghost, realised it was Temple she'd stabbed they were so tangled. She caught the Ghost around the throat and clutched him close and pushed the sword into his back, dragged at it and shoved at it, scraping on bone until she had it all the way into him, hand slippery hot.

Arrows fluttered down, gentle as butterflies, and fell among the cattle and they snorted their upset, some feathered and bloodied. They jostled unhappily at each other and one of Gentili's old cousins knelt on the ground with two arrows in his side, one dangling broken.

'There! There!' And she saw something slithering in under a wagon, a clawing hand, and she stomped on it with her boot and nearly fell, and one of the miners was beside her hacking with a shovel and some of the whores stabbing at something with spears, screaming and stabbing like they were chasing a rat.

Shy caught sight of a gap between the wagons and beyond the Ghosts flooding up on foot in a gibbering crowd, and she heard Temple breathe something in some tongue of his own and a woman near her moan – or was it her voice? The heart went out of her and she took a cringing step back, as though an extra stride of mud would be a shield, all thoughts of standing far in a vanished past as the first Ghost loomed up, an antique greatsword brown with rust clutched in painted fists and a man's skull worn over its face as a mask.

Then with a roar that was half a laugh Lamb was in their midst, twisted face a grinning mockery of the man she knew, more horrible to her than any mask a Ghost might wear. His swung sword was a blur and the skull-face burst in a spray of black, body sagging like an empty sack. Savian was stabbing from a wagon with a spear, stabbing into the shrieking mass and Crying Rock beating with her club and others cutting at them and mouthing curses in every language in the Circle of the World, driving them back, driving them out. Lamb swung again and folded a ragged shape in half, kicked the corpse away, opened a great wound in a back, white splinters in red, hacking and chopping and he lifted a wriggling Ghost and dashed its

head against the rim of a barrel. Shy knew she should help but instead she sat down on a wagon-wheel and was sick while Temple watched her, lying on his side, clutching at his rump where she'd stabbed him.

She saw Corlin stitching up a cut in Majud's leg, thread in her teeth, cool as ever though with sleeves red speckled to the elbow from the wounds she'd tended. Savian was already shouting out, voice gravelly hoarse, to close up the wagons, plug that gap, toss the bodies out, show 'em they were ready for more. Shy didn't reckon she was ready for more. She sat with hands braced against her knees to stop everything from shaking, blood tickling at the side of her face, sticky in her hair, staring at the corpse of the Ghost she'd killed.

They were just men, like Savian said. Now she got a proper look, she saw this one was a boy no older than Leef. No older than Leef had been. Five of the Fellowship were killed. Gentili's cousin shot with arrows, and two of Buckhorm's children found under a wagon with their ears cut off, and one of the whores had been dragged away and no one knew how or when.

There weren't many who didn't have some cuts or scrapes and none who wouldn't start when they heard a wolf howl for all their days. Shy couldn't make her hands stop trembling, ear burning where the Ghost had made a start at claiming it for a prize. She wasn't sure whether it was just a nick or if her ear was hanging by a flap and hardly dared find out.

But she had to get up. She thought of Pit and Ro out in the far wilderness, scared as she was, and that put the heat into her and got her teeth gritted and her legs moving and she growled as she dragged herself up onto Majud's wagon.

She'd half-expected the Ghosts would have vanished, drifted away like smoke on the wind, but they were there, still of this world and this time even if Shy could hardly believe it, milling in chaos or rage away across the grass, singing and wailing to each other, steel still winking.

'Kept your ears, then?' asked Sweet, and frowned as he pressed his thumb against the cut and made her wince. 'Just about.'

'They'll be coming again,' she muttered, forcing herself to look at those nightmare shapes.

'Maybe, maybe not. They're just testing us. Figuring whether they want to give us a proper try.'

Savian clambered up beside him, face set even harder and eyes even narrower than usual. ‘If I was them I wouldn’t stop until we were all dead.’

Sweet kept staring out across the plain. Seemed he was a man made for that purpose. ‘Luckily for us, you ain’t them. Might look a savage but he’s a practical thinker, your average Ghost. They get angry quick but they hold no grudges. We prove hard to kill, more’n likely they’ll try to talk. Get what they can by way of meat and money and move on to easier pickings.’

‘We can buy our way out of this?’ asked Shy.

‘Ain’t much God’s made can’t be bought out of if you’ve got the coin,’ said Sweet, and added in a mutter, ‘I hope.’

‘And once we’ve paid,’ growled Savian, ‘what’s to stop them following on and killing us when it suits?’

Sweet shrugged. ‘You wanted predictable, you should’ve stayed in Starikland. This here is the Far Country.’

And at that moment the axe-scarred door of Lestek’s wagon banged open and the noted actor himself struggled out, in his nightshirt, rheumy eyes wild and sparse white hair in disarray. ‘Bloody critics!’ he boomed, shaking an empty can at the distant Ghosts.

‘It will be all right,’ Temple said to Buckhorm’s son. His second son, he thought. Not one of the dead ones. Of course not one of them, because it would not be all right for them, they already had lost everything. That thought was unlikely to comfort their brother, though, so Temple said, ‘It will be all right,’ again, and tried to make it earnest, though the painful pounding of his heart, not to mention of his wounded buttock, made his voice wobble. It sounds funny, a wounded buttock. It is not.

‘It *will* be all right,’ he said, as if the emphasis made it a cast-iron fact. He remembered Kahdia saying the same to him when the siege had begun, and the fires burned all across Dagoska, and it was painfully clear that nothing would be all right. It had helped, to know that someone had the strength to tell the lie. So Temple squeezed the shoulder of Buckhorm’s second son and said, ‘It . . . will be . . . all right,’ his voice surer this time, and the boy nodded, and Temple felt stronger himself, that he could give strength to someone else. He wondered how long that strength would last when the Ghosts came again.

Buckhorm thrust his shovel into the dirt beside the graves. He still wore his old chain-mail shirt, still with the buckles done up wrong so it was twisted at the front, and he wiped his sweaty forehead with the back of his hand and left a smear of dirt across it.

'It'd mean a lot to us if you'd suh . . . say something.'

Temple blinked at him. 'Would it?' But perhaps worthwhile words could come from worthless mouths, after all.

The great majority of the Fellowship were busy strengthening the defences, such as they were, or staring at the horizon while they chewed their fingernails bloody, or too busy panicking about the great likelihood of their own deaths to concern themselves with anyone else's. In attendance about the five mounds of earth were Buckhorm, his stunned and blinking wife and their remaining brood of eight, who ranged from sorrow to terror to uncomprehending good humour; two of the whores and their pimp, who had been nowhere to be seen during the attack but had at least emerged in time to help with the digging; Gentili and two of his cousins; and Shy, frowning down at the heaped earth over Leef 's grave, shovel gripped white-knuckle hard in her fists. She had small hands, Temple noticed suddenly, and felt a strange welling of sympathy for her. Or perhaps that was just self-pity. More than likely the latter.

'God,' he croaked, and had to clear his throat. 'It seems . . . sometimes . . . that you are not out here.' It had mostly seemed to Temple, with all the blood and waste that he had seen, that He was not anywhere. 'But I know you are,' he lied. He was not paid for the truth. 'You are everywhere. Around us, and in us, and watching over us.' Not doing much about it, mind you, but that was God for you. 'I ask you . . . I beg you, watch over these boys, buried in strange earth, under strange skies. These men and women, too. You know they had their shortcomings. But they set out to make something in the wilderness.' Temple felt the sting of tears himself, had to bite his lip for a moment, look to the sky and blink them back. 'Take them to your arms, and give them peace. There are none more deserving.'

They stood in silence for a while, the wind tugging at the ragged hem of Temple's coat and snatching Shy's hair across her face, then Buckhorm held out his palm, coins glinting there. 'Thank you.'

Temple closed the drover's calloused hand with both of his. 'My honour to do it.' Words did nothing. The children were still dead. He would not take

money for that, whatever his debts.

The light was starting to fade when Sweet swung down from Majud's wagon, the sky pinking in the west and streaks of black cloud spread across it like breakers on a calm sea. 'They want to talk!' he shouted. 'They've lit a fire halfway to their camp and they're waiting for word!' He looked pretty damn pleased about it. Probably Temple should have been pleased, but he was sitting near Leef 's grave, weight uncomfortably shifted off his throbbing buttock, feeling as if nothing would ever please him again.

'*Now* they want to talk,' said Luline Buckhorm, bitterly. 'Now my two boys are dead.'

Sweet winced. 'Better'n when all your boys are. I'd best go out there.'

'I'll be coming,' said Lamb, dry blood still speckled on the side of his face.

'And me,' said Savian. 'Make sure those bastards don't try anything.'

Sweet combed at his beard with his fingers. 'Fair enough. Can't hurt to show 'em we've got iron in us.'

'I will be going, too.' Majud limped up, grimacing badly so that gold tooth glinted, trouser-leg flapping where Corlin had cut it free of his wound. 'I swore never to let you negotiate in my name again.'

'You bloody won't be going,' said Sweet. 'Things tend sour we might have to run, and you're running nowhere.'

Majud ventured some weight on his injured leg, grimaced again, then nodded over at Shy. 'She goes in my place, then.'

'Me?' she muttered, looking over. 'Talk to those fuckers?'

'There is no one else I trust to bargain. My partner Curnsbick would insist on the best price.'

'I could get to dislike Curnsbick without ever having met the man.'

Sweet was shaking his head. 'Sangeed won't take much to a woman being there.'

It looked to Temple as though that made up Shy's mind. 'If he's a practical thinker he'll get over it. Let's go.'

They sat in a crescent about their crackling fire, maybe a hundred strides from the Fellowship's makeshift fort, the flickering lights of their own camp dim in the distance. The Ghosts. The terrible scourge of the plains. The fabled savages of the Far Country.

Shy tried her best to stoke up a towering hatred for them, but when she thought of Leef cold under the dirt, all she felt was sick at the waste of it, and worried for his brother and hers who were still lost as ever, and worn through and chewed up and hollowed out. That and, now she saw them sitting tame with no death cries or shook weapons, she'd rarely seen so wretched-looking a set of men, and she'd spent a good stretch of her life in desperate straits and most of the rest bone-poor.

They wore half-cured hides, and ragged skins, and threadbare fragments of a dozen different scavenged costumes, the bare skin showing stretched pale and hungry-tight over the bone. One was smiling, maybe at the thought of the riches they were soon to win, and he'd but one rotten tooth in his head. Another frowned solemnly under a helmet made from a beaten-out copper kettle, spout sticking from his forehead. Shy took the old Ghost in the centre for the great Sangeed. He wore a cloak of feathers over a tarnished breastplate looked like it had made some general of the Empire proud a thousand years ago. He had three necklaces of human ears, proof she supposed of his great prowess, but he was long past his best. She could hear his breathing, wet and crackly, and one half of his leathery face sagged, the drooping corner of his mouth glistening with stray spit.

Could these ridiculous little men and the monsters that had come screaming for them on the plain be the same flesh? A lesson she should've remembered from her own time as a fearsome bandit – between the horrible and pitiful there's never much of a divide, and most of that is in how you look at it.

If anything, it was the old men on her side of the fire that scared her more now – deep-lined faces made devilish strangers by the shifting flames, eyes gleaming in chill-shadowed sockets, the head of the bolt in Savian's loaded flatbow coldly glistening, Lamb's face bent and twisted like a weather-worn tree, etched with old scars, no clue to his thoughts, not even to her who'd known him all these years. Especially not to her, maybe.

Sweet bowed his head and said a few words in the Ghosts' tongue, making big gestures with his arms. Sangeed said a few back, slow and grinding, coughed, and managed a few more.

'Just exchanging pleasantries,' Sweet explained.

'Ain't nothing pleasant about this,' snapped Shy. 'Let's get done and get back.'

‘We can talk in your words,’ said one of the Ghosts in a strange sort of common like he had a mouthful of gravel. He was a young one, sitting closest to Sangeed and frowning across the fire. His son, maybe. ‘My name is Locway.’

‘All right.’ Sweet cleared his throat. ‘Here’s a right fucking fuck up, then, ain’t it, Locway? There was no call for no one to die here. Now look. Corpses on both sides just to get to where we could’ve started if you’d just said how do.’

‘Every man takes his life in his hands who trespasses upon our lands,’ said Locway. Looked like he took himself mighty seriously, which was quite the achievement for someone wearing a ripped-up pair of old Union cavalry trousers with a beaver pelt over the crotch.

Sweet snorted. ‘I was ranging these plains long before you was sucking tit, lad. And now you’re going to tell me where I can ride?’ He curled his tongue and spat into the fire.

‘Who gives a shit who rides where?’ snapped Shy. ‘Ain’t like it’s land any sane man would want.’

The young Ghost frowned at her. ‘She has a sour tongue.’

‘Fuck yourself.’

‘Enough,’ growled Savian. ‘If we’re going to deal, let’s deal and go.’

Locway gave Shy a hard look, then leaned to speak to Sangeed, and the so-called Emperor of the Plains mulled his words over for a moment, then croaked a few of his own.

‘Five thousands of your silver marks,’ said Locway, ‘and twenty of cattle, and twenty of horses, and you leave with your ears. That is the word of dread Sangeed.’ And the old Ghost lifted his chin and grunted.

‘You can have two thousand,’ said Shy.

‘Three thousand, then, and the animals.’ His haggling was almost as piss-weak as his clothes.

‘My people agreed to two. That’s what you’re getting. Far as cattle go, you can have the dozen you were fool enough to make meat of with your arrows, that’s all. The horses, no.’

‘Then perhaps we will come and take them,’ said Locway.

‘You can come and fucking try.’

His face twisted and he opened his mouth to speak but Sangeed touched his shoulder and mumbled a few words, looking all the time at Sweet. The

old scout nodded to him, and the young Ghost sourly worked his mouth. ‘Great Sangeed accepts your offering.’

Sweet rubbed his hands on his crossed legs and smiled. ‘All right, then. Good.’

‘Uh.’ Sangeed broke out in a lopsided grin.

‘We are agreed,’ said Locway, no smile of his own.

‘All right,’ said Shy, though she took no pleasure in it. She was worn down to a nub, just wanted to sleep. The Ghosts stirred, relaxing a little, the one with the rotten tooth grinning wider’n ever.

Lamb slowly stood, the sunset at his back, a towering piece of black with the sky all bloodstained about him.

‘I’ve a better offer,’ he said.

Sparks whirled about his flicking heels as he jumped the fire. There was a flash of orange steel and Sangeed clutched his neck, toppling backwards. Savian’s bowstring went and the Ghost with the kettle fell, bolt through his mouth. Another leaped up but Lamb buried his knife in the top of his head with a crack like a log splitting.

Locway scrambled to his feet just as Shy was doing the same, but Savian dived and caught him around the neck, rolling over onto his back and bringing the Ghost with him, thrashing and twitching, a hatchet in his hand but pinned helpless, snarling at the sky.

‘What you doing?’ called Sweet, but there wasn’t much doubt by then. Lamb was holding up the last of the Ghosts with one fist and punching him with the other, knocking out the last couple of teeth, punching him so fast Shy could hardly tell how many times, whipping sound of his arm inside his sleeve and his big fist crunching, crunching and the black outline of the Ghost’s face losing all shape, and Lamb tossed his body fizzling in the fire.

Sweet took a step back from the shower of sparks. ‘Fuck!’ His hands tangled in his grey hair like he couldn’t believe what he was seeing. Shy could hardly believe it either, cold all over and sitting frozen, each breath whooping a little in her throat, Locway snarling and struggling still but caught tight in Savian’s grip as a fly in honey.

Sangeed tottered up, one hand clutching at his chopped-open throat, clawing fingers shining with blood. He had a knife but Lamb stood waiting for it, and caught his wrist as though it was a thing ordained, and twisted it, and forced Sangeed down on his knees, drooling blood into the grass. Lamb

planted one boot in the old Ghost's armpit and drew his sword with a faint ringing of steel, paused a moment to stretch his neck one way and the other, then lifted the blade and brought it down with a thud. Then another. Then another, and Lamb let go of Sangeed's limp arm, reached down and took his head by the hair, a misshapen thing now, split open down one cheek where one of Lamb's blows had gone wide of the mark.

'This is for you,' he said, and tossed it in the young Ghost's lap.

Locway stared at it, chest heaving against Savian's arm, a strip of tattoo showing below the old man's rucked-up sleeve. The Ghost's eyes moved from the head to Lamb's face, and he bared his teeth and hissed out, 'We will be coming for you! Before dawn, in the darkness, we will be coming for you!'

'No.' Lamb smiled, his teeth and his eyes and the blood streaked down his face all shining with the firelight. 'Before dawn . . .' He squatted in front of Locway, still held helpless. 'In the darkness . . .' He gently stroked the Ghost's face, the three fingers of his left hand leaving three black smears down pale cheek. 'I'll be coming for you.'

They heard sounds, out there in the night. Talking at first, muffled by the wind. People demanded to know what was being said and others hissed at them to be still. Then Temple heard a cry and clutched at Corlin's shoulder. She brushed him off.

'What's happening?' demanded Lestek.

'How can we know?' snapped Majud back.

They saw shadows shifting around the fire and a kind of gasp went through the Fellowship.

'It's a trap!' shouted Lady Ingelstad, and one of the Suljuks started yammering in words not even Temple could make sense of. A spark of panic, and there was a general shrinking back in which Temple was ashamed to say he took a willing part.

'They should never have gone out there!' croaked Hedges, as though he had been against it from the start.

'Everyone be calm.' Corlin's voice was hard and level and did no shrinking whatsoever.

'There's someone coming!' Majud pointed out into the darkness. Another spark of panic, another shrinking back in which, again, Temple was a

leading participant.

'No one shoot!' Sweet's gravel bass echoed from the darkness. 'That's all I need to crown my fucking day!' And the old scout stepped into the torchlight, hands up, Shy behind him.

The Fellowship breathed a collective sigh of relief, in which Temple was among the loudest, and rolled away two barrels to let the negotiators into their makeshift fort.

'What happened?'

'Did they talk?'

'Are we safe?'

Sweet just stood there, hands on hips, slowly shaking his head. Shy frowned off at nothing. Savian came behind, narrowed eyes giving away as little as ever.

'Well?' asked Majud. 'Do we have a deal?'

'They're thinking it over,' said Lamb, bringing up the rear.

'What did you offer? What happened, damn it?'

'He killed them,' muttered Shy.

There was a moment of confused silence. 'Who killed who?' squeaked Lord Ingelstad.

'Lamb killed the Ghosts.'

'Don't overstate it,' said Sweet. 'He let one go.' And he pushed back his hat and sagged against a wagon tyre.

'Sangeed?' grunted Crying Rock. Sweet shook his head. 'Oh,' said the Ghost.

'You . . . killed them?' asked Temple.

Lamb shrugged. 'Out here when a man tries to murder you, maybe you pay him for the favour. Where I come from we got a different way of doing things.'

'He killed them?' asked Buckhorm, eyes wide with horror.

'Good!' shouted his wife, shaking one small fist. 'Good someone had the bones to do it! They got what they had coming! For my two dead boys!'

'We've got eight still living to think about!' said her husband.

'Not to mention every other person in this Fellowship!' added Lord Ingelstad.

'He was right to do it,' growled Savian. 'For those that died and those that live. You trust those fucking animals out there? Pay a man to hurt you, all

you do is teach him to do it again. Better they learn to fear us.'

'So *you* say!' snapped Hedges.

'That I do,' said Savian, flat and cold. 'Look on the upside – we might've saved a great deal of money here.'

'Scant comfort if it cuh . . . if it costs us all our lives!' snapped Buckhorm.

The financial argument looked to have gone a long way towards bringing Majud around, though. 'We should have made the choice together,' he said.

'A choice between killing and dying ain't no choice at all.' And Lamb brushed through the gathering as though they were not there and to an empty patch of grass beside the nearest fire.

'Hell of a fucking gamble, ain't it?'

'A gamble with our lives!'

'A chance worth taking.'

'You are the expert,' said Majud to Sweet. 'What do you say to this?'

The old scout rubbed at the back of his neck. 'What's to be said? It's done. Ain't no undoing it. Less your niece is so good a healer she can stitch Sangeed's head back on?'

Savian did not answer.

'Didn't think so.' And Sweet climbed back up onto Majud's wagon and perched in his place behind his arrow-prickled crate, staring out across the black plain, distinguishable from the black sky now only by its lack of stars.

Temple had suffered some long and sleepless nights during his life. The night the Gurkish had finally broken through the walls and the Eaters had come for Kahdia. The night the Inquisition had swept the slums of Dagoska for treason. The night his daughter died, and the night not long after when his wife followed. But he had lived through none longer than this.

People strained their eyes into the inky nothing, occasionally raising breathless alarms at some imagined movement, the bubbling cries of one of the prospectors who had an arrow-wound in his stomach, and who Corlin did not expect to last until dawn, as the backdrop. On Savian's order, since he had stopped making suggestions and taken unquestioned command, the Fellowship lit torches and threw them out into the grass beyond the wagons. Their flickering light was almost worse than darkness because, at its edges, death always lurked.

Temple and Shy sat together in silence, with a palpable emptiness where Leef 's place used to be, Lamb's contented snoring stretching out the

endless time. In the end Shy nodded sideways, and leaned against him, and slept. He toyed with the idea of shouldering her off into the fire, but decided against. It could well have been his last chance to feel the touch of another person, after all. Unless he counted the Ghost who would kill him tomorrow.

As soon as there was grey light enough to see by, Sweet, Crying Rock and Savian mounted up and edged towards the trees, the rest of the Fellowship gathered breathless on the wagons to watch, hollow-eyed from fear and lack of sleep, clutching at their weapons or at each other. The three riders came back into view not long after, calling out that in the lee of the timber there were fires still smoking on which the Ghosts had burned their dead.

But they were gone. It turned out they were practical thinkers after all.

Now the enthusiasm for Lamb's courage and swift action was unanimous. Luline Buckhorm and her husband were both tearful with gratitude on behalf of their dead sons. Gentili would have done just the same in his youth, apparently. Hedges would have done it if it weren't for his leg, injured in the line of duty at the Battle of Osrung. Two of the whores offered a reward in kind, which Lamb looked minded to accept until Shy declined on his behalf. Then Lestek clambered on a wagon and suggested in quavering tones that Lamb be rewarded with four hundred marks from the money saved, which he looked minded to refuse until Shy accepted on his behalf.

Lord Ingelstad slapped Lamb on the back, and offered him a swig from his best bottle of brandy, aged for two hundred years in the family cellars in faraway Keln which were now, alas, the property of a creditor.

'My friend,' said the nobleman, 'you're a bloody hero!'

Lamb looked at him sideways as he raised the bottle. 'I'm bloody, all right.'

The Fair Price

It was cold as hell up in them hills. The children all cold, and scared, huddling together at night close to the fires with cheeks pinched and pinked and their breath smoking in each other's faces. Ro took Pit's hands and rubbed them between hers and breathed on them and tried to wrap the bald furs tighter against the dark.

Not long after they got off the boat, a man had come and said Papa Ring needed everyone and Cantliss had cursed, which never took much, and sent seven of his men off. That left just six with that bastard Blackpoint but no one spoke of running now. No one spoke much at all, as if with each mile poled or rode or trod the spirit went out of them, then the thought, and they became just meat on the hoof, trailing slack and wretched to whatever slaughterhouse Cantliss had in mind.

The woman called Bee had been sent off, too, and she'd cried and asked Cantliss, 'Where you taking the children?' And he'd sneered, 'Get back to Crease and mind your business, damn you.' So it was up to Ro and the boy Evin and a couple of the other older ones to see to the blisters and fears of the rest.

High they went into the hills, and higher, twisting by scarce-trodden ways cut by the water of long ago. They camped among great rocks that had the feel of buildings fallen, buildings ancient as the mountains. The trees grew taller and taller until they were pillars of wood that seemed to pierce the sky, their lowest branches high above, creaking in the silent forest bare of brush, without animals, without insects.

'Where you taking us?' Ro asked Cantliss for the hundredth time, and for the hundredth time he said, 'On,' jerking his unshaved face towards the grey

outlines of the peaks beyond, his fancy clothes worn out to rags.

They passed through some town, all wood-built and not built well, and a lean dog barked at them but there were no people, not a one. Blackpoint frowned up at the empty windows and licked at the gap in his teeth and said, ‘Where did they all go to?’ He spoke in Northern but Lamb had taught Ro enough to understand. ‘I don’t like it.’

Cantliss just snorted. ‘You ain’t meant to.’

Up, and on, and the trees withered to brown and stunted pine then twisted twig then there were no trees. It turned from icy cold to strangely warm, the soft breeze across the mountainside like breath, and then too hot, too hot, the children toiling on, pink faces sweat-beaded, up bare slopes of rock yellow with crusted sulphur, the ground warm to touch as flesh, the very land alive. Steam popped and hissed from cracks like mouths and in cupped stones lay salt-crusted pools, the water bubbling with stinking gas, frothing with multicoloured oils and Cantliss warned them not to drink for it was poison.

‘This place is wrong,’ said Pit.

‘It’s just a place.’ But Ro saw the fear in the eyes of the other children, and in the eyes of Cantliss’ men, and felt it, too. It was a dead place.

‘Is Shy still following?’

‘Course she is.’ But Ro didn’t think she could be, not so far as this, so far it seemed they weren’t in the world any more. She could hardly remember what Shy looked like, or Lamb, or the farm as it had been. She was starting to think all that was gone, a dream, a whisper, and this was all there was.

The way grew too steep for horses, then for mules, so one man was left waiting with the animals. They climbed a deep, bare valley where the cliffs were riddled with holes too square for nature to have made, heaped mounds of broken rock beside the way that put Ro in mind of the spoil of mines. But what ancient miners had delved here and for what excavated in this blasted place she could not guess.

After a day breathing its ugly fume, noses and throats raw from the stink, they came upon a great needle of rock set on its end, pitted and stained by weather and time but bare of moss or lichen or plant of any kind. As they came close in a group all tattered reluctance, Ro saw it was covered with letters, and though she couldn’t read them knew it for a warning. In the rocky walls above, the blue sky so far away, were more holes, many more,

and towering, creaking scaffolds of old wood held platforms, ropes and buckets and evidence of fresh diggings.

Cantliss held up his open hand. ‘Stop here.’

‘What now?’ asked Blackpoint, fingering the hilt of his sword.

‘Now we wait.’

‘How long?’

‘Not long, brother.’ A man leaned against a rock, quite at his ease. How Ro had missed him there she could not tell because he was by no means small. Very tall, and dark-skinned, head shaved to the faintest silver stubble, and he wore a simple robe of undyed cloth. In the crook of one heavy-muscled arm he had a staff as tall as he was, in the other hand a small and wrinkled apple. Now he bit into it and said, ‘Greetings,’ with his mouth half-full, and he smiled at Cantliss, and at Blackpoint and the other men, his face alive with friendly creases unfitting to these grim surroundings, and he smiled at the children, and at Ro in particular, she thought. ‘Greetings, children.’

‘I want my money,’ said Cantliss.

The smile did not leave the old man’s face. ‘Of course. Because you have a hole in you and you believe gold will fill it.’

‘Because I got a debt, and if I don’t pay I’m a dead man.’

‘We are all dead men, brother, in due course. It is how we get there that counts. But you will have your fair price.’ His eyes moved over the children. ‘I count but twenty.’

‘Long journey,’ said Blackpoint, one hand resting on his sword. ‘Bound to be some wastage.’

‘Nothing is bound to be, brother. What is so is so because of the choices we make.’

‘I ain’t the one buys children.’

‘I buy them. I do not kill them. Is it the hurting of weak things that fills the hole in you?’

‘I ain’t got no hole in me,’ said Blackpoint.

The old man took a last bite from his apple. ‘No?’ And he tossed the core to Blackpoint. The Northman reached for it on an instinct, then grunted. The old man had covered the ground between them in two lightning steps and struck him in the chest with the end of his staff.

Blackpoint shuddered, letting fall the core and fumbling for his sword but he had no strength left to draw it, and Ro saw it was not a staff but a spear, the long blade sticking bloody from Blackpoint's back. The old man lowered him to the ground, put a gentle hand on his face and closed his eyes.

'It is a hard thing to say, but I feel the world is better without him.'

Ro looked at the Northman's corpse, clothes already dark with blood, and found that she was glad, and did not know what that meant.

'By the dead,' breathed one of Cantliss' men, and looking up Ro saw many figures had come silent from the mines and out onto the scaffolds, looking down. Men and women of all races and ages, but all wearing the same brown cloth and all with heads shaved bald.

'A few friends,' said the old man, standing.

Cantliss' voice quavered, thin and wheedling. 'We did our best.'

'It saddens me, that this might be your best.'

'All I want is the money.'

'It saddens me, that money might be all a man wants.'

'We had a deal.'

'That also saddens me, but so we did. Your money is there.' And the old man pointed out a wooden box sitting on a rock they had passed on the way. 'I wish you joy of it.'

Cantliss snatched up the box and Ro saw the glitter of gold inside. He smiled, dirty face warm with the reflected glow. 'Let's go.' And he and his men backed off.

One of the little children started snivelling then, because little children will come to love even the hateful if that is all they have, and Ro put a hand on her shoulder and said, 'Shhh,' and tried to be brave as the old man walked up to stand towering over her.

Pit clenched his little fists and said, 'Don't hurt my sister!'

The man swiftly knelt so that his bald head was level with Ro's, huge-looking so close, and he put one great hand gently upon Ro's shoulder and one upon Pit's and he said, 'Children, my name is Waerdinur, the thirty-ninth Right Hand of the Maker, and I would never harm either one of you, nor allow anyone else so to do. I have sworn it. I have sworn to protect this sacred ground and the people upon it with my last blood and breath and only death will stop me.'

He brought out a fine chain and hung it around Ro's neck, and strung upon it, resting on her chest, was a piece of dull, grey metal in the shape of a teardrop.

'What's this?' she asked.

'It is a dragon's scale.'

'A real one?'

'Yes, a real one. We all have them.' He reached into his robe and pulled out his own to show to her.

'Why do I have one?'

He smiled, eyes glimmering with tears. 'Because you are my daughter now.' And he put his arms around her and held her very tight.

III
CREASE

'The town, with less than one thousand permanent residents, was filled with so much vileness that the very atmosphere appeared impregnated with the odour of abomination; murder ran riot, drunkenness was the rule, gambling a universal pastime, fighting a recreation.'

J. W. Buel

Hell on the Cheap

Crease at night?

Picture hell on the cheap. Then add more whores.

The greatest settlement of the new frontier, that prospector's paradise, the Fellowship's long-anticipated destination, was wedged into a twisting valley, steep sides dotted with the wasted stumps of felled pines. It was a place of wild abandon, wild hope, wild despair, everything at extremes and nothing in moderation, dreams trodden into the muck and new ones sucked from bottles to be vomited up and trodden down in turn. A place where the strange was commonplace and the ordinary bizarre, and death might be along tomorrow so you'd best have all your fun today

At its muddy margins, the city consisted mostly of wretched tents, scenes better left unwitnessed by mankind assaulting the eye through wind-stirred flaps. Buildings were botched together from split pine and high hopes, held up by the drunks slumped against both sides, women risking their lives to lean from wonky balconies and beckon in the business.

'It's got bigger,' said Corlin, peering through the jam of wet traffic that clogged the main street.

'Lot bigger,' grunted Savian.

'I'd have trouble saying better, though.'

Shy was trying to imagine worse. A parade of crazed expressions reeled at them through the litter-strewn mud. Faces fit for some nightmare stage show. A demented carnival permanently in town. Off-key giggling split the jagged night and moans of pleasure or horror, the calls of pawnbrokers and the snorts of livestock, the groaning of ruined bedsteads and the squeaking of ruined violins. All composing a desperate music together, no two bars

alike, spilling into the night through ill-fitting doors and windows, roars of laughter at a joke or a good spin of the gaming wheel hardly to be told from roars of anger at an insult or the bad turn of a card.

'Merciful heaven,' muttered Majud, one sleeve across his face against the ever-shifting stench.

'Enough to make a man believe in God,' said Temple. 'And that He's somewhere else.'

Ruins loomed from the wet night. Columns on inhuman scale towered to either side of the main street, so thick three men couldn't have linked their arms around them. Some were toppled short, some sheared off ten strides up, some still standing so high the tops were lost to the dark above, the shifting torchlight picking out stained carvings, letters, runes in alphabets centuries forgotten, mementoes of ancient happenings, winners and losers a thousand years dust.

'What did this place used to be?' muttered Shy, neck aching from looking up.

'Cleaner, at a guess,' said Lamb.

Shacks had sprouted around those ancient columns like unruly fungi from the trunks of dead trees. Folk had built teetering scaffolds up them, and chiselled bent props into them, and hung ropes from the tops and even slung walkways between, until some were entirely obscured by incompetent carpentry, turned to nightmare ships run thousands of miles aground, decked out in torches and lanterns and garish advertising for every vice imaginable, the whole so precarious you could see the buildings shifting when the breeze got stiff.

The valley opened up as the remnants of the Fellowship threaded its way further and the general mood intensified to something between orgy, riot and an outbreak of fever. Wild-eyed revellers rushed at it all open-mouthed, fixed on ripping through a lifetime of fun before sunup, as if violence and debauch wouldn't be there on the morrow.

Shy had a feeling they would.

'It's like a battle,' grunted Savian.

'But without any sides,' said Corlin.

'Or any victory,' said Lamb.

'Just a million defeats,' muttered Temple.

Men tottered and lurched, limped and spun with gaits grotesque or comical, drunk beyond reason, or crippled in head or body, or half-mad from long months spent digging alone in high extremities where words were a memory. Shy directed her horse around a man making a spatter all down his own bare legs, trousers about ankles in the muck, cock in one wobbling hand while he slobbered at a bottle in the other.

'Where the hell do you start?' Shy heard Goldy asking her pimp. He had no answer.

The competition was humbling, all right. The women came in every shape, colour and age, lolling in the national undress of a score of different nations and displaying flesh by the acre. Gooseflesh, mostly, since the weather was tending chilly. Some cooed and simpered or blew kisses, others shrieked unconvincing promises about the quality of their services at the torchlit dark, still others abandoned even that much subtlety and thrust their hips at the passing Fellowship with the most warlike expressions. One let a pair of pendulous, blue-veined teats dangle over the rail of a balcony and called out, 'What d'you think o' these?'

Shy thought they looked about as appealing as a pair of rotten hams. You never can tell what'll light the fire in some folk, though. A man looked up eagerly with one hand down the front of his trousers noticeably yanking away, others stepping around him like a wank in the street was nothing to remark upon. Shy blew out her cheeks.

'I been to some low-down places and I done some low-down shit when I got there, but I never saw the like o' this.'

'Likewise,' muttered Lamb, frowning about with one hand resting on the hilt of his sword. Seemed to Shy it rested there a lot these days, and had got pretty comfortable too. He weren't the only one with steel to hand, mind you. The air of menace was thick enough to chew, gangs of ugly-faced and ugly-purposed men haunting the porches, armed past their armpits, aiming flinty frowns across at groups no better favoured on the other side of the way.

While they were stopped waiting for the traffic to clear, a thug with too much chin and nowhere near enough forehead stepped up to Majud's wagon and growled, 'Which side o' the street you on?'

Never a man to be rushed, Majud considered a moment before answering. 'I have purchased a plot on which I mean to site a business, but until I see it

—’

‘He ain’t talking about plots, fool,’ snorted another tough with hair so greasy he looked like he’d dipped his head in cold stew. ‘He means are you on the Mayor’s side or Papa Ring’s side?’

‘I am here to do business.’ Majud snapped his reins and his wagon lurched on. ‘Not to take sides.’

‘Only thing on neither side o’ the street is the sewer!’ shouted Chinny after him. ‘You want to go in the fucking sewer, do you?’

The way grew wider and busier still, a crawling sea of muck, the columns even higher above it, the ruin of an ancient theatre cut from the hillside where the valley split in two ahead of them. Sweet was waiting near a sprawling heap of building like a hundred shacks piled on top of each other. Looked as if some optimist had taken a stab at it with whitewash but given up halfway and left the rest to slowly peel, like a giant lizard in the midst of moulting.

‘This here is Papa Ring’s Emporium of Romance, Song and Dry Goods, known locally as the Whitehouse,’ Sweet informed Shy as she hitched her horse. ‘Over yonder,’ and the old scout nodded across the stream that split the street in two, serving at once for drinking water and sewer and crossed by a muddle of stepping stones, wet planks and improvised bridges, ‘is the Mayor’s Church of Dice.’

The Mayor had occupied the ruins of some old temple – a set of pillars with half a moss-caked pediment on top – and filled in the gaps with a riot of planks to consecrate a place of worship for some very different idols.

‘Though, being honest,’ continued Sweet, ‘they both offer fucking, drink and gambling so the distinction is largely in the signage. Come on, the Mayor’s keen to meet you.’ He stepped back to let a wagon clatter past, showering mud from its back wheels over all and sundry, then set off across the street.

‘What shall I do?’ called Temple, still on his mule with a faceful of panic.

‘Take in the sights. Reckon there’s a lifetime of material for a preacher. But if you’re tempted by a sample, don’t forget you got debts!’ Shy forded the road after Lamb, trying to pick the firmest patches as the slop threatened to suck her boots right off, around a monstrous boulder she realised was the head of a fallen statue, half its face mud-sunk while the other still wore a

pitted frown of majesty, then up the steps of the Mayor's Church of Dice, between two groups of frowning thugs and into the light.

The heat was a slap, such a reek of sweltering bodies that Shy – no stranger to the unwashed – felt for a moment like she might drown in it. Fires were stoked high and the air was hazy with their smoke, and chagga smoke, and the smoke from cheap lamps burning cheap oil with a fizz and sputter, and her eyes set right away to watering. Stained walls half green wood and half moss-crusted stone trickled with the wet of desperate breath. Mounted in alcoves above the swarming humanity were a dozen sets of dusty Imperial armour that must've belonged to some general of antiquity and his guards, the proud past staring down in faceless disapproval at the sorry now.

'It gets worse?' muttered Lamb.

'What gets better?' asked Sweet.

The air rang with the rattle of thrown dice and bellowed odds, thrown insults and bellowed warnings. There was a band banging away like their lives were at stake and some drunken prospectors were singing along but didn't know even a quarter of the words and were making up the balance with swears at random. A man reeled past clutching at a broken nose and blundered into the counter – gleaming wood and more'n likely the only thing in the place that came near clean – stretching what looked like half a mile and every inch crammed with clients clamouring for drink. Stepping back, Shy nearly tripped over a card-game. One of the players had a woman astride him, sucking at his face like he'd a gold nugget down his gullet and with just a bit more effort she'd get her tongue around it.

'Dab Sweet?' called a man with a beard seemed to go right up to his eyes, slapping the scout on the arm. 'Look, Sweet's back!'

'Aye, and brought a Fellowship with me.'

'No trouble with old Sangeed on the way?'

'There was,' said Sweet. 'As a result of which he's dead.'

'Dead?'

'No doubt o' that.' He jerked his thumb at Lamb. 'It was this lad did—'

But the man with all the beard was already clambering up on the nearest table sending glasses, cards and counters clattering. 'Listen up, all o' you! Dab Sweet killed that fucker Sangeed! That old Ghost bastard's dead!'

‘A cheer for Dab Sweet!’ someone roared, a surge of approval battered the mildewed rafters and the band struck up an even wilder tune than before.

‘Hold on,’ said Sweet, ‘Wasn’t me killed him—’

Lamb steered him on. ‘Silence is the warrior’s best armour, the saying goes. Just show us to the Mayor.’

They threaded through the heaving crowd, past a cage where a pair of clerks weighed out gold dust and coins in a hundred currencies and transformed it through the alchemy of the abacus to gambling chips and back. A few of the men Lamb brushed out of the way didn’t much care for it, turned with a harsh word in mind, but soon reconsidered when they saw his face. Same face that, slack and sorry, boys used to laugh at back in Squaredeal. He was a man much changed since those days, all right. Or maybe just a man revealed.

A couple of nail-eyed thugs blocked the bottom of the stairs but Sweet called, ‘These two are here to see the Mayor!’ and bundled them up with a deal of back-slappery, along a balcony overlooking the swarming hall and to a heavy door flanked by two more hard faces.

‘Here we go,’ said Sweet, and knocked.

It was a woman who answered. ‘Welcome to Crease,’ she said.

She wore a black dress with a shine to the fabric, long-sleeved and buttoned all the way to her throat. Late in her forties was Shy’s guess, hair streaked with grey. She must’ve been quite the beauty in her day, though, and her day weren’t entirely past either. She took Shy’s hand in one of hers and clasped it with the other one besides and said, ‘You must be Shy. And Lamb.’ She gave Lamb’s weathered paw the same treatment, and he thanked her too late in a creaky voice and took his battered hat off as an afterthought, sparse hair overdue for a cut left flapping at all angles.

But the woman smiled like she’d never been treated to so gallant a gesture. She shut the door and with its solid click into the frame the madness outside was shut away and all was calm and reasonable. ‘Do sit. Master Sweet has told me of your troubles. Your stolen children. A terrible thing.’ And she had such pain in her face you’d have thought it was her babies had vanished.

‘Aye,’ muttered Shy, not sure what to do with that much sympathy.

‘Would either of you care for a drink?’ She poured four healthy measures of spirit without need for an answer. ‘Please forgive this place, it’s a

struggle to get good furniture out here, as you can imagine.'

'Guess we'll manage,' said Shy, even though it was about the most comfortable chair she'd ever sat in and about the nicest room besides, Kantic hangings at the windows, candles in lamps of coloured glass, a great desk with a black leather top just a little stained with bottle rings.

She'd real fine manners, Shy thought, this woman, as she handed out the drinks. Not that haughty, down-the-nose kind that idiots thought lifted you above the crowd. The kind that made you feel you were worth something even if you were dog-tired and dog-filthy and had near worn the arse out of your trousers and not even you could tell how many hundred miles of dusty plain you'd covered since your last bath.

Shy took a sip, noted the drink was just as far out of her class as everything else, cleared her throat and said, 'We were hoping to see the Mayor.'

The woman perched herself against the edge of the desk – Shy had a feeling she'd have looked comfortable sitting on an open razor – and said, 'You are.'

'Hoping?'

'Seeing her.'

Lamb shifted awkwardly in his chair, like it was too comfortable for him to be comfortable in.

'You're a woman?' asked Shy, head somewhat scrambled from the hell outside and the clean calm in here.

The Mayor only smiled. She did that a lot but somehow you never tired of it. 'They have other words for what I am on the other side of the street, but, yes.' She tossed down her drink in a way that suggested it wasn't her first, wouldn't be her last and wouldn't make much difference either. 'Sweet tells me you're looking for someone.'

'Man by the name of Grega Cantliss,' said Shy.

'I know Cantliss. Preening scum. He robs and murders for Papa Ring.'

'Where can we find him?' asked Lamb.

'I believe he's been out of town. But I expect he'll be back before long.'

'How long are we talking about?' asked Shy.

'Forty-three days.'

That kicked the guts out of her. She'd built herself up to good news, or at least to news. Kept herself going with thoughts of Pit and Ro's smiling

faces and happy hugs of reunion. Should've known better but hope's like damp – however much you try to keep it out there's always a little gets in. She knocked back the balance of her drink, not near so sweet now, and hissed, 'Shit.'

'We've come a long way.' Lamb carefully placed his own glass on the desk, and Shy noticed with a hint of worry his knuckles were white with pressure. 'I appreciate your hospitality, no doubt I do, but I ain't in any mood to fuck around. Where's Cantliss?'

'I'm rarely in the mood to fuck around either.' The rough word sounded double harsh in the Mayor's polished voice, and she held Lamb's eye like manners or no she wasn't someone to be pushed. 'Cantliss will be back in forty-three days.'

Shy had never been one to mope. A moment to tongue at the gap between her teeth and dwell on all the unfairness the world had inflicted on her undeserving carcass and she was on to the what nexts. 'Where's the magic in forty-three days?'

'That's when things are coming to a head here in Crease.'

Shy nodded towards the window and the sounds of madness drifting through. 'Strikes me they always are.'

'Not like this one.' The Mayor stood and offered out the bottle.

'Why not?' said Shy, and Lamb and Sweet were turning nothing down either. Refusing to drink in Crease seemed wrong-headed as refusing to breathe. Especially when the drink was so fine and the air so shitty.

'Eight years we've been here, Papa Ring and I, staring across the street at each other.' The Mayor drifted to the window and looked out at the babbling carnage below. She had a trick of walking so smooth and graceful it seemed it must done with wheels rather'n legs. 'There was nothing on the map out here but a crease when we arrived. Twenty shacks among the ruins, places where trappers could see out the winter.'

Sweet chuckled. 'You were quite a sight among 'em.'

'They soon got used to me. Eight years, while the town grew up around us. We outlasted the plague, and four raids by the Ghosts, and two more by bandits, and the plague again, and after the big fire came through we rebuilt bigger and better and were ready when they found the gold and the people started coming. Eight years, staring across the street at each other, and snapping at each other, and in the end all but at war.'

‘You going to come near a point?’ asked Shy.

‘Our feud was getting bad for business. We agreed to settle it according to mining law, which is the only kind out here for the moment, and I can assure you people take it very seriously. We treated the town as a plot with two rival claims, winner takes all.’

‘Winner of what?’ asked Lamb.

‘A fight. Not my choice but Papa Ring manoeuvred me into it. A fight, man against man, bare-fisted, in a Circle marked out in the old amphitheatre.’

‘A fight in the Circle,’ muttered Lamb. ‘To the death, I daresay?’

‘I understand more often than not that’s where these things end up. Master Sweet tells me you may have some experience in that area.’

Lamb looked over at Sweet, then glanced at Shy, then back to the Mayor and grunted, ‘Some.’

There was a time, not all that long ago, Shy would’ve laughed her arse off at the notion of Lamb in a fight to the death. Nothing could’ve been less funny now.

Sweet was chuckling as he put down his empty glass, though. ‘I reckon we can drop the pretence, eh?’

‘What pretence?’ asked Shy.

‘Lamb,’ said Sweet. ‘That’s what. You know what I call a wolf wearing a sheep mask?’

Lamb looked back at him. ‘I’ve a feeling you can’t keep it to yourself.’

‘A wolf.’ The old scout wagged a finger across the room, looking quite decidedly pleased with himself. ‘I’d a crazy guess about you the moment I saw a big nine-fingered Northman kill the hell out o’ two drifters back in Averstock. When I saw you crush Sangeed like a beetle I was sure. I must admit it did occur when I asked you along that you and the Mayor might be the answer to each other’s problems—’

‘Ain’t you a clever little bastard?’ snarled Lamb, eyes burning and the veins suddenly popping from his thick neck. ‘Best be careful when you pull that mask off, fucker, you might not like what’s under there!’

Sweet twitched, Shy flinched, the comfortable room of a sudden feeling balanced on the brink of a great pit and that an awful dangerous place for a chat. Then the Mayor smiled as if this was all a joke between friends, gently

took Lamb's trembling hand and filled his glass, fingers lingering on his just a moment.

'Papa Ring's brought in a man to fight for him,' she carried on, smooth as ever. 'A Northman by the name of Golden.'

'Glama Golden?' Lamb shrank back into his chair like he'd been embarrassed by his own temper.

'I've heard the name,' said Shy. 'Heard it'd be a fool who'd bet against him in a fight.'

'That would depend who he was fighting. None of my men is a match for him, but you . . .' She leaned forwards and the sweet whiff of perfume, rare as gold among the reeks of Crease, even got Shy a little warm under the collar. 'Well, from what Sweet tells me, you're more than a match for anyone.'

There was a time Shy would have laughed her arse off at that, too. Now, she wasn't even near a chuckle.

'Might be my best years are behind me,' muttered Lamb.

'Come, now. I don't think either one of us is over the hill quite yet. I need your help. And I can help you.' The Mayor looked Lamb in the face and he looked back like no one else was even there. Shy got a worried feeling, then. Like she'd somehow been out-bartered by this woman without prices even being mentioned.

'What's to stop us finding the children some other how?' she snapped, her voice sounding harsh as a graveyard crow's.

'Nothing,' said the Mayor simply. 'But if you want Cantliss, Papa Ring will put himself in your way. And I'm the only one who can get him out of it. Would you say that's fair, Dab?'

'I'd say it's true,' said Sweet, still looking a little unnerved. 'Fair I'll leave to better judges.'

'But you needn't decide now. I'll arrange a room for you over at Camling's Hostelry. It's the closest thing to neutral ground we have here. If you can find your children without my help, go with my blessing. If not . . .' And the Mayor gave them one more smile. 'I'll be here.'

''Til Papa Ring kicks you out of town.'

Her eyes flickered to Shy's and there was anger there, hot and sharp. Just for a moment, then she shrugged. 'I'm still hoping to stay.' And she poured another round of drinks.

Plots

‘It is a plot,’ said Temple.

Majud slowly nodded. ‘Undeniably.’

‘Beyond that,’ said Temple, ‘I would not like to venture.’

Majud slowly shook his head. ‘Nor I. Even as its owner.’

It appeared the amount of gold in Crease had been drastically over-stated, but no one could deny there had been a mud strike here of epic proportions. There was the treacherous slop that constituted the main street and in which everyone was forced to take their wading, cursing, shuffling chances. There was the speckly filth that showered from every wagon-wheel to inconceivable heights when it was raining, sprinkling every house, column, beast and person. There was an insidious, watery muck that worked its way up from the ground, leaching into wood and canvas and blooming forth with moss and mould, leaving black tidemarks on the hems of every dress in town. There was an endless supply of dung, shit, crap and night soil, found in every colour and configuration and often in the most unlikely places. Finally, of course, there was the all-pervasive moral filth.

Majud’s plot was rich in all of these and more.

An indescribably haggard individual stumbled from one of the wretched tents pitched higgledy-piggledy upon it, hawked up at great length and volume, and spat upon the rubbish-strewn mud. Then he turned the most bellicose of expressions towards Majud and Temple, scratched at his infested beard, dragged up his decaying full-body undershirt so it could instantly slump once more, and returned to the unspeakable darkness whence he came.

‘The location is good,’ said Majud.

‘Excellent,’ said Temple.

‘Right on the main street.’ Although Crease was so narrow that it was virtually the only street. Daylight revealed a different side to the thoroughfare: no cleaner, perhaps even less so, but at least the sense of a riot in a madhouse had faded. The flood of intoxicated criminals between the ruined columns had become a more respectable trickle. The whorehouses, gaming pits, husk-shacks and drinking dens were no doubt still taking customers but no longer advertising as if the world would end tomorrow. Premises with less spectacular strategies for fleecing passers-by came to the fore: eateries, money changers, pawnshops, blacksmiths, stables, butchers, combined stables and butchers, ratters and hatters, animal and fur traders, land agents and mineral consultancies, merchants in mining equipment of the most execrable quality, and a postal service whose representative Temple had seen dumping letters in a stream scarcely even out of town. Groups of bleary prospectors slogged miserably back to their claims, probably in hopes of scraping enough gold dust from the freezing stream-beds for another night of madness. Now and again a dishevelled Fellowship came chasing their diverse dreams into town, usually wearing the same expressions of horror and amazement that Majud and Temple had worn when they first arrived.

That was Crease for you. A place where everyone was passing through.

‘I have a sign,’ said Majud, patting it affectionately. It was painted clean white with gilt lettering and proclaimed:*Majud and Curnsbick Metalwork, Hinges, Nails, Tools, Wagon Fixings, High-Quality Smithing of All Varieties*. Then it said *Metalwork* in five other languages – a sensible precaution in Crease, where it sometimes seemed no two people spoke quite the same tongue, let alone read it. In Northern it had been spelled wrong, but it was still vastly superior to most of the gaudy shingles dangling over the main street. A building across the way sported a red one on which yellow letters had run into drips on the bottom edge. It read, simply, *Fuck Palace*.

‘I brought it all the way from Adua,’ said Majud.

‘It is a noble sign, and embodies your high achievement in coming so far. All you need now is a building to hang it on.’

The merchant cleared his throat, its prominent knobble bobbing. ‘I remember house-builder being among your impressive list of previous

professions.’

‘I remember you being unimpressed,’ said Temple. ‘ “We need no houses out here,” were your very words.’

‘You have a sharp memory for conversations.’

‘Those on which my life depends in particular.’

‘Must I apologise at the start of our every exchange?’

‘I see no pressing reason why not.’

‘Then I apologise. I was wrong. You have proved yourself a staunch travelling companion, not to mention a valued leader of prayer.’ A stray dog limped across the plot, sniffed at a turd, added one of its own and moved on. ‘Speaking as a carpenter—’

‘Ex-carpenter.’

‘—how would you go about building on this plot?’

‘If you held a knife to my throat?’ Temple stepped forwards. His boot sank in well beyond the ankle, and it was only with considerable effort he was able to drag it squelching free.

‘The ground is not the best,’ Majud was forced to concede.

‘The ground is always good enough if one goes deep enough. We would begin by driving piles of fresh hardwood.’

‘That task would require a sturdy fellow. I will have to see if Master Lamb can spare us a day or two.’

‘He is a sturdy fellow.’

‘I would not care to be a pile under his hammer.’

‘Nor I.’ Temple had felt very much like a pile under a hammer ever since he had abandoned the Company of the Gracious Hand, and was hoping to stop. ‘A hardwood frame upon the piles, then, jointed and pegged, beams to support a floor of pine plank to keep your customers well clear of the mud. Front of the ground floor for your shop, rear for office and workshop, contract a mason for a chimney-stack and a stone-built addition to house your forge. On the upper floor, quarters for you. A balcony overlooking the street appears to be the local fashion. You may festoon it with semi-naked women, should you so desire.’

‘I will probably avoid the local fashion to that degree.’

‘A steeply pitched roof would keep off the winter rains and accommodate an attic for storage or employees.’ The building took shape in Temple’s imagination, his hand sketching out the rough dimensions, the effect only

slightly spoiled by a clutch of feral Ghost children frolicking naked in the shit-filled stream beyond.

Majud gave a curt nod of approval. ‘You should have said architect rather than carpenter.’

‘Would that have made any difference?’

‘To me it would.’

‘But, don’t tell me, not to Curnsbick.’

‘His heart is of iron—’

‘I got one!’ A filth-crusted individual rode squelching down the street into town, pushing his blown nag as fast as it would hobble, one arm raised high as though it held the word of the Almighty. ‘I got one!’ he roared again. Temple caught the telltale glint of gold in his hand. Men gave limp cheers, called out limp congratulations, gathered around to clap the prospector on the back as he slid from his horse, hoping perhaps his good fortune might rub off.

‘One of the lucky ones,’ said Majud as they watched him waddle, bow-legged, up the steps into the Mayor’s Church of Dice, a dishevelled crowd trailing after, eager at the chance even of seeing a nugget.

‘I fully expect he’ll be destitute by lunchtime,’ said Temple.

‘You give him that long?’

One of the tent-flaps was thrust back. A grunt from within and an arc of piss emerged, spattered against the side of one of the other tents, sprinkled the mud, drooped to a dribble and stopped. The flap closed.

Majud gave vent to a heavy sigh. ‘In return for your help in constructing the edifice discussed, I would be prepared to pay you the rate of one mark a day.’

Temple snorted. ‘Curnsbick has not chased all charity from the Circle of the World, then.’

‘The Fellowship may be dissolved but still I feel a certain duty of care towards those I travelled with.’

‘That, or you expected to find a carpenter here but now perceive the local workmanship to be . . . inferior.’ Temple cocked a brow at the building beside the plot, every door and window-frame at its own wrong angle, leaning sideways even with the support of an ancient stone block half-sunk in the ground. ‘Perhaps you would like a place of business that will not

wash away in the next shower. Does the weather get harsh here, do you suppose, in winter?'

A brief pause while the wind blew up chill and made the canvas of the tents flap and the wood of the surrounding buildings creak alarmingly. 'What fee would you demand?' asked Majud.

Temple had been giving serious consideration to the idea of slipping away and leaving his debt to Shy South forever stalled at seventy-six marks. But the sad fact was he had nowhere to slip to and no one to slip with, and was even more useless alone than in company. That left him with money to find. 'Three marks a day.' A quarter of what Cosca used to pay him, but ten times his wages riding drag.

Majud clicked his tongue. 'Ridiculous. That is the lawyer in you speaking.'

'He is a close friend of the carpenter.'

'How do I know your work will be worth the price?'

'I challenge you to find anyone less than entirely satisfied with the quality of my joinery.'

'You have built no houses here!'

'Then yours shall be unique. Customers will flock to see it.'

'One and a half marks a day. Any more and Curnsbick will have my head!'

'I would hate to have your death upon my conscience. Two it is, with meals and lodging provided.' And Temple held out his hand.

Majud regarded it without enthusiasm. 'Shy South has set an ugly precedent for negotiation.'

'Her ruthlessness approaches Master Curnsbick's. Perhaps they should go into business together.'

'If two jackals can share a carcass.' They shook. Then they considered the plot again. The intervening time had in no way improved it.

'The first step would be to clear the ground,' said Majud.

'I agree. Its current state is a veritable offence against God. Not to mention public health.' Another occupant had emerged from a structure of mildewed cloth sagging so badly that it must have been virtually touching the mud inside. This one wore nothing but a long grey beard not quite long enough to protect his dignity, or at least everyone else's, and a belt with a

large knife sheathed upon it. He sat down in the dirt and started chewing savagely at a bone. ‘Master Lamb’s help might come in useful there also.’

‘Doubtless.’ Majud clapped him on the shoulder. ‘I shall seek out the Northman while you begin the clearance.’

‘Me?’

‘Who else?’

‘I am a carpenter, not a bailiff!’

‘A day ago you were a priest and cattleman and a moment before that a lawyer! A man of your varied talents will, I feel sure, find a way.’ And Majud was already hopping briskly off down the street.

Temple rolled his eyes from the earthbound refuse to the clean, blue heavens. ‘I’m not saying I don’t deserve it, but you surely love to test a man.’ Then he hitched up his trouser-legs and stepped gingerly towards the naked beggar with the bone, limping somewhat since the buttock Shy pricked on the plains was still troubling him in the mornings.

‘Good day!’ he called.

The man squinted up at him, sucking a strip of gristle from his bone. ‘I don’t fucking think so. You got a drink?’

‘I thought it best to stop.’

‘Then you need a good fucking reason to bother me, boy.’

‘I have a reason. Whether you will consider it a good one I profoundly doubt.’

‘You can but try.’

‘The fact is,’ ventured Temple, ‘we will soon be building on this plot.’

‘How you going to manage that with me here?’

‘I was hoping you could be persuaded to move.’

The beggar checked every part of his bone for further sustenance and, finding none, tossed it at Temple. It bounced off his shirt. ‘You ain’t going to persuade me o’ nothing without a drink.’

‘The thing is, this plot belongs to my employer, Abram Majud, and—’

‘Who says so?’

‘Who . . . says?’

‘Do I fucking stutter?’ The man took out his knife as if he had some everyday task that required one, but the subtext was plain. It really was a very large blade and, given the prevailing filthiness of everything else

within ten strides, impressively clean, edge glittering with the morning sun. ‘I asked who says?’

Temple took a wobbly step back. Straight into something very solid. He spun about, expecting to find himself face to face with one of the other tent-dwellers, probably sporting an even bigger knife – God knew there were so many big knives in Crease the distinction between them and swords was a total blur – and was hugely relieved to find Lamb towering over him.

‘*I* say,’ said Lamb to the beggar. ‘You could ignore me. You could wave that knife around a little more. But you might find you’re wearing it up your arse.’

The man looked down at his blade, perhaps wishing he had opted for a smaller one after all. Then he put it sheepishly away. ‘Reckon I’ll just move along.’

Lamb gave that a nod. ‘I reckon.’

‘Can I get my trousers?’

‘You’d fucking better.’

He ducked into his tent and came out buttoning up the most ragged article of clothing Temple ever saw. ‘I’ll leave the tent, if it’s all the same. Ain’t that good a one.’

‘You don’t say,’ said Temple.

The man loitered a moment longer. ‘Any chance of that drink do you—’

‘Get gone,’ growled Lamb, and the beggar scampered off like he’d a mean dog at his heels.

‘There you are, Master Lamb!’ Majud waded over, trouser-legs held up by both hands to display two lean lengths of muddy calf. ‘I was hoping to persuade you to work on my behalf and here I find you already hard at it!’

‘It’s nothing,’ said Lamb.

‘Still, if you could help us clear the site I’d be happy to pay you—’

‘Don’t worry about it.’

‘Truly?’ The watery sun gleamed from Majud’s golden tooth. ‘If you were to do me this favour I would consider you a friend for life!’

‘I should warn you, friend o’ mine can be a dangerous position.’

‘I feel it is worth the risk.’

‘If it’ll save a couple of bits,’ threw in Temple.

‘I got all the money I need,’ said Lamb, ‘but I always been sadly short on friends.’ He frowned over at the vagrant with the underclothes, just poking

his head out of his tent and into the light. ‘You!’ And the man darted back inside like a tortoise into its shell.

Majud raised his brows at Temple. ‘If only everyone was so accommodating.’

‘Not everyone has been obliged to sell themselves into slavery.’

‘You could’ve said no.’ Shy was on the rickety porch of the building next door, leaning on the rail with boots crossed and fingers dangling. For a moment Temple hardly recognised her. She had a new shirt, sleeves rolled up with her tanned forearms showing, one with the old rope burn coiled pink around it, a sheepskin vest on top which was no doubt yellow by any reasonable estimation but looked white as a heavenly visitation in the midst of all that dirt. The same stained hat but tipped back, hair less greasy and more red, stirring in the breeze.

Temple stood and looked at her, and found he quite enjoyed it. ‘You look . . .’

‘Clean?’

‘Something like that.’

‘You look . . . surprised.’

‘Little bit.’

‘Did you think I stunk out of choice?’

‘No, I thought you couldn’t help yourself.’

She spat daintily through the gap between her front teeth, narrowly missing his boots. ‘Then you discover your error. The Mayor was kind enough to lend me her bath.’

‘Bathing with the Mayor, eh?’

She winked. ‘Moving up in the world.’

Temple plucked at his own shirt, only held together by the more stubborn stains. ‘Do you think she’d give me a bath?’

‘You could ask. But I reckon there’s about a four in five chance she’d have you killed.’

‘I like those odds. Lots of people are five in five on my untimely death.’

‘Something to do with you being a lawyer?’

‘As of today, I will have you know, I am a carpenter and architect.’

‘Well, your professions slip on and off easy as a whore’s drawers, don’t they?’

‘A man must follow the opportunities.’ He turned to take in the plot with an airy wave. ‘I am contracted to build upon this unrivalled site a residence and place of business for the firm of Majud and Curnsbick.’

‘My congratulations on leaving the legal profession and becoming a respectable member of the community.’

‘Do they have such a thing in Crease?’

‘Not yet, but I reckon it’s on the way. You stick a bunch of drunken murderers together, ain’t long before some turn to thieving, then to lying, then to bad language, and pretty soon to sobriety, raising families and making an honest living.’

‘It’s a slippery slope, all right.’ Temple watched Lamb shepherd a tangle-haired drunkard off the plot, few possessions dragging in the muck behind him. ‘Is the Mayor going to help you find your brother and sister?’

Shy gave a long sigh. ‘Maybe. But she’s got a price.’

‘Nothing comes for free.’

‘Nothing. How’s carpenter’s pay?’

Temple winced. ‘Barely enough to scrape by on, sadly—’

‘Two marks a day, plus benefits!’ called Majud as he dismantled the most recently vacated tent. ‘I’ve known bandits kinder to their victims!’

‘Two marks from that miser?’ Shy gave an approving nod. ‘Well done. I’ll take a mark a day towards the debt.’

‘A mark,’ Temple managed to force out. ‘Very reasonable.’ If there was a God His bounty was only lent, never given.

‘I thought the Fellowship dissolved!’ Dab Sweet pulled his horse up beside the plot, Crying Rock haunting his shoulder. Neither of them appeared to have ventured within spitting range of a bath, or a change of clothes either. Temple found that strangely reassuring. ‘Buckhorm’s out of town with his grass and his water, Lestek’s dressing the theatre for his grand debut and most of the rest split up to dig gold their own way, but here’s the four of you still, inseparable. Warms my heart that I forged such camaraderie out in the wilderness.’

‘Don’t pretend you got a heart,’ said Shy.

‘Got to be something pumps the black poison through my veins, don’t there?’

‘Ah!’ shouted Majud. ‘If it is not the new Emperor of the Plains, the conqueror of great Sangeed, Dab Sweet!’

The scout gave Lamb a nervous sideways glance. ‘I’ve made no effort to spread that rumour.’

‘And yet it has taken to this town like fire to tinder! I have heard half a dozen versions, none particularly close to my own remembrance. Most recently, I was told you shot the Ghost from a mile’s distance and with a stiff side wind.’

‘I heard you impaled him on the horns of an enraged steer,’ said Shy.

‘And in the newest version to reach my ear,’ said Temple, ‘you killed him in a duel over the good name of a woman.’

Sweet snorted. ‘Where the hell do they get this rubbish? Everyone knows there’s no women o’ my acquaintance with a good name. This your plot?’

‘It is,’ said Majud.

‘It is a plot,’ said Crying Rock solemnly.

‘Majud has contracted me to build a shop upon it,’ said Temple.

‘More buildings?’ Sweet wriggled his shoulders. ‘Bloody roofs hanging over you. Walls bearing in on you. How can you take a breath in those things?’

Crying Rock shook her head. ‘Buildings.’

‘A man can’t think of nothing when he’s in one but how to get back out. I’m a wanderer and that’s a fact. Born to be under the sky.’ Sweet watched Lamb drag another wriggling drunk from a tent one-handed and toss him rolling into the street. ‘Man has to be what he is, don’t he?’

Shy frowned up. ‘He can try to be otherwise.’

‘But more often than not it don’t stick. All that trying, day after day, it wears you right through.’ The old scout gave her a wink. ‘Lamb taking up the Mayor’s offer?’

‘We’re thinking on it,’ she snapped back.

Temple looked from one to the other. ‘Am I missing something?’

‘Usually,’ said Shy, still giving Sweet the eyeball. ‘If you’re heading on out of town, don’t let us hold you up.’

‘Wouldn’t dream of it.’ The old scout pointed down the main street, busier with traffic as the day wore on, weak sun raising a little steam from the wet mud, the wet horses, the wet roofs. ‘We’re signed up to guide a Fellowship of prospectors into the hills. Always work for guides around Crease. Everyone here wants to be somewhere else.’

‘Not I,’ said Majud, grinning as Lamb kicked another tent over.

‘Oh no.’ Sweet gave the plot a final glance, smile lurking at the corner of his mouth. ‘You lot are right where you belong.’ And he trotted on out of town, Crying Rock at his side.

Words and Graces

Shy didn't much care for pretension, and despite having crawled through more than her share was no high enthusiast for dirt. The dining room of Camling's Hostelry was an unhappy marriage of the two uglier by far than either one alone. The tabletops were buffed to a prissy shine but the floor was caked with boot-mud. The cutlery had bone handles but the walls were spattered hip high with ancient food. There was a gilt-framed painting of a nude who'd found something to smirk about but the plaster behind was blistered with mould from a leak above.

'State o' this place,' muttered Lamb.

'That's Crease for you,' said Shy. 'Everything upside down.'

On the trail she'd heard the stream-beds in the hills were lined with nuggets, just itching for greedy fingers to pluck them free. Some lucky few who'd struck gold in Crease might've dug it from the earth but it looked to Shy like most had found a way to dig it out of other folks. It weren't prospectors crowding the dining room of Camling's and forming a grumpy queue besides, it was pimps and gamblers, racketeers and money lenders, and merchants pedalling the same stuff they might anywhere else at half the quality and four times the price.

'A damn superfluity of shysters,' muttered Shy as she stepped over a pair of dirty boots and dodged a careless elbow. 'This the future of the Far Country?'

'Of every country,' muttered Lamb.

'Please, please, my friends, do sit!' Camling, the proprietor, was a long, oily bastard with a suit wearing through at the elbows and a habit of laying soft hands where they weren't wanted which had already nearly earned him

Shy's fist in his face. He was busy flicking crumbs from a table perched on an ancient column top some creative carpenter had laid the floorboards around. 'We try to stay neutral but any friend of the Mayor's is a friend of mine, indeed they are!'

'I'll face the door,' said Lamb, shifting his chair around.

Camling drew out the other for Shy. 'And may I say how positively radiant you are this morning?'

'You can say it, but I doubt anyone'll be taking your word over the evidence o' their senses.' She levered her way to sitting, not easy since the ancient carvings on the column were prone to interfere with her knees.

'On the contrary, you are a positive ornament to my humble dining room.'

Shy frowned up. A slap in the face she could take in good part but all this fawning she didn't trust in the least. 'How about you bring the food and hold on to the blather?'

Camling cleared his throat. 'Of course.' And slipped away into the crowd.

'That Corlin over there?'

She was wedged into a shadowy corner, eyeing the gathering with her mouth pressed into that tight line of hers, like it'd take a couple of big men with pick and crowbar to get a word out.

'If you say so,' said Lamb, squinting across the room. 'My eyes ain't all they were.'

'I say so. And Savian, too. Thought they were meant to be prospecting?'

'Thought you didn't believe they would be?

'Looks like I was right.'

'You usually are.'

'I'd swear she saw me.'

'And?'

'And she ain't given so much as a nod.'

'Maybe she wishes she hadn't seen you.'

'Wishing don't make it so.' Shy slipped from the table, having to make room for a big bald bastard who insisted on waving his fork around when he talked.

'. . . there's still a few coming in but less than we hoped. Can't be sure how many more'll turn up. Sounds like Mulkova was bad . . .' Savian stopped short when he saw Shy coming. There was a stranger wedged even

further into the shadows between him and Corlin, under a curtained window.

'Corlin,' said Shy.

'Shy,' said Corlin.

'Savian,' said Shy.

He just nodded.

'I thought you two were out digging?'

'We're putting it off a while.' Corlin held Shy's eye all the time. 'Might leave in a week. Might be later.'

'Lot of other folks coming through with the same idea. You want to claim aught but mud you'd best get into them hills.'

'The hills have been there since great Euz drove the devils from the world,' said the stranger. 'I predict that they will persist into next week.' He was an odd one, with bulging eyes, a long tangle of grey beard and hair and eyebrows hardly shorter. Odder yet, Shy saw now he had a pair of little birds, tame as puppies, pecking seed from his open palm.

'And you are?' asked Shy.

'My name is Zacharus.'

'Like the Magus?'

'Just like.'

Seemed a foolish sort of thing to take the name of a legendary wizard, but then you might have said the same for naming a woman after social awkwardness. 'Shy South.' She reached for his hand and an even smaller bird hopped from his sleeve and snapped at her finger, gave her the hell of a shock and made her jerk it back. 'And, er, that's Lamb over there. We rolled out from the Near Country in a Fellowship with these two. Faced down Ghosts and storms and rivers and an awful lot of boredom. High times, eh?'

'Towering,' said Corlin, eyes narrowed to blue slits. Shy was getting the distinct feeling they wanted her somewhere else and that was making her want to stay. 'And what's your business, Master Zacharus?'

'The turning of ages.' He had a trace of an Imperial accent, but it was strange somehow, crackly as old papers. 'The currents of destiny. The rise and fall of nations.'

'There a good living in that?'

He flashed a faintly crazy smile made of a lot of jagged yellow teeth. 'There is no bad living and no good death.'

‘Right y’are. What’s with the birds?’

‘They bring me news, companionship, songs when I am melancholy and, on occasion, nesting materials.’

‘You have a nest?’

‘No, but they think I should.’

‘Course they do.’ The old man was mad as a mushroom, but she doubted folk hard-headed as Corlin and Savian would be wasting time on him if that was the end of the story. There was something off-putting to the way those birds stared, heads on one side, unblinking. Like they’d figured her for a real idiot.

She thought the old man might share their opinion. ‘What brings you here, Shy South?’

‘Come looking for two children stole from our farm.’

‘Any luck?’ asked Corlin.

‘Six days I been up and down the Mayor’s side of the street asking every pair of ears, but children ain’t exactly a common sight around here and no one’s seen a hair of them. Or if they have they ain’t telling me. When I say the name Grega Cantliss they shut up like I cast a spell of silence.’

‘Spells of silence are a challenging cloth to weave,’ mused Zacharus, frowning up into an empty corner. ‘So many variables.’ There was a flapping outside and a pigeon stuck its head through the curtains and gave a burbling coo. ‘She says they are in the mountains.’

‘Who?’

‘The children. But pigeons are liars. They only tell you what you want to hear.’ And the old man stuck his tongue in the seeds in his palm and started crunching them between his yellow front teeth.

Shy was already minded to beat a retreat when Camling called from behind. ‘Your breakfast!’

‘What do you reckon those two are about?’ asked Shy as she slipped back into her chair and flicked away a couple of crumbs their host had missed.

‘Prospecting, I heard,’ said Lamb.

‘You ain’t been listening to me at all, have you?’

‘I try to avoid it. If they want our help I daresay they’ll ask. ’Til then, it ain’t our business.’

‘Can you imagine either of them asking for help?’

‘No,’ said Lamb. ‘So I reckon it’ll never be our business, will it?’

‘Definitely not. That’s why I want to know.’

‘I used to be curious. Long time ago.’

‘What happened?’

Lamb waved his three-fingered hand at his scar-covered face.

Breakfast was cold porridge, runny egg and grey bacon, and the porridge weren’t the freshest and the bacon may well not have derived from a pig. All whisked in front of Shy on imported crockery with trees and flowers painted into it in gilt, Camling with an air of smarmy pride like there was no finer meal to be had anywhere in the Circle of the World.

‘This from a horse?’ she muttered to Lamb, prodding at that meat and half-expecting it to tell her to stop.

‘Just be thankful it ain’t from the rider.’

‘On the trail we ate shit, but at least it was honest shit. What the hell’s this?’

‘Dishonest shit?’

‘That’s Crease for you. You can get fine Suljuk plates but only slops to eat off ’em. Everything back to bloody front . . .’ She realised the chatter had all faded, the scraping of her fork about the only noise. Hairs prickled on the back of her neck and she slowly turned.

Six men were adding their boot-prints to the mud-caked floor. Five were the kind of thugs you saw a lot of in Crease, spreading out among the tables to find watchful places, each wearing that ready slouch said they were better’n you ’cause there were more of them and they all had blades. The sixth was a different prospect. Short but hugely wide and with a big belly on him, too, a suit of fine clothes bulging at the buttons like the tailor had been awful optimistic with the measurements. He was black-skinned with a fuzz of grey hair, one earlobe stretched out around a thick golden ring, hole in the middle big enough almost for Shy to have got her fist through.

He looked pleased with himself to an untold degree, smiling on everything as though it was all exactly the way he liked it. Shy disliked him right off. Most likely jealousy. Nothing ever seemed to be the way she liked it, after all.

‘Don’t worry,’ he boomed in a voice spilling over with good humour, ‘you can all keep on eating! If you want to be shitting water all day!’ And he burst out laughing, and slapped one of his men on the back and near knocked him into some fool’s breakfast. He made his way between the

tables, calling out hellos by name, shaking hands and patting shoulders, a long stick with a bone handle tapping at the boards.

Shy watched him come, easing a little sideways in her chair and slipping the bottom button of her vest open so the grip of her knife poked out nice and perky. Lamb just sat eating with eyes on his food. Not looking up even when the fat man stopped right next to their table and said, 'I'm Papa Ring.'

'I'd made a prediction to that effect,' said Shy.

'You're Shy South.'

'It ain't a secret.'

'And you must be Lamb.'

'If I must, I guess I must.'

'Look for the big fucking Northman with the face like a chopping block, they told me.' Papa Ring swung a free chair away from the next-door table. 'Mind if I sit?'

'What if I said yes?' asked Shy.

He paused halfway down, leaning heavy on his stick. 'Most likely I'd say sorry but sit anyway. Sorry.' And he lowered himself the rest of the way. 'I've got no fucking graces at all, they tell me. Ask anyone. No fucking graces.'

Shy took the quickest glance across the room. Savian hadn't even looked up, but she caught the faintest gleam of a blade ready under the table. That made her feel a little better. He didn't give much to your face, Savian, but he was a reassurance at your back.

Unlike Camling. Their proud host was hurrying over now, rubbing his hands together so hard Shy could hear them hiss. 'Welcome, Papa, you're very welcome.'

'Why wouldn't I be?'

'No reason, no reason at all.' If Camling had rubbed his hands any faster he might've made fire. 'As long as there's no . . . trouble.'

'Who'd want trouble? I'm here to talk.'

'Talk's how it always begins.'

'Talk's how everything begins.'

'My concern is how it will conclude.'

'How's a man to know that 'til he's talked?' asked Lamb, still not looking up.

'Exactly so,' said Papa Ring, smiling like it was the best day of his life.

‘All right,’ said Camling, reluctantly. ‘Will you be taking food?’

Ring snorted. ‘Your food is shit, as these two unfortunates are only now discovering. You can lose yourself.’

‘Now look, Papa, this is my place—’

‘Happy chance.’ Of a sudden Ring’s smile seemed to have an edge to it. ‘You’ll know just where to lose yourself.’

Camling swallowed, then scraped away with the sourest of expressions. The chatter gradually came up again, but honed to a nervous point now.

‘One of the strongest arguments I ever saw for there being no God is the existence of Lennart Camling,’ muttered Ring, as he watched their host depart. The joints of his chair creaked unhappily as he settled back, all good humour again. ‘So how are you finding Crease?’

‘Filthy in every sense.’ Shy poked her bacon away, then tossed her fork down and pushed the plate away, too. There could never be too great a distance between her and that bacon, far as she was concerned. She let her hands flop into her lap where one just happened to rest right on her knife’s handle. Imagine that.

‘Dirty’s how we like it. You meet the Mayor?’

‘I don’t know,’ said Shy, ‘did we?’

‘I know you did.’

‘Why ask, then?’

‘Watching my manners, such as they are. Though I don’t deceive myself they come close to hers. She’s got graces, don’t she, our Mayor?’ And Ring gently rubbed the polished wood of the table with one palm. ‘Smooth as mirror glass. When she talks you feel swaddled in a goose-down blanket, don’t you? The worthier folks around here, they tend to move in her orbit. Those manners. That way. The worthy folks lap that stuff up. But let’s not pretend you all are two of the worthy ones, eh?’

‘Could be we’re aspiring to be worthier,’ said Shy.

‘I’m all for aspiration,’ said Ring. ‘God knows I came here with nothing. But the Mayor won’t help you better yourselves.’

‘And you will?’

Ring gave a chuckle, deep and joyful, like you might get from a kindly uncle. ‘No, no, no. But at least I’ll be honest about it.’

‘You’ll be honest about your dishonesty?’

‘I never claimed to do anything other than sell folk what they want and make no judgements on ’em for their desires. Daresay the Mayor gave you the impression I’m quite the evil bastard.’

‘We can get that impression all by ourselves,’ said Shy.

Ring grinned at her. ‘Quick, aren’t you?’

‘I’ll try not to leave you behind.’

‘She do all the talking?’

‘The vast majority,’ said Lamb, out the side of his mouth.

‘Reckon he’s waiting for something worth replying to,’ said Shy.

Ring kept grinning. ‘Well that’s a very reasonable policy. You seem like reasonable folks.’

Lamb shrugged. ‘You ain’t really got to know us yet.’

‘That’s the very reason I came along. To get to know you better. And maybe just to offer some friendly advice.’

‘I’m getting old for advice,’ said Lamb. ‘Even the friendly kind.’

‘You’re getting old for brawling, too, but I do hear tell you might be involving yourself in some bare-fist business we got coming to Crease.’

Lamb shrugged again. ‘I fought a bout or two in my youth.’

‘I see that,’ said Ring, with an eye on Lamb’s battered face, ‘but, keen devotee though I am of the brawling arts, I’d rather this fight didn’t happen at all.’

‘Worried your man might lose?’ asked Shy.

She really couldn’t drag Ring’s grin loose at all. ‘Not really. My man’s famous for beating a lot of famous men, and beating ’em bad. But the fact is I’d rather the Mayor packed up nice and quiet. Don’t get me wrong, I don’t mind seeing a little blood spilled. Shows people you care. But too much is awful bad for business. And I got big plans for this place. Good plans . . . But you don’t care about that, do you?’

‘Everyone’s got plans,’ said Shy, ‘and everyone thinks theirs are good. It’s when one set of good plans gets tangled with another things tend to slide downhill.’

‘Just tell me this, then, and if the answer’s yes I’ll leave you to enjoy your shitty breakfast in peace. Have you given the Mayor a certain yes or can I still make you a better offer?’ Ring’s eyes moved between them, and neither spoke, and he took that for encouragement, and maybe it was. ‘I may not

have the graces but I'm always willing to deal. Just tell me what she's promised you.'

Lamb looked up for the first time. 'Grega Cantliss.'

Shy was watching him hard and she saw Ring's smile slip at the name. 'You know him, then?' she asked.

'He works for me. Has worked for me, at times.'

'Was he working for you when he burned my farm, and killed my friend, and stole two children from me?' asked Lamb.

Ring sat back, rubbing at his jaw, a trace of frown showing. 'Quite an accusation. Stealing children. I can tell you now I'd have no part of that.'

'Seems you got one even so,' said Shy.

'Only your word for it. What kind of a man would I be if I gave my people up on your say-so?'

'I don't care one fucking shit what kind of man y'are,' snarled Lamb, knuckles white around his cutlery, and Ring's men stirred unhappily, and Shy saw Savian sitting up, watchful, but Lamb took no notice of any of it. 'Give me Cantliss and we're done. Get in my way, there'll be trouble.' And he frowned as he saw he'd bent his knife at a right angle against the tabletop.

Ring mildly raised his brows. 'You're very confident. Given nobody's heard of you.'

'I been through this before. I got a fair idea how it turns out.'

'My man ain't bent cutlery.'

'He will be.'

'Just tell us where Cantliss is,' said Shy, 'and we'll be on our way and out of yours.'

Papa Ring looked for the first time like he might be running short of patience. 'Girl, do you suppose you could sit back and let me and your father talk this out?'

'Not really. Maybe it's my Ghost blood but I'm cursed with a contrary temperament. Folk warn me off a thing, I just start thinking on how to go about it. Can't help myself.'

Ring took a long breath and forced himself back to reasonable. 'I understand. Someone stole my children, there'd be nowhere in the Circle of the World for those bastards to run to. But don't make me your enemy when I can every bit as easily be your friend. I can't just hand you Cantliss.

Maybe that's what the Mayor would do but it ain't my way. I tell you what, though, next time he comes to town we can all sit down and talk this out, get to the truth of it, see if we can't find your young ones. I'll help you every way I can, you got my word.'

'Your word?' And Shy curled back her lip and spat onto her cold bacon. If it was bacon.

'I got no graces but I got my word.' And Ring stabbed at the table with his thick forefinger. 'That's what everything stands on, on my side of the street. Folk are loyal to me 'cause I'm loyal to them. Break that, I got nothing. Break that, I am nothing.' He leaned closer, beckoning like he had the killer offer to make. 'But forget my word and just look at it this way – you want the Mayor's help, you're going to have to fight for it and, believe me, that'll be one hell of a fight. You want my help?' He gave the biggest shrug his big shoulders could manage, like even considering an alternative was madness. 'All you got to do is *not* fight.'

Shy didn't like the feel of this bastard one bit, but she didn't like the feel of the Mayor much more and she had to admit there was something in what he was saying.

Lamb nodded as he straightened out his knife between finger and thumb and tossed it on his plate. Then he stood. 'What if I'd rather fight?' And he strode for the door, the queue for breakfast scurrying to part for him.

Ring blinked, brows drawn in with puzzlement. 'Who'd rather fight?' Shy got up without answering and hurried after, weaving between the tables. 'Just think about it, that's all I'm asking! Be reasonable!'

And they were out into the street. 'Hold up there, Lamb! Lamb!'

She dodged through a bleating mass of little grey sheep, had to lurch back to let a pair of wagons squelch past. She caught sight of Temple, sitting high up astride a big beam, hammer in hand, the strong square frame of Majud's shop already higher than the slumping buildings on either side. He raised one hand in greeting.

'Seventy!' she bellowed at him. She couldn't see his face but the shoulders of his silhouette slumped in a faintly heartening way.

'Will you hold up?' She caught Lamb by the arm just as he was getting close to the Mayor's Church of Dice, the thugs around the door, hardly to be told from the ones who'd come with Papa Ring, watching them hard-eyed. 'What do you think you're doing?'

‘Taking the Mayor up on her offer.’

‘Just ’cause that fat fool rubbed you the wrong way?’

Lamb came close and suddenly it seemed that he was looming over her from quite the height. ‘That and ’cause his man stole your brother and sister.’

‘You think I’m happy about that?’ she hissed at him, getting angry now. ‘But we don’t know the ins and outs of it! He seemed reasonable enough, considering’

Lamb frowned back towards Camling’s. ‘Some men only listen to violence.’

‘Some men only talk it. Never took you for one of ’em. Did we come for Pit and Ro or for blood?’

She’d meant to make a point not ask a question but for a moment it looked like he had to consider the answer. ‘I’m thinking I might get all three.’

She stared at him for a moment. ‘Who the fuck *are* you? There was a time men could rub your face in the dung and you’d just thank ’em and ask for more.’

‘And you know what?’ He peeled her fingers from his arm with a grip that was almost painful. ‘I’ve remembered I didn’t like it much.’ And he stomped muddy footprints up the steps of the Mayor’s place, leaving Shy behind in the street.

That Simple

Temple tapped a few more shavings from the joint, then nodded to Lamb and together they lowered the beam, tenon sliding snugly into mortise.

'Hah!' Lamb slapped Temple on the back. 'Naught so nice as to see a job done well. You got clever hands, lad. Damn clever for a man washes up out of streams. Sort of hands you can turn to anything.' He looked down at his own big, battered, three-fingered hand and made a fist of it. 'Mine only ever really been good for one thing.' And he thumped at the beam until it came flush.

Temple had expected carpentry to be almost as much of a chore as riding drag, but he had to admit he was enjoying himself, and it was getting harder every day to pretend otherwise. There was something in the smell of fresh-sawn timber – when the mountain breeze slipped into the valley long enough for one to smell anything but shit – that wafted away his suffocating regrets and let him breathe free. His hands had found old skills with hammer and chisel and he had worked out the habits of the local wood, pale and straight and strong. Majud's hirelings silently conceded he knew his business and soon were taking his instructions without a second word, working at scaffold and pulleys with little skill but great enthusiasm, the frame sprouting up twice as fast and twice as fine as Temple had hoped.

'Where's Shy?' he asked, offhand, as though it was no part of a plan to dodge his latest payment. It was getting to be a game between them. One he never seemed to win.

'She's still touring town, asking questions about Pit and Ro. New folk coming in every day to ask. Probably she's trying Papa Ring's side of the street by now.'

‘Is that safe?’

‘I doubt it.’

‘Shouldn’t you stop her?’

Lamb snorted as he pushed a peg into Temple’s fishing hand. ‘Last time I tried to stop Shy she was ten years old and it didn’t stick then.’

Temple worked the peg into its hole. ‘Once she has a destination in mind, she isn’t one to stop halfway.’

‘Got to love that about her.’ Lamb had a trace of pride in his voice as he passed the mallet. ‘She’s no coward, that girl.’

‘So why are you helping me not her?’

‘’Cause I reckon I’ve found a way to Pit and Ro already. I’m just waiting for Shy to come round to the cost.’

‘Which is?’

‘The Mayor wants a favour.’ There was a long pause, measured out by the tapping of Temple’s mallet, accompanied by the distant sounds of other hammers on other more slovenly building sites scattered about the town. ‘She and Papa Ring bet Crease on a fight.’

Temple looked around. ‘They bet Crease?’

‘They each own half the town, more or less.’ Lamb looked out at it, crammed thoughtlessly into both sides of that winding valley like the place was an almighty gut, people and goods and animals squeezing in one end and shit and beggars and money squirting out the other. ‘But the more you get the more you want. And all either one o’ them wants is the half they haven’t got.’

Temple puffed out his cheeks as he twisted at the next peg. ‘I imagine one of them is sure to be disappointed.’

‘At least one. The worst enemies are those that live next door, my father used to tell me. These two have been squabbling for years and neither one’s come out on top, so they’re putting on a fight. Winner takes all.’ A group of half-tame Ghosts had spilled from one of the worse whorehouses – the better ones wouldn’t let them in the door – and had knives out, taunting each other in common, knowing no words but swearing and the language of violence. That was more than enough to get by on in Crease. ‘Two men in a Circle,’ murmured Lamb, ‘more’n likely with a considerable audience and a fair few side bets. One comes out alive, one comes out otherwise, and everyone else comes out thoroughly entertained.’

‘Shit,’ breathed Temple.

‘Papa Ring’s brought in a man called Glama Golden. A Northman. Big name in his day. I hear he’s been fighting for money in pits and pens all across the Near Country and done a lot of winning, too. The Mayor, well, she’s been searching high and low for someone to stand up for her . . .’ He gave Temple a long look and it was easy enough to guess the rest.

‘Shit.’ It was one thing to fight for your life out there on the plains when the Ghosts were coming at you and offering no alternatives. Another to wait weeks for the moment, choose to step out in front of a crowd and batter, twist and crush the life from a man with your hands. ‘Have you had any practice at . . . that sort of thing?’

‘As luck would have it – my luck being what it is – more’n a little.’

‘Are you sure the Mayor’s on the right side of this?’ asked Temple, thinking of all the wrong sides he had taken.

Lamb frowned down at the Ghosts, who had evidently resolved their differences without bloodshed and were noisily embracing. ‘In my experience there’s rarely such a thing as a right side, and when there is I’ve an uncanny knack of picking out the other. All I know is Grega Cantliss killed my friend and burned my farm and stole two children I swore to protect.’ Lamb’s voice had a cold edge on it as he shifted his frown to the Whitehouse, cold enough to bring Temple out in gooseflesh all over. ‘Papa Ring’s standing by him, so he’s made himself my enemy. The Mayor’s standing against him, and that makes her my friend.’

‘Are things ever really that simple?’

‘When you step into a Circle with the intention of killing a man, it’s best if they are.’

‘Temple?’ The sun was low and the shadow of one of the great columns had fallen across the street below, so it took a moment to work out who was calling from the swirling traffic. ‘Temple?’ Another moment before he placed the smiling face tipped towards him, bright-eyed and with a bushy yellow beard. ‘That you up there?’ Still a third before he connected the world in which he knew that man to the world he lived in now, and recognition washed over him like a bucket of ice-water over a peaceful sleeper.

‘Bermi?’ he breathed.

‘Friend of yours?’ asked Lamb.

‘We know each other,’ Temple managed to whisper.

He slipped down the ladder with shaky hands, all the time tingling with the rabbit’s urge to run. But where to? He had been beyond lucky to survive the last time he fled the Company of the Gracious Hand and was far from sure his divine support would stretch to another effort. He picked his way to Bermi with reluctant little steps, plucking at the hem of his shirt, like a child that knows he has a slap coming and more than likely deserves it.

‘You all right?’ asked the Styrian. ‘You look ill.’

‘Is Cosca with you?’ Temple could hardly get the words out he felt that sick. God might have blessed him with clever hands but He’d cursed him with a weak stomach.

Bermi was all smiles, though. ‘I’m happy to say he’s not, nor any of those other bastards. I daresay he’s still floundering about the Near Country bragging to that bloody biographer and searching for ancient gold he’ll never find. If he hasn’t given up and gone back to Starikland to get drunk.’

Temple closed his eyes and expelled a lungful of the most profound relief. ‘Thank heaven.’ He put his hand on the Styrian’s shoulder and leaned over, bent nearly double, head spinning.

‘You sure you’re all right?’

‘Yes, I am.’ He grabbed Bermi around the back and hugged him tight. ‘Better than all right!’ He was ecstatic! He breathed free once again! He kissed Bermi’s bearded cheek with a noisy smack. ‘What the hell brings you to the arse of the world?’

‘You showed me the way. After that town – what was the name of it?’

‘Averstock,’ muttered Temple.

Bermi’s eyes took on a guilty squint. ‘I’ve done things I’m not proud of, but that? Nothing else but murder. Cosca sent me to find you, afterwards.’

‘He did?’

‘Said you were the most important man in the whole damn Company. Other than him, of course. Two days out I ran into a Fellowship coming west to mine for gold. Half of them were from Puranti – from my home town, imagine that! It’s as if God has a purpose!’

‘Almost as if.’

‘I left the Company of the Fucking Finger and off we went.’

‘You put Cosca behind you.’ Cheating death once again had given Temple a faintly drunken feeling. ‘Far, far behind.’

‘You a carpenter now?’

‘One way to clear my debts.’

‘Shit on your debts, brother. We’re heading back into the hills. Got a claim up on the Brownwash. Men are just sieving nuggets out of the mud up there!’ He slapped Temple on the shoulder. ‘You should come with us! Always room for a carpenter with a sense of humour. We’ve a cabin but it could do with some work.’

Temple swallowed. How often on the trail, choking on the dust of Buckhorm’s herd or chafing under the sting of Shy’s jibes, had he dreamed of an offer just like this? An easy way, unrolling before his willing feet. ‘When do you leave?’

‘Five days, maybe six.’

‘What would a man need to bring?’

‘Just some good clothes and a shovel, we’ve got the rest.’

Temple looked for the trick in Bermi’s face but there was no sign of one. Perhaps there was a God after all. ‘Are things ever really that simple?’

Bermi laughed. ‘You’re the one always loved to make things complicated. This is the new frontier, my friend, the land of opportunities. You got anything keeping you here?’

‘I suppose not.’ Temple glanced up at Lamb, a big black shape on the frame of Majud’s building. ‘Nothing but debts.’

Yesterday's News

'I'm looking for a pair of children.'

Blank faces.

'Their names are Ro and Pit.'

Sad shakes of the head.

'They're ten and six. Seven. He'd be seven now.'

Sympathetic mumbles.

'They were stole by a man named Grega Cantliss.'

A glimpse of scared eyes as the door slammed in her face.

Shy had to admit she was getting tired. She'd near worn her boots through tramping up and down the crooked length of main street, which wormed longer and more crooked every day as folk poured in off the plains, throwing up tents or wedging new hovels into some sliver of mud or just leaving their wagons rotting alongside the trail. Her shoulders were bruised from pushing through the bustle, her legs sore from scaling the valley sides to talk to folk in shacks clinging to the incline. Her voice was a croak from asking the same old questions over and over in the gambling halls and husk-dens and drinking sheds until she could hardly tell them apart one from another. There were a good few places they wouldn't let her in, now. Said she put off the customers. Probably she did. Probably Lamb had the right of it just waiting for Cantliss to come to him, but Shy had never been much good at waiting. *That's your Ghost blood*, her mother would've said. But then her mother hadn't been much good at waiting either.

'Look here, it's Shy South.'

'You all right, Hedges?' Though she could tell the answer at a glance. He'd never looked flushed with success but he'd had a spark of hope about

him on the trail. It had guttered since and left him greyed out and ragged. Crease was no place to make your hopes healthier. No place to make anything healthier, far as she could tell. ‘Thought you were looking for work?’

‘Couldn’t find none. Not for a man with a leg like this. Wouldn’t have thought I led the charge up there at Osrung, would you?’ She wouldn’t have, but he’d said so already so she kept her silence. ‘Still looking for your kin?’

‘Will be until I find ’em. You heard anything?’

‘You’re the first person said more’n five words together to me in a week. Wouldn’t think I led a charge, would you? Wouldn’t think that.’ They stood there awkward, both knowing what was coming next. Didn’t stop it coming, though. ‘Can you spare a couple o’ bits?’

‘Aye, a few.’ She delved in her pocket and handed him the coins Temple had handed her an hour before, then headed on quick. No one likes to stand that close to failure, do they? Worried it might rub off.

‘Ain’t you going to tell me not to drink it all?’ he called after her.

‘I’m no preacher. Reckon folk have the right to pick their own method of destruction.’

‘So they do. You’re not so bad, Shy South, you’re all right!’

‘We’ll have to differ on that,’ she muttered, leaving Hedges to shuffle for the nearest drinking hole, never too many steps away in Crease even for a man whose steps were miserly as his.

‘I’m looking for a pair of children.’

‘I cannot assist you there, but I have other tidings!’ This woman was a strange-looking character, clothes that must’ve been fine in their time but their time was long past and the months since full of mud and stray food. She drew back her sagging coat with a flourish and produced a sheaf of crumpled papers.

‘What are they, news-bills?’ Shy was already regretting talking to this woman but the path here was a narrow stretch of mud between sewer-stream and rotten porches and her bulging belly wasn’t giving space to pass.

‘You have a keen eye for quality. You wish to make a purchase?’

‘Not really.’

‘The faraway happenings of politics and power are of no interest?’

‘They never seem to bear much on my doings.’

‘Perhaps it is your ignorance of current affairs keeps you down so?’

‘I always took it to be the greed, laziness and ill-temper of others plus a fair share of bad luck, but I reckon you’ll have it your way.’

‘Everyone does.’ But the woman didn’t move.

Shy sighed. Given her knack for upsetting folk she thought she might give indulgence a try. ‘All right, then, deliver me from ignorance.’

The woman displayed the upmost bill and spoke with mighty selfimportance. ‘Rebels defeated at Mulkova – routed by Union troops under General Brint! How about that?’

‘Unless they been defeated there a second time, that happened before I even left the Near Country. Everyone knows it.’

‘The lady requires something fresher,’ muttered the old woman, rooting through her thumbed-over bundle. ‘Styrian conflict ends! Sipani opens gates to the Snake of Talins!’

‘That was at least two years before.’ Shy was starting to think this woman was touched in the head, if that even meant anything in a place where most were happy-mad, dismal-mad, or some other kind of mad that defied further description.

‘A challenge indeed.’ The woman licked a dirty finger to leaf through her wares and came up with one that looked a veritable antique. ‘Legate Sarmis menaces border of the Near Country? Fears of Imperial incursion?’

‘Sarmis has been menacing for decades. He’s the most menacing Legate you ever heard of.’

‘Then it’s true as it ever was!’

‘News spoils quick, friend, like milk.’

‘I say it gets better if carefully kept, like wine.’

‘I’m glad you like the vintage, but I ain’t buying yesterday’s news.’

The woman cradled her papers like a mother hiding an infant from bird attack, and as she leaned forward Shy saw the top was tore off her tall hat and got a view of the scabbiest scalp imaginable and a smell of rot almost knocked her over. ‘No worse than tomorrow’s, is it?’ And the woman swept her aside and strode on waving her old bills over her head. ‘News! I have news!’

Shy took a long, hard breath before she set off. Damn, but she was tired. Crease was no place to get less tired, far as she could tell.

‘I’m looking for a pair of children.’

The one in the middle treated her to something you'd have had to call a leer. 'I'll give you children, girl.'

The one on the left burst out laughing. The one on the right grinned, and a bit of chagga juice dribbled out of his mouth and ran down into his beard. From the look of his beard it wasn't his first dribble either. They were an unpromising trio all right, but if Shy had stuck to the promising she'd have been done in Crease her first day there.

'They were stolen from our farm.'

'Probably nothing else there worth stealing.'

'Being honest, I daresay you're right. Man called Grega Cantliss stole 'em.'

The mood shifted right off. The one on the right stood up, frowning. The one on the left spat juice over the railing. Leery leered more'n ever. 'You got some gall asking questions over here, girl. Some fucking gall.'

'You ain't the first to say so. Probably best I just take my gall away on down the street.'

She made to move on but he stepped down from the porch to block her way, pointed a waving finger towards her face. 'You know what, you've got kind of a Ghosty look to you.'

'Half-breed, maybe,' grunted one of his friends.

Shy set her jaw. 'Quarter, as it goes.'

Leery took his leer into realms of facial contortion. 'Well, we don't care for your kind over on this side o' the street.'

'Better quarter-Ghost than all arsehole, surely?'

There was that knack for upsetting folk. His brows drew in and he took a step at her. 'Why, you bloody—'

Without thinking she put her right hand on the grip of her knife and said, 'You'd best stop right there.'

His eyes narrowed. Annoyed. Like he hadn't expected straight-up defiance but couldn't back down with his friends watching. 'You'd best not put your hand on that knife unless you're going to use it, girl.'

'Whether I use it or not depends on whether you stop there or not. My hopes ain't high but maybe you're cleverer than you look.'

'Leave her be.' A big man stood in the doorway. Big hardly did him justice. His fist up on the frame beside him looked about the size of Shy's head.

‘You can stay out o’ this,’ said Leery.

‘I could, but I’m not. You say you’re looking for Cantliss?’ he asked, eyes moving over to Shy.

‘That’s right.’

‘Don’t tell her nothing!’ snapped Squinty.

The big man’s eyes drifted back. ‘You can shut up . . .’ He had to duck his head to get through the doorway. ‘Or I can shut you up.’ The other two men backed off to give him room – and he needed a lot. He looked bigger still as he stepped out of the shadows, taller’n Lamb, even, and maybe bigger in the chest and shoulder, too. A real monster, but he spoke soft, accent thick with the North. ‘Don’t pay these idiots no mind. They’ve got big bones for fights they’re sure of winning but otherwise not enough for a toothpick.’ He took the couple of steps down into the street, boards groaning under his great boots, and stood towering over Leery.

‘Cantliss is from the same cloth,’ he said. ‘A puffed-up fool with a lot of vicious in him.’ For all his size there was a sad sag to his face. A droop to his blond moustache, a sorry greying to the stubble about it. ‘More or less what I used to be, if it comes to that. He owes Papa Ring a lot of money, as I heard it. Ain’t been around for a while now, though. Not much more I can tell you.’

‘Well, thanks for that much.’

‘My pleasure.’ The big man turned his washed-out blue eyes on Leery. ‘Get out of her way.’

Leery gave Shy a particularly nasty leer, but Shy had been treated to a lot of harsh expressions in her time and after a while they lose their sting. He made to go back up the steps but the big man didn’t let him. ‘Get out of her way, that way.’ And he nodded over at the stream.

‘Stand in the sewer?’ said Leery.

‘Stand in the sewer. Or I’ll lay you out in it.’

Leery cursed to himself as he clambered down the slimy rocks and stood up to his knees in shitty water. The big man put one hand on his chest and with the other offered Shy the open way.

‘My thanks,’ she said as she stepped past. ‘Glad I found someone decent this side of the street.’

The man gave a sad snort. ‘Don’t let a small kindness fool you. Did you say you’re looking for children?’

‘My brother and sister. Why?’

‘Might be I can help.’

Shy had learned to treat offers of help, and for that matter everything else, with a healthy suspicion. ‘Why would you?’

‘Because I know how it feels to lose your family. Like losing a part of you, ain’t it?’ She thought about that for a moment, and reckoned he had it right. ‘Had to leave mine behind, in the North. I know it was the best thing for ’em. The only thing. But it still cuts at me now. Didn’t ever think it would. Can’t say I valued ’em much when I had ’em. But it cuts at me.’

He’d such a sorry sag to his great shoulders then that Shy had to take pity on him. ‘Well, you’re welcome to follow along, I guess. It’s been my observation that folk take me more serious when I’ve a great big bastard looking over my shoulder.’

‘That is a sadly universal truth,’ he said as he fell into step, two of his near enough to every three of hers. ‘You here alone?’

‘Came with my father. Kind of my father.’

‘How can someone be kind of your father?’

‘He’s managed it.’

‘He father to these other two you’re looking for?’

‘Kind of to them, too,’ said Shy.

‘Shouldn’t he be helping look?’

‘He is, in his way. He’s building a house, over on the other side of the street.’

‘That new one I’ve seen going up?’

‘Majud and Curnsbick’s Metalwork.’

‘That’s a good building. And that’s a rare thing around here. Hard to see how it’ll find your young ones, though.’

‘He’s trusting someone else to help with that.’

‘Who?’

Normally she’d have kept her cards close, so to speak, but something in his manner brought her out. ‘The Mayor.’

He took a long suck of breath. ‘I’d sooner trust a snake with my fruits than that woman with anything.’

‘She sure is a bit too smooth.’

‘Never trust someone who don’t use their proper name, I was always told.’

‘You haven’t told me your name yet.’

The big man gave a weary sigh. ‘I was hoping to avoid it. People tend to look at me different, once they know what it is.’

‘One o’ those funny ones, is it? Arsehowl, maybe?’

‘That’d be a mercy. My name’ll make no one laugh, sad to say. You’d never believe how I worked at blowing it up bigger. Years of it. Now there ain’t no getting out from under its shadow. I’ve forged the links of my own chain and no mistake.’

‘I reckon we’re all prone to do that.’

‘More’n likely.’ He stopped and offered one huge hand, and she took it, her own seeming little as a child’s in its great warm grip. ‘My name’s—’

‘Glama Golden!’

Shy saw the big man flinch a moment, and his shoulders hunch, then he slowly turned. A young man stood in the street behind. A big lad, with a scar through his lips and a tattered coat. He had an unsteady look to him made Shy think he’d been drinking hard. To puff his courage up, maybe, though folk didn’t always bother with a reason to drink in Crease. He raised an unsteady finger to point at them, and his other hand hovered around the handle of a big knife at his belt.

‘You’re the one killed Stockling Bear?’ he sneered. ‘You’re the one won all them fights?’ He spat in the mud just near their feet. ‘You don’t look much!’

‘I ain’t much,’ said the big man, softly.

The lad blinked, not sure what to do with that. ‘Well . . . I’m fucking calling you out, you bastard!’

‘What if I ain’t listening?’

The lad frowned at the people on the porches, all stopped their business to watch. He ran his tongue around the inside of his mouth, not sure of himself. Then he looked over at Shy, and took one more stab at it. ‘Who’s this bitch? Your fucking—’

‘Don’t make me kill you, boy.’ Golden didn’t say it like a threat. Pleading, almost, his eyes sadder’n ever.

The lad flinched a little, and his fingers twitched, and he came over pale. The bottle’s a shifty banker – it might lend you courage but it’s apt to call the debt in sudden. He took a step back and spat again. ‘Ain’t fucking worth it,’ he snapped.

‘No, it ain’t.’ Golden watched the lad as he backed slowly off, then turned and walked away fast. A few sighs of relief, a few shrugs, and the talk started building back up.

Shy swallowed, mouth suddenly dried out and sticky-feeling. ‘You’re Glama Golden?’

He slowly nodded. ‘Though I know full well there ain’t much golden about me these days.’ He rubbed his great hands together as he watched that lad lose himself in the crowd, and Shy saw they were shaking. ‘Hell of a thing, being famous. Hell of a thing.’

‘You’re the one standing for Papa Ring in this fight that’s coming?’

‘That I am. Though I have to say I’m hopeful it won’t happen. I hear the Mayor’s got no one to fight for her.’ His pale eyes narrowed as he looked back to Shy. ‘Why, what’ve you heard?’

‘Nothing,’ she said, trying her best to smile and failing at it. ‘Nothing at all.’

Blood Coming

It was just before dawn, clear and cold, the mud crusted with frost. The lamps in the windows had mostly been snuffed, the torches lighting the signs had guttered out and the sky was bright with stars. Hundreds upon hundreds of them, sharp as jewels, laid out in swirls and drifts and twinkling constellations. Temple opened his mouth, cold nipping at his cheeks, turning, turning until he was dizzy, taking in the beauty of the heavens. Strange, that he had never noticed them before. Maybe his eyes had been always on the ground.

'You reckon there's an answer up there?' asked Bermi, his breath and his horse's breath smoking on the dawn chill.

'I don't know where the answer is,' said Temple.

'You ready?'

He turned to look at the house. The big beams were up, most of the rafters and the window and door-frames, too, the skeleton of the building standing bold and black against the star-scattered sky. Only that morning Majud had been telling him what a fine job he was doing, how even Curnsbick would have considered his money well spent. He felt a flush of pride, and wondered when he had last felt one. But Temple was a man who abandoned everything half-done. That was a long-established fact.

'You can ride on the packhorse. It's only a day or two into the hills.'

'Why not?' A few hundred miles on a mule and his arse was carved out of wood.

Over towards the amphitheatre the carpenters were already making a desultory start. They were throwing up a new bank of seating at the open side so they could cram in a few score more onlookers, supports and cross-

braces just visible against the dark hillside, bent and badly bolted, some of the timbers without the branches even properly trimmed.

'Only a couple of weeks to the big fight.'

'Shame we'll miss it,' said Bermi. 'Better get on, the rest of the lads'll be well ahead by now.'

Temple pushed his new shovel through one of the packhorse's straps, moving slower, and slower, then stopping still. It had been a day or two since he'd seen Shy, but he kept reminding himself of the debt in her absence. He wondered if she was out there somewhere, still doggedly searching. You could only admire someone who stuck at a thing like that, no matter the cost, no matter the odds. Especially if you were a man who could never stick at anything. Not even when he wanted to.

Temple thought about that for a moment, standing motionless up to his ankles in half-frozen mud. Then he walked to Bermi and slapped his hand down on the Styrian's shoulder. 'I won't be going. My bottomless thanks for the offer, but I've a building to finish. That and a debt to pay.'

'Since when do you pay your debts?'

'Since now, I suppose.'

Bermi gave him a puzzled look, as if he was trying to work out where the joke might be. 'Can I change your mind?'

'No.'

'Your mind always shifted with the breeze.'

'Looks like a man can grow.'

'What about your shovel?'

'Consider it a gift.'

Bermi narrowed his eyes. 'There's a woman involved, isn't there?'

'There is, but not in the way you're thinking.'

'What's she thinking?'

Temple snorted. 'Not that.'

'We'll see.' Bermi hauled himself into his saddle. 'I reckon you'll regret it, when we come back through with nuggets big as turds.'

'I'll probably regret it a lot sooner than that. Such is life.'

'You're right there.' The Styrian swept off his hat and raised it high in salute. 'No reasoning with the bastard!' And he was off, mud flicking from the hooves of his horse as he headed out up the main street, scattering a group of reeling-drunk miners on the way.

Temple gave a long sigh. He wasn't sure he didn't regret it already. Then he frowned. One of those stumbling miners looked familiar: an old man with a bottle in one hand and tear-tracks gleaming on his cheeks.

'Iosiv Lestek?' Temple twitched up his trousers to squelch out into the street. 'What happened to you?'

'Disgrace!' croaked the actor, beating at his breast. 'The crowd . . . wretched. My performance . . . abject. The cultural extravaganza . . . a debacle!' He clawed at Temple's shirt. 'I was pelted from the stage. I! Iosiv Lestek! He who ruled the theatres of Midderland as if they were a private fief!' He clawed at his own shirt, stained up the front. 'Pelted with *dung*! Replaced by a trio of girls with bared bubs. To rapturous applause, I might add. Is that all audiences care for these days? Bubs?'

'I suppose they've always been popular—'

'All finished!' howled Lestek at the sky.

'Shut the fuck up!' someone roared from an upstairs window.

Temple took the actor by the arm. 'Let me take you back to Camling's—'

'Camling!' Lestek tore free, waving his bottle. 'That cursed maggot! That treacherous cuckoo! He has ejected me from his Hostelry! I! Me! Lestek! I will be revenged upon him, though!'

'Doubtless.'

'He will see! They will all see! My best performance is yet ahead of me!'

'You will show them, but perhaps in the morning. There are other hostelries—'

'I am penniless! I sold my wagon, I let go my props, I pawned my costumes!' Lestek dropped to his knees in the filth. 'I have nothing but the rags I wear!'

Temple gave a smoking sigh and looked once more towards the star-prickled heavens. Apparently he was set on the hard way. The thought made him oddly pleased. He reached down and helped the old man to his feet. 'I have a tent big enough for two, if you can stand my snoring.'

Lestek stood swaying for a moment. 'I don't deserve such kindness.'

Temple shrugged. 'Neither did I.'

'My boy,' murmured the actor, opening wide his arms, tears gleaming again in his eyes.

Then he was sick down Temple's shirt.

Shy frowned. She'd been certain Temple was about to get on that packhorse and ride out of town, trampling her childish trust under hoof and no doubt the last she'd ever hear of him. But all he'd done was give a man a shovel and wave him off. Then haul some shit-covered old drunk into the shell of Majud's building. People are a mystery there's no solving, all right.

She was awake a lot in the nights, now. Watching the street. Maybe thinking she'd see Cantliss ride in – not that she even had the first clue what he looked like. Maybe thinking she'd catch a glimpse of Pit and Ro, if she even recognised them any more. But mostly just picking at her worries. About her brother and sister, about Lamb, about the fight that was coming. About things and places and faces she'd rather have forgotten.

Jeg with his hat jammed down saying, 'Smoke? Smoke?' and Dodd all surprised she'd shot him and that bank man saying so politely, 'I'm afraid I can't help you,' with that puzzled little smile like she was a lady come for a loan rather'n a thief who'd ended up murdering him for nothing. That girl they'd hanged in her place whose name Shy had never known. Swinging there with a sign around her twisted neck and her dead eyes asking, *why me and not you?* and Shy still no closer to an answer.

In those slow, dark hours her head filled with doubts like a rotten rowboat with bog water, going down, going down for all her frantic bailing, and she'd think of Lamb dead like it was already done and Pit and Ro rotting in the empty somewhere and she'd feel like some kind of traitor for thinking it, but how do you stop a thought once it's in there?

Death was the one sure thing out here. The one fact among the odds and chances and bets and prospects. Leef, and Buckhorm's sons, and how many Ghosts out there on the plain? Men in fights in Crease, and folk hung on tissue-paper evidence or dead of fever or of silly mishaps like that drover kicked in the head by his brother's horse yesterday, or the shoe-merchant they found drowned in the sewer. Death walked among them daily, and presently would come calling on them all.

Hooves in the street and Shy craned to see, a set of torches flickering, folk retreating to their porches from the flying mud of a dozen horsemen. She turned to look at Lamb, a big shape under his blanket, shadow pooled in its folds. At the head-end she could just see his ear, and the big notch out of it. Could just hear his soft, slow breathing.

'You awake?'

He took a longer breath. ‘Now I am.’

The men had reined in before the Mayor’s Church of Dice, torchlight shifting over their hard-used, hard-bitten faces, and Shy shrank back. Not Pit or Ro and not Cantliss either. ‘More thugs arrived for the Mayor.’

‘Lots of thugs about,’ grunted Lamb. ‘Don’t take no reader of the runes to see blood coming.’

Hooves thumped on by in the street and a flash of laughter and a woman shouting then quiet, with just the quick tap-tap of a hammer from over near the amphitheatre to remind them that the big show was on its way.

‘What happens if Cantliss don’t come?’ She spoke at the dark. ‘How do we find Pit and Ro then?’

Lamb slowly sat up, scrubbing his fingers through his grey hair. ‘We’ll just have to keep looking.’

‘What if . . .’ For all the time she’d spent thinking it she hadn’t crossed the bridge of actually making the words ’til now. ‘What if they’re dead?’

‘We keep looking ’til we’re sure.’

‘What if they died out there on the plains and we’ll never know for sure? Every month passes there’s more chance we’ll never know, ain’t there? More chance they’ll just be lost, no finding ’em.’ Her voice was turning shrill but she couldn’t stop it rising, wilder and wilder. ‘They could be anywhere by now, couldn’t they, alive or dead? How do we find two children in all the unmapped empty they got out here? When do we stop, is what I’m asking? When *can* we stop?’

He pushed his blanket back, padded over and winced as he squatted, looking up into her face. ‘You can stop whenever you want, Shy. You come this far and that’s a long, hard way, and more’n likely there’s a long, hard way ahead yet. I made a promise to your mother and I’ll keep on. Long as it takes. Ain’t like I got better offers knocking my door down. But you’re young, still. You got a life to lead. If you stopped, no one could blame you.’

‘I could.’ She laughed then, and wiped the beginnings of a tear on the back of her hand. ‘And it ain’t like I got much of a life either, is it?’

‘You take after me there,’ he said, pulling back the covers on her bed, ‘daughter or not.’

‘Guess I’m just tired.’

‘Who wouldn’t be?’

‘I just want ’em back,’ as she slid under the blankets.

‘We’ll get ’em back,’ as he dropped them over her and laid a weighty hand on her shoulder. She could almost believe him, then. ‘Get some sleep now, Shy.’

Apart from the first touch of dawn creeping between the curtains and across Lamb’s bedspread in a grey line, the room was dark.

‘You really going to fight that man Golden?’ she asked, after a while. ‘He seemed all right to me.’

Lamb was silent long enough she started to wonder whether he was asleep. Then he said, ‘I’ve killed better men for worse reasons, I’m sorry to say.’

The Sleeping Partner

In general, Temple was forced to concede, he was a man who had failed to live up to his own high standards. Or even to his low ones. He had undertaken a galaxy of projects. Many of those any decent man would have been ashamed of. Of the remainder, due to a mixture of bad luck, impatience and a shiftless obsession with the next thing, he could hardly remember one that had not tailed off into disappointment, failure or outright disaster.

Majud's shop, as it approached completion, was therefore a very pleasant surprise.

One of the Suljuks who had accompanied the Fellowship across the plains turned out to be an artist of a roofer. Lamb had applied his nine digits to the masonry and proved himself more than capable. More recently the Buckhorms had shown up in full numbers to help saw and nail the plank siding. Even Lord Ingelstad took a rare break from losing money to the town's gamblers to give advice on the paint. Bad advice, but still.

Temple took a step back into the street, gazing up at the nearly completed façade, lacking only for balusters to the balcony and glass in the windows, and produced the broadest and most self-satisfied grin he had entertained in quite some time. Then he was nearly pitched on his face by a hearty thump on the shoulder.

He turned, fully expecting to hear Shy grate out the glacial progress of his debt to her, and received a second surprise.

A man stood at his back. Not tall, but broad and possessed of explosive orange sideburns. His thick eyeglasses made his eyes appear minute, his

smile immense by comparison. He wore a tailored suit, but his heavy hands were scarred across the backs by hard work.

'I had despaired of finding decent carpentry in this place!' He raised an eyebrow at the new seating haphazardly sprouting skywards around the ancient amphitheatre. 'But what should I find, just at my lowest ebb?' And he seized Temple by the arms and pointed him back towards Majud's shop. 'But this invigorating example of the joiner's craft! Bold in design, diligent in execution and in a heady fusion of styles aptly reflecting the many-cultured character of the adventurers braving this virgin land. And all on my behalf! Sir, I am quite humbled!'

'Your . . . behalf?'

'Indeed!' He pointed towards the sign above the front door. 'I am Honrig Curnsbick, the better half of Majud and Curnsbick!' And he flung his arms around Temple and kissed him on both cheeks, then rooted in his waistcoat pocket and produced a coin. 'A little something extra for your trouble. Generosity repays itself, I have always said!'

Temple blinked down at the coin. It was a silver five-mark piece. 'You have?'

'I have! Not always financially, not always immediately, but in goodwill and friendship which ultimately are beyond price!'

'They are? I mean . . . you think they are?'

'I do! Where is my partner, Majud? Where is that stone-hearted old money-grubber?'

'I do not believe he is expecting your arrival—'

'Nor do I! But how could I stay in Adua while . . . *this*,' and he spread his arms wide to encompass swarming, babbling, fragrant Crease, 'all *this* was happening without me? Besides, I have a fascinating new idea I wish to discuss with him. Steam, now, is the thing.'

'Is it?'

'The engineering community is in an uproar following a demonstration of Scibgard's new coal-fired piston apparatus!'

'Whose what?'

Curnsbick perched eyeglasses on broad forehead to squint at the hills behind the town. 'The results of the first mineral investigations are quite fascinating. I suspect the gold in these mountains is black, my boy! Black as . . .' He trailed off, staring up the steps of the house. 'Not . . . can it be . . .'

He fumbled down his eyeglasses and let fall his jaw. ‘The famous Iosiv Lestek?’

The actor, swaddled in a blanket and with several days’ grey growth upon his grey cheeks, blinked back from the doorway. ‘Well, yes—’

‘My dear sir!’ Curnsbick trotted up the steps, caused one of Buckhorm’s sons to fumble his hammer by flicking a mark at him, seized the actor by the hand and pumped it more vigorously than any piston apparatus could have conceived of. ‘An honour to make your acquaintance, sir, a perfect honour! I was transported by your Bayaz on one occasion back in Adua. Veritably transported!’

‘You do me too much kindness,’ murmured Lestek as Majud’s ruthlessly pleasant partner steered him into the shop. ‘Though I feel sure my best work still lies ahead of me . . .’

Temple blinked after them. Curnsbick was not quite what he had been led to expect. But then what was in life? He stepped back once again, losing himself again in happy contemplation of his building, and was nearly knocked onto his face by another slap on the shoulder. He rounded on Shy, decidedly annoyed this time.

‘You’ll get your money, you bloodsucking—’

A monstrous fellow with a tiny face perched on an enormous bald head stood at his back. ‘The Mayor . . . wants . . . to see you,’ he intoned, as though they were lines for a walk-on part badly memorised.

Temple was already running through the many reasons why someone powerful might want him dead. ‘You’re sure it was me?’ The man nodded. Temple swallowed. ‘Did she say why?’

‘Didn’t say. Didn’t ask.’

‘And if I would rather remain here?’

That minuscule face crinkled smaller still with an almost painful effort of thought. ‘Wasn’t an option . . . she discussed.’

Temple took a quick glance about but there was no help in easy reach and, in any case, the Mayor was one of those inevitable people. If she wanted to see him, she would see him soon enough. He shrugged, once more whisked helpless as a leaf on the winds of fate, and trusted to God. For reasons best known to Himself, He’d been coming through for Temple lately.

The Mayor gazed across her desk in thoughtful silence for a very long time.

People with elevated opinions of themselves no doubt delight in being looked upon in such a manner, mentally listing the many wonderful characteristics the onlooker must be in dumbstruck admiration of. For Temple it was torture. Reflected in that estimating gaze he saw all his own disappointment in himself, and wriggled in his chair wishing the ordeal would end.

'I am hugely honoured by the kind invitation, your . . . Mayor . . . ness,' he ventured, able to bear it no longer, 'but—'

'Why are we here?'

The old man by the window, whose presence was so far a mystery, gave vent to a crackly chuckle. 'Juvens and his brother Bedesh debated that very question for seven years and the longer they argued, the further away was the answer. I am Zacharus.' He leaned forward, holding out one knobbly-knuckled hand, black crescents of dirt ingrained beneath the fingernails.

'Like the Magus?' asked Temple, tentatively offering his own.

'Exactly like.' The old man seized his hand, twisted it over and probed at the callus on his middle finger, still pronounced even though Temple had not held a pen in weeks. 'A man of letters,' said Zacharus, and a group of pigeons perched on the window sill all at once reared up and flapped their wings at each other.

'I have had . . . several professions.' Temple managed to worm his hand from the old man's surprisingly powerful grip. 'I was trained in history, theology and law in the Great Temple of Dagoska by Haddish Kahdia—' The Mayor looked up sharply at the name. 'You knew him?'

'A lifetime ago. A man I greatly admired. He always preached and practised the same. He did what he thought right, no matter how difficult.'

'My mirror image,' muttered Temple.

'Different tasks need different talents,' observed the Mayor. 'Do you have experience with treaties?'

'As it happens, I negotiated a peace agreement and trimmed a border or two last time I was in Styria.' He had served as a tool in a shameful and entirely illegal land-grab, but honesty was an advantage to carpenters and priests, not to lawyers.

'I want you to prepare a treaty for me,' said the Mayor. 'One that brings Crease, and a slab of the Far Country around it, into the Empire and under its protection.'

‘Into the Old Empire? The great majority of the settlers come from the Union. Would that not be the natural—’

‘Absolutely not the Union.’

‘I see. Not wishing to talk myself into trouble – I do that rather too often – but . . . the only laws people seem to respect out here are the ones with a point on the end.’

‘Now, perhaps.’ The Mayor swept to the window and looked down into the swarming street. ‘But the gold will run out and the prospectors will drift off, and the fur will run out and the trappers will drift off, then the gamblers, then the thugs, then the whores. Who will remain? The likes of your friend Buckhorm, building a house and raising cattle a day’s ride out of town. Or your friend Majud, whose very fine shop and forge you have been chafing your hands on these past weeks. People who grow things, sell things, make things.’ She gracefully acquired a glass and bottle on the way back. ‘And those kinds of people like laws. They don’t like lawyers much, but they consider them a necessary evil. And so do I.’

She poured out a measure but Temple declined. ‘Drink and I have had some long and painful conversations and found we simply can’t agree.’

‘Drink and I can’t agree either.’ She shrugged and tossed it down herself. ‘But we keep on having the argument.’

‘I have a rough draft . . .’ Zacharus rummaged in his coat, producing a faint smell of musty onions and a grubby sheaf of odd-sized papers, scrawled upon with the most illegible handwriting imaginable. ‘The principal points covered, as you see. The ideal is the status of a semi-independent enclave under the protection of and paying nominal taxes to the Imperial government. There is precedent. The city of Calcis enjoys similar status. Then there is . . . was . . . what’s it called? Thingy. You know.’ He screwed up his eyes and slapped at the side of his head as if he could knock the answer free.

‘You have some experience with the law,’ said Temple as he leafed through the document.

The old man waved a dismissive and gravy-stained hand. ‘Imperial law, a long time ago. This treaty must be binding under Union law and mining traditions also.’

‘I will do the best I can. It will mean nothing until it is signed, of course, by a representative of the local population and, well, by the Emperor, I

suppose.’

‘An Imperial Legate speaks for the Emperor.’

‘You have one handy?’

Zacharus and the Mayor exchanged a glance. ‘The legions of Legate Sarmis are said to be within four weeks’ march.’

‘I understand Sarmis is . . . not a man anyone would choose to invite. His legions even less so.’

The Mayor gave a resigned shrug. ‘Choice does not enter into it. Papa Ring is keen for Crease to be brought into the Union. I understand his negotiations in that direction are well advanced. That *cannot* be allowed to happen.’

‘I understand,’ said Temple. That their escalating squabble had acquired an international dimension and might well escalate further still. But escalating squabbles are meat and drink to a lawyer. He had to confess some trepidation at the idea of going back to that profession, but it certainly looked like the easy way.

‘How long will it take you to prepare the document?’ asked the Mayor.

‘A few days. I have Majud’s shop to finish—’

‘Make this a priority. Your fee will be two hundred marks.’

‘Two . . . hundred?’

‘Is that sufficient?’

Most definitely the easy way. Temple cleared his throat and said in a voice slightly hoarse, ‘That will be adequate but . . . I must complete the building first.’ He surprised himself with that even more than the Mayor had surprised him with the fee.

Zacharus nodded approvingly. ‘You are a man who likes to see things through.’

Temple could only smile. ‘The absolute opposite but . . . I’ve always liked the idea of being one.’

Fun

They were all in attendance, more or less. The whole Fellowship reunited. Well, not Leef, of course, or the others left in the dirt out there on the flat and empty. But the rest. Laughing and backslapping and lying about how well things were going now. Some misting up at rose-tinted remembrances of the way things had been on the trail. Some observing what a fine building the firm of Majud and Curnsbick had to work with. Probably Shy should've been joshing away with the rest. How long since she had some fun, after all? But she'd always found fun was easier talked of and looked forward to than actually had.

Dab Sweet was complaining about the faithlessness of those prospectors he'd guided into the mountains and who'd stiffed him on the payment before he could stiff them. Crying Rock was nodding along and grumbling, 'Mmm,' at all the wrong moments. Iosiv Lestek was trying to impress one of the whores with tales of his heyday on the stage. She was asking whether that was before the amphitheatre got built, which by most estimates was well over a thousand years ago. Savian was swapping grunts with Lamb in one corner, tight as if they'd known each other since boys. Hedges was lurking in another, nursing a bottle. Buckhorm and his wife still had a fair old brood running about folks' legs despite the ones they'd lost in the wilderness.

Shy gave a sigh and drank another silent toast to Leef and the rest who couldn't be there. Probably the company of the dead suited her better right then.

'I used to ride drag behind an outfit like this!'

She turned towards the door and got quite the shock. Temple's more successful twin stood there in a new black suit, all tidy as a princess, his dusty tangle of hair and beard barbered close. He'd come upon a new hat and a new manner besides, swaggering in more like owner than builder.

Wasn't until she felt a sting of disappointment to see him so unfamiliar that she realised how much she'd been looking forward to seeing him the same.

'Temple!' came the merry calls and they crowded round to approve of him.

'Who'd have thought you could fish such a carpenter from a river?' Curnsbick was asking, an arm around Temple's shoulders like he'd known him all his life.

'A lucky find indeed!' said Majud, like he was the one did the fishing and lent the money and Shy hadn't been within a dozen miles at the time.

She worked her tongue around, reflecting that it surely was hard to get even the little credit you deserved, leaned to spit through the gap in her teeth, then saw Luline Buckhorm watching her with a warning eyebrow up and swallowed it instead.

Probably she should've been glad she'd saved a man from drowning and steered him to a better life, her faith justified against all contrary opinion. Let ring the bells! But instead she felt like a secret only she'd enjoyed was suddenly common knowledge, and found she was brooding on how she might go about spoiling it all for him, and then was even more annoyed that she was thinking like a mean child, and turned her back on the room and took another sour pull at her bottle. The bottle never changed unexpectedly, after all. It always left you equally disappointed.

'Shy?'

She made sure she looked properly surprised, like she'd no idea he'd be in the room. 'Well, if it ain't everyone's favourite chunk o' driftwood, the great architect himself.'

'The very same,' said Temple, tipping that new hat.

'Drink?' she asked him, offering the bottle.

'I shouldn't.'

'Too good to drink with me these days?'

'Not good enough. I can never stop halfway.'

'Halfway to where?'

‘Face down in the shit was my usual destination.’

‘You take a sip, I’ll try and catch you if you fall, how’s that?’

‘I suppose it wouldn’t be the first time.’ He took the bottle, and a sip, and grimaced like she’d kicked him in the fruits. ‘God! What the hell’s it made of?’

‘I’ve decided it’s one of those questions you’re happier without an answer to. Like how much that finery o’ yours cost.’

‘I haggled hard,’ thumping at his chest as he tried to get his voice back. ‘You would’ve been proud.’

Shy snorted. ‘Pride ain’t common with me. And it still must’ve cost a fair sum for a man with debts.’

‘Debts, you say?’

Here was familiar ground, at least. ‘Last we spoke it was—’

‘Forty-three marks?’ Eyes sparkling with triumph, he held out one finger. A purse dangled from the tip, gently swinging.

She blinked at it, then snatched it from his finger and jerked it open. It held the confusion of different coinage you usually found in Crease, but mostly silver, and at a quick assay there could easily have been sixty marks inside.

‘You turned to thievery?’

‘Lower yet. To law. I put ten extra in there for the favour. You did save my life, after all.’

She knew she should be smiling but somehow she was doing just the opposite. ‘You sure your life’s worth that much?’

‘Only to me. Did you think I’d never pay?’

‘I thought you’d grab your first chance to wriggle out of it and run off in the night. Or maybe die first.’

Temple raised his brows. ‘That’s about what I thought. Looks like I surprised us both. Pleasantly, though, I hope.’

‘Of course,’ she lied, pocketing the purse.

‘Aren’t you going to count it?’

‘I trust you.’

‘You do?’ He looked right surprised about it and so was she, but she realised it was true. True of a lot of folk in that room.

‘If it ain’t all there I can always track you down and kill you.’

‘It’s nice to know that’s an option.’

They stood side by side, in silence, backs to the wall, watching a room full of their friends' chatter. She glanced at him and he slowly looked sideways, like he was checking whether she was looking, and when he got there she pretended she'd been looking past him at Hedges all along. Tense having him next to her of a sudden. As if without that debt between them they were pressed up too close for comfort.

'You did a fine job on the building,' was the best she could manage after digging away for something to say.

'Fine jobs and paid debts. I can think of a few acquaintances who wouldn't recognise me.'

'I'm not sure I recognise you.'

'That good or bad?'

'I don't know.' A long pause, and the room was getting hot from all the folk blathering in it, and her face was hot in particular, and she passed Temple the bottle, and he shrugged and took a sip and passed it back. She took a bigger one. 'What do we talk about, now you don't owe me money?'

'The same things as everyone else, I suppose.'

'What do they talk about?'

He frowned at the crowded room. 'The high quality of my craftsmanship appears to be a popular—'

'Your head swells any bigger you won't be able to stand.'

'A lot of people are talking about this fight that's coming—'

'I've heard more'n enough about that.'

'There's always the weather.'

'Muddy, lately, in main street, I've observed.'

'And I hear there's more mud on the way.' He grinned sideways at her and she grinned back, and the distance didn't feel so great after all.

'Will you say a few words before the fun starts?' It was when Curnsbick loomed suddenly out of nowhere Shy realised she was already more'n a bit drunk.

'Words about what?' she asked.

'I apologise, my dear, but I was speaking to this gentleman. You look surprised.'

'Not sure which shocks me more, that I'm a dear or he's a gentleman.'

'I stand by both appellations,' said the inventor, though Shy wasn't sure what the hell he meant by it. 'And as ex-spiritual advisor to this ex-

Fellowship, and architect and chief carpenter of this outstanding edifice, what gentleman better to address our little gathering at its completion?'

Temple raised his palms helplessly as Curnsbick hustled him off and Shy took another swig. The bottle was getting lighter all the time. And she was getting less annoyed.

Probably there was a link between the two.

'My old teacher used to say you know a man by his friends!' Temple called at the room. 'Guess I can't be quite the shit I thought I was!'

A few laughs and some shouts of, 'Wrong! Wrong!'

'Not long ago I barely knew one person I could have called decent. Now I can fill a room I built with them. I used to wonder why anyone would come out to this God-forsaken arse of the world who didn't have to. Now I know. They come to be part of something new. To live in new country. To be new people. I nearly died out on the plains, and I can't say I would have been widely mourned. But a Fellowship took me in and gave me another chance I hardly deserved. Not many of them were keen to begin with, I'll admit, but . . . one was, and that was enough. My old teacher used to say you know the righteous by what they give to those who can't give back. I doubt anyone who's had the misfortune to bargain with her would agree, but I will always count Shy South among the righteous.'

A general murmur of agreement, and some raised glasses, and he saw Corlin slapping Shy on the back and her looking sour beyond belief.

'My old teacher used to say there is no better act than the raising of a good building. It gives something to those that live in it, and visit it, and even pass it by every day it stands. I haven't really tried at much in life, but I've tried to make a good building of this. Hopefully it will stand a little longer than some of the others hereabouts. May God smile on it as He has smiled on me since I fell in that river, and bring shelter and prosperity to its occupants.'

'And liquor is free to all!' bellowed Curnsbick. Majud's horrified complaints were drowned out in the stampede towards the table where the bottles stood. 'Especially the master carpenter himself.' And the inventor conjured a glass into Temple's hand and poured a generous measure, smiling so broadly Temple could hardly refuse. He and drink might have had their disagreements, but if the bottle was always willing to forgive, why

shouldn't he? Was not forgiveness neighbour to the divine? How drunk could one get him?

Drunk enough for another, as it turned out.

'Good building, lad, I always knew you had hidden talents,' rambled Sweet as he sloshed a third into Temple's glass. 'Well hidden, but what's the point in an obvious hidden talent?'

'What indeed?' agreed Temple, swallowing a fourth. He could not have called it a pleasant taste now, but it was no longer like swallowing red-hot wire wool. How drunk could four get him, anyway?

Buckhorm had produced a fiddle now and was hacking out a tune while Crying Rock did injury to a drum in the background. There was dancing. Or at least well-meaning clomping in the presence of music if not directly related to it. A kind judge would have called it dancing and Temple was feeling like a kind judge then, and with each drink – and he'd lost track of the exact number – he got more kind and less judging, so that when Luline Buckhorm laid small but powerful hands upon him he did not demur and in fact tested the floorboards he had laid only a couple of days before with some enthusiasm.

The room grew hotter and louder and dimmer, sweat-shining faces swimming at him full of laughter and damn it but he was enjoying himself like he couldn't remember when. The night he joined the Company of the Gracious Hand, maybe, and the mercenary life was all a matter of good men facing fair risks together and laughing at the world and nothing to do with theft, rape and murder on an industrial scale. Lestek tried to add his pipe to the music, failed in a coughing fit and had to be escorted out for air. Temple thought he saw the Mayor, talking softly to Lamb under the watchful eyes of a few of her thugs. He was dancing with one of the whores and complimenting her on her clothes, which were repugnantly garish, and she couldn't hear him anyway and kept shouting, 'What?' Then he was dancing with one of Gentili's cousins, and complimenting him on his clothes, which were dirt-streaked from prospecting and smelled like a recently opened tomb, but the man still beamed at the compliment. Corlin came past in stately hold with Crying Rock, both of them looking grave as judges, both trying to lead, and Temple near choked on his tongue at the unlikeliness of the couple. Then suddenly he was dancing with Shy and to his mind they

were making a pretty good effort at it, quite an achievement since he still had a half-full glass in one hand and she a half-empty bottle.

'Never thought you'd be a dancer,' he shouted in her ear. 'Too hard for it.'

'Never thought you'd be one,' her breath hot against his cheek. 'Too soft.'

'No doubt you're right. My wife taught me.'

She stiffened then, for a moment. 'You've got a wife?'

'I did have. And a daughter. They died. Long time ago, now. Sometimes it doesn't feel so long.'

She took a drink, looking at him sideways over the neck of the bottle, and there was something to that glance gave him a breathless tingle. He leaned to speak to her and she caught him around the head and kissed him quite fiercely. If he'd had time he would've reasoned she wasn't the type for gentle kisses but he didn't get time to reason, or kiss back, or push her off, or even work out which would be his preference before she twisted his head away and was dancing with Majud, leaving him to be manhandled about the floor by Corlin.

'You think you're getting one from me you've another think coming,' she growled.

He leaned against the wall, head spinning, face sweating, heart pounding as if he had a dose of the fever. Strange, what sharing a little spit can do. Well, along with a few measures of raw spirits on a man ten years sober. He looked at his glass, thought he'd be best off throwing the contents down the wall, then decided he put more value on the wall than himself and drank them instead.

'You all right?'

'She kissed me,' he muttered.

'Shy?'

Temple nodded, then realised it was Lamb he'd said it to, and shortly thereafter that it might not have been the cleverest thing to say.

But the big Northman only grinned. 'Well, that's about the least surprising thing I ever heard. Everyone in the Fellowship saw it coming. The snapping and arguing and niggling over the debt. Classic case.'

'Why did no one say anything?'

'Several talked of nothing else.'

'I mean to me.'

‘In my case, ’cause I had a bet with Savian on when it would happen. We both thought a lot sooner’n this, but I won. He can be a funny bastard, that Savian.’

‘He can . . . what?’ Temple hardly knew what shocked him more, that Shy kissing him came as no surprise, or that Savian could be funny. ‘Sorry to be so predictable.’

‘Folk usually prefer the obvious outcome. Takes bones to defy expectation.’

‘Meaning I don’t have any.’

Lamb only shrugged as though that was a question that hardly needed answering. Then he picked up his battered hat.

‘Where are you going?’ asked Temple.

‘Ain’t I got a right to my own fun?’ He put a hand on Temple’s shoulder. A friendly, fatherly hand, but a frighteningly firm one, too. ‘Be careful with her. She ain’t as tough as she looks.’

‘What about me? I don’t even look tough.’

‘That’s true. But if Shy hurts you I won’t break her legs.’

By the time Temple had worked that one out, Lamb was gone. Dab Sweet had commandeered the fiddle and was up on a table, stomping so the plates jumped, sawing away at the strings like they were around his sweetheart’s neck and he had moments to save her.

‘I thought we were dancing?’

Shy’s cheek had colour in it and her eyes were shining deep and dark and for reasons he couldn’t be bothered to examine but probably weren’t all that complicated anyway she looked dangerously fine to him right then. So, fuck it all, he tossed down his drink with a manly flick of the wrist then realised the glass was empty, threw it away, snatched her bottle while she grabbed his other hand and they dragged each other in amongst the lumbering bodies.

It was a long time since Shy had got herself properly reeling drunk but she found the knack came back pretty quick. Putting one foot in front of the other had become a bit of a challenge but if she kept her eyes wide open on the ground and really thought about it she didn’t fall over too much. The hostelry was way too bright and Camling said something about a policy on guests and she laughed in his face and told him there were more whores

than guests in this fucking place and Temple laughed as well and snorted snot down his beard. Then he chased her up the stairs with his hand on her arse which was funny to begin with then a bit annoying and she slapped him and near knocked him down the steps he was that surprised, but she caught him by the shirt and dragged him after and said sorry for the slap and he said what slap and started kissing her on the top landing and tasted like spirits. Which wasn't a bad way to taste in her book.

'Isn't Lamb here?'

'Staying at the Mayor's place now.'

Bloody hell things were spinning by then. She was fumbling in her trousers for the key and laughing and then she was fumbling in his trousers and they were up against the wall and kissing again her mouth full of his breath and his tongue and her hair then the door banging open and the two of them tumbling through and across the dim-lit floorboards. She crawled on top of him and they were grunting away, room reeling, and she felt the burn of sick at the back of her throat but swallowed it and didn't much care as it tasted no worse than the first time and Temple seemed to be a long way from complaining or probably even noticing either, he was too busy struggling with the buttons on her shirt and couldn't have been making harder work of it if they'd been the size of pinheads.

She realised the door was open still and kicked out at it but judged the distance all wrong and kicked a hole in the plaster beside the frame instead, started laughing again. Got the door shuddering shut with the next kick and he had her shirt open now and was kissing at her chest which felt all right actually if a bit ticklish, her own body looking all pale and strange to her and she was wondering when was the last time she did anything like this and deciding it was way too long. Then he'd stopped and was staring down in the darkness, eyes just a pair of glimmers.

'Are we doing the right thing?' he asked, so comic serious for a moment she wanted to laugh again.

'How the fuck should I know? Get your trousers off.'

She was trying to wriggle free of her own but still had her boots on and was getting more and more tangled, knew she should've taken the boots off first but it was a bit late now and she grunted and kicked and her belt thrashed about like a snake cut in half, her knife flopping off the end of it

and clattering against the wall, until she got one boot off and one trouser-leg and that seemed good enough for the purpose.

They'd made it to the bed somehow and were tangled up with each other more naked than not, warm and pleasantly wriggling, his hand between her legs and her shoving her hips against it, both laughing less and grunting more, slow and throaty, bright dots fizzing on the inside of her closed lids so she had to open her eyes so she didn't feel like she'd fall right off the bed and out the ceiling. Eyes open was worse, the room turning around her loud with her breath and her thudding heartbeat and the warm rubbing of skin on skin and the springs in the old mattress shrieking with complaint but no one giving too much of a shit for their objections.

Something about her brother and sister niggled at her, and Gully swinging, and Lamb and a fight, but she let it all drift past like smoke and spin away with the spinning ceiling.

How long since she had some fun, after all?

'Oh,' groaned Temple. 'Oh no.'

He moaned a piteous moan as of the cursed dead in hell, facing an eternity of suffering and regretting most bitterly their lives wasted in sin.

'God help me.'

But God had the righteous to assist and Temple could not pretend to be in that category. Not after last night's fun.

Everything hurt him. The blanket across his bare legs. A fly buzzing faintly up near the ceiling. The sun sneaking around the edges of the curtains. The sounds of Crease life and Crease death beyond them. He remembered now why he had stopped drinking. What he could not remember was why it had felt like a good idea to start again.

He winced at the hacking, gurgling noise that had woken him, managed to lift his head a few degrees and saw Shy kneeling over the night pot. She was naked except for one boot and her trousers tangled around that ankle, ribs standing stark as she retched. A strip of light from the window cut over one shoulder-blade bright, bright, and found a big scar, a burn like a letter upside down.

She rocked back, turned eyes sunken in dark rings on him and wiped a string of spit from the corner of her mouth. 'Another kiss?'

The sound he made was indescribable. Part laugh, part belch, part groan. He could not have made it again in a year of trying. But why would he have wanted to?

'Got to get some air.' Shy dragged up her trousers but left the belt dangling and they sagged off her arse as she tottered to the window.

'Don't do it,' moaned Temple, but there was no stopping her. Not without moving, and that was inconceivable. She hauled the curtains away and pushed the window wide, while he struggled feebly to shield his eyes from the merciless light.

Shy was cursing as she fished around under the other bed. He could hardly believe it when she came up with a quarter-full bottle, pulled the cork with her teeth and sat there gathering her courage, like a swimmer staring into an icy pool.

'You're not going to—'

She tipped the bottle up and swallowed, clapped the back of her hand to her mouth, stomach muscles fluttering, and burped, and grimaced, and shivered, and offered it to him.

'You?' she asked, voice wet with rush back.

He wanted to be sick just looking. 'God, no.'

'It's the only thing'll help.'

'Is the cure for a stab-wound really another one?'

'Once you set to stabbing yourself it can be hard to stop.'

She shrugged her shirt over that scar, and after doing a couple of buttons realised she had them in the wrong holes and the whole front twisted, gave up and slumped down on the other bed. Temple wasn't sure he'd ever seen anyone look so worn out and defeated, not even in the mirror.

He wondered whether he should put his clothes on. Some of the muddy rags scattered across the boards bore a faint resemblance to part of his new suit, but he could not be sure. Could not be sure of anything. He forced himself to sit, dragging his legs off the bed as if they were made of lead. When he was sure his stomach would not immediately rebel, he looked at Shy and said, 'You'll find them, you know.'

'How do I know?'

'Because no one deserves a good turn of the card more.'

'You don't know what I deserve.' She slumped back on her elbows, head sinking into her bony shoulders. 'You don't know what I've done.'

‘Can’t be worse than what you did to me last night.’

She didn’t laugh. She was looking past him, eyes focused far away. ‘When I was seventeen I killed a boy.’

Temple swallowed. ‘Well, yes, that is worse.’

‘I ran off from the farm. Hated it there. Hated my bitch mother. Hated my bastard stepfather.’

‘Lamb?’

‘No, the first one. My mother got through ’em. I had some fool notion I’d open a store. Things went wrong right off. Didn’t mean to kill that boy, but I got scared and I cut him.’ She rubbed absently under her jaw with a fingertip. ‘He wouldn’t stop bleeding.’

‘Did he have it coming?’

‘Guess he must’ve. Got it, didn’t he? But he had a family, and they chased me, and I ran, and I got hungry so I started stealing.’ She droned it all out in a dead monotone. ‘After a while I got to thinking no one gives you a fair chance and taking things is easier than making ’em. I fell in with some low company and dragged ’em lower. More robbing, and more killings, and maybe some had it coming, and maybe some didn’t. Who gets what they deserve?’

Temple thought of Kahdia. ‘I’ll admit God can be a bit of a shit that way.’

‘In the end there were bills up over half the Near Country for my arrest. Smoke, they called me, like I was something to be scared of, and put a price on my head. About the only time in my life I was thought worth something.’ She curled her lips back from her teeth. ‘They caught some woman and hanged her in my place. Didn’t even look like me, but she got killed and I got away with it and I don’t know why.’

There was a heavy silence, then. She raised the bottle and took a couple of good, long swallows, neck working with the effort, and she came up gasping for air with eyes watering hard. That was an excellent moment for Temple to mumble his excuses and run. A few months ago, the door would have been swinging already. His debts were settled, after all, which was better than he usually managed on his way out. But he found this time he did not want to leave.

‘If you want me to share your low opinion of yourself,’ he said, ‘I’m afraid I can’t oblige. Sounds to me like you made some mistakes.’

‘You’d call all that mistakes?’

‘Some pretty stupid ones, but yes. You never chose to do evil.’

‘Who chooses evil?’

‘I did. Pass me that bottle.’

‘What’s this?’ she asked as she tossed it across. ‘A shitty-past competition?

‘Yes, and I win.’ He closed his eyes and forced down a swallow, burning and choking all the way. ‘After my wife died, I spent a year as the most miserable drunk you ever saw.’

‘I’ve seen some pretty fucking miserable ones.’

‘Then picture worse. I thought I couldn’t get any lower, so I signed up as lawyer for a mercenary company, and found I could.’ He raised the bottle in salute. ‘The Company of the Gracious Hand, under Captain General Nicomo Cosca! Oh, noble brotherhood!’ He drank again. It felt good in a hideous way, like picking at a scab.

‘Sounds fancy.’

‘That’s what I thought.’

‘Wasn’t fancy?’

‘A worse accumulation of human scum you never saw.’

‘I’ve seen some pretty fucking bad ones.’

‘Then picture worse. To begin with I believed there were good reasons for what they did. What *we* did. Then I convinced myself there were good reasons. Then I knew there weren’t even good excuses, but did it anyway because I was too coward not too. We were sent to the Near Country to root out rebels. A friend of mine tried to save some people. He was killed. And them. They killed each other. But I squirmed away, as always, and I ran like the coward I am, and I fell in a river and, for reasons best known only to Himself, God sent a good woman to fish my worthless carcass out.’

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‘As a point of fact, God sent a murdering outlaw.’

‘Well, His ways are damned mysterious. I can’t say I took to you right away, that’s true, but I’m starting to think God sent exactly what I needed.’ Temple stood. It wasn’t easy, but he managed it. ‘I feel like all my life I’ve been running. Maybe it’s time for me to stick. To try it, at least.’ He sank down beside her, the creaking of the bedsprings going right through him. ‘I don’t care what you’ve done. I owe you. Only my life, now, but still. Let me stick.’ He tossed the empty bottle aside, took a deep breath, licked his finger

and thumb-tip and smoothed down his beard. ‘God help me, but I’ll take that kiss now.’

She squinted at him, every colour in her face wrong – skin a little yellow, eyes a little pink, lips a little blue. ‘You serious?’

‘I may be a fool, but I’m not letting a woman who can fill a sick pot without spilling pass me by. Wipe your mouth and come here.’

He shifted towards her, someone clattering in the corridor outside, and her mouth twitched up in a smile. She leaned towards him, hair tickling his shoulder, and her breath smelled foul and he did not care. The doorknob turned and rattled, and Shy bellowed at the door, so close and broken-voiced it felt like a hatchet blow in Temple’s forehead, ‘You got the wrong fucking room, idiot!’

Against all expectation, the door lurched open anyway and a man stepped in. A tall man with close-cropped fair hair and sharp clothes. He had a sharp expression too as his eyes wandered unhurried about the place, as if this was his room and he was both annoyed and amused to find someone else had been fucking in it.

‘I think I got it right,’ he said, and two other men appeared in the doorway, and neither looked like men you’d be happy to see anywhere, let alone uninvited in your hotel room. ‘I heard you been looking for me.’

‘Who the fuck are you?’ growled Shy, eyes flickering to the corner where her knife was lying sheathed on the floor.

The newcomer smiled like a conjuror about to pull off the trick you won’t believe. ‘Grega Cantliss.’

Then a few things happened at once. Shy flung the bottle at the doorway and dived for her knife. Cantliss dived for her, the other two tangled in the doorway behind him.

And Temple dived for the window.

Statements about sticking notwithstanding, before he knew it he was outside, air whooping in his throat in a terrified squeal as he dropped, then rolling in the cold mud, then floundering up and sprinting naked across the main street, which in most towns would have been considered poor form but in Crease was not especially remarkable. He heard someone bellow and forced himself on, slipping and sliding and his heart pounding so hard he thought he might have to hold his skull together, the Mayor’s Church of Dice lurching closer.

When the guards at the door saw him they smiled, then they frowned, then they caught hold of him as he scrambled up the steps.

'The Mayor's got a rule about trousers—'

'Got to see Lamb. Lamb!'

One of them punched him in the mouth, snapped his head back and sent him stumbling against the door-frame. He knew he deserved it more than ever, but somehow a fist in the face always came as a surprise.

'Lamb!' he screeched again, covering his head as best he could. 'La—ooof.' The other's fist sank into his gut and doubled him up, drove his wind right out and dropped him to his knees, blowing bloody bubbles. While he was considering the stones under his face in breathless silence, one of the guards grabbed him by the hair and started dragging him up, raising his fist high.

'Leave him be.' To Temple's great relief, Savian caught that fist before it came down with one knobbly hand. 'He's with me.' He grabbed Temple under the armpit with the other and dragged him through the doorway, shrugging off his coat and throwing it around Temple's shoulders. 'What the hell happened?'

'Cantliss,' croaked Temple, limping into the gaming hall, waving a weak arm towards the hostelry, only able to get enough breath for one wheezing word at a time. 'Shy—'

'What happened?' Lamb was thumping down the steps from the Mayor's room, barefooted himself and with his shirt half-buttoned, and for a moment Temple was wondering why he came that way, and then he saw the drawn sword in Lamb's fist and felt very scared, and then he saw something in Lamb's face that made him feel more scared still.

'Cantliss . . . at Camling's . . .' he managed to splutter.

Lamb stood a moment, eyes wide, then he strode for the door, brushing the guards out of his way, and Savian strode after.

'Everything all right?' The Mayor stood on the balcony outside her rooms in a Gurkish dressing gown, a pale scar showing in the hollow between her collar bones. Temple blinked up, wondering if Lamb had been in there with her, then pulled his borrowed coat around him and hurried after the others without speaking. 'Put some trousers on!' she called after him.

When Temple struggled up the steps of the hostelry, Lamb had Camling by the collar and had dragged him most of the way over his own counter

with one hand, sword in the other and the proprietor desperately squealing, ‘They just dragged her out! The Whitehouse, maybe, I have no notion, it was none of my doing!’

Lamb shoved Camling tottering away and stood, breath growling in his throat. Then he put the sword carefully on the counter and his palms flat before it, fingers spreading out, the wood gleaming in the space where the middle one should have been. Savian walked around behind the counter, shouldering Camling out of the way, took a glass and bottle from a high shelf, blew out one then pulled the cork from the other.

‘You need a hand, you got mine,’ he grunted as he poured.

Lamb nodded. ‘You should know lending me a hand can be bad for your health.’

Savian coughed as he nudged the glass across. ‘My health’s a mess.’

‘What are you going to do?’ asked Temple.

‘Have a drink.’ And Lamb picked up the glass and drained it, white stubble on his throat shifting. Savian tipped the bottle to fill it again.

‘Lamb!’ Lord Ingelstad walked in somewhat unsteadily, his face pale and his waistcoat covered in stains. ‘He said you’d be here!’

‘Who said?’

Ingelstad gave a helpless chuckle as he tossed his hat on the counter, a few wisps of stray hair left standing vertically from his head. ‘Strangest thing. After that fun at Majud’s place, I was playing cards over at Papa Ring’s. Entirely lost track of time and I was somewhat behind financially, I’ll admit, and a gentleman came in to tell Papa something, and he told me he’d forget my debt if I brought you a message.’

‘What message?’ Lamb drank again, and Savian filled his glass again.

Ingelstad squinted at the wall. ‘He said he’s playing host to a friend of yours . . . and he’d very much like to be a gracious host . . . but you’ll have to kiss the mud tomorrow night. He said you’ll be dropping anyway, so you might as well drop willingly and you can both walk out of Crease free people. He said you have his word on that. He was very particular about it. You have his word, apparently.’

‘Well, ain’t I the lucky one,’ said Lamb.

Lord Ingelstad squinted over at Temple as though only just noticing his unusual attire. ‘It appears some people have had an even heavier night than I.’

‘Can you take a message back?’ asked Lamb.

‘I daresay a few more minutes won’t make any difference to Lady Ingelstad’s temper at this point. I am *doomed* whatever.’

‘Then tell Papa Ring I’ll keep his word safe and sound. And I hope he’ll do the same for his guest.’

The nobleman yawned as he jammed his hat back on. ‘Riddles, riddles. Then off to bed for me!’ And he strutted back out into the street.

‘What are you going to do?’ whispered Temple.

‘There was a time I’d have gone charging over there without a thought for the costs and got bloody.’ Lamb lifted the glass and looked at it for a moment. ‘But my father always said patience is the king of virtues. A man has to be realistic. Has to be.’

‘So what are you going to do?’

‘Wait. Think. Prepare.’ Lamb swallowed the last measure and bared his teeth at the glass. ‘Then get bloody.’

High Stakes

‘A trim?’ asked Faukin, directing his blank, bland, professional smile towards the mirror. ‘Or something more radical?’

‘Shave it all off, hair and beard, close to the skull as you can get.’

Faukin nodded as though that would have been his choice. The client always knows best, after all. ‘A wet shave of the pate, then.’

‘Wouldn’t want to give the other bastard anything to hold on to. And I reckon it’s a little late to damage my looks, don’t you?’

Faukin gave his blank, bland, professional chuckle and began, comb struggling with the tangles in Lamb’s thick hair, the snipping of the scissors cutting the silence up into neat little fragments. Outside the window the noise of the swelling crowd grew louder, more excited, and the tension in the room swelled with it. The grey cuttings spilled down the sheet, scattered across the boards in those tantalising patterns that looked to hold some meaning one could never quite grasp.

Lamb stirred at them with his foot. ‘Where does it all go, eh?’

‘Our time or the hair?’

‘Either one.’

‘In the case of the time, I would ask a philosopher rather than a barber. In the case of the hair, it is swept up and thrown out. Unless on occasion one might have a lady friend who would care to be entrusted with a lock . . .’

Lamb glanced over at the Mayor. She stood at the window, keeping one eye on Lamb’s preparations and the other on those in the street, a slender silhouette against the sunset. He dismissed the notion with an explosive snort. ‘One moment it’s a part of you, the next it’s rubbish.’

‘We treat whole men like rubbish, why not their hair?’

Lamb sighed. ‘I guess you’ve got the right of it.’

Faukin gave the razor a good slapping on the strap. Clients usually appreciated a flourish, a mirror flash of lamplight on steel, an edge of drama to proceedings.

‘Careful,’ said the Mayor, evidently in need of no extra drama today. Faukin had to confess to being considerably more scared of her than he was of Lamb. The Northman he knew for a ruthless killer, but suspected him of harbouring principles of a kind. He had no such suspicions about the Mayor. So he gave his blank, bland, professional bow, ceased his sharpening, brushed up a lather and worked it into Lamb’s hair and beard, then began to shave with patient, careful, hissing strokes.

‘Don’t it ever bother you that it always grows back?’ asked Lamb. ‘There’s no beating it, is there?’

‘Could not the same be said of every profession? The merchant sells one thing to buy another. The farmer harvests one set of crops to plant another. The blacksmith—’

‘Kill a man and he stays dead,’ said Lamb, simply.

‘But . . . if I might observe without causing offence . . . killers rarely stop at one. Once you begin, there is always someone else that needs killing.’

Lamb’s eyes moved to Faukin’s in the mirror. ‘You’re a philosopher after all.’

‘On a strictly amateur footing.’ Faukin worked the warm towel with a flourish and presented Lamb shorn, as it were, a truly daunting array of scars laid bare. In all his years as a barber, including three in the service of a mercenary company, he had never attended upon a head so battered, dented and otherwise manhandled.

‘Huh.’ Lamb leaned closer to the mirror, working his lopsided jaw and wrinkling his bent nose as though to convince himself it was indeed his own visage gazing back. ‘There’s the face of an evil bastard, eh?’

‘I would venture to say a face is no more evil than a coat. It is the man beneath, and his actions, that count.’

‘No doubt.’ Lamb looked up at Faukin for a moment, and then back to himself. ‘And there’s the face of an evil bastard. You done the best a man could with it, though. Ain’t your fault what you’re given to work with.’

‘I simply try to do the job exactly as I’d want it done to me.’

‘Treat folk the way you’d want to be treated and you can’t go far wrong, my father used to tell me. Seems our jobs are different after all. Aim o’ mine is to do to the other man exactly what I’d least enjoy.’

‘Are you ready?’ The Mayor had silently drifted closer and was looking at the pair of them in the mirror.

Lamb shrugged. ‘Either a man’s always ready for a thing like this or he’ll never be.’

‘Good enough.’ She came closer and took hold of Faukin’s hand. He felt a strong need to back away, but clung to his blank, bland professionalism a moment longer. ‘Any other jobs today?’

Faukin swallowed. ‘Just the one.’

‘Across the street?’

He nodded.

The Mayor pressed a coin into his palm and leaned close. ‘The time is fast approaching when every person in Crease will have to choose one side of the street. I hope you choose wisely.’

Sunset had lent the town a carnival atmosphere. There was a single current to the crowds of drunk and greedy and it flowed to the amphitheatre. As he passed, Faukin could see the Circle marked out on the ancient cobbles at its centre, six strides across, torches on close-set poles to mark the edge and light the action. The ancient banks of stone seating and the new teetering stands of bodged-together carpentry were already boiling with an audience such as that place had not seen in centuries. Gamblers screeched for business and chalked odds on high boards. Hawkers sold bottles and hot gristle for prices outrageous even in this home of outrageous prices.

Faukin gazed at all those people swarming over each other, most of whom could hardly have known what a barber was let alone thought of employing one, reflected for the hundredth time that day, the thousandth time that week, the millionth time since he arrived that he should never have come here, clung tight to his bag and hurried on.

Papa Ring was one of those men who liked to spend money less the more of it he had. His quarters were humble indeed by comparison with the Mayor’s, the furniture an improvised and splinter-filled collection, the low ceiling lumpy as an old bedspread. Glama Golden sat before a cracked mirror lit by smoking candles, something faintly absurd in that huge body

crammed onto a stool and draped in a threadbare sheet, his head giving the impression of teetering on top like a cherry on a cream cake.

Ring stood at the window just as the Mayor had, his big fists clamped behind his back, and said, ‘Shave it all off.’

‘Except the moustache.’ Golden gathered up the sheet so he could stroke at his top lip with huge thumb and forefinger. ‘Had that all my life and it’s going nowhere.’

‘A most resplendent article of facial hair,’ said Faukin, though in truth he could see more than a few grey hairs despite the poor light. ‘To remove it would be a deep regret.’

In spite of being the undoubted favourite in the coming contest, Golden’s eyes had a strange, haunted dampness as they found Faukin’s in the mirror. ‘You got regrets?’

Faukin lost his blank, bland, professional smile for a moment. ‘Don’t we all, sir?’ He began to cut. ‘But I suppose regrets at least prevent one from repeating the same mistakes.’

Golden frowned at himself in that cracked mirror. ‘I find however high I stack the regrets, I still make the same mistakes again and again.’

Faukin had no answer for that, but the barber holds the advantage in such circumstances: he can let the scissors fill the silence. Snip, snip, and the yellow cuttings scattered across the boards in those tantalising patterns that looked to hold some meaning one could never quite grasp.

‘Been over there with the Mayor?’ called Papa Ring from the window.

‘Yes, sir, I have.’

‘How’d she seem?’

Faukin thought about the Mayor’s demeanour and, more importantly, about what Papa Ring wanted to hear. A good barber never puts truth before the hopes of his clients. ‘She seemed very tense.’

Ring stared back out of the window, thick thumb and fingers fussing nervously behind his back. ‘I guess she would be.’

‘What about the other man?’ asked Golden. ‘The one I’m fighting?’ Faukin stopped snipping for a moment. ‘He seemed thoughtful. Regretful. But fixed on his purpose. In all honesty . . . he seemed very much like you.’ Faukin did not mention what had only just occurred.

That he had, in all likelihood, given one of them their last haircut.

Bee was mopping up when he passed by the door. She hardly even had to see him, she knew him by his footsteps. ‘Grega?’ She dashed out into the hall, heart going so hard it hurt. ‘Grega!’

He turned, wincing, like hearing her say his name made him sick. He looked tired, more’n a little drunk, and sore. She could always tell his moods. ‘What?’

She’d made up all kinds of little stories about their reunion. One where he swept her into his arms and told her they could get married now. One where he was wounded and she’d to nurse him back to health. One where they argued, one where they laughed, one where he cried and said sorry for how he’d treated her.

But she hadn’t spun no stories where she was just ignored.

‘That all you got to say to me?’

‘What else would there be?’ He didn’t even look her in the eye. ‘I got to go talk to Papa Ring.’ And he made off up the hall.

She caught his arm. ‘Where are the children?’ Her voice all shrill and bled out from her own disappointment.

‘Mind your own business.’

‘I am. You made me help, didn’t you? You made me bring ’em!’

‘You could’ve said no.’ She knew it was true. She’d been so keen to please him she’d have jumped in a fire on his say-so. Then he gave a little smile, like he’d thought of something funny. ‘But if you must know, I sold ’em.’

She felt cold to her stomach. ‘To who?’

‘Those Ghosts up in the hills. Those Dragon fuckers.’

Her throat was all closed up, she could hardly talk. ‘What’ll they do with ’em?’

‘I don’t know. Fuck ’em? Eat ’em? What do I care? What did you think I was going to do, start up an orphanage?’ Her face was burning now, like he’d slapped her. ‘You’re such a stupid sow. Don’t know that I ever met anyone stupider than you. You’re stupider than—’

And she was on him and tearing at his face with her nails and she’d probably have bitten him if he hadn’t hit her first, just above the eye, and she tumbled into the corner and caught a faceful of floor.

‘You mad bitch!’ She started to push herself up, all groggy, that familiar pulsing in her face, and he was touching his scratched cheek like he

couldn't believe it. 'What did you do that for?' Then he was shaking out his fingers. 'You hurt my fucking hand!' And he took a step towards her as she tried to stand and kicked her in the ribs, folded her gasping around his boot.

'I hate you,' she managed to whisper, once she was done coughing.

'So?' And he looked at her like she was a maggot.

She remembered the day he'd chosen her out of all the room to dance with and nothing had ever felt so fine, and of a sudden it was like she saw the whole thing fresh, and he seemed so ugly, so petty and vain and selfish beyond enduring. He just used people and threw them away and left a trail of ruin behind him. How could she ever have loved him? Just because for a few moments he'd made her feel one step above shit. The rest of the time ten steps below.

'You're so small,' she whispered at him. 'How did I not see it?'

He was pricked in his vanity then and he took another step at her, but she found her knife and whipped it out. He saw the blade, and for a moment he looked surprised, then he looked angry, then he started laughing like she was a hell of a joke.

'As if you've got the bones to use it!' And he sauntered past, giving her plenty of time to stab him if she'd wanted to. But she just knelt there, blood leaking out her nose and tapping down the front of her dress. Her best dress, which she'd worn three days straight 'cause she knew he'd be coming.

Once the dizziness had passed she got up and went to the kitchen. Everything was trembling but she'd taken worse beatings and worse disappointments, too. No one there so much as raised a brow at her bloody nose. The Whitehouse was that kind of place.

'Papa Ring said I need to feed that woman.'

'Soup in the pot,' grunted the cook's boy, perched on a box to look out of a high little window where all he got was a view of boots outside.

So she put a bowl on a tray with a cup of water and carried it down the damp-smelling stair to the cellar, past the big barrels in the darkness and the bottles on the racks gleaming with the torchlight.

The woman in the cage uncrossed her legs and stood, sliding her tight-bound hands up the rail behind her, one eye glinting through the hair tangled across her face as she watched Bee come closer. Warp sat in front at his table, ring of keys on it, pretending to read a book. He loved to pretend,

thought it made him look right special, but even Bee, who weren't no wonder with her letters, could tell he had it upside down.

'What d'you want?' And he turned a sneer on her like she was a slug in his breakfast.

'Papa Ring said to feed her.'

She could almost see his brain rattling around in his big fat head. 'Why? Ain't like she'll be here much longer.'

'You think he tells me why?' she snapped. 'But I'll go back and tell Papa you wouldn't let me in if you—'

'All right, get it done, then. But I've got my eye on you.' He leaned close and blasted her with his rotting breath. 'Both eyes.'

He unlocked the gate and swung it squealing open and Bee ducked inside with her tray. The woman watched her. She couldn't move far from the rail, but even so she was backed up tight against it. The cage smelled of sweat and piss and fear, the woman's and all the others' who'd been kept in here before and no bright futures among 'em, that was a fact. No bright futures anywhere in this place.

Bee set the tray down and took the cup of water. The woman sucked at it thirstily, no pride left in her if she'd had any to begin with. Pride don't last long in the Whitehouse, and especially not down here. Bee leaned close and whispered.

'You asked me about Cantliss before. About Cantliss and the children.'

The woman stopped swallowing and her eyes flickered over to Bee's, bright and wild.

'He sold the children to the Dragon People. That's what he said.' Bee looked over her shoulder but Warp was already sitting back at his table and pulling at his jug, not looking in the least. He wouldn't think Bee would do anything worth attending to in her whole life. Right now that worked for her. She stepped closer, slipped out the knife and sawed through the ropes around one of the woman's rubbed-raw wrists.

'Why?' she whispered.

'Because Cantliss needs hurting.' Even then she couldn't bring herself to say killing, but they both knew what she meant. 'I can't do it.' Bee pressed the knife, handle first, into the woman's free hand where it was hidden behind her back. 'Reckon you can, though.'

Papa Ring fidgeted at the ring through his ear, an old habit went right back to his days as a bandit in the Badlands, his nerves rising with the rising noise in a painful lump under his jaw. He'd played a lot of hands, rolled a lot of dice, spun a lot of wheels, and maybe the odds were all stacked on his side, but the stakes had never been higher. He wondered whether she was nervous, the Mayor. No sign of it, standing alone on her balcony bolt upright with the light behind her, that stiff pride of hers showing even at this distance. But she had to be scared. Had to be.

How often had they stood here, after all, glaring across the great divide, planning each other's downfall by every means fair or foul, the number of men they paid to fight for them doubling and doubling again, the stakes swelling ever higher. A hundred murders and stratagems and manoeuvrings and webs of petty alliances broken and re-formed, and it all came down to this.

He slipped into one of his favourite furrows of thought, what to do with the Mayor when he won. Hang her as a warning? Have her stripped naked and beaten through town like a hog? Keep her as his whore? As anyone's? But he knew it was all fancy. He'd given his word she'd be let go and he'd keep it. Maybe folk on the Mayor's side of the street took him for a low bastard and maybe they were right, but all his life he'd kept his word.

It could give you some tough moments, your word. Could force you into places you didn't want to be, could serve you up puzzles where the right path weren't easy to pick. But it wasn't meant to be easy, it was meant to be right. There were too many men always did the easy thing, regardless.

Grega Cantliss, for instance.

Papa Ring looked sourly sideways. Here he was, three days late as always, slumped on Ring's balcony as if he had no bones in him and picking his teeth with a splinter. In spite of a new suit he looked sick and old and had fresh scratches on his face and a stale smell about him. Some men use up fast. But he'd brought what he owed plus a healthy extra for the favour. That was why he was still breathing. Ring had given his word, after all.

The fighters were coming out now with an accompanying rise in the mood of the mob. Golden's big shaved head bobbed above the crowd, a knot of Ring's men around him clearing folks away as they headed for the theatre, old stones lit up orange in the fading light. Ring hadn't mentioned

the woman to Golden. He might be a magician with his fists but that man had a bad habit of getting distracted. So Ring had just told him to let the old man live if he got the chance, and considered that a promise kept. A man's got to keep his word but there has to be some give in it or you'll get nothing done.

He saw Lamb now, coming down the steps of the Mayor's place between the ancient columns, his own entourage of thugs about him. Ring fussed with his ear again. He'd a worry the old Northman was one of those bastards you couldn't trust to do the sensible thing. A right wild card, and Papa Ring liked to know what was in the deck. Specially when the stakes were high as this.

'I don't like the looks of that old bastard,' Cantliss said.

Papa Ring frowned at him. 'Do you know what? Neither do I.'

'You sure Golden'll take him?'

'Golden's taken everyone else, hasn't he?'

'I guess. Got a sad sort o' look to him though, for a winner.'

Ring could've done without this fool picking at his worries. 'That's why I had you steal the woman, isn't it? Just in case.'

Cantliss rubbed at his stubbly jaw. 'Still seems a hell of a risk.'

'One I wouldn't have had to take if you hadn't stole that old bastard's children and sold 'em to the savage.'

Cantliss' head jerked around with surprise.

'I can add two and two,' growled Ring, and felt a shiver like he was dirty and couldn't clean it off. 'How much lower can a man stoop? Selling children?'

Cantliss looked deeply wounded. 'That's so *fucking* unfair! You just said get the money by winter or I'd be a dead man. You didn't concern yourself with the source. You want to give me the money back, free yourself of its base origins?'

Ring looked at the old box on the table, and thought about that bright old gold inside, and frowned back out into the street. He hadn't got where he'd got by giving money back.

'Didn't think so.' Cantliss shook his head like stealing children was a fine business scheme for which he deserved the warmest congratulation. 'How was I to know this old bastard would wriggle out the long grass?'

‘Because,’ said Ring, speaking very slow and cold, ‘you should have learned by now there’s consequences when you *fucking* do a thing, and a man can’t wander through life thinking no further ahead than the end of his cock!’

Cantliss worked his jaw and muttered, ‘So fucking unfair,’ and Ring was forced to wonder when was the last time he’d punched a man in the face. He was sorely, sorely tempted. But he knew it would solve nothing. That’s why he’d stopped doing it and started paying other people to do it for him.

‘Are you a child yourself, to whine about what’s fair?’ he asked. ‘You think it’s fair I have to stand up for a man can’t tell a good hand of cards from a bad but still has to bet an almighty pile of money he don’t have on the outcome? You think it’s fair I have to threaten some girl’s life to make sure of a fight? How does that reflect on me, eh? How’s that for the start of my new era? You think it’s fair I got to keep my word to men don’t care a damn about theirs? Eh? What’s God-fucked fair about all that? Go and get the woman.’

‘Me?’

‘Your bloody mess I’m aiming to clean up, isn’t it? Bring her up here so our friend Lamb can see Papa Ring’s a man of his word.’

‘I might miss the start,’ said Cantliss, like he couldn’t believe he’d be inconvenienced to such an extent by a pair of very likely deaths.

‘You keep talking you’ll be missing the rest of your fucking life, boy. Get the woman.’

Cantliss stomped for the door and Ring thought he heard him mutter, ‘Ain’t fair.’

He gritted his teeth as he turned back towards the theatre. That bastard made trouble everywhere he went and had a bad end coming, and Ring was starting to hope it’d come sooner rather than later. He straightened his cuffs, and consoled himself with the thought that once the Mayor was beaten the bottom would fall right out of the henchman market and he could afford to hire himself a better class of thug. The crowd was falling silent now, and Ring reached for his ear then stopped himself, stifling another swell of nerves. He’d made sure the odds were all stacked on his side, but the stakes had never been higher.

‘Welcome all!’ bellowed Camling, greatly relishing the way his voice echoed to the very heavens, ‘To this, the historic theatre of Crease! In the many centuries since its construction it can rarely have seen so momentous an event as that which will shortly be played out before your fortunate eyes!’

Could eyes be fortunate independently of their owners? This question gave Camling an instant’s pause before he dismissed it. He could not allow himself to be distracted. This was his moment, the torchlit bowl crammed with onlookers, the street beyond heaving with those on tiptoe for a look, the trees on the valley side above even carrying cargoes of intrepid observers in their upper branches, all hanging upon his every word. Noted hotelier he might have been, but he was without doubt a sad loss to the performing arts.

‘A fight, my friends and neighbours, and what a fight! A contest of strength and guile between two worthy champions, to be humbly refereed by myself, Lennart Camling, as a respected neutral party and long-established leading citizen of this community!’

He thought he heard someone call, ‘Cockling!’ but ignored it.

‘A contest to settle a dispute between two parties over a claim, according to mining law—’

‘Get the fuck on with it!’ someone shouted.

There was a scattering of laughs, boos and jeers. Camling gave a long pause, chin raised, and treated the savages to a lesson in cultured gravity. The type of lesson he had been hoping Iosiv Lestek might administer, what a farce *that* had turned out to be. ‘Standing for Papa Ring, a man who needs no introduction—’

‘Why give him one, then?’ More laughter.

‘—who has forged a dread name for himself across the fighting pits, cages and Circles of the Near and Far Countries ever since he left his native North. A man undefeated in twenty-two encounters.

Glama . . . Golden!’

Golden shouldered his way into the Circle, stripped to the waist, his huge body smeared with grease to frustrate an opponent’s grasp, great slabs of muscle glistening white by torchlight and reminding Camling of the giant albino slugs he sometimes saw in his cellar and was irrationally afraid of. With his skull shaved, the Northman’s luxuriant moustache looked even

more of an absurd affectation, but the volume of the crowd's bellows only increased. A breathless frenzy had descended upon them and they no doubt would have cheered an albino slug if they thought it might bleed for their entertainment.

'And, standing for the Mayor, his opponent . . . Lamb.' Much less enthusiastic cheering as the second fighter stepped into the Circle to a last frantic round of betting. He was likewise shaved and greased, his body so covered with a multitude of scars that, even if he had no fame as a fighter, his familiarity with violence was not to be doubted.

Camling leaned close to whisper, 'Just that for a name?'

'Good as another,' said the old Northman, without removing his steady gaze from his opponent. No doubt everyone considered him the underdog. Certainly Camling had almost discounted him until that very moment: the older, smaller, leaner man, the gambler's odds considerably against him, but Camling noticed something in his eye that gave him pause. An eager look, as though he had an awful hunger and Golden was the meal.

The bigger man's face, by contrast, held a trace of doubt as Camling ushered the two together in the centre of the Circle. 'Do I know you?' he called over the baying of the audience. 'What's your real name?'

Lamb stretched his neck out to one side and then the other. 'Maybe it'll come to you.'

Camling held one hand high. 'May the best man win!' he shrieked.

Over the sudden roar he heard Lamb say, 'It's the worst man wins these.'

This would be Golden's last fight. That much he knew.

They circled each other, footwork, footwork, step and shuffle, each feeling out the other, the wild noise of the crowd and their shaken fists and twisted faces pushed off to one side. No doubt they were eager for the fight to start. They didn't realise that oftentimes the fight was won and lost here, in the slow moments before the fighters even touched.

By the dead, though, Golden was tired. Failures and regrets dragging after him like chains on a swimmer, heavier with each day, with each breath. This had to be his last fight. He'd heard the Far Country was a place where men could find their dreams, and come searching for a way to claim back all he'd lost, but this was all he'd found. Glama Golden, mighty War Chief, hero of Ollensand, who'd stood tall in the songs and on the battlefield,

admired and feared in equal measure, rolling in the mud for the amusement of morons.

A tilt of the waist and a dip of the shoulder, a couple of lazy ranging swings, getting the other man's measure. He moved well, this Lamb, whatever his age. He was no stranger to this business – there was a snap and steadiness to his movements and he wasted no effort. Golden wondered what his failures had been, what his regrets. What dream had he come chasing after into this Circle?

'Leave him alive if you can,' Ring had said, which only showed how little he understood in spite of his endless bragging about his word. There were no choices in a fight like this, life and death on the Leveller's scales. There was no place for mercy, no place for doubts. He could see in Lamb's eyes that he knew it, too. Once two men step into the Circle, nothing beyond its edge can matter, past or future. Things fall the way they fall.

Golden had seen enough.

He squeezed his teeth together and rushed across the Circle. The old man dodged well but Golden still caught him by the ear and followed with a heavy left in the ribs, felt the thud right up his arm, warming every joint. Lamb struck back but Golden brushed it off and as quickly as they'd come together they were apart, circling again, watching, a gust swirling around the theatre and dragging out the torch flames.

He could take a punch, this old man, still moving calm and steady, showing no pain. Golden might have to break him down piece by piece, use his reach, but that was well enough. He was warming to the task. His breath came faster and he growled along with it, his face finding a fighting snarl, sucking in strength and pushing out doubt, all his shame and disappointment made tinder for his anger.

Golden slapped his palms together hard, feinted right then hissed as he darted in, faster and sharper than before, catching the old man with two more long punches, bloodying his bent nose, staggering him and dancing away before he could think of throwing back, the stone bowl ringing with encouragements and insults and fresh odds in a dozen languages.

Golden settled to the work. He had the reach and the weight and the youth but he took nothing for granted. He would be cautious. He would make sure.

This would be his last fight, after all.

‘I’m coming, you bastard, I’m coming!’ shouted Pane, hobbling down the hall on his iffy leg.

Bottom of the pile, that’s what he was. But he guessed every pile needs someone on the bottom, and probably he didn’t deserve to be no higher. The door was jolting in its frame from the blows outside. They should’ve had a slot to look through. He’d said that before but no one took no notice. Probably they couldn’t hear him through that heap of folks on top. So he had to wrestle the bolt back and haul the door open a bit to see who was calling.

There was an old drunk outside. Tall and bony with grey hair plastered to one side of his head and big hands flapping and a tattered coat with what looked like old vomit down one side and fresh down the other. ‘I wanna get fucked,’ he said in a voice like rotten wood splitting.

‘Don’t let me stop you.’ And Pane swung the door shut.

The old man wedged a boot in it and the door bounced back open. ‘I wanna get fucked, I says!’

‘We’re closed.’

‘You’re what?’ The old man craned close, most likely deaf as well as drunk.

Pane heaved the door open wider so he could shout it. ‘There’s a fight on, case you didn’t notice. We’re closed!’

‘I did notice and I don’t care a shit. I want fucking and I want it now. I got dust and I heard tell the Whitehouse is never closed to business. Not never.’

‘Shit,’ hissed Pane. That was true. ‘Never closed,’ Papa Ring was always telling ’em. But then they’d been told to be careful, and triple careful today. ‘Be triple careful today,’ Papa had told them all. ‘I can’t stand a man ain’t careful.’ Which had sounded strange, since no one round here was ever the least bit careful.

‘I want a fuck,’ grunted the old man, hardly able to stand up straight, he was that drunk. Pane pitied the girl got that job, he stank like all the shit in Crease. Usually there’d be three guards at the door but the others had all snuck off to watch the fight and left him on his own, bottom of the bloody heap that he was.

He gave a strangled groan of upset, turned to shriek for someone just a little higher up the heap, and to his great and far from pleasant surprise an

arm slipped tight around his neck and a cold point pressed into his throat and he heard the door swing shut behind.

'Where's the woman you took?' The old man's breath stank like a still but his hands were tight as vices. 'Shy South, skinny thing with a big mouth. Where is she?'

'I don't know nothing about no woman,' Pane managed to splutter, trying to say it loud enough to get someone's attention but half-swallowing his words from the pressure.

'Guess I might as well open you up, then.' And Pane felt the point of the knife dig into his jaw.

'Fuck! All right! She's in the cellar!'

'Lead on.' And the old man started moving him. One step, two, and suddenly it just got to Pane what a damn indignity this was on top of everything else, and without thinking he started twisting and thrashing and elbowing away, struggling like this was his moment to get out from under the bottom of that heap and finally be somebody worthy of at least his own respect.

But the old man was made of iron. That knotty hand clamped Pane's windpipe shut so he couldn't make more'n a gurgle and he felt the knife's point burning across his face, right up under his eye.

'Struggle any more and that eye's coming out,' and there was a terrible coldness in the old man's voice froze all the fight right out. 'You're just the fool who opens the door, so I reckon you don't owe Papa Ring too much. He's finished anyway. Take me to the woman and do nothing stupid, you'll live to be the fool who opens someone else's door. Make sense?'

The hand released enough for him to choke, 'Makes sense.' It did make sense, too. That was about as much fight as Pane had showed in his whole life and where'd it got him? He was just the fool who opened the door.

Bottom of the pile.

Golden had bloodied the old man's face up something fierce. Drizzle was streaking through the light about the torches, cool on his forehead but he was hot inside now, doubts banished. He had Lamb's measure and even the blood in his mouth tasted like victory.

This would be his last fight. Back to the North with Ring's money and win back his lost honour and his lost children, cut his revenge out of Cairm

Ironhead and Black Calder, the thought of those hated names and faces bringing up the fury in a sudden blaze.

Golden roared and the crowd roared with him, carried him across the Circle as if on the crest of a wave. The old man pushed away one punch and slipped under another, found a hold on Golden's arm and they slapped and twisted, fingers wriggling for a grip, hands slippery with grease and drizzle, feet shuffling for advantage. Golden strained, and heaved, and finally with a bellow got Lamb off his feet, but the old man hooked his leg as he went down and they crashed together onto the stones, the crowd leaping up in joy as they fell.

Golden was on top. He tried to get a hand around the old man's throat, fumbled with a notch out of his ear, tried to rip at it but it was too slippery, tried to inch his hand up onto Lamb's face so he could get his thumbnail in his eye, the way he had with that big miner back in the spring, and of a sudden his head was dragged down and there was a burning, tugging pain in his mouth. He bellowed and twisted and growled, clawed at Lamb's wrist with his nails and, with a stinging and ripping right through his lip and into his gums he tore himself free and thrashed away.

As Lamb rolled up he saw the old man had yellow hairs caught in one fist and Golden realised he'd torn half his moustache out. There was laughter in the crowd, but all he heard was the laughter years behind him as he trudged from Skarling's Hall and into exile.

The rage came up white-hot and Golden charged in shrieking, no thoughts except the need to smash Lamb apart with his fists. He caught the old man square in the face and sent him staggering right out of the Circle, folk on the front row of stone benches scattering like starlings. Golden came after him, spewing curses, raining blows, fists knocking Lamb left and right like he was made of rags. The old man's hands dropped, face slack, eyes glassy, and Golden knew the moment was come. He stepped in, swinging with all his strength, and landed the father of all punches right on the point of Lamb's jaw.

He watched the old man stumble, fists dangling, waiting for Lamb's knees to buckle so he could spring on top of him and put an end to it.

But Lamb didn't fall. He tottered back a pace or two into the Circle and stood, swaying, blood drooling from his open mouth and his face tipped

into shadow. Then Golden caught something over the thunder of the crowd, soft and low but there was no mistaking it.

The old man was laughing.

Golden stood, chest heaving, legs weak, arms heavy from his efforts, and he felt a chill doubt wash over him because he wasn't sure he could hit a man any harder than that.

'Who are you?' he roared, fists aching like he'd been beating a tree. Lamb gave a smile like an open grave, and stuck out his red tongue, and smeared blood from it across his cheek in long streaks. He held up his left fist and gently uncurled it so he looked at Golden, eyes wide and weeping wet like two black tar-pits, through the gap where his middle finger used to be.

The crowd had fallen eerily quiet, and Golden's doubt turned to a sucking dread because he finally knew the old man's name.

'By the dead,' he whispered, 'it can't be.'

But he knew it was. However fast, however strong, however fearsome you make yourself, there's always someone faster, stronger, more fearsome, and the more you fight the sooner you'll meet him. No one cheats the Great Leveller for ever and now Glama Golden felt the sweat turn cold on him, and the fire inside guttered out and left only ashes.

And he knew this would be his last fight indeed.

'So fucking unfair,' Cantliss muttered to himself.

All that effort spent dragging those mewling brats across the Far Country, all that risk taken bringing 'em to the Dragon People, every bit repaid and interest too and what thanks? Just Papa Ring's endless moaning and another shitty task to get through besides. However hard he worked things never went his way.

'A man just can't get a fair go,' he snapped at nothing, and saying it made his face hurt and he gingerly pressed the scratches and that made his hand hurt and he reflected bitterly on the wrong-headed stupidity of womankind.

'After everything I done for that whore . . .'

That idiot Warp was pretending to read as Cantliss stalked around the corner.

'Get up, idiot!' The woman was still in the cage, still tied and helpless, but she was watching him in a style made him angrier than ever, level and steady like she'd something on her mind other than fear. Like she'd a plan

and he was a piece of it. ‘What d’you think you’re looking at, bitch?’ he snapped.

Clear and cold she said, ‘A fucking coward.’

He stopped short, blinking, hardly able to believe it at first. Even this skinny thing disrespecting him? Even this, who should have been snivelling for mercy? If you can’t get a woman’s respect tying her up and beating her, when can you fucking get it? ‘What?’ he whispered, going cold all over.

She leaned forwards, mocking eyes on him all the way, curled her lips back, pressed her tongue into the gap between her teeth, and with a jerk of her head spat across the cage and through the bars and it spattered against Cantliss’ new shirt.

‘Coward cunt,’ she said.

Taking a telling from Papa Ring was one thing. This was another. ‘Get that cage open!’ he snarled, near choking on fury.

‘Right y’are.’ Warp was fumbling with his ring of keys, trying to find the right one. There were only three on there. Cantliss tore it out of his hand, jammed the key in the lock and ripped back the gate, edge clanging against the wall and taking a chunk out of it.

‘I’ll learn you a fucking lesson!’ he screamed, but the woman watched him still, teeth bared and breathing so hard he could see the specks of spit off her lips. He caught a twisted handful of her shirt, half-lifting her, stitches ripping, and he clamped his other hand around her jaw, crushing her mouth between his fingers like he’d crush her face to pulp and—

Agony lanced up his thigh and he gave a whooping shriek. Another jolt and his leg gave so he tottered against the wall.

‘What you—’ said Warp, and Cantliss heard scuffling and grunting and he twisted around, only just staying on his feet for the pain right up into his groin.

Warp was against the cage, face a picture of stupid surprise, the woman holding him up with one hand and punching him in the gut with the other. With each punch she gave a spitty snort and he gave a cross-eyed gurgle and Cantliss saw she had a knife, strings of blood slopping off it and spattering the floor as she stabbed him. Cantliss realised she’d stabbed him, too, and he gave a whimper of outrage at the hurt and injustice of it, took one hopping step and flung himself at her, caught her around the back and

they tumbled through the cage door and crashed together onto the packed-dirt floor outside, the knife bouncing away.

She was slippery as a trout, though, slithered out on top and gave him a couple of hard punches in the mouth, snapping his head against the ground before he knew where he was. She lunged for the knife but he caught her shirt before she got there and dragged her back, ragged thing ripped half-off, the pair of them wriggling across the dirt floor towards the table, grunting and spitting. She punched him again but it only caught the top of his skull and he tangled his hand in her hair and dragged her head sideways. She squealed and thrashed but he had her now and smacked her skull into the leg of the table, and again, and she went limp long enough for him to drag his weight on top of her, groaning as he tried to use his stabbed leg, all wet and warm now from his leaking blood.

He could hear her breath whooping in her throat as they twisted and strained and she kneed at him but his weight was on her and he finally got his forearm across her neck and started pressing on it, shifted his body and reached out, stretching with his fingers, and gathered in the knife, and he chuckled as his hand closed around it because he knew he'd won.

'Now we'll thucking thee,' he hissed, a bit messed-up with his lips split and swollen, and he lifted the blade so she got a good look at it, her face all pinked from lack of air with bloody hair stuck across it, and her bulging eyes followed the point as she strained at his arm, weaker and weaker, and he brought the knife high, did a couple of fake little stabs to taunt her, enjoying the way her face twitched each time. 'Now we'll thee!' He brought it higher still to do the job for real.

And Cantliss' wrist was suddenly twisted right around and he gasped as he was dragged off her, and as he was opening his mouth something smashed into it and sent everything spinning. He shook his head, could hear the woman coughing what sounded like a long way away. He saw the knife on the ground, reached for it.

A big boot came down and smashed his hand into the dirt floor. Another swung past and its toe flicked the blade away. Cantliss groaned and tried to move his hand but couldn't.

'You want me to kill him?' asked an old man, looking down.

'No,' croaked the girl, stooping for the knife. 'I want to kill him.' And she took a step at Cantliss, spitting blood in his face through the gap between

her teeth.

'No!' he whimpered, trying to scramble back with his useless leg but still with his useless hand pinned under the old man's boot. 'You need me! You want your children back, right? Right?' He saw her face and knew he had a chink to pick at. 'Ain't easy getting up there! I can show you the ways! You need me! I'll help! I'll put it right! Wasn't my fault, it was Ring. He said he'd kill me! I didn't have no choice! You need me!' And he blathered and wept and begged but felt no shame because when he's got no other choice a sensible man begs like a bastard.

'What a thing is this,' muttered the old-timer, lip curled with contempt.

The girl came back from the cage with the rope she'd been bound with. 'Best keep our options open, though.'

'Take him with us?'

She squatted down and gave Cantliss a red smile. 'We can always kill him later.'

Abram Majud was deeply concerned. Not about the result, for that no longer looked in doubt. About what would come after.

With each exchange Golden grew weaker. His face, as far as could be told through the blood and swelling, was a mask of fear. Lamb's smile, by terrible contrast, split wider with every blow given or received. It had become the demented leer of a drunkard, of a lunatic, of a demon, no trace remaining of the man Majud had laughed with on the plains, an expression so monstrous that observers in the front row scrambled back onto the benches behind whenever Lamb lurched close.

The audience was turning almost as ugly as the show. Majud dreaded to imagine the total value of wagers in the balance, and he had already seen fights break out among the spectators. The sense of collective insanity was starting to remind him strongly of a battle – a place he had very much hoped never to visit again – and in a battle he knew there are always casualties.

Lamb sent Golden reeling with a heavy right hand, caught him before he fell, hooked a finger in his mouth and ripped his cheek wide open, blood spotting the nearest onlookers.

'Oh my,' said Curnsbick, watching the fight through his spread fingers.

‘We should go.’ But Majud saw no easy way to manage it. Lamb had hold of Golden’s arm, was wrapping his own around it, forcing him onto his knees, the pinned hand flopping uselessly. Majud heard Golden’s bubbling scream, then the sharp pop as his elbow snapped back the wrong way, skin horribly distended around the joint.

Lamb was on him like a wolf on the kill, giggling as he seized Golden around the throat, arching back and smashing his forehead into his face, and again, and again, the crowd whooping their joy or dismay at the outcome.

Majud heard a wail, saw bodies heaving in the stands, what looked like two men stabbing another. The sky was suddenly lit by a bloom of orange flame, bright enough almost to feel the warmth of. A moment later a thunderous boom shook the arena and terrified onlookers flung themselves down, hands clasped over their heads, screams of bloodlust turned to howls of dismay.

A man staggered into the Circle, clutching at his guts, and fell not far from where Lamb was still intent on smashing Golden’s head apart with his hands. Fire leaped and twisted in the drizzle on Papa Ring’s side of the street. A fellow not two strides away was hit in the head by a piece of debris as he stood and knocked flying.

‘Explosive powder,’ muttered Curnsbick, his eyeglasses alive with the reflections of fire.

Majud seized him by the arm and dragged him along the bench. Between the heaving bodies he could see Lamb’s hacked-out smile lit by one guttering torch, beating someone’s head against one of the pillars with a regular crunch, crunch, the stone smeared black. Majud had a suspicion the victim was Camling. The time for referees was plainly long past.

‘Oh my,’ muttered Curnsbick. ‘Oh my.’

Majud drew his sword. The one General Malzagurt had given him as thanks for saving his life. He hated the damn thing but was glad of it now. Man’s ingenuity has still developed no better tool for getting people out of the way than a length of sharpened steel.

Excitement had devolved into panic with the speed of a mudslide. On the other side of the Circle, the new-built stand was starting to rock alarmingly as people boiled down it, trampling each other in their haste to get away. With a tortured creak the whole structure lurched sideways, buckling, spars

splintering like matchsticks, twisting, falling, people pitching over the poorly made railings and tumbling through the darkness.

Majud dragged Curnsbick through it all, ignoring the fighting, the injured, a woman propped on her elbows staring at the bone sticking out of her leg. It was every man for himself and perhaps, if they were lucky, those closest to him, no choice but to leave the rest to God.

'Oh my,' burbled Curnsbick.

In the street it was no longer like a battle, it was one. People dashed gibbering through the madness, lit by the spreading flames on Ring's side of the street. Blades glinted, men clashed and fell and rolled, floundered in the stream, the sides impossible to guess. He saw someone toss a burning bottle whirling onto a roof where it shattered, curling lines of fire shooting across the thatch and catching hungrily in spite of the wet.

He glimpsed the Mayor, still staring across the maddened street from her balcony. She pointed at something, spoke to a man beside her, calmly directing. Majud acquired the strong impression that she had never intended to sit back and meekly abide by the result.

Arrows flickered in the darkness. One stuck in the mud near them, burning. Majud's ears rang with words screeched in languages he did not know. There was another thunderous detonation and he cowered as timbers spun high, smoke roiling up into the wet sky.

Someone had a woman by the hair, was dragging her kicking through the muck.

'Oh my,' said Curnsbick, over and over.

A hand clutched at Majud's ankle and he struck out with the flat of his sword, tore free and struggled on, not looking back, sticking to the porches of the buildings on the Mayor's side of the street. High above, at the top of the nearest column, three men were silhouetted, two with bows, a third lighting their pitch-soaked arrows so they could calmly shoot them at the houses across the way.

The building with the sign that said *Fuck Palace* was thoroughly ablaze. A woman leaped from the balcony and crumpled in the mud, wailing. Two corpses lay nearby. Four men stood with naked swords, watching. One was smoking a pipe. Majud thought he was a dealer from the Mayor's Church of Dice.

Curnsbick tried to pull his arm free. 'We should—'

‘No!’ snapped Majud, dragging him on. ‘We shouldn’t.’

Mercy, along with all the trappings of civilised behaviour, was a luxury they could ill afford. Majud tore out the key to their shop and thrust it into Curnsbick’s trembling hand while he faced the street, sword up.

‘Oh my,’ the inventor was saying as he struggled with the lock, ‘oh my.’

They spilled inside, into the still safety, the darkness of the shop flickering with slashes of orange and yellow and red. Majud shouldered the door shut, gasped with relief as he felt the latch drop, spun about when he felt a hand on his shoulder and nearly took Temple’s head off with his flailing sword.

‘What the hell’s going on?’ A strip of light wandered across one half of Temple’s stricken face. ‘Who won the fight?’

Majud put the point of his sword on the floor and leaned on the pommel, breathing hard. ‘Lamb tore Golden apart. Literally.’

‘Oh my,’ whimpered Curnsbick, sliding down the wall until his arse thumped against the floor.

‘What about Shy?’ asked Temple.

‘I’ve no idea. I’ve no idea about anything.’ Majud eased the door open a crack to peer out. ‘But I suspect the Mayor is cleaning house.’

The flames on Papa Ring’s side of the street were lighting the whole town in garish colours. The Whitehouse was ablaze to its top floor, fire shooting into the sky, ravenous, murderous, trees burning on the slopes above, ash and embers fluttering in the rain.

‘Shouldn’t we help?’ whispered Temple.

‘A good man of business remains neutral.’

‘Surely there’s a moment to cease being a good man of business, and try to be merely a good man.’

‘Perhaps.’ Majud heaved the door shut again. ‘But this is not that moment.’

Old Friends

‘Well, then!’ shouted Papa Ring, and he swallowed, and he blinked into the sun. ‘Here we are, I guess!’ There was a sheen of sweat across his forehead, but Temple could hardly blame him for that. ‘I haven’t always done right!’ Someone had ripped the ring from his ear and the distorted lobe flopped loose as he turned his head. ‘Daresay most of you won’t miss me none! But I’ve always done my best to keep my word, at least! You’d have to say I always kept my—’

Temple heard the Mayor snap her fingers and her man booted Ring in the back and sent him lurching off the scaffold. The noose jerked tight and he kicked and twisted, rope creaking as he did the hanged man’s dance, piss running from one of his dirty trouser-legs. Little men and big, brave men and cowards, powerful men and meagre, they all hang very much the same. That made eleven of them dangling. Ring, and nine of his henchmen, and the woman who had been in charge of his whores. A half-hearted cheer went up from the crowd, more habit than enthusiasm. Last night’s events had more than satisfied even Crease’s appetite for death.

‘And that’s the end of that,’ said the Mayor under her breath.

‘It’s the end of a lot,’ said Temple. One of the ancient pillars the Whitehouse had stood between had toppled in the heat. The other loomed strangely naked, cracked and soot-blackened, the ruins of the present tangled charred about the ruins of the past. A good half of the buildings on Ring’s side of the street had met the same fate, yawning gaps burned from the jumble of wooden shack and shanty, scavengers busy among the wreckage.

‘We’ll rebuild,’ said the Mayor. ‘That’s what we do. Is that treaty ready yet?’

‘Very nearly done,’ Temple managed to say.

‘Good. That piece of paper could save a lot of lives.’

‘I see that saving lives is our only concern.’ He trudged back up the steps without waiting for a reply. He shed no tears for Papa Ring, but he had no wish to watch him kick any longer.

With a fair proportion of the town’s residents dead by violence, fire or hanging, a larger number run off, a still larger number even now preparing to leave, and most of the rest in the street observing the conclusion of the great feud, the Mayor’s Church of Dice was eerily empty, Temple’s footsteps echoing around the smoke-stained rafters. Dab Sweet, Crying Rock and Corlin sat about one table, playing cards under the vacant gaze of the ancient armour ranged about the walls.

‘Not watching the hanging?’ asked Temple.

Corlin glanced at him out of the corner of her eye and treated him to a hiss of contempt. More than likely she had heard the story of his naked dash across the street.

‘Nearly got hanged myself one time, up near Hope,’ said Sweet. ‘Turned out a misunderstanding, but even so.’ The old scout hooked a finger in his collar and dragged it loose. ‘Strangled my enthusiasm for the business.’

‘Bad luck,’ intoned Crying Rock, seeming to stare straight through her cards, half of which faced in and the other half out. Whether it was the end of Sweet’s enthusiasm, or his near-hanging, or hanging in general that was bad luck she didn’t clarify. She was not a woman prone to clarification.

‘And when there’s death outside is the one time a man can get some room in here.’ Sweet rocked his chair back on two legs and deposited his dirty boot on the table. ‘I reckon this place has turned sour. Soon there’ll be more money in taking folk away than bringing ’em in. Just need to round up a few miserable failures desperate to see civilisation again and we’re on our way back to the Near Country.’

‘Maybe I’ll join you,’ said Temple. A crowd of failures sounded like ideal company for him.

‘Always welcome.’ Crying Rock let fall a card and started to rake in the pot, her face just as slack as if she’d lost. Sweet tossed his hand away in

disgust. ‘Twenty years I been losing to this cheating bloody Ghost and she still pretends she don’t know how to play the game!’

Savian and Lamb stood at the counter, warming themselves at a bottle. Shorn of hair and beard the Northman looked younger, even bigger, and a great deal meaner. He also looked as if he had made every effort to fell a tree with his face. It was a misshapen mass of scab and bruise, a ragged cut across one cheekbone roughly stitched and his hands both wrapped in stained bandages.

‘All the same,’ he was grunting through bloated lips, ‘I owe you big.’

‘Daresay I’ll find a way for you to pay,’ answered Savian. ‘Where d’you stand on politics?’

‘These days, as far away from it as I can . . .’

They shut up tight when they saw Temple. ‘Where’s Shy?’ he asked.

Lamb looked at him, one eye swollen nearly shut and the other infinitely tired. ‘Upstairs in the Mayor’s rooms.’

‘Will she see me?’

‘That’s up to her.’

Temple nodded. ‘You’ve got my thanks as well,’ he said to Savian. ‘For what that’s worth.’

‘We all give what we can.’

Temple wasn’t sure whether that was meant to sting. It was one of those moments when everything stung. He left the two old men and made for the stairs. Behind him he heard Savian mutter, ‘I’m talking about the rebellion in Starikland.’

‘The one just finished?’

‘That and the next one . . .’

He lifted his fist outside the door, and paused. There was nothing to stop him letting it drop and riding straight out of town, to Bermi’s claim, maybe, or even on to somewhere no one knew what a disappointing cock he was. If there was any such place left in the Circle of the World. Before the impulse to take the easy way could overwhelm him, he made himself knock.

Shy’s face looked little better than Lamb’s, scratched and swollen, nose cut across the bridge, neck a mass of bruises. It hurt him to see it. Not as much as if he’d taken the beating, of course. But it hurt still. She didn’t look upset to see him. She didn’t look that interested. She left the door open,

limping slightly, and showed her teeth as she sank down on a bench under the window, bare feet looking very white against the floorboards.

'How was the hanging?' she asked.

He stepped inside and gently pushed the door to. 'Very much like they always are.'

'Can't say I've ever understood their appeal.'

'Perhaps it makes people feel like winners, seeing someone else lose so hard.'

'Losing hard I know all about.'

'Are you all right?'

She looked up and he could hardly meet her eye. 'Bit sore.'

'You're angry with me.' He sounded like a sulking child.

'I'm not. I'm just sore.'

'What good would I have done if I'd stayed?'

She licked at her split lip. 'I daresay you'd just have got yourself killed.'

'Exactly. But instead I ran for help.'

'You ran all right, that I can corroborate.'

'I got Savian.'

'And Savian got me. Just in time.'

'That's right.'

'That's right.' She held her side as she slowly fished up one boot and started to pull it on. 'So I guess what we're saying is, I owe you my life. Thanks, Temple, you're a fucking hero. Next time I see a bare arse vanishing out my window I'll know to just lie back and await salvation.'

They looked at each other in silence, while outside in the street the hanging crowd started to drift away. Then he sank into a chair facing her. 'I'm fucking ashamed of myself.'

'That's a great comfort. I'll use your shame as a poultice on my grazes.'

'I've got no excuse.'

'And yet I feel one's coming.'

His turn to grimace. 'I'm a coward, simple as that. I've been running away so long it's come to be a habit. Not easy, changing old habits. However much we might—'

'Don't bother.' She gave a long, pained sigh. 'I got low expectations. To be fair, you already exceeded 'em once when you paid your debt. So you tend to the cowardly. Who doesn't? You ain't the brave knight and I ain't

the swooning maiden and this ain't no storybook, that's for sure. You're forgiven. You can go your way.' And she waved him out the door with the scabbed back of her hand.

That was closer to forgiveness than he could have hoped for, but he found he was not moving. 'I don't want to go.'

'I'm not asking you to jump again, you can use the stairs.'

'Let me make it right.'

She looked up at him from under her brows. 'We're heading into the mountains, Temple. That bastard Cantliss'll show us where these Dragon People are, and we're going to try and get my brother and sister back, and I can't promise there'll be anything made right at all. A few promises I can make – it'll be hard and cold and dangerous and there won't even be any windows to jump out of. You'll be about as useful there as a spent match, and let's neither one of us offend honesty by pretending otherwise.'

'Please.' He took a wheedling step towards her, 'Please give me one more —'

'Leave me be,' she said, narrowing her eyes at him. 'I just want to sit and hurt in peace.'

So that was all. Maybe he should have fought harder, but Temple had never been much of a fighter. So he nodded at the floor, and quietly shut the door behind him, and went back down the steps, and over to the counter.

'Get what you wanted?' asked Lamb.

'No,' said Temple, spilling a pocketful of coins across the wood. 'What I deserved.' And he started drinking.

He was vaguely aware of the dull thud of hooves out in the street, shouting and the jingle of harness. Some new Fellowship pulling into town. Some new set of forthcoming disappointments. But he was too busy with his own even to bother to look up. He told the man behind the counter to leave the bottle.

This time there was no one else to blame. Not God, not Cosca, certainly not Shy. Lamb had been right. The trouble with running is wherever you run to, there you are. Temple's problem was Temple, and it always had been. He heard heavy footsteps, spurs jingling, calls for drink and women, but he ignored them, inflicted another burning glassful on his gullet, banged it down, eyes watering, reached for the bottle.

Someone else got there first.

‘You’d best leave that be,’ growled Temple.

‘How would I drink it then?’

At the sound of that voice a terrible chill prickled his spine. His eyes crawled to the hand on the bottle – aged, liver-spotted, dirt beneath the cracked nails, a gaudy ring upon the first finger. His eyes crawled past the grubby lacework on the sleeve, up the mud-spotted material, over the breastplate, gilt peeling, up a scrawny neck speckled with rash, and to the face. That awfully familiar, hollowed visage: the nose sharp, the eyes bright, the greyed moustaches waxed to curling points.

‘Oh God,’ breathed Temple.

‘Close enough,’ said Nicomo Cosca, and delivered that luminous smile of which only he was capable, good humour and good intentions radiating from his deep-lined face. ‘Look who it is, boys!’

At least two dozen well-known and deeply detested figures had made their way in after the Old Man. ‘Whatever are the odds?’ asked Brachio, showing his yellow teeth. He had a couple fewer knives in his bandolier than when Temple had left the Company, but was otherwise unchanged.

‘Rejoice, ye faithful,’ rumbled Jubair, quoting scripture in Kantic, ‘for the wanderer returns.’

‘Scouting, were you?’ sneered Dimbik, smoothing his hair down with a licked finger and straightening his sash, which had devolved into a greasy tatter of indeterminate colour. ‘Finding us a path to glory?’

‘Ah, a drink, a drink, a drink . . .’ Cosca took a long and flamboyant swig from Temple’s bottle. ‘Did I not tell you all? Wait long enough and things have a habit of returning to their proper place. Having lost my Company, I was for some years a penniless wanderer, buffeted by the winds of fate, most *roughly* buffeted, Sworbreck, make a note of that.’ The writer, whose hair had grown considerably wilder, clothes shabbier, nostril rims pinker and hands more tremulous since last they met, fumbled for his pencil. ‘But here I am, once more in command of a band of noble fighting men! You will scarcely believe it, but Sergeant Friendly was at one time forced into the criminal fraternity.’ The neckless sergeant hoisted one brow a fraction. ‘But he now stands beside me as the staunch companion he was born to be. And you, Temple? What role could fit your high talents and low character so well as that of my legal advisor?’

Temple hopelessly shrugged. ‘None that I can think of.’

‘Then let us celebrate our inevitable reunion! One for me.’ The Old Man took another hefty swig, then grinned as he poured the smallest dribble of spirit into Temple’s glass. ‘And one for you. I thought you stopped drinking?’

‘It felt like a perfect moment to start again,’ croaked Temple. He had been expecting Cosca to order his death but, almost worse, it appeared the Company of the Gracious Hand would simply reabsorb him without breaking stride. If there was a God, He had clearly taken a set dislike to Temple over the past few years. But Temple supposed he could hardly blame Him. He was coming to feel much the same.

‘Gentlemen, welcome to Crease!’ The Mayor came sweeping through the doorway. ‘I must apologise for the mess, but we have—’ She saw the Old Man and her face drained of all colour. The first time Temple had seen her even slightly surprised. ‘Nicomo Cosca,’ she breathed.

‘None other. You must be the Mayor.’ He stiffly bowed, then looking slyly up added, ‘These days. It is a morning of reunions, apparently.’

‘You know each other?’ asked Temple.

‘Well,’ muttered the Mayor. ‘What . . . astonishing luck.’

‘They do say luck is a woman.’ The Old Man made Temple grunt by poking him in the ribs with the neck of his own bottle. ‘She’s drawn to those who least deserve her!’

Out of the corner of his eye, Temple saw Shy limping down the stairs and over towards Lamb who, along with Savian, was watching the new arrivals in careful silence. Cosca, meanwhile, was strutting to the windows, spurs jingling. He took a deep breath, apparently savouring the odour of charred wood, and started to swing his head gently in time to the creaking of the bodies on their scaffold. ‘I love what you’ve done with the place,’ he called to the Mayor. ‘Very . . . apocalyptic. You make something of a habit of leaving settlements you preside over in smoking ruins.’

Something they had in common, as far as Temple could tell. He realised he was picking at the stitches holding his buttons on and forced himself to stop.

‘Are these gentlemen your whole contingent?’ asked the Mayor, eyeing the filthy, squinting, scratching, spitting mercenaries slouching about her gaming hall.

‘Dear me, no! We lost a few on the way across the Far Country – the inevitable desertions, a round of fever, a little trouble with the Ghosts – but these stalwarts are but a representative sample. I have left the rest beyond the city limits because if I were to bring some three hundred—’

‘Two hundred and sixty,’ said Friendly. The Mayor looked paler yet at the number.

‘Counting Inquisitor Lorsen and his Practicals?’

‘Two hundred and sixty-eight.’ At the mention of the Inquisition, the Mayor’s face had turned positively deathly.

‘If I were to bring two hundred and sixty eight travel-sore fighting men into a place like this, there would, frankly, be carnage.’

‘And not the good sort,’ threw in Brachio, dabbing at his weepy eye.

‘There is a good sort?’ murmured the Mayor.

Cosca thoughtfully worked one moustache-tip between thumb and forefinger. ‘There are . . . *degrees*, anyway. And here he is!’

His black coat was weather-worn, a patchy yellow-grey beard had sprouted from cheeks more gaunt than ever, but Inquisitor Lorsen’s eyes were just as bright with purpose as they had been when the Company left Mulkova. More so, if anything.

‘This is Inquisitor Lorsen.’ Cosca scratched thoughtfully at his rashy neck. ‘My current employer.’

‘An honour.’ Though Temple detected the slightest strain in the Mayor’s voice. ‘If I may ask, what business might his Majesty’s Inquisition have in Crease?’

‘We are hunting escaped rebels!’ called Lorsen to the room at large. ‘Traitors to the Union!’

‘We are far from the Union here.’

The Inquisitor’s smile seemed to chill the whole room. ‘The reach of his Eminence lengthens yearly. Large rewards are being offered for the capture of certain persons. A list will be posted throughout town, at its head the traitor, murderer and chief fomenter of rebellion, Conthus!’

Savian gave vent to a muffled round of coughing and Lamb slapped him on the back, but Lorsen was too busy frowning down his nose at Temple to notice. ‘I see you have been reunited with this slippery liar.’

‘Come now.’ Cosca gave Temple’s shoulder a fatherly squeeze. ‘A degree of slipperiness, and indeed of lying, is a positive boon in a notary. Beneath

it all there has never been a man of such conscience and moral courage. I'd trust him with my life. Or at least my hat.' And he swept it off and hung it over Temple's glass.

'As long as you trust him with none of my business.' Lorsen waved to his Practicals. 'Come. We have questions to ask.'

'He seems charming,' said the Mayor as she watched him leave.

Cosca scratched at his rash again and held up his fingernails to assess the results. 'The Inquisition makes a point of recruiting only the most well-mannered fanatical torturers.'

'And the most foul-mannered old mercenaries too, it would appear.'

'A job is a job. But I have my own reasons for being here also. I came looking for a man called Grega Cantliss.'

There was a long pause as that name settled upon the room like a chilly snowfall.

'Fuck,' he heard Shy breathe.

Cosca looked about expectantly. 'The name is not unknown, then?'

'He has at times passed through.' The Mayor had the air of choosing her words very carefully. 'If you were to find him, what then?'

'Then I and my notary – not to mention my employer the noble Inquisitor Lorsen – could be very much out of your way. Mercenaries have, I am aware, a poor reputation, but believe me when I say we are not here to cause trouble.' He swilled some spirit lazily around in the bottom of the bottle. 'Why, do you have some notion of Cantliss' whereabouts?'

A pregnant silence ensued while a set of long glances were exchanged. Then Lamb slowly lifted his chin. Shy's face hardened. The Mayor graced them with the tiniest apologetic shrug. 'He is chained up in my cellar.'

'Bitch,' breathed Shy.

'Cantliss is ours.' Lamb pushed himself up from the counter and stood tall, bandaged left hand sitting loose on the hilt of his sword.

Several of the mercenaries variously puffed themselves up and found challenging stances of one kind or another, like tomcats opening hostilities in a moonlit alley. Friendly only watched, dead-eyed, dice clicking in his fist as he worked them gently around each other.

'Yours?' asked Cosca.

'He burned my farm and stole my son and daughter and sold 'em to some savages. We've tracked him all the way from the Near Country. He's going

to take us up into the mountains and show us where these Dragon People are.'

The Old Man's body might have stiffened down the years but his eyebrows were still some of the most limber in the world, and they reached new heights now. 'Dragon People, you say? Perhaps we can help each other?'

Lamb glanced about the dirty, scarred and bearded faces. 'Guess you can never have too many allies.'

'Quite so! A man lost in the desert must take such water as he is offered, eh, Temple?'

'Not sure I wouldn't rather go thirsty,' muttered Shy.

'I'm Lamb. That's Shy.' The Northman raised his glass, the stump of his middle finger plainly visible in spite of the bandages.

'A nine-fingered Northman,' mused the captain general. 'I do believe a fellow called Shivers was looking for you in the Near Country.'

'Haven't seen him.'

'Ah.' Cosca waved his bottle at Lamb's injuries. 'I thought perhaps this might be his handiwork.'

'No.'

'You appear to have many enemies, Master Lamb.'

'Sometimes it seems I can't shit without making a couple more.'

'It all depends who you shit on, I suppose? A fearsome fellow, Caul Shivers, and I would not judge the years to have mellowed him. We knew each other back in Styria, he and I. Sometimes I feel I have met everyone in the world and that every new place is peopled with old faces.' His considering gaze came to rest on Savian. 'Although I do not recognise this gentleman.'

'I'm Savian.' And he coughed into his fist.

'And what brings you to the Far Country? Your health?'

Savian paused, mouth a little open, while an awkward silence stretched out, several of the mercenaries still with hands close to weapons, and suddenly Shy said, 'Cantliss took one of his children, too, he's been tracking 'em along with us. Lad called Collem.'

The silence lasted a little longer then Savian added, almost reluctantly, 'My lad, Collem.' He coughed again, and raspingly cleared his throat. 'Hoping Cantliss can lead us to him.'

It was almost a relief to see two of the Mayor's men dragging the bandit across the gaming hall. His wrists were in manacles, his once fine clothes were stained rags and his face as bruised as Lamb's, one hand hanging useless and one leg dragging on the boards behind him.

'The elusive Grega Cantliss!' shouted Cosca as the Mayor's men flung him cringing down. 'Fear not. I am Nicomo Cosca, infamous soldier of fortune, et cetera, et cetera, and I have some questions for you. I advise you to consider your answers carefully as your life may depend upon them, and so forth.'

Cantliss registered Shy, Savian, Lamb and the score or more of mercenaries, and with a coward's instinct Temple well recognised quickly perceived the shift in the balance of power. He eagerly nodded.

'Some months ago you bought some horses in a town called Greyer. You used coins like these.' Cosca produced a tiny gold piece with a magician's flourish. 'Antique Imperial coins, as it happens.'

Cantliss' eyes flickered over Cosca's face as though trying to read a script. 'I did. That's a fact.'

'You bought those horses from rebels, fighting to free Starikland from the Union.'

'I did?'

'You did.'

'I did!'

Cosca leaned close. 'Where did the coins come from?'

'Dragon People paid me with 'em,' said Cantliss. 'Savages in the mountains up beyond Beacon.'

'Paid you for what?'

He licked his scabbed lips. 'For children.'

'An ugly business,' muttered Sworbreck.

'Most business is,' said Cosca, leaning closer and closer towards Cantliss. 'They have more of these coins?'

'All I could ever want, that's what he said.'

'Who said?'

'Waerdinur. He's their leader.'

'All I could ever want.' Cosca's eyes glimmered as brightly as his imagined gold. 'So you are telling me these Dragon People are in league with the rebels?'

‘What?’

‘That these savages are funding, and perhaps harbouring, the rebel leader Conthus himself?’

There was a silence while Cantliss blinked up. ‘Er . . . yes?’

Cosca smiled very wide. ‘Yes. And when my employer Inquisitor Lorsen asks you the same question, what will your answer be?’

Now Cantliss smiled, too, sensing that his chances might have drastically improved. ‘Yes! They got them that Conthus up there, no doubt in my mind! Hell, he’s more’n likely going to use their money to start a new war!’

‘I knew it!’ Cosca poured a measure of spirit into Lamb’s empty glass. ‘We must accompany you into the mountains and pull up this very root of insurrection! This wretched man will be our guide and thereby win his freedom.’

‘Yes, indeed!’ shouted Cantliss, grinning at Shy and Lamb and Savian, then squawking as Brachio hauled him to his feet and manhandled him towards the door, wounded leg dragging.

‘Fuckers,’ whispered Shy.

‘Realistic,’ Lamb hissed at her, one hand on her elbow.

‘What luck for all of us,’ Cosca was expounding, ‘that I should arrive as you prepare to leave!’

‘Oh, I’ve always had the luck,’ muttered Temple.

‘And me,’ murmured Shy.

‘Realistic,’ hissed Lamb.

‘A party of four is easily dismissed,’ Cosca was telling the room. ‘A party of three hundred, so much less easily!’

‘Two hundred and seventy-two,’ said Friendly.

‘If I could have a word?’ Dab Sweet was approaching the counter. ‘You’re planning on heading into the mountains, you’ll need a better scout than that half-dead killer. I stand ready and willing to offer my services.’

‘So generous,’ said Cosca. ‘And you are?’

‘Dab Sweet.’ And the famous scout removed his hat to display his own thinning locks. Evidently he had caught the scent of a more profitable opportunity than shepherding the desperate back to Starikland.

‘The noted frontiersman?’ asked Sworbreck, looking up from his papers. ‘I thought you’d be younger.’

Sweet sighed. ‘I used to be.’

‘You’re aware of him?’ asked Cosca.

The biographer pointed his nose towards the ceiling. ‘A man by the name of Marin Glanhorm – I refuse to use the term writer in relation to him – has penned some most inferior and far-fetched works based upon his supposed exploits.’

‘Those was unauthorised,’ said Sweet. ‘But I’ve exploited a thing or two, that’s true. I’ve trodden on every patch of this Far Country big enough to support a boot, and that includes them mountains.’ He beckoned Cosca closer, spoke softer. ‘Almost as far as Ashranc, where those Dragon People live. Their sacred ground. My partner, Crying Rock, she’s been even further, see . . .’ He gave a showman’s pause. ‘She used to be one of ’em.’

‘True,’ grunted Crying Rock, still occupying her place at the table, though Corlin had vanished leaving only her cards.

‘Raised up there,’ said Sweet. ‘Lived up there.’

‘Born up there, eh?’ asked Cosca.

Crying Rock solemnly shook her head. ‘No one is born in Ashranc.’ And she stuck her dead chagga pipe between her teeth as though that was her last word on the business.

‘She knows the secret ways up there, though, and you’ll need ’em, too, ’cause those Dragon bastards won’t be extending no warm welcomes once you’re on their ground. It’s some strange, sulphurous ground they’ve got but they’re jealous about it as mean bears, that’s the truth.’

‘Then the two of you would be an invaluable addition to our expedition,’ said Cosca. ‘What would be your terms?’

‘We’d settle for a twentieth share of any valuables recovered.’

‘Our aim is to root out rebellion, not valuables.’

Sweet smiled. ‘There’s a risk of disappointment in any venture.’

‘Then welcome aboard! My notary will prepare an agreement!’

‘Two hundred and seventy-four,’ mused Friendly. His dead eyes drifted to Temple. ‘And you.’

Cosca began to slosh out drinks. ‘Why are all the really interesting people always advanced in years?’ He nudged Temple in the ribs. ‘Your generation really isn’t producing the goods.’

‘We cower in giants’ shadows and feel our shortcomings most keenly.’

‘Oh, you’ve been missed, Temple! If I’ve learned one thing in forty years of warfare, it’s that you have to look on the funny side. The tongue on this

man! Conversationally, I mean, not sexually, I can't vouch for that. Don't include that, Sworbreck!' The biographer sullenly crossed something out. 'We shall leave as soon as the men are rested and supplies gathered!'

'Might be best to wait 'til winter's past,' said Sweet.

Cosca leaned close. 'Do you have any notion what will happen if I leave my Company quartered here for four months? The state of the place now barely serves as a taster.'

'You got any notion what'll happen if three hundred men get caught in a real winter storm up there?' grunted Sweet, pulling his fingers through his beard.

'None whatsoever,' said Cosca, 'but I can't wait to find out. We must seize the moment! That has always been my motto. Note that down, Sworbreck.'

Sweet raised his brows. 'Might not be long 'til your motto is, "I can't feel my fucking feet." '

But the captain general was, as usual, not listening. 'I have a premonition we will all find what we seek in those mountains!' He threw one arm about Savian's shoulders and the other about Lamb's. 'Lorsen his rebels, I my gold, these worthy folk their missing children. Let us toast our alliance!' And he raised Temple's nearly empty bottle high.

'Shit on this,' breathed Shy through gritted teeth.

Temple could only agree. But that appeared to be all his say in the matter.

Nowhere to Go

Ro pulled off the chain with the dragon's scale and laid it gently on the furs. Shy once told her you can waste your life waiting for the right moment. Now was good as any.

She touched Pit's cheek in the dark and he stirred, the faintest smile on his face. He was happy here. Young enough to forget, maybe. He'd be safe, or safe as he could be. In this world there are no certainties. Ro wished she could say goodbye but she was worried he'd cry. So she gathered her bundle and slipped out into the night.

The air was sharp, snow gently falling but melting as soon as it touched the hot ground and dry a moment later. Light spilled from some of the houses, windows needing neither glass nor shutter cut from the mountain or from walls so old and weathered Ro couldn't tell them from the mountain. She kept to the shadows, rag-wrapped feet silent on the ancient paving, past the great black cooking slab, surface polished to a shine by the years, steam whispering from it as the snow fell.

The Long House door creaked as she passed and she pressed herself against the pitted wall, waiting. Through the window she could hear the voices of the elders at their Gathering. Three months here and she already knew their tongue.

'The Shanka are breeding in the deeper tunnels.' Uto's voice. She always counselled caution.

'Then we must drive them out.' Akosh. She was always bold.

'If we send enough for that there will be few left behind. One day men will come from outside.'

'We put them off in the place they call Beacon.'

‘Or we made them curious.’

‘Once we wake the Dragon it will not matter.’

‘It was given to me to make the choice.’ Waerdinur’s deep voice. ‘The Maker did not leave our ancestors here to let his works fall into decay. We must be bold. Akosh, you will take three hundred of us north into the deep places and drive out the Shanka, and keep the diggings going over winter. After the thaw you will return.’

‘I worry,’ said Uto. ‘There have been visions.’

‘You always worry . . .’

Their words faded into the night as Ro padded past, over the great sheets of dulled bronze where the names were chiselled in tiny characters, thousands upon thousands stretching back into the fog of ages. She knew Icaray was on guard tonight and guessed he would be drunk, as always. He sat in the archway, head nodding, spear against the wall, empty bottle between his feet. The Dragon People were just people, after all, and each had their failings like any other.

Ro looked back once and thought how beautiful it was, the yellow-lit windows in the black cliff-face, the dark carvings on the steep roofs against a sky blazing with stars. But it wasn’t her home. She wouldn’t let it be. She scurried past Icaray and down the steps, hand brushing the warm rock on her right because on her left, she knew, was a hundred strides of empty drop.

She came to the needle and found the hidden stair, striking steeply down the mountainside. It scarcely looked hidden at all but Waerdinur had told her that it had a magic, and no one could see it until they were shown it. Shy had always told her there were no such things as Magi or demons and it was all stories, but out here in this far, high corner of the world all things had their magic. To deny it felt as foolish as denying the sky.

Down the winding stair, switching back and forth, away from Ashranc, the stones growing colder underfoot. Into the forest, great trees on the bare slopes, roots catching at her toes and tangling at her ankles. She ran beside a sulphurous stream, bubbling through rocks crusted with salt. She stopped when her breath began to smoke, the cold biting in her chest, and she bound her feet more warmly, unrolled the fur and wrapped it around her shoulders, ate and drank, tied her bundle and hurried on. She thought of Lamb plodding endlessly behind his plough and Shy swinging the scythe sweat

dripping from her brows and saying through her gritted teeth, *You just keep on. Don't think of stopping. Just keep on*, and Ro kept on.

The snow had settled in slow melting patches here, the branches dripping tap, tap and how she wished she had proper boots. She heard wolves sorrowful in the high distance and ran faster, her feet wet and her legs sore, downhill, downhill, clambering over jagged rock and sliding in scree, checking with the stars the way Gully taught her once, sitting out beside the barn in the dark of night when she couldn't sleep.

The snow had stopped falling but it was drifted deep now, sparkling as dawn came fumbling through the forest, her feet crunching, her face prickling with the cold. Ahead the trees began to thin and she hurried on, hoping perhaps to look out upon fields or flower-filled valleys or a merry township nestled in the hills.

She burst out at the edge of a dizzy cliff and stared far over high and barren country, sharp black forest and bare black rock slashed and stabbed with white snow fading into long grey rumour without a touch of people or colour. No hint of the world she had known, no hope of deliverance, no heat now from the earth beneath and all was cold inside and out and Ro breathed into her trembling hands and wondered if this was the end of the world.

'Well met, daughter.' Waerdinur sat cross-legged behind her, his back against a tree-stump, his staff, or his spear – Ro still was not sure which it was – in the crook of one arm. 'Do you have meat there in your bundle? I was not prepared for a journey and you have led me quite a chase.'

In silence she gave him a strip of meat and sat down beside him and they ate and she found she was very glad he had come.

After a time he said, 'It can be difficult to let go. But you must see the past is done.' And he pulled out the dragon scale that she had left behind and put the chain around her neck and she did not try to stop him.

'Shy'll be coming . . .' But her voice sounded tiny, thinned by the cold, muffled in the snow, lost in the great emptiness.

'It may be so. But do you know how many children have come here in my lifetime?'

Ro said nothing.

'Hundreds. And do you know how many families have come to claim them?'

Ro swallowed, and said nothing.

‘None.’ Waerdinur put his great arm around her and held her tight and warm. ‘You are one of us now. Sometimes people choose to leave us. Sometimes they are made to. My sister was. If you really wish to go, no one will stop you. But it is a long, hard way, and to what? The world out there is a red country, without justice, without meaning.’

Ro nodded. That much she’d seen.

‘Here life has purpose. Here we need you.’ He stood and held out his hand. ‘Can I show you a wondrous thing?’

‘What thing?’

‘The reason why the Maker left us here. The reason we remain.’

She took his hand and he hoisted her up easily onto his shoulders. She put her palm on the smooth stubble of his scalp and said, ‘Can we shave my head tomorrow?’

‘Whenever you are ready.’ And he set off up the hillside the way she had come, retracing her footprints through the snow.

IV
DRAGONS

'There are many humorous things in the world,
among them the white man's notion that he
is less savage than the other savages.'

Mark Twain

In Threes

‘Fuck, it’s cold,’ whispered Shy.

They’d found a shred of shelter wedged in a hollow among frozen tree-roots, but when the wind whipped up it was still like a slap in the face, and even with a piece of blanket double-wrapped around her head so just her eyes showed, it left Shy’s face red and stinging as a good slapping might’ve. She lay on her side, needing a piss but hardly daring to drop her trousers in case she ended up with a yellow icicle stuck to her arse to add to her discomforts. She dragged her coat tight around her shoulders, then the frost-crusted wolfskin Sweet had given her tight around that, wriggled her numb toes in her icy boots and pressed her dead fingertips to her mouth so she could make the most of her breath while she still had some.

‘Fuck, it’s cold.’

‘This is nothing,’ grunted Sweet. ‘Got caught in drifts one time in the mountains near Hightower for two months. So cold the spirits froze in the bottles. We had to crack the glass off and pass the booze around in lumps.’

‘Shhh,’ murmured Crying Rock, faintest puff of smoke spilling from her blued lips. ’Til that moment Shy had been wondering whether she’d frozen to death hours before with her pipe still clamped in her mouth. She’d scarcely even blinked all morning, staring through the brush they’d arranged the previous night as cover and down towards Beacon.

Not that there was much to see. The camp looked dead. Snow in the one street was drifted up against doors, thick on roofs toothed with glinting icicles, pristine but for the wandering tracks of one curious wolf. No smoke from the chimneys, no light from the frozen flaps of the half-buried tents. The old barrows were just white humps. The broken tower which in some

forgotten past must've held the beacon the place was named for held nothing but snow now. Aside from wind sad in the mangy pines and making a shutter somewhere tap, tap, tap, the place was silent as Juvens' grave.

Shy had never been much for waiting, that wasn't news, but lying up here in the brush and watching reminded her too much of her outlaw days. On her belly in the dust with Jeg chewing and chewing and spitting and chewing in her ear and Neary sweating an inhuman quantity of salt water, waiting for travellers way out of luck to pass on the road below. Pretending to be the outlaw, Smoke, half-crazy with meanness, when what she really felt like was a painfully unlucky little girl, half-crazy with constant fear. Fear of those chasing her and fear of those with her and fear of herself most of all. No clue what she'd do next. Like some hateful lunatic might seize her hands and her mouth and use them like a puppet any moment. The thought of it made her want to wriggle out of her own sore skin.

'Be still,' whispered Lamb, motionless as a felled tree.

'Why? There's no one bloody here, place is dead as a—'

Crying Rock raised one gnarled finger, held it in front of Shy's face, then gently tilted it to point towards the treeline on the far side of the camp.

'You see them two big pines?' whispered Sweet. 'And them three rocks like fingers just between? That's where the hide is.'

Shy stared at that colourless tangle of stone and snow and timber until her eyes ached. Then she caught the faintest twitch of movement.

'That's one of them?' she breathed.

Crying Rock held up two fingers.

'They go in pairs,' said Sweet.

'Oh, she's good,' whispered Shy, feeling a proper amateur in this company.

'The best.'

'How do we flush 'em out?'

'They'll flush 'emselves out. Long as that drunk madman Cosca comes through on his end of it.'

'Far from a certainty,' muttered Shy. In spite of Cosca's talk about haste his Company had loitered around Crease like flies around a turd for a whole two weeks to resupply, which meant to cause every kind of unsavoury chaos and steadily desert. They'd taken even longer slogging across the few dozen miles of high plateau between Crease and Beacon as the weather

turned steadily colder, a good number of Crease's most ambitious whores, gamblers and merchants straggling after in hopes of wrenching free any money the mercenaries had somehow left unspent. All the while the Old Man smiled upon this tardy shambles like it was exactly the plan discussed, spinning far-fetched yarns about his glorious past for the benefit of his idiot biographer. 'Seems to me talk and action have come properly uncoupled for that bastard—'

'Shhh,' hissed Lamb.

Shy pressed herself against the dirt as a gang of outraged crows took off clattering into the frozen sky below. Shouting drifted deadened on the wind, then the rattle of gear, then horsemen came into view. Twenty or more, floundering up through the snow drifted in the valley and making damned hard work of it, dipping and bobbing, riders slapping at their mounts' steaming flanks to keep them on.

'The drunk madman comes through,' muttered Lamb.

'This time.' Shy had a strong feeling Cosca didn't make a habit of it.

The mercenaries dismounted and spread out through the camp, digging away at doorways and windows, ripping open tents with canvas frozen stiff as wood, raising a whoop and a clamour which in that winter deadness sounded noisy as the battle at the end of time. That these scum were on her side made Shy wonder whether she was on the right side, but she was where she was. Making the best from different kinds of shit was the story of her life.

Lamb touched her arm and she followed his finger to the hide, caught a dark shape flitting through the trees behind it, keeping low, quickly vanished among the tangle of branch and shadow.

'There goes one,' grunted Sweet, not keeping his voice so soft now the mercenaries were raising hell. 'Any luck, that one'll run right up to their hidden places. Right up to Ashranc and tell the Dragon People there's twenty horsemen in Beacon.'

'When strong seem weak,' muttered Lamb, 'when weak seem strong.'

'What about the other one?' asked Shy.

Crying Rock tucked away her pipe and produced her beaked club, as eloquent an answer as was called for, then slipped limber as a snake around the tree she had her back to and into cover.

‘To work,’ said Sweet, and started to wriggle after her, a long stretch faster than Shy had ever seen him move standing. She watched the two old scouts crawl between the black tree-trunks, through the snow and the fallen pine needles, working their way towards the hide and out of sight.

She was left shivering on the frozen dirt next to Lamb, and waiting some more.

Since Crease he’d stuck to shaving his head and it was like he’d shaved all sentiment off, too, hard lines and hard bones and hard past laid bare. The stitches had been pulled with the point of Savian’s knife and the marks of the fight with Glama Golden were fast fading, soon to be lost among all the rest. A lifetime of violence written so plain into that beaten anvil of a face she’d no notion how she never read it there before.

Hard to believe how easy it had been to talk to him once. Or talk at him, at least. Good old cowardly Lamb, he’ll never surprise you. Safe and comfortable as talking to herself. Now there was a wider and more dangerous gulf between them each day. So many questions swimming round her head but now she finally got her mouth open, the one that dropped out she hardly cared about the answer to.

‘Did you fuck the Mayor, then?’

Lamb left it long enough to speak, she thought he might not bother. ‘Every which way and I don’t regret a moment.’

‘I guess a fuck can still be a wonderful thing between folk who’ve reached a certain age.’

‘No doubt. Specially if they didn’t get many beforehand.’

‘Didn’t stop her knifing you in the back soon as it suited her.’

‘Get many promises from Temple ’fore he jumped out your window?’

Shy felt the need for a pause of her own. ‘Can’t say I did.’

‘Huh. I guess fucking someone don’t stop them fucking you.’

She gave a long, cold, smoking sigh. ‘For some of us it only seems to increase the chances . . .’

Sweet came trudging from the pines near the hide, ungainly in his swollen fur coat, and waved up. Crying Rock followed and bent down, cleaning her club in the snow, leaving the faintest pink smear on the blank white.

‘I guess that’s it done,’ said Lamb, wincing as he clambered up to a squat.

‘I guess.’ Shy hugged herself tight, too cold to feel much about it but cold. She turned, first time she’d looked at him since they started speaking. ‘Can

I ask you a question?'

The jaw muscles worked on the side of his head. 'Sometimes ignorance is the sweetest medicine.' He turned this strange, sick, guilty look on her, like a man who's been caught doing murder and knows the game's all up. 'But I don't know how I'd stop you.' And she felt worried to the pit of her stomach and could hardly bring herself to speak, but couldn't stand to stay silent either.

'Who are you?' she whispered. 'I mean . . . who were you? I mean—shit.'

She caught movement – a figure flitting through the trees towards Sweet and Crying Rock.

'Shit!' And she was running, stumbling, blundering, snagged a numb foot at the edge of the hollow and went tumbling through the brush, floundered up and was off across the bare slope, legs so caught in the virgin snow it felt like she was dragging two giant stone boots after her.

'Sweet!' she wheezed. The figure broke from the trees and over the unspoiled white towards the old scout, hint of a snarling face, glint of a blade. No way Shy could get there in time. Nothing she could do.

'Sweet!' she wailed one more time, and he looked up, smiling, then sideways, eyes suddenly wide, shrinking away as the dark shape sprang for him. It twisted in the air, fell short and went tumbling through the snow. Crying Rock rushed up and hit it over the head with her club. Shy heard the sharp crack a moment after.

Savian pushed some branches out of his way and trudged through the snow towards them, frowning at the trees and calmly cranking his flatbow.

'Nice shot,' called Crying Rock, sliding her club into her belt and jamming that pipe between her teeth.

Sweet pushed back his hat. 'Nice shot, she says! I've damn near shat myself.'

Shy stood with her hands on her hips and tried to catch her smoking breath, chest on fire from the icy coldness of it.

Lamb walked up beside her, sheathing his sword. 'Looks like they sometimes go in threes.'

Among the Barbarians

‘They hardly look like demons.’ Cosca nudged the Dragon Woman’s cheek with his foot and watched her bare-shaved head flop back. ‘No scales. No forked tongues. No flaming breath. I feel a touch let down.’

‘Simple barbarians,’ grunted Jubair.

‘Like the ones out on the plains.’ Brachio took a gulp of wine and peered discerningly at the glass. ‘A step above animals and not a high step.’

Temple cleared his sore throat. ‘No barbarian’s sword.’ He squatted down and turned the blade over in his hands: straight, and perfectly balanced, and meticulously sharpened.

‘These ain’t no common Ghosts,’ said Sweet. ‘They ain’t really Ghosts at all. They aim to kill and know how. They don’t scare at nothing and know each rock o’ this country, too. They did for every miner in Beacon without so much as a struggle.’

‘But clearly they bleed.’ Cosca poked his finger into the hole made by Savian’s flatbow bolt and pulled it out, fingertip glistening red. ‘And clearly they die.’

Brachio shrugged. ‘Everyone bleeds. Everyone dies.’

‘Life’s one certainty,’ rumbled Jubair, rolling his eyes towards the heavens. Or at least the mildewed ceiling.

‘What is this metal?’ Sworbreck pulled an amulet from the Dragon Woman’s collar, a grey leaf dully gleaming in the lamplight. ‘It is very thin but . . .’ He bared his teeth as he strained at it. ‘I cannot bend it. Not at all. The workmanship is remarkable.’

Cosca turned away. ‘Steel and gold are the only metals that interest me. Bury the bodies away from the camp. If I’ve learned one thing in forty

years of warfare, Sworbreck, it's that you have to bury the bodies far from camp.' He drew his cloak tight at the icy blast as the door was opened. 'Damn this cold.' Hunched jealously over the fire, he looked like nothing so much as an old witch over her cauldron, thin hair hanging lank, grasping hands like black claws against the flames. 'Reminds me of the North, and that can't be a good thing, eh, Temple?'

'No, General.' Being reminded of any moment in the past ten years was no particularly good thing in Temple's mind – the whole a desert of violence, waste and guilt. Except, perhaps, gazing out over the free plains from his saddle. Or down on Crease from the frame of Majud's shop. Or arguing with Shy over their debt. Dancing, pressed tight against her. Leaning to kiss her, and her smile as she leaned to kiss him back . . . He shook himself. All thoroughly, irredeemably fucked. Truly, you never value what you have until you jump out of its window.

'That cursed retreat.' Cosca was busy wrestling with his own failures. There were enough of them. 'That damned snow. That treacherous bastard Black Calder. So many good men lost, eh, Temple? Like . . . well . . . I forget the names, but my point holds.' He turned to call angrily over his shoulder. 'When you said "fort" I was expecting something more . . . substantial.'

Beacon's chief building was, in fact, a large log cabin on one and a half floors, separated into rooms by hanging animal skins and with a heavy door, narrow windows, access to the broken tower in one corner and a horrifying array of draughts.

Sweet shrugged. 'Standards ain't high in the Far Country, General. Out here you put three sticks together, it's a fort.'

'I suppose we must be glad of the shelter we have. Another night in the open you'd have to wait for spring to thaw me out. How I long for the towers of beautiful Visserine! A balmy summer night beside the river! The city was mine, once, you know, Sworbreck?'

The writer winced. 'I believe you have mentioned it.'

'Nicomo Cosca, Grand Duke of Visserine!' The Old Man paused to take yet another swig from his flask. 'And it shall be mine again. My towers, my palace, and my respect. I have been often disappointed, that's true. My back is a tissue of metaphorical scars. But there is still time, isn't there?'

‘Of course.’ Sworbreck gave a false chuckle. ‘You have many successful years ahead of you, I’m sure!’

‘Still a little time to make things right . . .’ Cosca was busy staring at the wrinkled back of his hand, wincing as he worked the knobbly fingers. ‘I used to be a wonder with a throwing knife, you know, Sworbreck. I could bring down a fly at twenty paces. Now?’ He gave vent to an explosive snort. ‘I can scarcely see twenty paces on a clear day. That’s the most wounding betrayal of all. The one by your own flesh. Live long enough, you see everything ruined . . .’

The next whirlwind heralded Sergeant Friendly’s arrival, blunt nose and flattened ears slightly pinked but otherwise showing no sign of discomfort at the cold. Sun, rain or tempest all seemed one to him.

‘The last stragglers are into camp along with the Company’s baggage,’ he intoned.

Brachio poured himself another drink. ‘Hangers-on swarm to us like maggots to a corpse.’

‘I am not sure I appreciate the image of our noble brotherhood as a suppurating carcass,’ said Cosca.

‘However accurate it may be,’ murmured Temple.

‘Who made it all the way here?’

Friendly began the count. ‘Nineteen whores and four pimps—’

‘They’ll be busy,’ said Cosca.

‘—twenty-two wagon-drivers and porters including the cripple Hedges, who keeps demanding to speak to you—’

‘Everyone wants a slice of me! You’d think I was a feast-day currant cake!’

‘—thirteen assorted merchants, pedlars and tinkers, six of whom complain of having been robbed by members of the Company—’

‘I consort with criminals! I was a Grand Duke, you know. So many disappointments.’

‘—two blacksmiths, a horse trader, a fur trader, an undertaker, a barber boasting of surgical qualifications, a pair of laundry women, a vintner with no stock, and seventeen persons of no stated profession.’

‘Vagrants and layabouts hoping to grow fat on my crumbs! Is there no honour left, Temple?’

‘Precious little,’ said Temple. Certainly his own stock was disgracefully meagre.

‘And is Superior Pike’s . . .’ Cosca leaned close to Friendly and after taking another swallow from his flask whispered, entirely audibly, ‘*secret wagon* in the camp?’

‘It is,’ said Friendly.

‘Place it under guard.’

‘What’s in it, anyway?’ asked Brachio, wiping some damp from his weepy eye with a fingernail.

‘Were I to share that information, it would no longer be a secret wagon, merely . . . a wagon. I think we can agree that lacks mystique.’

‘Where will all this flotsam find shelter?’ Jubair wished to know. ‘There is hardly room for the fighting men.’

‘What of the barrows?’ asked the Old Man.

‘Empty,’ said Sweet. ‘Robbed centuries ago.’

‘I daresay they’ll warm up something snug. The irony, eh, Temple? Yesterday’s heroes kicked from their graves by today’s whores!’

‘I thrill to the profundity,’ muttered Temple, shivering at the thought of sleeping in the dank innards of those ancient tombs, let alone fucking in them.

‘Not wanting to spoil your preparations, General,’ said Sweet, ‘but I’d best be on my way.’

‘Of course! Glory is like bread, it stales with time! Was it Farans who said so, or Stolicus? What is your plan?’

‘I’m hoping that scout’ll run straight back and tell his Dragon friends there’s no more’n twenty of us down here.’

‘The best opponent is one befuddled and mystified! Was that Farans? Or Bialoveld?’ Cosca treated Sworbreck, busy with his notebooks, to a contemptuous glare. ‘One *writer* is very much like another. You were saying?’

‘Reckon they’ll set to wondering whether to stay tucked up at Ashranc and ignore us, or come down and wipe us out.’

‘They’ll trip over a shock if they try it,’ said Brachio, jowls wobbling as he chuckled.

‘That’s just what we want ’em to do,’ said Sweet. ‘But they ain’t prone to come down without good reason. A little trespass on their ground should

hook ’em. Prickly as all hell about their ground. Crying Rock knows the way. She knows secret ways right into Ashranc, but that’s a hell of a risk. So all we do is creep up there and leave some sign they won’t miss. A burned-out fire, some nice clear tracks across their road—’

‘A turd,’ said Jubair, pronouncing the word as solemnly as a prophet’s name.

Cosca raised his flask. ‘Marvellous! Lure them with a turd! I’m reasonably sure Stolicus never recommended *that*, eh, Temple?’

Brachio squeezed his big lower lip thoughtfully between finger and thumb. ‘You’re sure they’ll fall for this turd trap?’

‘They’ve been the big dogs around here for ever,’ said Sweet. ‘They’re used to slaughtering Ghosts and scaring off prospectors. All that winning’s made ’em arrogant. Set in old ways. But they’re dangerous, still. You’d best be good and ready. Don’t reel ’em in ’til they’ve swallowed the hook.’

Cosca nodded. ‘Believe me when I say I have stood at both ends of an ambush and fully understand the principles. What would be your opinion of this scheme, Master Cantliss?’

The wretched bandit, his clothes splitting at the seams and stuffed with straw against the cold, had until then been sitting in the corner of the room nursing his broken hand and quietly sniffling. He perked up at the sound of his name and nodded vigorously, as though his support might be help to any cause. ‘Sounds all right. They think they own these hills, that I can chime with. And that Waerdinur killed my friend Blackpoint. Snuffed him out casual as you please. Can I . . .’ licking his scabbed lips and reaching towards Cosca’s flask.

‘Of course,’ said Cosca, draining it, upending it to show it was empty, then shrugging. ‘Captain Jubair has picked out eight of his most competent men to accompany you.’

Sweet looked less than reassured as he gave the hulking Kantic a sidelong glance. ‘I’d rather stick with folks I know I can count on.’

‘So would we all, but are there truly any such in life, eh, Temple?’

‘Precious few.’ Temple certainly would not have counted himself among their number, nor anyone else currently in the room.

Sweet affected an air of injured innocence. ‘You don’t trust us?’

‘I have been often disappointed by human nature,’ said Cosca. ‘Ever since Grand Duchess Sefeline turned on me and poisoned my favourite mistress I

have tried never to encumber working relationships with the burden of trust.'

Brachio gave vent to a long burp. 'Better to watch each other carefully, stay well armed and mutually suspicious, and keep our various self-interests as the prime motives.'

'Nobly said!' And Cosca slapped his thigh. 'Then, like a knife in the sock, we make trust our secret weapon in the event of emergencies.'

'I tried a knife in the sock,' muttered Brachio, patting the several he had stowed in his bandolier. 'Chafed terribly.'

'Shall we depart?' rumbled Jubair. 'Time is wasting, and there is God's work to be done.'

'There's work, anyway,' said Sweet, pulling the collar of his big fur coat up to his ears as he ducked out into the night.

Cosca tipped up his flask, realised it was empty and held it aloft for a refill. 'Bring me more spirit! And Temple, come, talk to me as you used to! Offer me comfort, Temple, offer me advice.'

Temple took a long breath. 'I'm not sure what advice I can offer. We're far beyond the reach of the law out here.'

'I don't speak of the law, man, but of the righteous path! Thank you.' This as Sergeant Friendly began to decant a freshly opened bottle into Cosca's waving flask with masterful precision. 'I feel I am adrift upon strange seas and my moral compass spins entirely haywire! Find me an ethical star to steer by, Temple! What of God, man, what of God?'

'I fear we may be far beyond the reach of God as well,' muttered Temple as he made for the door. Hedges limped in as he opened it, clutching tight to his ruin of a hat and looking sicker than ever, if that was possible.

'Who's this now?' demanded Cosca, peering into the shadows.

'The name's Hedges, Captain General, sir, one of the drovers from Crease. Injured at Osrung, sir, leading a charge.'

'The very reason charges are best left led by others.'

Hedges sidled past into the room, eyes nervously darting. 'Can't say I disagree, sir. Might I have a moment?' Grateful for the distraction, Temple slipped out into the bitter darkness.

In the camp's one street, secrecy did not seem a prime concern. Men swathed in coats and furs, swaddled in torn-up blankets and mismatched armour stomped cursing about, churning the snow to black slush, holding

rustling torches high, dragging reluctant horses, unloading boxes and barrels from listing wagons, breath steaming from wrappings around their faces.

'Might I accompany you?' asked Sworbreck, threading after Temple through the chaos.

'If you're not scared my luck will rub off.'

'It could be no worse than mine,' lamented the biographer.

They passed a group huddled in a hut with one missing wall, playing dice for bedding, a man sharpening blades at a shrieking grindstone, sparks showering into the night, three women arguing over how best to get a cook-fire started. None had the answer.

'Do you ever feel . . .' Sworbreck mused, face squashed down for warmth into the threadbare collar of his coat, 'as though you have somehow blundered into a situation you never intended to be in, but now cannot see your way clear of?'

Temple looked sidelong at the writer. 'Lately, every moment of every day.'

'As if you were being punished, but you were not sure what for.'

'I know what for,' muttered Temple.

'I don't belong here,' said Sworbreck.

'I wish I could say the same. But I fear that I do.'

Snow had been dug away from one of the barrows and torchlight flickered in its moss-caked archway. One of the pimps was busy hanging a worn hide at the entrance of another, a disorderly queue already forming outside. A shivering pedlar had set up shop between the two, offering belts and boot-polish to the heedless night. Commerce never sleeps.

Temple caught Inquisitor Lorsen's grating tones emerging from a cabin's half-open door, '. . . Do you really believe there are rebels in these mountains, Dimbik?'

'Belief is a luxury I have not been able to afford for some time, Inquisitor. I simply do as I'm told.'

'But by whom, Captain, by whom is the question. I, after all, have the ear of Superior Pike, and the Superior has the ear of the Arch Lector himself, and a recommendation from the Arch Lector . . .' His scheming was lost in the babble.

In the darkness at the edge of the camp, Temple's erstwhile fellows were already mounting up. It had begun to snow again, white specks gently settling on the manes of the horses, on Crying Rock's grey hair and the old flag it was bound up with, across Shy's shoulders, hunched as she steadfastly refused to look over, on the packages Lamb was busy stowing on his horse.

'Coming with us?' asked Savian as he watched Temple approach.

'My heart is willing but the rest of me has the good sense to politely decline.'

'Crying Rock!' Sworbreck produced his notebook with a flourish. 'It is a most intriguing name!'

She stared down at him. 'Yes.'

'I daresay an intriguing story lies behind it.'

'Yes.'

'Would you care to share it?'

Crying Rock slowly rode off into the gathering darkness.

'I'd call that a no,' said Shy.

Sworbreck sighed. 'A writer must learn to flourish on scorn. No passage, sentence or even word can be to the taste of *every* reader. Master Lamb, have you ever been interviewed by an author?'

'We've run across just about every other kind of liar,' said Shy.

The biographer persisted. 'I've heard it said that you have more experience of single combat than any man alive.'

Lamb pulled the last of the straps tight. 'You believe everything you hear?'

'Do you deny it, then?'

Lamb did not speak.

'Have you any insights into the deadly business, for my readers?'

'Don't do it.'

Sworbreck stepped closer. 'But is it true what General Cosca tells me?'

'From what I've seen, I wouldn't rate him the yardstick of honesty.'

'He told me you were once a king.'

Temple raised his brows. Sweet cleared his throat. Shy burst out laughing, but then she saw Lamb wasn't, and trailed off.

'He told me you were champion to the King of the Northmen,' continued Sworbreck, 'and that you won ten duels in the Circle in his name, were

betrayed by him but survived, and finally killed him and took his place.'

Lamb dragged himself slowly up into his saddle and frowned off into the night. 'Men put a golden chain on me for a while, and knelt, because it suited 'em. In violent times folk like to kneel to violent men. In peaceful times they remember they're happier standing.'

'Do you blame them?'

'I'm long past blaming. That's just the way men are.' Lamb looked over at Temple. 'Can we count on your man Cosca, do you reckon?'

'Absolutely not,' said Temple.

'Had a feeling you'd say that.' And Lamb nudged his horse uphill into the darkness.

'And they say I've got stories,' grumbled Sweet as he followed.

Sworbreck stared after them for a moment, then fumbled out his pencil and began to scratch feverishly away.

Temple met Shy's eye as she turned her mount. 'I hope you find them!' he blurted. 'The children.'

'We will. Hope you find . . . whatever you're looking for.'

'I think I did,' he said softly. 'And I threw it away.'

She sat there a moment as though considering what to say, then clicked her tongue and her horse walked on.

'Good luck!' he called after her. 'Take care of yourself, among the barbarians!'

She glanced over towards the fort, from which the sounds of off-key singing were already beginning to float, and raised one eyebrow.

'Likewise.'

Bait

The first day they rode through towering forest, trees far bigger'n Shy ever saw, branch upon branch upon branch blocking out the sun so she felt they stole through some giant's crypt, sombre and sacred. The snow had found its way in still, drifted a stride deep between the crusted trunks, frozen to a sparkling crust that skinned the horse's legs, so they had to take turns breaking new ground. Here and there a freezing fog had gathered, curling round men and mounts as they passed like spirits jealous of their warmth. Not that there was much of that to be had. Crying Rock gave a warning hiss whenever anyone started in to talk so they just nodded in dumb misery to the crunching of snow and the laboured breaths of the struggling horses, Savian's coughing and a soft mumbling from Jubair which Shy took for prayers. He was a pious bastard, the big Kantic, that you couldn't deny. Whether piety made him a safe man to have at your back she profoundly doubted. Folk she'd known to be big on religion had tended to use it as an excuse for doing wrong rather'n a reason not to.

Only when the light had faded to a twilight glimmer did Sweet lead them to a shallow cave under an overhang and let them stop. By then the mounts and the spare mounts were all blown and shuddering and

Shy wasn't in a state much better, her whole body one stiff and aching, numbed and prickling, chafed and stinging competition of complaints.

No fire allowed, they ate cold meat and hard biscuit and passed about a bottle. Savian put a hard face over his coughing like he did over everything else, but Shy could tell he was troubled with it, bent and hacking and his pale hands clawing his coat shut at his neck.

One of the mercenaries, a Styrian with a jutting jaw by the name of Sacri, who struck Shy as the sort whose only comfort in life is others' discomfort, grinned and said, 'You got a cough, old man. You want to go back?'

Shy said, 'Shut your mouth,' with as much fire as she could muster which right then wasn't much.

'What'll you do?' he sneered at her. 'Slap me?'

That struck a hotter spark from her. 'That's right. With a fucking axe. Now shut your mouth.'

This time he did shut it, too, but by the moon's glimmering she gathered he was working out how to even the score, and reckoned she'd better mind her back even closer than before.

They kept watch in pairs, one from the mercenaries, one from the Fellowship that had been, and they watched each other every bit as hard as they watched the night for Dragon People. Shy marked time by Sweet's snoring, and when the moment came she shook Lamb and whispered in his ear.

'Wake up, your Majesty.'

He gave a grunting sigh. 'Wondered how long it'd be 'fore that floated up again.'

'Pardon the foolishness of a witless peasant. I'm just overcome at having the King of the Northmen snoring in my blankets.'

'I spent ten times as long poorer'n a beggar and without a friend to my name. Why does no one want to talk about that?'

'In my case 'cause I know well enough what that feels like. I haven't had occasion to wear a crown that often.'

'Neither have I,' he said, crawling stiffly clear of the bedding. 'I had a chain.'

'A golden one?'

'With a diamond like that.' And he made a shape the size of a hen's egg with his thumb and forefinger and eyed her through it.

She still wasn't sure whether this was all some kind of a joke. 'You.'

'Me.'

'That got through a whole winter in one pair of trousers.'

He shrugged. 'I'd lost the chain by then.'

'Any particular way I should act around royalty?'

'The odd curtsy wouldn't go amiss.'

She snorted. ‘Fuck yourself.’

‘Fuck yourself, *your Majesty*.’

‘King Lamb,’ she muttered, crawling into the blankets to make the most of his already fading warmth. ‘King Lamb.’

‘I had a different name.’

Shy looked sideways at him. ‘What name?’

He sat there in the wide mouth of the cave, hunched black against the star-speckled night, and she couldn’t guess at what was on his face. ‘Don’t matter,’ he said. ‘No good ever came of it.’

Next morning the snow whirled down on a wind that came from every way at once, bitter as a bankrupt. They mounted up with all the joy of folk riding to their own hangings and pressed on, uphill, uphill. The forest thinned out, trees shrinking, withering, twisting like folk in pain. They threaded through bare rocks and the way grew narrow – an old stream bed, maybe, though sometimes it looked more like a man-made stair worn almost smooth by years and weather. Jubair sent one of his men back with the horses and Shy half-wished she was going with him. The rest of them toiled on by foot.

‘What the hell are these Dragon bastards doing up here anyhow?’ Shy grunted at Sweet. Didn’t seem like a place anyone in their right mind would want to visit, let alone live in.

‘Can’t say I know exactly . . . why they’re up here.’ The old scout had to talk in rushes between his heaving breaths. ‘But they been here a long time.’

‘She hasn’t told you?’ asked Shy, nodding at Crying Rock, striding on hard up ahead.

‘I reckon it’s on account . . . o’ my reluctance to ask those kind o’ questions . . . she’s stuck with me down the years.’

‘Ain’t for your good looks, I can tell you that.’

‘There’s more to life than looks.’ He glanced sideways at her. ‘Luckily for us both.’

‘What would they want with children?’

He stopped to take a swallow of water and offered one to her while the mercenaries laboured past under the considerable burden of their many weapons. ‘The way I hear it, no children are born here. Something in the land. They turn barren. All the Dragon People were taken from someone

else, one time or another. Used to be that meant Ghosts mostly, maybe Imperials, the odd Northman strayed down from the Sea of Teeth. Looks like since the prospectors drove the Ghosts out they're casting their net wider. Buying children off the likes of Cantliss.'

'Less talk!' hissed Crying Rock from above. 'More walk!'

The snow came down weightier than ever but didn't drift as deep, and when Shy peeled the wrappings off her face she found the wind wasn't half so keen. An hour later the snow was slippery slush on the wet rock, and she pulled her soaked gloves off and could still feel her fingertips. An hour after that the snow still fell but the ground was bare, and Shy was sweating fast enough she had to strip her coat off and wedge it in her pack. The others were doing the same. She bent and pressed her palm to the earth and there was a strange warmth, like it was the wall of a baker's and the oven was stoked on the other side.

'There is fire below,' said Crying Rock.

'There is?' Shy snatched her hand back like flames might pop from the dirt then and there. 'Can't say that notion floods a woman with optimism.'

'Better'n freezing the crap up my arse, ain't it?' said Sweet, pulling his shirt off to reveal another underneath. Shy wondered how many he had on. Or if he'd keep taking them off until he disappeared altogether.

'Is that why the Dragon People live up here?' Savian pressed his own palm to the warm dirt. 'Because of the fire?'

'Or because they live here there is a fire.' Crying Rock stared up the slope, bare rock and scree now, crusted in places with stains of yellow sulphur, overlooked by a towering bastard of a rock face. 'This way may be watched.'

'Certainly it will be,' said Jubair. 'God sees all.'

'Ain't God as'll put an arrow in your arse if we keep on this path,' said Sweet.

Jubair shrugged. 'God puts all things where they must be.'

'What now, then?' asked Savian.

Crying Rock was already uncoiling a rope from her pack. 'Now we climb.'

Shy rubbed at her temples. 'Had a nasty feeling she'd say that.'

Damn it if the climbing wasn't even harder than the walking and a long drop scarier. Crying Rock swarmed up like a spider and Lamb wasn't much

slower, seeming well at home among the mountains, the two of them getting ropes ready for the rest. Shy brought up the rear with Savian, cursing and fumbling at the slick rock, arms aching from the effort and her hands burning from the hemp.

'Haven't had the chance to thank you,' she said as she waited on a ledge.

He didn't make a sound but the hissing of the rope through his gnarled hands as he pulled it up behind them.

'For what you did back in Crease.' Silence. 'Ain't had my life saved so often that I overlook it.' Silence. 'Remember?'

She thought he gave the tiniest shrug.

'Get the feeling you've been avoiding mention of it.'

Silence. He avoided mentioning anything wherever possible.

'Probably you ain't much of a one for taking thanks.'

More silence.

'Probably I ain't much of a one for giving 'em.'

'You're taking your time about it, all right.'

'Thanks, then. Reckon I'd be good and dead if it weren't for you.'

Savian pressed his thin lips together even tighter and gave a throaty grunt. 'Reckon you or your father would've done the same for me.'

'He ain't my father.'

'That's between you two. But if you were to ask, I'd say you could do worse.'

Shy snorted. 'I used to think so.'

'This isn't what he wanted, you know. Or the way he wanted it.'

'I used to think that, too. Not so sure any more. Family, eh?'

'Family.'

'Where's Corlin got to?'

'She can look after herself.'

'Oh, no doubt.' Shy dropped her voice. 'Look, Savian, I know what you are.'

He looked up at her hard. 'That so?'

'I know what you got under there,' and she moved her eyes down to his forearms, blue with tattoos, she knew, under his coat.

'Can't fathom your meaning,' but tweaking one of his sleeves down even so.

She leaned closer and whispered, ‘Just pretend you can, then. When Cosca got to talking about rebels, well, my big fucking mouth ran away with me, like always. I meant well, like always, trying to help out . . . but I haven’t, have I?’

‘Not a lot.’

‘My fault you’re in this fix. If that bastard Lorsen finds out what you got there . . . what I’m saying is, you should go. This ain’t your fight. Naught to stop you slipping away, and no shortage of empty to slip into.’

‘And you’d say what? Forgot all about my lost boy, did I? It’d just make ’em curious. Might make trouble for you. Might make trouble for me, in the end. Reckon I’ll just keep my head down and my sleeves down too and stick with you. Best all round.’

‘My big fucking mouth,’ she hissed to herself.

Savian grinned. It might have been the first time she’d ever seen him do it and it was like a lantern uncovered, the lines shifting in his weathered face and his eyes suddenly gleaming. ‘You know what? Your big fucking mouth ain’t to everyone’s taste but I’ve almost got to like it.’ And he put his hand down on her shoulder and gave it a squeeze. ‘You’d best watch out for that prick Sacri, though. Don’t think he sees it that way.’

Nor did she. Not long after that, a rock came clattering down that missed her head by a whisker. She saw Sacri grinning above and was sure he’d kicked it loose on purpose. Soon as she got the chance she told him so and where she’d stick her knife if another rock came along. The other mercenaries were quite tickled by her language.

‘I should teach you some manners, girl,’ snapped Sacri, sticking his jutting jaw out even further, trying to save what face he could.

‘You’d have to fucking know some to teach some.’

He put his hand on his sword, more bluster than meaning to use it, but before he even got the chance Jubair loomed between them.

‘There will be weapons drawn, Sacri,’ he said, ‘but when and against whom I say. These are our allies. We need them to show us the way. Leave the woman be or we will quarrel and a quarrel with me is a heavy weight to carry.’

‘Sorry, Captain,’ said Sacri, scowling.

Jubair offered him the way with one open hand. ‘Regret is the gateway to salvation.’

Lamb scarcely even looked over while they were arguing, and trudged off when they were done like none of it was his concern.

'Thanks for your help back there,' she snapped as she caught him up.

'You'd have had it if you'd needed it. You know that.'

'A word or two wouldn't have hurt.'

He leaned close. 'Way I see it, we've got two choices. Try and use these bastards, or kill 'em all. Hard words have never won a battle yet, but they've lost a few. You mean to kill a man, telling him so don't help.'

Lamb walked on, and left her to think about that.

They camped near a steaming stream that Sweet said not to drink from. Not that anyone was keen to try since it smelled like feast-day farts. All night the water hissing in Shy's ears and she dreamed of falling. Woke sweating with her throat raw from the warm stink to see Sacri on guard and watching her and thought she caught the gleam of metal in his hand. She lay awake after that, her own knife drawn in her fist. The way she had long ago when she was on the run. The way she'd hoped she never would again. She found herself wishing that Temple was there. Surely the man was no hero, but somehow he made her feel braver.

In the morning, grey shadows of crags loomed over them that through the shifting veil of snow looked like the ruins of walls, towers, fortresses. Holes were cut in the rock, too square to be natural, and near them mounds of spoil.

'Prospectors get this far?' one of the mercenaries asked.

Sweet shook his head. 'Nowhere near. These is older diggings.'

'How much older?'

'Much older,' said Crying Rock.

'Seems like the closer we get the more I worry,' Shy muttered at

Lamb as they set off, bent and sore.

He nodded. 'Starting to think about all the thousand things could go wrong.'

'Scared we won't find 'em.'

'Or scared we will.'

'Or just plain scared,' she muttered.

'Scared is good,' he said. 'The dead are fearless and I don't want either of us joining 'em.'

They stopped beside a deep gorge, the sound of water moving far below, steam rising and everywhere the reek of brimstone. An arch spanned the canyon, black rock slick with wet and bearded with dripping icicles of lime. From its middle a great chain hung, links a stride high, rust-eaten metal squealing faintly as the wind stirred them. Savian sat with his head back, breathing hard. The mercenaries slouched in a group nearby, passing round a flask.

'And here she is!' Sacri chuckled. 'The child hunter!' Shy looked at him, and at the drop beside him, and thought how dearly she'd like to introduce one to the other. 'What kind of fool would hope to find children alive in a place like this?'

'Why do big mouths and little brains so often go together?' she muttered, but she thought about Lamb's words, realised her question might apply to herself just as easily, and stopped her tongue for once.

'Nothing to say?' Sacri grinned down his nose as he tipped his flask up. 'At least you've learned some—'

Jubair put out a great arm and brushed him off the cliff. The Styrian made a choking whoop, flask tumbling from his hand, and he was gone. A thump and a clatter of stones, then another, and another, fading out of hearing in the gorge below.

The mercenaries stared, one with a piece of dried meat halfway to his open mouth. Shy watched, skin prickling, as Jubair stepped to the brink, lips thoughtfully pursed, and looked down. 'The world is filled with folly and waste,' he said. 'It is enough to shake a man's faith.'

'You killed him,' said one of the mercenaries, with that talent for stating the obvious some men have.

'God killed him. I was but the instrument.'

'God sure can be a thorny bastard, can't He?' croaked Savian.

Jubair solemnly nodded. 'He is a terrible and a merciless God and all things must bend to His design.'

'His design's left us a man short,' said Sweet.

Jubair shrugged his pack over his shoulder. 'Better that than discord. We must be together in this. If we disagree, how can God be for all of us?' He waved Crying Rock forward, and let his surviving men step, more than a little nervously, past him, one swallowing as he peered down into the gorge.

Jubair took Sacri's fallen flask from the brink. 'In the city of Ul-Nahb in Gurkhul, where I was born, thanks be to the Almighty, death is a great thing. All efforts are taken with the body and a family wails and a procession of mourners follows the flower-strewn way to the place of burial. Out here, death is a little thing. A man who expects more than one chance is a fool.' He frowned out at the vast arch and its broken chain, and took a thoughtful swig. 'The further I go into the unmapped extremes of this country, the more I become convinced these are the end times.'

Lamb plucked the flask from Jubair's hand, drained it, then tossed it after its owner. 'All times are end times for someone.'

They squatted among ruined walls, between stones salt-streaked and crystal-crusted, and watched the valley. They'd been watching it for what felt like for ever, squinting into the sticky mist while Crying Rock hissed at them to keep low, stay out of sight, shut their mouths. Shy was getting just a little tired of being hissed at. She was getting a little tired altogether. Tired, and sore, and her nerves worn down to aching stubs with fear, and worry, and hope. Hope worst of all.

Now and again Savian broke out in muffled coughs and Shy could hardly blame him. The very valley seemed to breathe, acrid steam rising from hidden cracks and turning the broken boulders to phantoms, drifting down to make a fog over the pool in the valley's bottom, slowly fading only to gather again.

Jubair sat cross-legged, eyes closed and arms folded, huge and patient, lips silently moving, a sheen of sweat across his forehead. They all were sweating. Shy's shirt was plastered to her back, hair stuck clammy to her face. She could hardly believe she'd felt close to death from cold a day or two before. She'd have given her teeth to strip and drop into a snowdrift now. She crawled over to Crying Rock, the stones wet and sticky-warm under her palms.

'They're close?'

The Ghost shifted her frown up and down a fraction.

'Where?'

'If I knew that, I would not have to watch.'

'We leave this bait soon?'

'Soon.'

‘I hope it ain’t really a turd you got in mind,’ grunted Sweet, surely down to his last shirt now, ‘’cause I don’t fancy dropping my trousers here.’

‘Shut up,’ hissed Crying Rock, sticking her hand out hard behind her.

A shadow was shifting in the murk on the valley’s side, a figure hopping from one boulder to another. Hard to tell for the distance and the mist but it looked like a man, tall and heavy-built, dark-skinned, bald-headed, a staff carried loose in one hand.

‘Is he whistling?’ Shy muttered.

‘Shh,’ hissed Crying Rock.

The old man left his staff beside a flat rock at the water’s edge, shrugged off his robe and left it folded carefully on top, then did a little dance, spinning naked in and out of some broken pillars at the shoreline.

‘He don’t look all that fearsome,’ whispered Shy.

‘Oh, he is fearsome,’ said Crying Rock. ‘He is Waerdinur. My brother.’

Shy looked at her, pale as new milk, then back to the dark-skinned man, still whistling as he waded out into the pool. ‘Ain’t much resemblance.’

‘We came of different wombs.’

‘Good to know.’

‘What is?’

‘Had a feeling you might’ve hatched from an egg, you’re that painless.’

‘I have my pains,’ said Crying Rock. ‘But they must serve me, not the other way about.’ And she stuck the stained stem of her pipe between her jaws and chomped down hard on it.

‘What is Lamb doing?’ came Jubair’s voice.

Shy turned and stared. Lamb was scurrying through the boulders and down towards the water, already twenty strides away.

‘Oh, hell,’ muttered Sweet.

‘Shit!’ Shy forced her stiff knees into life and vaulted over the crumbling wall. Sweet made a grab at her but she slapped his hand off and threaded after Lamb, one eye on the old man still splashing happily below them, his whistling floating through the mist. She winced and skidded over the slick rocks, almost on all fours, ankles aching as her feet were jarred this way and that, burning to shout to Lamb but knowing she couldn’t make a peep.

He was too far ahead to catch, had made it all the way down to the water’s edge. She could only watch as he perched on that flat rock with the folded robe as a cushion, laid his drawn sword across one knee, took out his

whetstone and licked it. She flinched as he set it to the blade and gave it a single grating stroke.

Shy caught the surprise in the tightening of Waerdinur's shoulders, but he didn't move right off. Only as the second stroke cut the silence did he slowly turn. A kind face, Shy would've said, but she'd seen kind-looking men do some damned mean things before.

'Here is a surprise.' Though he seemed more puzzled than shocked as his dark eyes shifted from Lamb to Shy and back again. 'Where did you two come from?'

'All the way from the Near Country,' said Lamb.

'The name means nothing to me.' Waerdinur spoke common without much of an accent. More'n likely he spoke it better'n Shy did. 'There is only here and not here. How did you get here?'

'Rode some, walked the rest,' grunted Lamb. 'Or do you mean, how did we get here without you knowing?' He gave his sword another shrieking stroke. 'Maybe you ain't as clever as you think you are.'

Waerdinur shrugged his broad shoulders. 'Only a fool supposes he knows everything.'

Lamb held up the sword, checked one side and the other, blade flashing. 'I've got some friends waiting, down in Beacon.'

'I had heard.'

'They're killers and thieves and men of no character. They've come for your gold.'

'Who says we have any?'

'A man named Cantliss.'

'Ah.' Waerdinur splashed water on his arms and carried on washing. 'That is a man of no substance. A breeze would blow him away. You are not one such, though, I think.' His eyes moved across to Shy, weighing her, no sign of fear at all. 'Neither of you. I do not think you came for gold.'

'We came for my brother and sister,' grated Shy, voice harsh as the stone on the blade.

'Ah.' Waerdinur's smile slowly faded as he considered her, then he hung his head, water trickling down his shaved scalp. 'You are Shy. She said you would come and I did not believe her.'

'Ro said?' Her throat almost closing up around the words. 'She's alive?'

'Healthy and flourishing, safe and valued. Her brother, too.'

Shy's knees went for a moment and she had to lean on the rock beside Lamb.

'You have come a long, hard way,' said Waerdinur. 'I congratulate you on your courage.'

'We didn't come for your fucking congratulations!' she spat at him. 'We came for the children!'

'I know. But they are better off with us.'

'You think I care a fuck?' There was a look on Lamb's face then, vicious as an old fighting dog, made Shy go cold all over. 'This ain't about them. You've stolen from me, fucker. From *me*!' Spit flicked from his bared teeth as he stabbed at his chest with a finger. 'And I'll have back what's mine or I'll have blood.'

Waerdinur narrowed his eyes. 'You, she did not mention.'

'I got one o' those forgettable faces. Bring the children down to Beacon, you can forget it, too.'

'I am sorry but I cannot. They are my children now. They are Dragon People, and I have sworn to protect this sacred ground and those upon it with my last blood and breath. Only death will stop me.'

'He won't stop me.' Lamb gave his sword another grinding lick. 'He's had a thousand chances and never took a one.'

'Do you think death fears you?'

'Death loves me.' Lamb smiled, black-eyed, wet-eyed, and the smile was worse even than the snarl had been. 'All the work I done for him? The crowds I've sent his way? He knows he ain't got no better friends.'

The leader of the Dragon People looked back sad and level. 'If we must fight it would be . . . a shame.'

'Lot o' things are,' said Lamb. 'I gave up trying to change 'em a long time ago.' He stood and slid his sword back into its sheath with a scraping whisper. 'Three days to bring the children down to Beacon. Then I come back to your sacred ground.' He curled his tongue and blew spit into the water. 'And I'll bring death with me.' And he started picking his way back towards the ruins on the valley side.

Shy and Waerdinur looked at each other a moment longer. 'I am sorry,' he said. 'For what has happened, and for what must happen now.'

She turned and hurried to catch up to Lamb. What else could she do?

‘You didn’t mean that, did you?’ she hissed at his back, slipping and sliding on the broken rocks. ‘About the children? That this ain’t about them? That it’s about blood?’ She tripped and skinned her shin, cursed and stumbled on. ‘Tell me you didn’t mean that!’

‘He got my meaning,’ snapped Lamb over his shoulder. ‘Trust me.’

But there was the problem – Shy was finding that harder every day. ‘Weren’t you just saying that when you mean to kill a man, telling him so don’t help?’

Lamb shrugged. ‘There’s a time for breaking every rule.’

‘What the hell did you do?’ hissed Sweet when they clambered back into the ruin, scrubbing at his wet hair with his fingernails and no one else looking too happy about their unplanned expedition either.

‘I left him some bait he’ll have to take,’ said Lamb.

Shy glanced back through one of the cracks towards the water. Waerdinur was only now wading to the shore, scraping the wet from his body, putting on his robe, no rush. He picked up his staff, looked towards the ruins for a while, then turned and strode away through the rocks.

‘You have made things difficult.’ Crying Rock had already stowed her pipe and was tightening her straps for the trip back. ‘They will be coming now, and quickly. We must return to Beacon.’

‘I ain’t going back,’ said Lamb.

‘What?’ asked Shy.

‘That was the agreement,’ said Jubair. ‘That we would draw them out.’

‘You draw ’em out. Delay’s the parent o’ disaster, and I ain’t waiting for Cosca to blunder up here drunk and get my children killed.’

‘What the hell?’ Shy was tiring of not knowing what Lamb would do one moment to the next. ‘What’s the plan now, then?’

‘Plans have a habit o’ falling apart when you lean on ’em,’ said Lamb. ‘We’ll just have to think up another.’

The Kantic cracked a bastard of a frown. ‘I do not like a man who breaks an agreement.’

‘Try and push me off a cliff.’ Lamb gave Jubair a flat stare. ‘We can find out who God likes best.’

Jubair pressed one fingertip against his lips and considered that for a long, silent moment. Then he shrugged. ‘I prefer not to trouble God with every little thing.’

Savages

‘I’ve finished the spear!’ called Pit, doing his best to say the new words just the way Ro had taught him, and he offered it up for his father to see. It was a good spear. Shebat had helped him with the binding and declared it excellent, and everyone said that the only man who knew more about weapons than Shebat was the Maker himself, who knew more about everything than anyone, of course. So Shebat knew a lot about weapons, was the point, and he said it was good, so it must be good.

‘Good,’ said Pit’s father, but he didn’t really look. He was walking fast, bare feet slapping against the ancient bronze, and frowning. Pit wasn’t sure he’d ever seen him frown before. Pit wondered if he’d done wrong. If his father could tell his new name still sounded strange to him. He felt ungrateful, and guilty, and worried that he’d done something very bad even though he hadn’t meant to.

‘What have I done?’ he asked, having to hurry to keep up, and realised he’d slipped back to his old talk without thinking.

His father frowned down, and it seemed then he did it from a very long way up.

‘Who is Lamb?’

Pit blinked. It was about the last thing he’d expected his father to ask.

‘Lamb’s my father,’ he said without thinking, then put it right, ‘*was* my father, maybe . . . but Shy always said he wasn’t.’ Maybe neither of them were his father or maybe both, and thinking about Shy made him think about the farm and the bad things, and Gully saying run, run, and the journey across the plains and into the mountains and Cantliss laughing and

he didn't know what he'd done wrong and he started to cry and he felt ashamed and so he cried more, and he said 'Don't send me back.'

'No!' said Pit's father. 'Never!' Because he was Pit's father, you could see it in the pain in his face. 'Only death will part us, do you understand?'

Pit didn't understand the least bit but he nodded anyway, crying now with relief that everything would be all right, and his father smiled, and knelt beside him, and put his hand on Pit's head.

'I am sorry.' And Waerdinur was sorry, truly and completely, and he spoke in the Outsiders' tongue because he knew it was easier on the boy. 'It is a fine spear, and you a fine son.' And he patted his son's shaved scalp. 'We will go hunting, and soon, but there is business I must see to first, for all the Dragon People are my family. Can you play with your sister until I call for you?'

He nodded, blinking back tears. He cried easily, the boy, and that was a fine thing, for the Maker taught that closeness to one's feelings was closeness to the divine.

'Good. And . . . do not speak to her of this.'

Waerdinur strode to the Long House, his frown returning. Six of the Gathering were naked in the hot dimness, hazy in the steam, sitting on the polished stones around the fire-pit, listening to Uto sing the lessons, words of the Maker's father, all-mighty Euz, who split the worlds and spoke the First Law. Her voice faltered as he strode in.

'There were outsiders at the Seeking Pool,' he growled as he stripped off his robe, ignoring the proper forms and not caring.

The others stared upon him, shocked, as well they might be. 'Are you sure?' Ulstal's croaking voice croakier still from breathing the Seeing Steam.

'I spoke to them! Scarlaer?'

The young hunter stood, tall and strong and the eagerness to act hot in his eye. Sometimes he reminded Waerdinur so much of his younger self it was like gazing in Juvens' glass, through which it was said one could look into the past.

'Take your best trackers and follow them. They were in the ruins on the north side of the valley.'

'I will hunt them down,' said Scarlaer.

‘They were an old man and a young woman, but they might not be alone. Go armed and take care. They are dangerous.’ He thought of the man’s dead smile, and his black eye, like gazing into a great depth, and was sore troubled. ‘Very dangerous.’

‘I will catch them,’ said the hunter. ‘You can depend on me.’

‘I do. Go.’

He bounded from the hall and Waerdinur took his place at the fire-pit, the heat of it close to painful before him, perching on the rounded stone where no position was comfortable, for the Maker said they should never be comfortable who weigh great matters. He took the ladle and poured a little water on the coals, and the hall grew gloomier yet with steam, rich with the scents of mint and pine and all the blessed spices. He was already sweating, and silently asked the Maker that he sweat out his folly and his pride and make pure choices.

‘Outsiders at the Seeking Pool?’ Hirfac’s withered face was slack with disbelief. ‘How did they come to the sacred ground?’

‘They came to the barrows with the twenty Outsiders,’ said Waerdinur. ‘How they came further I cannot say.’

‘Our decision on those twenty is more pressing.’ Akarin’s blind eyes were narrowed. They all knew what decision he would favour. Akarin tended bloody, and bloodier with each passing winter. Age sometimes distils a person – rendering the calm more calm, the violent more violent.

‘Why have they come?’ Uto leaned forward into the light, shadow patching in the hollows of her skull. ‘What do they want?’

Waerdinur glanced around the old sweat-beaded faces and licked his lips. If they knew the man and woman had come for his children they might ask him to give them up. A faint chance, but a chance, and he would give them up to no one but death. It was forbidden to lie to the Gathering, but the Maker set down no prohibition on offering half the truth.

‘What all outsiders want,’ said Waerdinur. ‘Gold.’

Hirfac spread her gnarled hands. ‘Perhaps we should give it to them? We have enough.’

‘They would always want more.’ Shebat’s voice was low and sad. ‘Theirs is a hunger never satisfied.’

A silence while all considered, and the coals shifted and hissed in the pit and sparks whirled and glowed in the dark and the sweet smell of the

Seeing Steam washed out among them.

The colours of fire shifted across Akarin's face as he nodded. 'We must send everyone who can hold a blade. Eighty of us are there, fit to go, who did not travel north to fight the Shanka?'

'Eighty swords upon my racks.' Shebat shook his head as if that was a matter for regret.

'It worries me to leave Ashranc guarded only by the old and young,' said Hirfac. 'So few of us now—'

'Soon we will wake the Dragon.' Ulstal smiled at the thought.

'Soon.'

'Soon.'

'Next summer,' said Waerdinur, 'or perhaps the summer after. But for now we must protect ourselves.'

'We must drive them out!' Akarin slapped knobbly fist into palm. 'We must journey to the barrows and drive out the savages.'

'Drive them out?' Uto snorted. 'Call it what it is, since you will not be the one to wield the blade.'

'I wielded blades enough in my time. Kill them, then, if you prefer to call it that. Kill them all.'

'We killed them all, and here are more.'

'What should we do, then?' he asked, mocking her. 'Welcome them to our sacred places with arms wide?'

'Perhaps the time has come to consider it.' Akarin snorted with disgust, Ulstal winced as though at blasphemy, Hirfac shook her head, but Uto went on. 'Were we not all born savage? Did not the Maker teach us to first speak peace?'

'So he did,' said Shebat.

'I will not hear this!' Ulstal struggled to his feet, wheezing with the effort.

'You will.' Waerdinur waved him down. 'You will sit and sweat and listen as all sit and listen here. Uto has earned her right to speak.' And Waerdinur held her eye. 'But she is wrong. Savages at the Seeking Pool? Outsiders' boots upon the sacred ground? Upon the stones where trod the Maker's feet?' The others groaned at each new outrage, and Waerdinur knew he had them. 'What should we do, Uto?'

'I do not like that there are only six to make the choice—'

'Six is enough,' said Akarin.

Uto saw they were all fixed on the steel road and she sighed, and reluctantly nodded. ‘We kill them all.’

‘Then the Gathering has spoken.’ Waerdinur stood, and took the blessed pouch from the altar, knelt and scooped up a handful of dirt from the floor, the sacred dirt of Ashranc, warm and damp with life, and he put it in the pouch and offered it to Uto. ‘You spoke against this, you must lead.’

She slipped from her stone and took the pouch. ‘I do not rejoice in this,’ she said.

‘It is not necessary that we rejoice. Only that we do. Prepare the weapons.’ And Waerdinur put his hand on Shebat’s shoulder.

Shebat slowly nodded, slowly rose, slowly put on his robe. He was no young man any more and it took time, especially since, even if he saw the need, there was no eagerness in his heart. Death sat close beside him, he knew, too close for him to revel in bringing it to others.

He shuffled from the steam and to the archway as the horn was sounded, shrill and grating, to arms, to arms, the younger people putting aside their tasks and stepping out into the evening, preparing themselves for the journey, kissing their closest farewell. There would be no more than sixty left behind, and those children and old ones. Old and useless and sitting close to death, as he was.

He passed the Heartwoods, and patted his fondly, and felt the need to work upon it, and so he took out his knife, and considered, and finally stripped the slightest shaving. That would be today’s change. Tomorrow might bring another. He wondered how many of the People had worked upon it before his birth. How many would work upon it after his death.

Into the stone darkness he went, the weight of mountains heavy above him, the flickering oil wicks making gleam the Maker’s designs, set into the stone of the floor in thrice-blessed metal. Shebat’s footsteps echoed in the silence, through the first hall to the place of weapons, his sore leg dragging behind him. Old wound, old wound that never heals. The glory of victory lasts a moment, the wounds are always. Though he loved the weapons, for the Maker taught the love of metal and of the thing well made and fitted for its purpose, he gave them out only with regret.

‘For the Maker taught also that each blow struck is its own failure,’ he sang softly as one blade at a time he emptied the racks, wood polished

smooth by the fingertips of his forebears. ‘Victory is only in the hand taken, in the soft word spoken, in the gift freely given.’ But he watched the faces of the young ones as they took from him the tools of death, hot and eager, and feared they heard his words but let their meaning slip away. Too often of late the Gathering spoke in steel.

Uto came last, as fitted the leader. Shebat still thought she should have been the Right Hand, but in these hard days soft words rarely found willing ears. Shebat handed her the final blade.

‘This one I kept for you. Forged with my own hands, when I was young and strong and had no doubts. My best work. Sometimes the metal . . .’ and he rubbed dry fingertips against thumb as he sought the words, ‘comes out *right*.’

She sadly smiled as she took the sword. ‘Will this come out right, do you think?’

‘We can hope.’

‘I worry we have lost our way. There was a time I felt so sure of the path I had only to walk forward and I would be upon it. Now I am hemmed in by doubts and know not which way to turn.’

‘Waerdinur wants what is best for us.’ But Shebat wondered if it was himself he struggled to convince.

‘So do we all. But we disagree on what is best and how to get it. Waerdinur is a good man, and strong, and loving, and can be admired for many reasons.’

‘You say that as if it is a bad thing.’

‘It makes us likely to agree when we had better consider. The soft voices are all lost in the babble. Because Waerdinur is full of fire. He burns to wake the Dragon. To make the world as it was.’

‘Would that be such a bad thing?’

‘No. But the world does not go back.’ She lifted the blade he had given her and looked at it, the flickering reflection of the lights on her face. ‘I am afraid.’

‘You?’ he said. ‘Never!’

‘Always. Not of our enemies. Of ourselves.’

‘The Maker taught us it is not fear, but how we face it that counts. Be well, my old friend.’ And he folded Uto in his arms, and wished that he was young again.

They marched through the High Gate swift and sure, for once the Gathering has debated the arguments and spoken its judgement there is no purpose in delay. They marched with swords sharpened and shields slung that had been ancient in the days of Uto's great-grandfather's great-grandfather. They marched over the names of their ancestors, etched in bronze, and Uto asked herself whether those Dragon People of the past would have stood shoulder to shoulder with this cause of theirs. Would the Gatherings of the past have sent them out to kill? Perhaps. Times rarely change as much as we suppose.

They left Ashranc behind, but they carried Ashranc with them, the sacred dirt of their home kept in her pouch. Swift and sure they marched and it was not long before they reached the valley of the Seeking Pool, the mirror of the surface still holding a patch of sky. Scarlaer was waiting in the ruin.

'Have you caught them?' asked Uto.

'No.' The young hunter frowned as if the Outsiders' escape was an insult to him alone. Some men, especially young ones, are fixed on taking offence at everything, from a rain shower to a fallen tree. From that offence they can fashion an excuse for any folly and any outrage. He would need watching. 'But we have their tracks.'

'How many are they?'

Maslingal squatted over the ground, lips pressed tight together. 'The marks are strange. Sometimes it has the feel of two trying to seem a dozen, sometimes of a dozen trying to seem like two. Sometimes it has the feel of carelessness, sometimes the feel of wanting to be followed.'

'They will receive their wish and far more than they wished for, then,' growled Scarlaer.

'It is best never to give your enemy what they most desire.' But Uto knew she was without choice. Who has choice, in the end? 'Let us follow. But let us be watchful.'

Only when snow came and hid the moon did Uto give the sign to stop, lying awake under the burden of leadership as the time slipped by, feeling the warmth of the earth and fearing for what would come.

In the morning they felt the first chill and she waved to the others to put on their furs. They left the sacred ground and passed into the forest, jogging in a rustling crowd. Scarlaer led them fast and merciless after the tracks, always ahead, always beckoning them on, and Uto ached and trembled and breathed hard, wondering how many more years she could run like this.

They stopped to eat near a place where there were no trees, only unsullied snow, a field of white innocence, but Uto knew what lay beneath. A crust of frozen dirt, then the bodies. The rotting remains of the Outsiders who had come to stab at the earth and delve in the streams and cut down the trees and plant their rotting shacks among the barrows of the old and honoured dead, using up the world and using up each other and spreading a plague of greed into the sacred places.

Uto squatted, and looked across that clean whiteness. Once the Gathering has debated the arguments and spoken its judgement there is no place for regrets, and yet she had kept hers, as often checked and polished and as jealously guarded as any miser's hoard. Something of her own, perhaps.

The Dragon People had fought, always. Won, always. They fought to protect the sacred ground. To protect the places where they mined for the Dragon's food. To take children so that the Maker's teaching and the Maker's work might be passed on and not be lost like smoke on the wind of time. The bronze sheets reminded them of those who had fought and those fallen, of what was won and what lost in those battles of the past, and the far past, back into the Old Time and beyond. Uto did not think the Dragon People had ever killed so many to so little purpose as they had here.

There had been a baby in the miners' camp but she had died, and two boys who were with Ashod now, and prospering. Then there had been a girl with curly hair and pleading eyes just on the cusp of womanhood. Uto had offered to take her but she was thirteen, and even at ten winters there were risks. She remembered Waerdinur's sister, taken from the Ghosts too old, who could not change and carried a fury of vengeance in her until she had to be cast out. So Uto had cut the girl's throat instead and laid her gently in the pit and wondered again what she dare not say – could the teachings that led them to this be right?

Evening was settling when they looked down upon Beacon. The snow had stopped but the sky was gloomy with more. A flame twinkled in the top of the broken tower and she counted four more lights at the windows, but otherwise the place was dark. She saw the shapes of wagons, one very large, almost like a house on wheels. A few horses huddled at a rail. What she might have expected for twenty men, all unwary, except . . .

Tracks sparkled faintly with the twilight, filled with fresh snow so they were no more than dimples, but once she saw one set, like seeing one insect

then realising the ground crawled with them, she saw more, and more. Criss-crossing the valley from treeline to treeline and back. Around the barrows and in at their fronts, snow dug away from their entrances. Now she saw the street between the huts, rutted and trampled, the ancient road up to the camp no better. The snow on the roofs was dripping from warmth inside. All the roofs.

Too many tracks for twenty men. Far too many, even careless as the Outsiders were. Something was wrong. She held her hand up for a halt, watching, studying.

Then she felt Scarlaer move beside her, looked around to see him already slipping through the brush, without orders.

'Wait!' she hissed at him.

He sneered at her. 'The Gathering made their decision.'

'And they decided I lead! I say wait!'

He snorted his contempt, turned for the camp, and she lunged for his heels.

Uto snatched at him but she was weak and slow and Scarlaer brushed off her fumbling hand. Perhaps she had been something in her day, but her day was long past and today was his. He bounded down the slope, swift and silent, scarcely leaving marks in the snow, up to the corner of the nearest hut.

He felt the strength of his body, the strength of his beating heart, the strength of the steel in his hand. He should have been sent north to fight the Shanka. He was ready. He would prove it whatever Uto might say, the withered-up old hag. He would write it in the blood of the Outsiders and make them regret their trespass on the sacred ground. Regret it in the instant before they died.

No sound from within the shack, built so poorly of split pine and cracking clay it almost hurt him to look upon its craftsmanship. He slipped low beside the wall, under the dripping eaves and to the corner, looking into the street. A faint crust of new snow, a few new trails of boot-prints and many, many older tracks. Maker's breath but they were careless and filthy, these Outsiders, leaving dung scattered everywhere. So much dung for so few beasts. He wondered if the men shat in the street as well.

‘Savages,’ he whispered, wrinkling his nose at the smell of their fires, of their burned food, of their unwashed bodies. No sign of the men, though, no doubt all deep in drunken sleep, unready in their arrogance, shutters and doors all fastened tight, light spilling from cracks and out into the blue dawn.

‘You damned fool!’ Uto slipped up, breathing hard from the run, breath puffing before her face. But Scarlaer’s blood was up too hot to worry at her carping. ‘Wait!’ This time he dodged her hand and was across the street and into the shadow of another shack. He glanced over his shoulder, saw Uto beckoning and the others following, spreading out through the camp, silent shadows.

Scarlaer smiled, hot all over with excitement. How they would make these Outsiders pay.

‘This is no game!’ snarled Uto, and he only smiled again, rushed on towards the iron-bound door of the largest building, feeling the folk behind him in a rustling group, strong in numbers and strong in resolve—

The door opened and Scarlaer was left frozen for a moment in the lamplight that spilled forth.

‘Morning!’ A wispy-haired old man leaned against the frame in a bedraggled fur with a gilded breastplate spotted with rust showing beneath. He had a sword at his side, but in his hand only a bottle. He raised it now to them, spirit sloshing inside. ‘Welcome to Beacon!’

Scarlaer lifted his blade and opened his mouth to make a fighting scream, and there was a flash at the top of the tower, a pop in his ears and he was shoved hard in the chest and found himself on his back.

He groaned but could not hear it. He sat up, head buzzing, and stared into oily smoke.

Isarult helped with the cooking at the slab and smiled at him when he brought the kill home blooded, and sometimes, if he was in a generous mood, he smiled back. She had been ripped apart. He could tell it was her corpse by the shield on her arm but her head was gone, and the other arm, and one leg so that it hardly looked like it could ever have been a person but just lumps of stuff, the snow all around specked, spattered, scattered with blood and hair and splinters of wood and metal, other friends and lovers and rivals flung about and torn and smouldering.

Tofric, who was known to be the best skinner anywhere, staggered two stiff-legged steps and dropped to his knees. A dozen wounds in him turned dark the furs he wore and one under his eye dripped a black line. He stared, not looking pained, but sad and puzzled at the way the world had changed so suddenly, all quiet, all in silence, and Scarlaer wondered, *What sorcery is this?*

Uto lay next to him. He put a hand under her head and lifted it. She shuddered, twitched, teeth rattling, red foam on her lips. She tried to pass the blessed pouch to him but it was ripped open and the sacred dust of Ashranc spilled across the bloodied snow.

'Uto? Uto?' He could not hear his own voice.

He saw friends running down the street to their aid, Canto in the lead, a brave man and the best to have beside you in a fix. He thought how foolish he had been. How lucky he was to have such friends. Then as they passed one of the barrows smoke burst from its mouth and Canto was flung away and over the roof of the shack beside. Others tumbled sideways, spun about, reeled blinking in the fog or strained as if into a wind, hands over their faces.

Scarlaer saw shutters open, the glint of metal. Arrows flitted silently across the street, lodged in wooden walls, dropped harmlessly in snow, found tottering targets, brought them to their knees, on their faces, clutching, calling, silently screaming.

He struggled to his feet, the camp tipping wildly. The old man still stood in the doorway, pointing with the bottle, saying something. Scarlaer raised his sword but it felt light, and when he looked at his hand his bloody palm was empty. He tried to search for it and saw there was a short arrow in his leg. It did not hurt, but it came upon him like a shock of cold water that he might fail. And then that he might die. And suddenly there was a fear upon him like a weight.

He tottered for the nearest wall, saw an arrow flicker past and into the snow. He laboured on, chest shuddering, floundering up the slope. He snatched a look over his shoulder. The camp was shrouded in smoke as the Gathering was in the Seeing Steam, giant shadows moving inside. Some of his people were running for the trees, stumbling, falling, desperate. Then shapes came from the whirling fog like great devils – men and horses fused into one awful whole. Scarlaer had heard tales of this obscene union and

laughed at its foolishness but now he saw them and was struck with horror. Spears and swords flashed, armour glittered, towering over the runners, cutting them down.

Scarlaer struggled on but his arrow-stuck leg would hardly move, a trail of blood following him up the slope and a horse-man following that, his hooves mashing the snow, a blade in his hand.

Scarlaer should have turned and shown his defiance, at least, proud hunter of the Dragon People that he was. Where had his courage gone? Once there had seemed no end to it. Now there was only the need to run, as desperate as a drowning man's need to breathe. He did not hear the rider behind him but he felt the jarring blow across his back and the snow cold, cold on his face as he fell.

Hooves thumped about him, circling him, showering him with white dust. He fought to get up but he could get no further than his hands and knees, trembling with that much effort. His back would not straighten, agony, all burning, and he whimpered and raged and was helpless, his tears melting tiny holes in the snow beneath his face, and someone seized him by the hair.

Brachio put his knee in the lad's back and forced him down into the snow, pulled a knife out and, taking care not to make a mess of it, which was something of a challenge with the lad still struggling and gurgling, cut his ears off. Then he wiped the knife in the snow and slipped it back into his bandolier, reflecting that a bandolier of knives was a damn useful thing to have in his business and wondering afresh why it hadn't caught on more widely. Might be the lad was alive when Brachio winced and grunted his bulk back up into his saddle, but he wasn't going anywhere. Not with that sword-cut in him.

Brachio chuckled over his trophies and, riding down to the camp, thought they'd be the perfect things to scare his daughters with when Cosca had made him rich and he finally came home to Puranti. Genuine Ghost ears, how about that? He imagined the laughter as he chased them around the parlour, though in his imaginings they were little girls still, and it made him sad to think they would be nearly women grown when he saw them again.

'Where does the time go?' he muttered to himself.

Sworbreck was standing at the edge of the camp, staring, mouth open as the horsemen chased the last few savages up into the woods. He was a

funny little fellow but Brachio had warmed to him.

'You're a man of learning,' he called as he rode up, holding high the ears. 'What do you think I should do? Dry them? Pickle them?' Sworbreck did not answer, only stood there looking decidedly bilious. Brachio swung down from his saddle. There was riding to do but damn it if he'd be hurrying anywhere, he was out of breath already. No one was as young as they used to be, he supposed. 'Cheer up,' he said. 'We won, didn't we?' And he clapped the writer on his scrawny back.

Sworbreck stumbled, put out a hand to steady himself, felt a warmth, and realised he had sunk his fingers into a savage's steaming guts, separated by some distance from the ruined body.

Cosca took another deep swallow from his bottle – if Sworbreck had read in print the quantity of spirits the Old Man was currently drinking each day he would have cursed it for an outrageous lie – and rolled the corpse over with his boot, then, wrinkling his pinked nose, wiped the boot on the side of the nearest shed.

'I have fought Northmen, Imperials, Union men, Gurkish, every variety of Styrian and plenty more whose origin I never got to the bottom of.' Cosca gave a sigh. 'And I am forced to consider the Dragon Person vastly overrated as an opponent. You may quote me on that.' Sworbreck only just managed to swallow another rush of nausea while the Old Man burbled on. 'But then courage can often be made to work against a man in a carefully laid ambuscade. Bravery, as Verturio had it, is the dead man's virtue— Ah. You are . . . discomfited. Sometimes I forget that not everyone is familiar with such scenes as this. But you came to witness battle, did you not? Battle is . . . not always glorious. A general must be a realist. Victory first, you understand?'

'Of course,' Sworbreck found he had mumbled. He had reached the point of agreeing with Cosca on instinct, however foul, ridiculous or outrageous his utterances. He wondered if he had ever come close to hating anyone as much as he did the old mercenary. Or relying on anyone so totally for everything. No doubt the two were not unrelated. 'Victory first.'

'The losers are always the villains, Sworbreck. Only winners can be heroes.'

'You are absolutely right, of course. Only winners.'

‘The one good way to fight is that which kills your enemy and leaves you with the breath to laugh . . .’

Sworbreck had come to see the face of heroism and instead he had seen evil. Seen it, spoken with it, been pressed up against it. Evil turned out not to be a grand thing. Not sneering Emperors with world-conquering designs. Not cackling demons plotting in the darkness beyond the world. It was small men with their small acts and their small reasons. It was selfishness and carelessness and waste. It was bad luck, incompetence and stupidity. It was violence divorced from conscience or consequence. It was high ideals, even, and low methods.

He watched Inquisitor Lorsen move eagerly among the bodies, turning them to see their faces, waving away the thinning, stinking smoke, tugging up sleeves in search of tattoos. ‘I see no sign of rebels!’ he rasped at Cosca. ‘Only these savages!’

The Old Man managed to disengage lips from bottle for long enough to shout back, ‘In the mountains, our friend Cantliss told us! In their so-called sacred places! In this town they call Ashranc! We will begin the pursuit right away!’

Sweet looked up from the bodies to nod. ‘Crying Rock and the rest’ll be waiting for us.’

‘Then it would be rude to delay! Particularly with the enemy so denuded. How many did we kill, Friendly?’

The sergeant wagged his thick index finger as he attempted to number the dead. ‘Hard to say which pieces go with which.’

‘Impossible. We can at least tell Superior Pike that his new weapon is a great success. The results scarcely compare to when I blew up that mine beneath the fortress of Fontezarmo but then neither does the effort involved, eh? It employs explosive powders, Sworbreck, to propel a hollow ball which shatters upon detonation sending splinters— boom!’ And Cosca demonstrated with an outward thrusting of both hands. An entirely unnecessary demonstration, since the proof of its effectiveness was distributed across the street in all directions, bloody and raw and in several cases barely recognisable as human.

‘So this is what success looks like,’ Sworbreck heard Temple murmur. ‘I have often wondered.’

The lawyer saw it. The way he took in the charnel-house scene with his black eyes wide and his jaw set tight and his mouth slightly twisted. It was some small comfort to know there was one man in this gang who, in better company, might have approached decency, but he was just as helpless as Sworbreck. All they could do was watch and, by doing nothing more, participate. But how could it be stopped? Sworbreck cowered as a horse thundered past, showering him with gory snow. He was one man, and that one no fighter. His pen was his only weapon and, however highly the scribes might rate its power, it was no match for axe and armour in a duel. If he had learned nothing else the past few months, he had learned that.

'Dimbik!' shrieked Cosca, and took another swig from his bottle. He had abandoned the flask as inadequate to his needs and would no doubt soon graduate to sucking straight from the cask. 'Dimbik? There you are! I want you to lead off, root out any of these creatures left in the woods. Brachio, get your men ready to ride! Master Sweet will show us the way! Jubair and the others are waiting to open the gates! There's gold to be had, boys, and no time to waste! And rebels!' he added hastily. 'Rebels, too, of course. Temple, with me, I want to be certain on the terms of the contract as regard plunder. Sworbreck, it might be better if you were to remain here. If you haven't the stomach for this, well . . .'

'Of course,' said Sworbreck. He felt so very tired. So very far from home. Adua, and his neat office with the clean walls and the new Rimaldi printing press of which he had been so particularly proud. All so far away, across an immeasurable gulf in time and space and thinking. A place where straightening the collar seemed important and a bad review was a disaster. How could such a fantastical realm occupy the same world as this slaughter-yard? He stared at his hands: calloused, blood-daubed, dirt-scraped. Could they be the same ones that had so carefully set the type, inky at the fingertips? Could they ever do so again?

He let them drop, too tired to ride let alone write. People do not realise the crushing effort of creation. The pain of dragging the words from a tortured mind. Who read books out here, anyway? Perhaps he would lie down. He began to shamble for the fort.

'Take care of yourself, author,' said Temple, looking grimly down from horseback.

'You too, lawyer,' said Sworbreck, and patted him on the leg as he passed.

The Dragon's Den

'When do we go?' whispered Shy.

'When Savian says go,' came Lamb's voice. He was close enough she could almost feel his breath, but all she could see in the darkness of the tunnel was the faintest outline of his stubbled skull. 'Soon as he sees Sweet bring Cosca's men up the valley.'

'Won't these Dragon bastards see 'em, too?'

'I expect so.'

She wiped her forehead for the hundredth time, rubbing the wet out of her eyebrows. Damn, but it was hot, like squatting in an oven, the sweat tickling at her, hand slippery-slick on the wood of her bow, mouth sticky-dry with heat and worry.

'Patience, Shy. You won't cross the mountains in a day.'

'Easily said,' she hissed back. How long had they been there? Might've been an hour, might've been a week. Twice already they'd had to slink back into the deeper blackness of the tunnel when Dragon People had strayed close, all pressed together in a baking panic, her heart beating so hard it made her teeth rattle. So many hundreds of thousands of things that could go wrong she could hardly breathe for their weight.

'What do we do when Savian says go?' she asked.

'Open the gate. Hold the gate.'

'And after?' Providing they were still alive after, which she wouldn't have wanted to bet good money on.

'We find the children,' said Lamb.

A long pause. 'Starting to look like less and less of a plan, ain't it?'

'Do the best you can with what there is, then.'

She puffed her cheeks out at that. ‘Story of my life.’

She waited for an answer but none was forthcoming. She guessed danger makes some folk blather and some clamp tight. Sadly, she was in the former camp, and surrounded by the latter. She crept forwards on all fours, stone hot under her hands, up next to Crying Rock, wondering afresh what the Ghost woman’s interest in all this was. Didn’t seem the type to be interested in gold, or rebels, or children neither. No way of knowing what went on behind that lined mask of a face, though, and she wasn’t shining any lights inward.

‘What’s this Ashranc place like?’ asked Shy.

‘A city carved from the mountain.’

‘How many are in there?’

‘Thousands once. Few now. Judging from those who left, very few, and mostly the young and old. Not good fighters.’

‘A bad fighter sticks a spear in you, you’re just as dead as with a good one.’

‘Don’t get stuck, then.’

‘You’re just a mine of good advice, ain’t you?’

‘Fear not,’ came Jubair’s voice. Across the passageway she could only see the gleam of his eyes, the gleam of his ready sword, but she could tell he was smiling. ‘If God is with us, He will be our shield.’

‘If He’s against?’ asked Shy.

‘Then no shield can protect us.’

Before Shy could tell him what a great comfort that was there was scuffling behind, and a moment later Savian’s crackling voice. ‘It’s time. Cosca’s boys are in the valley.’

‘All of them?’ asked Jubair.

‘Enough of them.’

‘You’re sure?’ The shudder of nerves up Shy’s throat almost choked her. For months now she’d been betting everything she had on finding Pit and Ro. Now the moment might’ve come she would’ve given anything to put it off.

‘Course I’m bloody sure! Go!’

A hand shoved at her back and she knocked into someone and almost fell, staggered on a few steps, fingers brushing the stone to keep her bearings.

The tunnel made a turn and suddenly she felt cooler air on her face and was out blinking into the light.

Ashranc was a vast mouth in the mountainside, a cavern cut in half, its floor scattered with stone buildings, a huge overhang of rock shadowing everything above. Ahead of them, beyond a daunting drop, a grand expanse of sky and mountain opened out. Behind the cliff was riddled with openings – doorways, windows, stairways, bridges, a confusion of wall and walkway on a dozen levels, houses half-built into the rock face, a city sunk in stone.

An old man stared at them, shaved bald, a horn frozen on the way to his mouth. He muttered something, took a shocked step back, then Jubair's sword split his head and he went over in a shower of blood, horn bouncing from his hand.

Crying Rock darted right and Shy followed, someone whispering 'Shit, shit, shit,' in her ear and she realised it was her. She rushed along low beside a crumbling wall, breath punching hard, every part of her singing with an unbearable fear and panic and rage, so wild and strong she thought she might burst open with it, sick it up, piss it out. Shouting from high above. Shouting from all around. Her boots clanked over metal plates polished smooth and scrawled with writing, grit pinging and rattling from her heels. A tall archway in a cleft in the rocks, bouncing and shuddering as she ran. A heavy double-door, one leaf already closed, two figures straining to haul the other fast, a third on the wall above, pointing at them, bow in hand. Shy went down on one knee and nocked her own arrow. A shaft looped down, missed one of the running mercenaries and clattered away across the bronze. Snap of the bowstring as Shy let fly and she watched her own arrow cover the distance, hanging in the still air. It caught the archer in the side and she gave a yelp – a woman's voice, or maybe a child's – staggered sideways and off the parapet, bounced from the rock and fell crumpled beside the gate.

The two Dragon People who'd been shutting the doors had found weapons. Old men, she saw now, very old. Jubair hacked at one and sent him reeling into the rock face. Two of the mercenaries caught up with the other and cut him down, swearing, chopping, stamping.

Shy stared at the girl she'd shot, lying there. Not much older'n Ro, she reckoned. Part Ghost, maybe, from the whiteness of her skin and the shape of her eyes. Just like Shy. Blame it on your Ghost blood. She stared down

and the girl stared up, breathing fast and shallow, saying nothing, eyes so dark and wet and blood across her cheek. Shy's free hand opened and closed, useless.

'Here!' roared Jubair, raising one hand. Shy heard a faint answering call, through the gate saw men struggling up the mountainside. Cosca's men, weapons drawn. Caught a glimpse of Sweet, maybe, struggling along on foot. The other mercenaries started dragging the doors wide to let them through. Doors of metal four fingers thick but swinging as smooth as a box lid.

'God is with us,' said Jubair, his grin spotted with blood.

God might've been, but Lamb was nowhere to be seen. 'Where's Lamb?' she asked, staring about.

'Don't know.' Savian only just managed to force the words out. He was breathing hard, bent over. 'Went the other way.'

She took off again.

'Wait!' Savian wheezed after her, but he weren't running anywhere. Shy dashed to the nearest house, about enough thought in her pounding head to sling her bow over her shoulder and pull her short-sword. Wasn't sure she'd ever swung a sword in anger. When she killed that Ghost that killed Leef, maybe. Wasn't sure why she was thinking about that now. Heaved in a great breath and tore aside the hide that hung in the doorway, leaped in, blade-first.

Maybe she'd been expecting Pit and Ro to look up, weeping grateful tears. Instead a bare room, naught there but strips of light across a dusty floor.

She barrelled into another house, empty as the first.

She dashed up a set of steps and through an archway in the rock face. This room had furniture, polished by time, bowls neatly stacked, no sign of life.

An old man blundered from the next doorway and right into Shy, slipped and fell, a big pot dropping from his hands and shattering across the ground. He scrambled away, holding up a trembling arm, muttering something, cursing Shy, or pleading for his life, or calling on some forgotten god, and Shy lifted the sword, standing over him. Took an effort to stop herself killing him. Her body burned to do it. But she had to find the children. Before Cosca's men boiled into this place and caught the killing fever. Had

to find the children. If they were here. She let the old man crawl away through a doorway.

'Pit!' she screamed, voice cracking. Back down the steps and into another dim, hot, empty room, an archway at the back leading to another yet. The place was a maze. A city built for thousands, like Crying Rock had said. How the hell to find two children in this? A roar came from somewhere, strange, echoing.

'Lamb?' She clawed sweaty hair out of her face.

Someone gave a panicked screech. There were people spilling from the doorways now, from the low houses below, some with weapons, others with tools, one grey-haired woman with a baby in her arms. Some stared about, sensing something was wrong but not sure what. Others were hurrying off, away from the gate, away from Shy, towards a tall archway in the rock at the far end of the open cavern.

A black-skinned man stood beside it, staff in hand, beckoning people through into the darkness. Waerdinur. And close beside him a much smaller figure, thin and pale, shaven-headed. But Shy knew her even so.

'Ro!' she screamed, but her voice was lost. The clatter of fighting echoed from the rocky ceiling, bounced from the buildings, coming from everywhere and nowhere. She vaulted over a parapet, hopped a channel where water flowed, startled as a huge figure loomed over her, realised it was a tree-trunk carved into a twisted man-shape, ran on into an open space beside a long, low building and slid to a stop.

A group of Dragon People had gathered ahead of her. Three old men, two old women and a boy, all shaven-headed, all armed, and none of them looking like they planned to move.

Shy hefted her sword and screamed, 'Get out o' my fucking way!'

She knew she wasn't that imposing a figure, so it was something of a shock when they began to back off. Then a flatbow bolt flitted into the stomach of one of the old men and he clutched at it, dropping his spear. The others turned and ran. Shy heard feet slapping behind her and mercenaries rushed past, whooping, shouting. One of them hacked an old woman across the back as she tried to limp away.

Shy looked towards that archway, flanked by black pillars and full of shadow. Waerdinur had vanished inside now. Ro too, if it had been her. It must have been.

She set off running.

In so far as Cosca had a best, danger brought it out in him. Temple hurried cringing along, sticking so close to the walls that he would occasionally scrape his face upon them, his fingernails so busy with the hem of his shirt he was halfway to unravelling the whole thing. Brachio scuttled bent almost double. Even Friendly prowled with shoulders suspiciously hunched. But the Old Man had no fear. Not of death, at least. He strode through the ancient settlement utterly heedless of the arrows that occasionally looped down, chin high, eyes aglitter, steps only slightly wayward from drink, snapping out orders that actually made sense.

'Bring down that archer!' Pointing with his sword at an old woman on top of a building.

'Clear those tunnels!' Waving towards some shadowy openings beside them.

'Kill no children if possible, a deal is a deal!' Wagging a lecturing finger at a group of Kantics already daubed with blood.

Whether anyone took any notice of him, it was hard to say. The Company of the Gracious Hand were not the most obedient at the best of times, and these times in no way qualified.

Danger brought no best from Temple. He felt very much as he had in Dagoska, during the siege. Sweating in that stinking hospital, and cursing, and fumbling with the bandages, and tearing up the clothes of the dead for more. Passing the buckets, all night long, lit by fires, water slopping, and for nothing. It all burned anyway. Weeping at each death. Weeping with sorrow. Weeping with gratitude that it was not him. Weeping with fear that it would be him next. Months in fear, always in fear. He had been in fear ever since.

A group of mercenaries had gathered around an ancient man, growling unintelligible insults through clenched teeth in a language something like Old Imperial, swinging a spear wildly in both hands. It did not take long for Temple to realise he was blind. The mercenaries darted in and out. When he turned, one would poke him in the back with a weapon, when he turned again, another would do the honours. The old man's robe was already dark with blood.

'Should we stop them?' muttered Temple.

‘Of course,’ said Cosca. ‘Friendly?’

The sergeant caught the blind man’s spear just below the blade in one big fist, whipped a cleaver from his coat with the other and split his head almost in half in one efficient motion, letting his body slump to the ground and tossing the spear clattering away.

‘Oh God,’ muttered Temple.

‘We have work to do!’ snapped the Old Man at the disappointed mercenaries. ‘Find the gold!’

Temple tore his hands away from his shirt and scratched at his hair instead, scrubbed at it, clawed at it. He had promised himself, after Averstock, that he would never stand by and watch such things again. The same promise he had made in Kadir. And before that in Styria. And here he was, standing uncomplaining by. And watching. But then he had never been much for keeping promises.

Temple’s nose kept running, tickling, running. He rubbed it with the heel of his hand until it bled, and it ran again. He tried to look only at the ground, but sounds kept jerking his wet eyes sideways. To crashes and screams and laughs and bellows, to whimpers and gurgles and sobs and screeches. Through the windows and the doorways he caught glimpses, glimpses he knew would be with him as long as he lived and he rooted his running eyes on the ground again and whispered to himself, ‘Oh God.’

How often had he whispered it during the siege? Over and over as he hurried through the scorched ruins of the Lower City, the bass rumble of the blasting powder making the earth shake as he rolled over the bodies, seeking for survivors, and when he found them burned and scarred and dying, what could he do? He had learned he was no worker of miracles. Oh God, oh God. No help had come then. No help came now.

‘Shall we burn ’em?’ asked a bow-legged Styrian, hopping like a child eager to go out and play. He was pointing up at some carvings chiselled from ancient tree-trunks, wood polished to a glow by the years, strange and beautiful.

Cosca shrugged. ‘If you must. What’s wood for, after all, if not to take a flame?’ He watched the mercenary shower oil on the nearest one and pull out his tinderbox. ‘The sad fact is I just don’t care much any more, either way. It bores me.’

Temple startled as a naked body crashed into the ground next to them. Whether it had been alive or dead on the way down, he could not say. ‘Oh God,’ he whispered.

‘Careful!’ bellowed Friendly, frowning up at the buildings on their left.

Cosca watched the blood spread from the corpse’s broken skull, scarcely interrupted in his train of thought. ‘I look at things such as this and feel only . . . a mild ennui. My mind wanders on to what’s for dinner, or the recurrent itch on the sole of my foot, or when and where I might next be able to get my cock sucked.’ He started to scratch absently at his codpiece, then gave up. ‘What horror, eh, to be bored by such as this?’ Flames flickered merrily up the side of the nearest carving, and the Styrian pyromaniac skipped happily over to the next. ‘The violence, treachery and waste that I have seen. It’s quite squeezed the enthusiasm out of me. I am numbed. That’s why I need you, Temple. You must be my conscience. I want to believe in something!’

He slapped a hand down on Temple’s shoulder and Temple twitched, heard a squeal and turned just in time to see an old woman kicked from the precipice.

‘Oh God.’

‘Exactly what I mean!’ Cosca slapped him on the shoulder again. ‘But if there is a God, why in all these years has He not raised a hand to stop me?’

‘Perhaps we are His hand,’ rumbled Jubair, who had stepped from a doorway wiping blood from his sword with a cloth. ‘His ways are mysterious.’

Cosca snorted. ‘A whore with a veil is mysterious. God’s ways appear to be . . . insane.’

Temple’s nose tickled with perfumed smoke as the wood burned. It had smelled that way in Dagoska when the Gurkish finally broke into the city. The flames spraying the slum buildings, spraying the slum-dwellers, people on fire, flinging themselves from the ruined docks into the sea. The noise of fighting coming closer. Kahdia’s face, lit in flickering orange, the low murmur of the others praying and Temple tugging at his sleeve and saying, ‘You must go, they will be coming,’ and the old priest shaking his head, and smiling as he squeezed at Temple’s shoulder, and saying, ‘That is why I must stay.’

What could he have done then? What could he do now?

He caught movement at the corner of his eye, saw a small shape flit between two of the low stone buildings. ‘Was that a child?’ he muttered, already leaving the others behind.

‘Why does everyone pout so over children?’ Cosca called after him. ‘They’ll turn out just as old and disappointing as the rest of us!’

Temple was hardly listening. He had failed Sufeen, he had failed Kahdia, he had failed his wife and daughter, he had sworn always to take the easy way, but perhaps this time . . . he rounded the corner of the building.

A boy stood there, shaven-headed. Pale-skinned. Red-brown eyebrows, like Shy’s. The right age, perhaps, could it—

Temple saw he had a spear in his hands. A short spear, but held with surprising purpose. In his worry for others, Temple had for once neglected to feel worried for himself. Perhaps that showed some level of personal growth. The self-congratulations would have to wait, however.

‘I’m scared,’ he said, without needing to dissemble. ‘Are you scared?’

No response. Temple gently held out his hands, palms up. ‘Are you Pit?’

A twitch of shock across the boy’s face. Temple slowly knelt and tried to dig out that old earnestness, not easy with the noises of destruction filtering from all around them. ‘My name is Temple. I am a friend of Shy’s.’ That brought out another twitch. ‘A good friend.’ A profound exaggeration at that moment, but a forgivable one. The point of the spear wavered. ‘And of Lamb’s too.’ It started to drop. ‘They came to find you. And I came with them.’

‘They’re here?’ It was strange to hear the boy speak the common tongue with the accent of the Near Country.

‘They’re here,’ he said. ‘They came for you.’

‘Your nose is bleeding.’

‘I know.’ Temple wiped it on his wrist again. ‘No need to worry.’

Pit set down his spear, and walked to Temple and hugged him tight. Temple blinked for a moment, then hesitantly put his arms around the boy and held him.

‘You are safe now,’ he said. ‘You are safe.’

It was hardly the first lie he had ever told.

Shy padded down the hallway, desperate to run on and scared to the point of shitting herself at once, clinging to the slippery grip of her sword. The place

was lit only by flickering little lamps that struck a gleam from the metal designs on the floor – circles within circles, letters and lines – and from the blood smeared across them. Her eyes flicked between the tricking shadows, jumped from body to body – Dragon People and mercenaries, too, hacked and punctured and still leaking.

'Lamb?' she whispered, but so quietly even she could hardly hear it.

Sounds echoed from the warm rock, spilled from the openings to either side – screams and crashes, whispering steam, weeping and laughter leaching through the walls. The laughter worst of all.

'Lamb?'

She edged to the archway at the end of the hall and pressed herself to the wall beside it, a hot draught sweeping past. She clawed the wet hair from her stinging eyes again, flicked sweat from her fingertips and gathered her tattered courage. For Pit and Ro. No turning back now.

She slipped through and her jaw fell. A vast emptiness opened before her, a great rift, an abyss inside the mountain. A ledge ahead was scattered with benches, anvils, smith's tools. Beyond a black gulf yawned, crossed by a bridge no more than two strides wide, no handrail, arching through darkness to another ledge and another archway, maybe fifty strides distant. The heat was crushing, the bridge lit underneath by fires that growled far out of sight below, streaks of crystal in the rocky walls sparkling, everything metal from the hammers and anvils and ingots to her own sword catching a smelter's glow. Shy swallowed as she edged out towards that empty plunge and the far wall dropped down, down, down. As if this were some upper reach of hell the living never should've broached.

'You'd think they'd give it a fucking rail,' she muttered.

Waerdinur stood on the bridge behind a great square shield, a dragon worked into the face, bright point of a spear-blade showing beside it, blocking the way. One mercenary lay dead in front of him, another was trying to ease back to safety, poking away wildly with a halberd. A third knelt not far from Shy, cranking a flatbow. Waerdinur lunged and smoothly skewered the halberdier with his spear, then stepped forward and brushed him off the bridge. He fell without a sound. Not of his falling. Not of his reaching the bottom.

The Dragon Man set himself again, bottom edge of that big shield clanging against the bridge as he brought it down, and he shouted over his

shoulder in words Shy didn't understand. People shuffled through the shadows behind him – old ones, and children, too, and a girl running last of all.

'Ro!' Shy's scream was dead in the throbbing heat and the girl ran on, swallowed in the shadows at the far end of the bridge.

Waerdinur stayed, squatting low behind his shield and watching her over the rim, and she gritted her teeth and gave a hiss of frustrated fury. To come so close, and find no way around.

'Have this, arsehole!' The last mercenary levelled his flatbow and the bolt rattled from Waerdinur's dragon shield and away into the dark, spinning end-over-end, a tiny orange splinter in all that inky emptiness. 'Well, he's going nowhere.' The archer fished a bolt from his quiver and set to cranking back the string again. 'Couple more bows up here and we'll get him. Sooner or later. Don't you fucking worry about—'

Shy saw a flicker at the corner of her eye and the mercenary lurched against the wall, Waerdinur's spear right through him. He said, 'Oh,' and slid to sitting, setting his bow carefully on the ground. Shy was just taking a step towards him when she felt a gentle touch on her shoulder.

Lamb was at her back, but no kind of reassurance. He'd lost his coat and stood in his leather vest all scar and twisted sinew and his sword broken off halfway, splintered blade slathered in blood to his elbow.

'Lamb?' she whispered. He didn't even look at her, just brushed her away with the back of his arm, black eyes picking up a fiery glimmer and fixed across that bridge, muscles starting from his neck, head hanging on one side, pale skin all sweat-beaded, blood-dotted, his bared teeth shining in a skull-grin. Shy shrank out of his way like death itself had come tapping at her shoulder. Maybe it had.

As if it was a meeting long arranged, Waerdinur drew a sword, straight and dull, a silver mark glinting near the hilt.

'I used to have one o' those.' Lamb tossed his own broken blade skittering across the floor and over the edge into nothingness.

'The work of the Maker himself,' said Waerdinur. 'You should have kept it.'

'Friend o' mine stole it.' Lamb stepped towards one of the anvils, fingers whitening as he wrapped them around a great iron bar that lay against it, tall

as Shy was. ‘And everything else.’ Metal grated as he dragged it after him towards the bridge. ‘And it was better’n I deserved.’

Shy thought about telling him not to go but the words didn’t come. Like she couldn’t get the air to speak. Wasn’t another way through that she could see, and it wasn’t as if she was about to turn back. So she sheathed her sword and shrugged her bow into her hand. Waerdinur saw it and took a few cautious steps away, light on the balls of his bare feet, calm as if he trod a dance floor rather’n a strip of stone too narrow for the slimmest of wagons to roll down.

‘Told you I’d be back,’ said Lamb as he stepped out onto the bridge, the tip of the metal bar clattering after him.

‘And so you are,’ said Waerdinur.

Lamb nudged the corpse of the dead mercenary out of his way with a boot and it dropped soundless into the abyss. ‘Told you I’d bring death with me.’

‘And so you have. You must be pleased.’

‘I’ll be pleased when you’re out o’ my way.’ Lamb stopped a couple of paces short of Waerdinur, a trail of glistening footprints left behind him, the two old men facing each other in the midst of that great void.

‘Do you truly think the right is with you?’ asked the Dragon Man.

‘Who cares about right?’ And Lamb sprang, lifting that big length of metal high and bringing it down on Waerdinur’s shield with a boom made Shy wince, leaving a great dent in the dragon design and one corner bent right back. The Dragon Man was driven sprawling, legs kicking as he scrambled from the brink. Before the echoes had faded Lamb was roaring as he swung again.

This time Waerdinur was ready, though, angled his shield so the bar glanced clear and swung back. Lamb jerked away snake-quick and the sword missed him by a feather, jerked forward snake-quick and caught Waerdinur under the jaw, sent him tottering, spitting blood. He found his balance fast, though, lashed left and right, sent sparks and splinters flying from the metal bar as Lamb brought it up to block.

Shy drew a bead but even close as she was the two old men were moving too fast – deadly, murderous fast so any step or twitch could be their last – no telling who she’d hit if she let loose the arrow. Her hand jerked about as she eased onto the bridge, trying to find the shot, always a few moments

behind, sweat tickling at her flickering eyelids as she looked from the fight ahead to the void under her feet.

Waerdinur saw the next blow coming and slipped clear, nimble for all his size. The bar caught the bridge with a shrieking crash, struck sparks, left Lamb off balance long enough for the Dragon Man to swing. Lamb jerked his head away and rather'n splitting his skull the bright point left a red line down his face, drops of blood flicking into nothingness. He staggered three steps, heel slapping at the very brink on the last, space opening between the two men for just a breath as Waerdinur brought his sword back to thrust.

Shy might not have been much at waiting but when the moment came she'd always had a talent for just diving in. She didn't even think about shooting. Her arrow flitted through the darkness, glanced the edge of the shield and into Waerdinur's sword-arm. He grunted, point of his blade dropping and scraping harmlessly against the bridge as Shy lowered her bow, hardly believing she'd taken the shot, still less hit the target.

Lamb bellowed like a mad bull, swinging that length of metal as if it was no heavier than a willow switch, knocking Waerdinur this way and that, sending him reeling along the bridge, no chance to hit back even if he'd been able with Shy's arrow through his arm, no chance to do anything but fight to keep his footing. Lamb kept after, tireless, merciless, driving him off the bridge and onto the ledge at the far end. One last blow tore the shield from Waerdinur's arm and sent it tumbling away into the darkness. He stumbled against the wall, sword clattering from his limp hand, bloody now from the leaking arrow-wound.

A shape came flying from the shadows in the archway, the flash of a knife as it sprang on Lamb and he staggered back towards the brink, wrestled with it, flung it off and into the wall. A shaven-headed girl crumpled against the floor. Changed, so changed, but Shy knew her.

She threw her bow away and ran, no thought for the drop to either side, no thought for anything but the space between them.

Lamb plucked the knife out of his shoulder along with a string of blood and flicked it away like a spent toothpick, face still locked in that red smile, bloody as a new wound, seeing nothing, caring for nothing. Not the man who'd sat beside her on that wagon so many swaying miles, or patiently ploughed the field or sang to the children or warned her to be realistic. Another man, if he was a man at all. The one who'd murdered those two

bandits in Averstock, who'd hacked Sangeed's head off on the plains, who'd killed Glama Golden with his hands in the Circle. Death's best friend indeed.

He arched back with that length of metal in his fists, cuts and notches from the Maker's sword all angrily glinting, and Shy screamed out but it was wasted breath. He'd no more mercy in him now than the winter. All those miles she'd come, all that ground struggled over, and just those few paces left were too many as he brought the bar hissing down.

Waerdinur flung himself on top of Ro and the metal caught his big forearm and snapped it like a twig, crashed on into his shoulder, opened a great gash down his head, knocked him senseless. Lamb raised the bar again, screaming froth on his twisted lips, and Shy caught hold of the other end of it as she hurtled off the bridge, whooped as she was jerked into the air. Wind rushed, the glowing cavern flipped over, and she crashed upside down into stone.

Then all quiet.

Just a faint ringing.

Shuffling boots.

Get up, Shy.

Can't just lie around all day.

Things need doing on a farm.

But breathing was quite the challenge.

She pushed against the wall, or the floor, or the ceiling, and the world spun right over, everything whirling like a leaf on a flood.

Was she standing? No. On her back. One arm dangling. Dangling over the edge of the drop, blackness and fire, tiny in the distant depth. That didn't seem a good idea. She rolled the other way. Managed to find her knees, everything swaying, trying to shake the fog from her skull.

People were shouting, voices vague, muffled. Something knocked against her and she nearly fell again.

A tangle of men, shuffling, wrestling. Lamb was in the midst, face wild as an animal's, red wet from a long cut right across it, squealing and gurgling sounds that weren't even halfway to swearing.

Cosca's big sergeant, Friendly, was behind him with one arm around his neck, sweat standing from his forehead with the effort but his face just faintly frowning like he was teasing out a troubling sum.

Sweet was trying to keep a grip on Lamb's left arm, getting dragged about like a man who'd roped a crazy horse. Savian had Lamb's right and he was croaking, 'Stop! Stop, you mad fucker!' Shy saw he had a knife drawn and didn't think she could stop him using it. Didn't even know if she wanted to.

Lamb had tried to kill Ro. All they'd gone through to find her and he'd tried to kill her. He would've killed Shy, too, whatever he'd promised her mother. He would've killed all of them. She couldn't make sense of it. Didn't want to.

Then Lamb went rigid, near dragging Sweet off the edge of the cliff, whites of his eyes showing under flickering lids. Then he sagged, gasping, whimpering, and he put his bloody three-fingered hand over his face, all the fight suddenly put out.

And Savian patted Lamb on the chest, drawn knife still held behind his back and said, 'Easy, easy.'

Shy tottered up, the world more or less settled but her head throbbing, blood tickling at the back of her skull.

'Easy, easy.'

Right arm hard to move and her ribs aching so it hurt to breathe but she started shuffling for the archway. Behind her she could hear Lamb sobbing.

'Easy . . . easy . . .'

A narrow passageway, hot as a forge, black but for a flaring glow up ahead and glimmering spots across the floor. Waerdinur's blood. Shy limped after, remembered her sword, managed to get it drawn but could hardly grip the thing in her numb right hand, fumbled it across to her left and went on, getting steadier, halfway to jogging now, the tunnel getting brighter, hotter still, and an opening ahead, a golden light spilling across the stones. She burst through and slid to a sudden stop, went over on her arse and lay still, propped on her elbows, gaping.

'Fuck,' she breathed.

They were called Dragon People, that much she knew. But she'd never guessed they actually had a dragon.

It lay there in the centre of a vast domed chamber like the big scene from a storybook – beautiful, terrible, strange, its thousand thousand metal scales dull-glistered with the light of fires.

It was hard to judge its size, coiled about and about as it was, but its tapered head might've been long as a man was tall. Its teeth were dagger-

blades. No claws. Each of its many legs ended in a hand, golden rings upon the graceful metal fingers. Beneath its folded paper wings gears gently clicked and clattered, wheels slowly, slowly turned, and the faintest breath of steam issued from its vented nostrils, the tip of a tongue like a forked chain softly rattling, a tiny slit of emerald eye showing under each of its four metal eyelids.

'Fuck,' she whispered again, eyes drifting down to the dragon's bed, no less of a child's daydream than the monster itself. A hill of money. Of ancient gold and silver plate. Of chains and chalices, coins and coronets. Of gilded arms and armour. Of gem-encrusted everythings. The silver standard of some long-lost legion thrust up at a jaunty angle. A throne of rare woods adorned with gold leaf stuck upside down from the mass. There was so much it became absurd. Priceless treasures rendered to gaudy trash by sheer quantity.

'Fuck,' she muttered one last time, waiting for the metal beast to wake and fall in blazing rage upon this tiny trespasser. But it didn't stir, and Shy's eyes crept down to the ground. The dotted tracks of blood became a smear, then a trickle, and now she saw Waerdinur, lying back against the dragon's foreleg, and Ro beside him, staring, face streaked with blood from a cut on her scalp.

Shy struggled up, and crept down the bowl-shaped floor of the chamber, the stone underfoot all etched with writing, gripping tight to her sword, as though that feeble splinter of steel was anything more than a petty reassurance.

She saw other things among the hoard as she came closer. Papers with heavy seals. Miners' claims. Bankers' drafts. Deeds to buildings long ago fallen. Wills to estates long ago divided. Shares in Fellowships, and companies, and enterprises long deceased. Keys to who knew what forgotten locks. Skulls, too. Dozens of them. Hundreds. Coins and gemstones cut and raw spilling from their empty eye sockets. What things more valued than the dead?

Waerdinur's breath came shallow, robe blood-soaked, shattered arm limp beside him and Ro clutching at the other, Shy's broken arrow still lodged near the shoulder.

'It's me,' Shy whispered, scared to raise her voice, edging forward, stretching out her hand. 'Ro. It's me.'

She wouldn't let go of the old man's arm. It took him reaching up and gently peeling her hand away. He nudged her towards Shy, spoke some soft words in his language and pushed again, more firmly. More words and Ro hung her shaved head, tears in her eyes, and started to shuffle away.

Waerdinur looked at Shy with pain-bright eyes. 'We only wanted what was best for them.'

Shy knelt and gathered the girl up in her arms. She felt thin, and stiff, and reluctant, nothing left of the sister she'd had so long ago. Scarcely the reunion Shy had dreamed of. But it was a reunion.

'Fuck!' Nicomo Cosca stood in the entrance of the chamber, staring at the dragon and its bed.

Sergeant Friendly walked towards it, sliding a heavy cleaver from inside his coat, took one crunching step onto the bed of gold and bones and papers, coins sliding in a little landslip behind his boot-heel and, reaching forward, tapped the dragon on the snout.

His cleaver made a solid clank, as if he'd tapped an anvil.

'It is a machine,' he said, frowning down.

'Most sacred of the Maker's works,' croaked Waerdinur. 'A thing of wonder, of power, of—'

'Doubtless.' Cosca smiled wide as he walked into the chamber, fanning himself with his hat. But it wasn't the dragon that held his eye. It was its bed. 'How great a sum, do you think, Friendly?'

The sergeant raised his brows and took a long breath through his nose. 'Very great. Shall I count it?'

'Perhaps later.'

Friendly looked faintly disappointed.

'Listen to me . . .' Waerdinur tried to prop himself up, blood oozing from around the shaft in his shoulder, smearing the bright gold behind him. 'We are close to waking the dragon. So close! The work of centuries. This year . . . perhaps next. You cannot imagine its power. We could . . . we could share it between us!'

Cosca grimaced. 'Experience has taught me I'm no good at sharing.'

'We will drive the Outsiders from the mountains and the world will be right again, as it was in the Old Time. And you . . . whatever you want is yours!'

Cosca smiled up at the dragon, hands on hips. ‘It certainly is a remarkable curiosity. A magnificent relic. But against what is already boiling across the plains? The legion of the dumb? The merchants and farmers and makers of trifles and filers of papers? The infinite tide of greedy little people?’ He waved his hat towards the dragon. ‘Such things as this are worthless as a cow against a swarm of ants. There will be no place in the world to come for the magical, the mysterious, the strange. They will come to your sacred places and build . . . tailors’ shops. And dry-goods emporia. And lawyers’ offices. They will make of them bland copies of everywhere else.’ The old mercenary scratched thoughtfully at his rashy neck. ‘You can wish it were not so. I wish it were not so. But it is so. I tire of lost causes. The time of men like me is passing. The time of men like you?’ He wiped a little blood from under his fingernails. ‘So long passed it might as well have never been.’

Waerdinur tried to reach out, his hand dangling from the broken forearm, skin stretched around the splintered bones. ‘You do not understand what I am offering you!’

‘But I do.’ And Cosca set one boot upon a gilded helmet wedged into the hoard and smiled down upon the Maker’s Right Hand. ‘You may be surprised to learn this, but I have been made many outlandish offers. Hidden fortunes, places of honour, lucrative trading rights along the Kadiri coast, an entire city once, would you believe, though admittedly in poor condition. I have come to realise . . .’ and he peered discerningly up at the dragon’s steaming snout, ‘a painful realisation, because I enjoy a fantastic dream just as much as the next man . . .’ and he fished up a single golden coin and held it to the light. ‘That one mark is worth a great deal more than a thousand promises.’

Waerdinur slowly let his broken arm drop. ‘I tried to do . . . what was best.’

‘Of course.’ Cosca gave him a reassuring nod, and flicked the coin back onto the heap. ‘Believe it or not, so do we all. Friendly?’

The sergeant leaned down and neatly split Waerdinur’s head with his cleaver.

‘No!’ shrieked Ro, and Shy could hardly hold on to her, she started thrashing so much.

Cosca looked mildly annoyed at the interruption. ‘It might be best if you removed her. This really is no place for a child.’

Greed

They set off in a happy crowd, smiling, laughing, congratulating one another on their work, comparing the trophies of gold and flesh they had stolen from the dead. Ro had not thought ever in her life to look upon a man worse than Grega Cantliss. Now they were everywhere she turned. One had Akarin's pipe and he tooted a mindless three-noted jig and some danced and capered down the valley, their clothes made motley by the blood of Ro's family.

They left Ashranc in ruins, the carvings smashed and the Heartwoods smoking charcoal and the bronze panels gouged up and the Long House burned with the blessed coals from its fire-pit, all forever stained with death. They despoiled even the most sacred caves and tipped the Dragon over so they could steal the coins that made its bed, then they sealed it in its cavern and brought down the bridge with a burning powder that made the very earth shake in horror at the heresy.

'Better to be safe,' the murderer Cosca had said, then leaned towards the old man called Savian and asked, 'Did you find your boy? My notary salvaged several children. He's discovered quite the talent for it.'

Savian shook his head.

'A shame. Will you keep searching?'

'Told myself I'd go this far. No further.'

'Well. Every man has his limit, eh?' And Cosca gave him a friendly slap on the arm then chucked Ro under the chin and said, 'Cheer up, your hair will grow back in no time!'

And Ro watched him go, wishing she had the courage, or the presence of mind, or the anger in her to find a knife and stab him, or rip him with her

nails, or bite his face.

They set off briskly but soon slowed, tired and sore and gorged on destruction. Bent and sweating under the weight of their plunder, packs and pockets bulging with coins. Soon they were jostling and cursing each other and arguing over fallen trinkets. One man tore the pipe away and smashed it on a rock and the one who had been playing it struck him and the great black man had to drag the two of them apart and spoke about God, as if He was watching, and Ro thought, if God can see anything, why would He watch this?

Shy talked, talked, different than she had been. Pared down and pale and tired as a candle burned to the stub, bruised as a beaten dog so Ro hardly recognised her. Like a woman she saw in a dream once. A nightmare. She blathered, nervous and foolish with a mask of a smile. She asked the nine children to tell their names and some gave their old names and some their new, hardly knowing who they were any more.

Shy squatted in front of Evin when he told his name, and said, 'Your brother Leef was with us, for a bit.' She put the back of her hand to her mouth and Ro saw it was trembling. 'He died out on the plains. We buried him in a good spot, I reckon. Good as you get out there.' And she put her hand on Ro's shoulder then and said, 'I wanted to bring you a book or something, but . . . didn't work out.' And the world in which there were books was a half-remembered thing, and the faces of the dead so real and new about her, Ro could not understand it. 'I'm sorry . . . we took so long.' Shy looked at her with wet in the corners of her pink rimmed eyes and said, 'Say something, can't you?'

'I hate you,' said Ro, in the language of the Dragon People so she would not understand.

The dark-skinned man called Temple looked sadly at her and said, in the same tongue, 'Your sister came a long way to find you. For months you have been all she has wanted.'

Ro said, 'I have no sister. Tell her that.'

Temple shook his head. 'You tell her.'

All the while the old Northman watched them, eyes wide but looking through her, as if he had seen an awful thing far-off, and Ro thought of him standing over her with that devil smile and her father giving his life for hers and wondered who this silent killer was who looked so much like Lamb.

When his cut face started bleeding, Savian knelt near him to stitch it and said, ‘Hardly seemed like demons, in the end, these Dragon Folk.’

The man who looked like Lamb didn’t flinch as the needle pierced his skin. ‘The real demons you bring with you.’

When Ro lay in the darkness, even with fingers stuck in her ears all she could hear was Hirfac screaming and screaming as they burned her on the cooking-slab, the air sweet with the smell of meat. Even with her hands over her eyes, all she could see was Ulstal’s face, sad and dignified, as they pushed him off the cliff with their spears and he fell without a cry, the bodies left broken at the foot, good people she had laughed with, each with their own wisdom, made useless meat and she could not understand the waste of it. She felt she should have hated all these Outsiders beyond hating but somehow she was only numb and withered inside, as dead a thing as her family herded off the cliff, as her father with his head split, as Gully swinging from his tree.

The next morning, men were missing and gold and food missing with them. Some said they had deserted and some that they had been lured by spirits in the night and some that the Dragon People were following, vengeful. While they argued, Ro looked back towards Ashranc, a pall of smoke still hanging over the mountainside in the pale blue, and felt she was stolen from her home once again, and she reached inside her robe and clutched the dragon scale her father had given her, cool against her skin. Beside her on a rock, the old Ghost Woman stood frowning.

‘Bad luck to look back too long, girl,’ said the white-bearded one called Sweet, though Ro reckoned the Ghost fifty years old at the least, only a few yellow hairs left among the grey she had bound up with a rag.

‘It does not feel so fine as I thought it would.’

‘When you spend half your life dreaming of a thing, its coming to pass rarely measures up.’

Ro saw Shy look at her, then down at the ground, and she curled her lip back and spat through the gap in her teeth. A memory came up then all unbidden of Shy and Gully having a contest at spitting in a pot and Ro laughing, and Pit laughing, and Lamb watching and smiling, and Ro felt a pain in her chest and looked away, not knowing why.

‘Maybe the money’ll make it feel finer,’ Sweet was saying.

The old Ghost woman shook her head. ‘A rich fool is still a fool. You will see.’

Sick of waiting for their missing friends, the men went on. Bottles were opened and they got drunk and slowed under the weight of their booty, toiling in the heat over broken rocks, straining and cursing with mighty burdens as though gold was worth more than their own flesh, more than their own breath. Even so they left discarded baubles scattered in their wake, sparkling like a slug’s trail, some picked up by those behind only to be dropped a mile further on. More food had gone in the night and more water and they squabbled over what was left, a haunch of bread worth its weight in gold, then ten times its weight, jewels given over for half a flask of spirits. A man killed another for an apple and Cosca ordered him hanged. They left him swinging behind them, still with the silver chains rattling around his neck.

‘Discipline must be maintained!’ Cosca told everyone, wobbling with drunkenness in the saddle of his unfortunate horse, and up on Lamb’s shoulders Pit smiled, and Ro realised she had not seen him smile in a long time.

They left the sacred places behind and passed into the forest, and the snow began to fall, and then to settle, and the Dragon’s warmth faded from the earth and it grew bitter chill. Temple and Shy handed out furs to the children as the trees reared taller and taller around. Some of the mercenaries had thrown their coats away so as to carry more gold, and now shivered where they had sweated before, curses smoking on the chill, cold mist catching at their heels.

Two men were found dead in the trees, shot in the back with arrows while they were shitting. Arrows that the mercenaries had themselves abandoned in Ashranc so they could stuff their quivers with loot.

They sent out other men to find and kill whoever had done the shooting but they did not come back and after a while the rest pressed on, but with a panic on them now, weapons drawn, staring into the trees, starting at shadows. Men kept vanishing, one by one, and one man took another who had strayed for an enemy and shot him down, and Cosca spread his hands and said, ‘In war, there are no straight lines.’ They argued over how they might carry the wounded man or whether they should leave him, but before

they decided he died anyway and they picked things from his body and kicked it into a crevasse.

Some of the children gave each other grins because they knew their own family must be following, the bodies left as a message to them, and Evin walked close beside her and said in the Dragon People's tongue, 'Tonight we run,' and Ro nodded.

The darkness settled without stars or moon and the snow falling thick and soft and Ro waited, trembling with the need to run and the fear of being caught, marking the endless time by the sleeping breath of the Outsiders, Shy's quick and even and Savian's crackling loud in his chest and the Ghost Woman prone to mutter as she turned, more to say when she was sleeping than waking. Until the old man Sweet, who she took for the slowest runner among them, was roused for his watch and grumbled to a place on the other side of their camp. Then she tapped Evin's shoulder, and he nodded to her, and prodded the others, and in a silent row they stole away into the darkness.

She shook Pit awake and he sat. 'Time to go.' But he only blinked. 'Time to go!' she hissed, squeezing his arm.

He shook his head. 'No.'

She dragged him up and he struggled and shouted, 'I won't go! Shy!' And someone flung back their blankets, a can clattering, all commotion, and Ro let go Pit's hand and ran, floundering in the snow, away into the trees, caught her boot on a root and tumbled over and over and up and on. Struggling, striving, this time she would get free. Then a terrible weight took her around the knees and she fell.

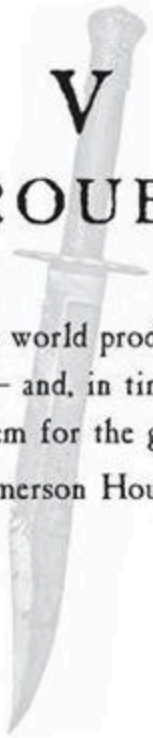
She screeched and kicked and punched but she might as well have struggled with a stone, with a tree, with the mighty earth itself. The weight was around her hips, then her chest, trapping her helpless. She thought she saw Evin as the snow swirled, looking back, and she strained towards him with one hand and shouted, 'Help me!'

Then he was lost in the darkness. Or she was.

'Damn you!' Ro snarled and wept and twisted but all in vain.

She heard Lamb's voice in her ear. 'I'm already damned. But I ain't letting you go again,' and he held her so tight she could scarcely move, could scarcely breathe.

So that was all.



V
TROUBLE

'Each land in the world produces its own men
individually bad – and, in time, other bad men
who kill them for the general good.'
Emerson Hough

The Tally

They smelled Beacon long before they saw it. A waft of cooking meat set the famished column shambling downhill through the trees, men slipping and barging and knocking each other over in their haste, sending snow showering. An enterprising hawker had set sticks of meat to cook high up on the slope above the camp. Alas for her, the mercenaries were in no mood to pay and, brushing her protests aside, plundered every shred of gristle as efficiently as a horde of locusts. Even meat as yet uncooked was fought over and wolfed down. One man had his hand pressed into the glowing brazier in the commotion and knelt moaning in the snow, clutching his black-striped palm as Temple laboured past, hugging himself against the cold.

'What a set o' men,' muttered Shy. 'Richer than Hermon and they'd still rather steal.'

'Doing wrong gets to be a habit,' answered Temple, teeth chattering.

The smell of profit must have drifted all the way to Crease because the camp itself was positively booming. Several more barrows had been dug out and several new shacks thrown up and their chimneys busily smoking. More pedlars had set up shop and more whores set down mattress, all crowding happily out to offer succour to the brave conquerors, price lists surreptitiously amended as salesmen noticed, all avaricious amaze, the weight of gold and silver with which the men were burdened.

Cosca was the only one mounted, leading the procession on an exhausted mule. 'Greetings!' He delved into his saddlebag and with a carefree flick of the wrist sent a shower of ancient coins into the air. 'And a happy birthday to you all!'

A stall was toppled, pots and pans clattering as people dived after the pinging coins, huddling about the hooves of the Old Man's mount and jostling each other like pigeons around a handful of seed. An emaciated fiddler, undeterred by his lack of a full complement of strings, struck up a merry jig and capered among the mercenaries, toothlessly grinning.

Beneath that familiar sign proclaiming *Majud and Curnsbick Metalwork*, to which had been carefully added *Weapons and Armour Manufactured and Repaired*, stood Abram Majud, a couple of hirelings keeping the patent portable forge aglow on a narrow strip of ground behind him.

'You've found a new plot,' said Temple.

'A small one. Would you build me a house upon it?'

'Perhaps later.' Temple clasped the merchant's hand, and thought with some nostalgia of an honest day's work done for a half-honest master. Nostalgia was becoming a favoured hobby of his. Strange, how the best moments of our lives we scarcely notice except in looking back.

'And are these the children?' asked Majud, squatting down before Pit and Ro.

'We found 'em,' said Shy, without displaying much triumph.

'I am glad.' Majud offered the boy his hand. 'You must be Pit.'

'I am,' he said, solemnly shaking.

'And you, Ro.'

The girl frowned away, and did not answer.

'She is,' said Shy. 'Or . . . was.'

Majud slapped his knees. 'And I am sure will be again. People change.'

'You sure?' asked Temple.

The merchant put a hand on his shoulder. 'Does not the proof stand before me?'

He was wondering whether that was a joke or a compliment when Cosca's familiar shriek grated at his ear. 'Temple!'

'Your master's voice,' said Shy.

Where was the purpose in disputing it? Temple nodded his apologies and slunk off towards the fort like the beaten dog he was. He passed a man ripping a cooked chicken apart with his hands, face slick with grease. Two others fought over a flask of ale, accidentally pulled the stopper, and a third dived between them, mouth open, in a vain effort to catch the spillings. A cheer rang out as a whore was hoisted up on three men's shoulders,

festooned with ancient gold, a coronet clasped lopsided to her head and screeching, ‘I’m the Queen of the fucking Union! I’m the fucking Queen of the fucking Union!’

‘I am glad to see you well.’ Sworbreck clapped him on the arm with what felt like genuine warmth.

‘Alive, at least.’ It had been some time since Temple last felt well.

‘How was it?’

Temple considered that. ‘No stories of heroism for you to record I fear.’

‘I have given up hope of finding any.’

‘I find hope is best abandoned early,’ muttered Temple.

The Old Man was beckoning his three captains into a conspiratorial and faintly unpleasant-smelling huddle in the shadow of Superior Pike’s great fortified wagon.

‘My trusted friends,’ he said, starting, as he would continue, with a lie. ‘We stand upon the heady pinnacle of attainment. But, speaking as one who has often done so, there is no more precarious perch and those that lose their footing have far to fall. Success tests a friendship far more keenly than failure. We must be doubly watchful of the men and triply cautious in our dealings with all outsiders.’

‘Agreed,’ nodded Brachio, jowls trembling.

‘Indeed,’ sneered Dimbik, sharp nose pinked by the cold.

‘God knows it,’ rumbled Jubair, eyes rolling to the sky.

‘How can I fail with three such pillars to support me? The first order of business must be to collect the booty. If we leave it with the men they will have frittered the majority away to these vultures by first light.’

Men cheered as a great butt of wine was tapped, red spots spattering the snow beneath, and began happily handing over ten times the price of the entire barrel for each mug poured.

‘By that time they will probably find themselves in considerable debt,’ observed Dimbik, slicking back a loose strand of hair with a dampened fingertip.

‘I suggest we gather the valuables without delay, then, observed by us all, counted by Sergeant Friendly, notarised by Master Temple, and stored in this wagon under triple-lock.’ And Cosca thumped the solid wood of which the wagon was made as though to advertise the good sense and

dependability of his suggestion. ‘Dimbik, set your most loyal men to guard it.’

Brachio watched a fellow swing a golden chain around his head, jewels sparkling. ‘The men won’t hand their prizes over happily.’

‘They never do, but if we stand together and provide enough distractions they will succumb. How many do we number now, Friendly?’

‘One hundred and forty-three,’ said the sergeant.

Jubair shook his heavy head at the faithlessness of mankind. ‘The Company dwindles alarmingly.’

‘We can afford no further desertions,’ said Cosca. ‘I suggest all mounts be gathered, corralled and closely watched by trusted guards.’

‘Risky.’ Brachio scratched worriedly at the crease between his chins. ‘There are some skittish ones among ’em—’

‘That’s horses for you. See it done. Jubair, I want a dozen of your best in position to make sure our little surprise goes to plan.’

‘Already awaiting your word.’

‘What surprise?’ asked Temple. God knew, he was not sure he could endure any further excitement.

The captain general grinned. ‘A surprise shared is no surprise at all. Don’t worry! I feel sure you’ll approve.’ Temple was in no way reassured. His idea of a good thing and Cosca’s intersected less with every passing day. ‘Each to our work, then, while I address the men.’

As he watched his three captains move off, Cosca’s smile slowly faded, leaving him with eyes narrowed to slits of suspicion. ‘I don’t trust those bastards further than I could shit.’

‘No,’ said Friendly.

‘No,’ said Temple. Indeed, the only man he trusted less stood beside him now.

‘I want the two of you to account for the treasure. Every brass bit properly tallied, noted and stored away.’

‘Counted?’ said Friendly.

‘Absolutely, my old friend. And see to it also that there is food and water in the wagon, and a team of horses hitched and at the ready. If things turn . . . ugly here, we may require a swift exit.’

‘Eight horses,’ said Friendly. ‘Four pairs.’

‘Now help me up. I have a speech to make.’

With a great deal of grimacing and grumbling, the Old Man managed to clamber onto the seat and then the roof of the wagon, fists bunched upon its wooden parapet, facing out into the camp. By that stage, those not already thoroughly occupied had begun a chant in his honour, weapons, bottles and half-devoured morsels shaken at the evening sky. Tiring of their burden, they unceremoniously deposed the newly crowned Queen of the Union screeching in the mud and plundered her of her borrowed valuables.

'Cosca! Cosca! Cosca!' they roared as the captain general removed his hat, smoothed the white wisps across his pate and spread his arms wide to receive their adulation. Someone seized the beggar's fiddle and smashed it to pieces, then further ensured his silence with a punch in the mouth.

'My honoured companions!' bellowed the Old Man. Time might have dulled some of his faculties but the volume of his voice was unimpaired. 'We have done well!' A rousing cheer. Someone threw money in the air, provoking an ugly scuffle. 'Tonight we celebrate! Tonight we drink, and sing, and revel, as befits a triumph worthy of the heroes of old!' Further cheers, and brotherly embraces, and slapping of backs. Temple wondered whether the heroes of old would have celebrated the herding of a few dozen ancients from a cliff. More than likely. That's heroes for you.

Cosca held up a gnarled hand for quiet, eventually achieved aside from the soft sucking sounds of a couple who were beginning the celebrations early. 'Before the revelry, however, I regret that there must be an accounting.' An immediate change in mood. 'Each man will surrender his booty—' Angry mutterings now broke out. '*All* his booty!' Angrier yet. 'No swallowed jewels, no coins up arses! No one wants to have to look for them there.' A few distinct boos. 'That our majestic haul may be properly valued, recorded, safely kept under triple-lock in this very wagon, to be dispersed as appropriate when we have reached civilisation!'

The mood now verged on the ugly. Temple noted some of Jubair's men, threading watchfully through the crowd. 'We start out tomorrow morning!' roared Cosca. 'But for tonight each man will receive one hundred marks as a bonus to spend as he sees fit!' Some amelioration of the upset at that. 'Let us not spoil our triumph with sour dissent! Remain united, and we can leave this benighted country rich beyond the dreams of greed. Turn against each other, and failure, shame and death will be our just deserts.' Cosca thumped one fist against his breastplate. 'I think, as ever, only of the safety of our

noble brotherhood! The sooner your booty is tallied, the sooner the fun begins!'

'What of the rebels?' rang out a piercing voice. Inquisitor Lorsen was shoving his way through the press towards the wagon, and from the look on his gaunt face the fun would not be starting any time soon. 'Where are the rebels, Cosca?'

'The rebels? Ah, yes. The strangest thing. We scoured Ashranc from top to bottom. Would you use the word "scoured", Temple?'

'I would,' said Temple. They had smashed anything that might hold a coin, let alone a rebel.

'But no sign of them?' growled Lorsen.

'We were deceived!' Cosca thumped the parapet in frustration. 'Damn, but these rebels are a slippery crowd! The alliance between them and the Dragon People was a ruse.'

'Their ruse or yours?'

'Inquisitor, you wrong me! I am as disappointed as you are—'

'I hardly think so!' snapped Lorsen. 'You have lined your own pockets, after all.'

Cosca spread his hands in helpless apology. 'That's mercenaries for you.'

A scattering of laughter from the Company but their employer was in no mood to participate. 'You have made me an accomplice to robbery! To murder! To massacre!'

'I held no dagger to your neck. Superior Pike did ask for chaos, as I recall —'

'To a purpose! You have perpetrated mindless slaughter!'

'Mind*ful* slaughter would surely be even worse?' Cosca burst out in a chuckle but Lorsen's black-masked Practicals, scattered about the shadows, lacked all sense of humour.

The Inquisitor waited for silence. 'Do you believe in anything?'

'Not if I can help it. Belief alone is nothing to be proud of, Inquisitor. Belief without evidence is the very hallmark of the savage.'

Lorsen shook his head in amazement. 'You truly are disgusting.'

'I would be the last to disagree, but you fail to see that you are worse. No man capable of greater evil than the one who thinks himself in the right. No purpose more evil than the higher purpose. I freely admit I am a villain. That's why you hired me. But I am no hypocrite.' Cosca gestured at the

ragged remnants of his Company, fallen silent to observe the confrontation. ‘I have mouths to feed. You could just go home. If you are set on doing good, make something to be proud of. Open a bakery. Fresh bread every morning, there’s a noble cause!’

Inquisitor Lorsen’s thin lip curled. ‘There truly is nothing in you of what separates man from animal, is there? You are bereft of conscience. An utter absence of morality. You have no principle beyond the selfish.’

Cosca’s face hardened as he leaned forwards. ‘Perhaps when you have faced as many disappointments and suffered as many betrayals as I, you will see it – there is no principle beyond the selfish, Inquisitor, and men *are* animals. Conscience is a burden we choose to bear. Morality is the lie we tell ourselves to make its bearing easier. There have been many times in my life when I have wished it was not so. But it is so.’

Lorsen slowly nodded, bright eyes fixed on Cosca. ‘There will be a price for this.’

‘I am counting on it. Though it seems an almost ludicrous irrelevance now, Superior Pike promised me fifty thousand marks.’

‘For the capture of the rebel leader Conthus!’

‘Indeed. And there he is.’

There was a scraping of steel, a clicking of triggers, a rattling of armour as a dozen of Jubair’s men stepped forward. A circle of drawn swords, loaded flatbows, levelled polearms all suddenly pointed in towards Lamb, Sweet, Shy and Savian. Gently, Majud drew the wideeyed children close to him.

‘Master Savian!’ called Cosca. ‘I deeply regret that I must ask you to lay down your weapons. Any and all, if you please!’

Betraying no emotion, Savian slowly reached up to undo the buckle on the strap across his chest, flatbow and bolts clattering to the mud. Lamb watched him do it, and calmly bit into a leg of chicken. No doubt that was the easy way, to stand and watch. God knew, Temple had taken that way often enough. Too often, perhaps . . .

He dragged himself up onto the wagon to hiss in Cosca’s ear. ‘You don’t have to do this!’

‘Have to? No.’

‘Please! How does it help you?’

‘Help *me*?’ The Old Man raised one brow at Temple as Savian unbuttoned his coat and one by one shed his other weapons. ‘It helps me not at all. That is the very essence of selflessness and charity.’

Temple could only stand blinking.

‘Are you not always telling me to do the right thing?’ asked Cosca. ‘Did we not sign a contract? Did we not accept Inquisitor Lorsen’s noble cause as our own? Did we not lead him a merry chase up and down this forsaken gulf of distance? Pray be silent, Temple. I never thought to say this, but you are impeding my moral growth.’ He turned away to shout, ‘Would you be kind enough to roll up your sleeves, Master Savian?’

Savian cleared his throat, metal rattling as the mercenaries nervously shifted, took the button at his collar and undid it, then the next, then the next, the fighters and pedlars and whores all watching the drama unfold in silence. Hedges too, Temple noticed, for some reason with a smile of feverish delight on his face. Savian shrugged his shirt off and stood stripped to the waist, and his whole body from his pale neck to his pale hands was covered in writing, in letters large and tiny, in slogans in a dozen languages: *Death to the Union, Death to the King. The only good Midderlander is a dead one. Never kneel. Never surrender. No Mercy. No Peace. Freedom. Justice. Blood.* He was blue with them.

‘I only asked for the sleeves,’ said Cosca, ‘but I feel the point is made.’

Savian gave the faintest smile. ‘What if I said I’m not Conthus?’

‘I doubt we’d believe you.’ The Old Man looked over at Lorsen, who was staring at Savian with a hungry intensity. ‘In fact, I very much doubt we would. Do you have any objections, Master Sweet?’

Sweet blinked around at all that sharpened metal and opted for the easy way. ‘Not me. I’m shocked as anyone at this surprising turn of events.’

‘You must be quite discomfited to learn you’ve been travelling with a mass-murderer all this time.’ Cosca grinned. ‘Well, two, in fact, eh Master Lamb?’ The Northman still picked at his drumstick as though there was no steel pointed in his direction. ‘Anything to say on behalf of your friend?’

‘Most o’ my friends I’ve killed,’ said Lamb around a mouthful. ‘I came for the children. The rest is mud.’

Cosca pressed one sorry hand to his breastplate. ‘I have stood where you stand, Master Savian, and entirely sympathise. We all are alone in the end.’

‘It’s a hard fucking world,’ said Savian, looking neither right nor left.

‘Seize him,’ growled Lorsen, and his Practicals swarmed forwards like dogs off the leash. For a moment it looked as if Shy’s hand was creeping towards her knife but Lamb held her arm with his free hand, eyes on the ground as the Practicals marched Savian towards the fort. Inquisitor Lorsen followed them inside, smiled grimly out into the camp and slammed the door with a heavy bang.

Cosca shook his head. ‘Not even so much as a thank you. Doing right is a dead end, Temple, as I have often said. Queue up, my boys, it’s time for an accounting!’

Brachio and Dimbik began to circulate, ushering the men into a grumbling queue, the excitement of Savian’s arrest already fading. Temple stared across at Shy, and she stared back at him, but what could either of them do?

‘We will need sacks and boxes!’ Cosca was shouting. ‘Open the wagon and find a table for the count. A door on trestles, then, good enough! Sworbreck? Fetch pen and ink and ledger. Not the writing you came to do, but no less honourable a task!’

‘Deeply honoured,’ croaked the writer, looking slightly sick.

‘We’d best be heading out.’ Dab Sweet had made his way over to the wagon and was looking up. ‘Get the children back to Crease, I reckon.’

‘Of course, my friend,’ said Cosca, grinning down. ‘You will be sorely missed. Without your skills – let alone the fearsome talents of Master Lamb – the task would have been nigh impossible. The tall tales don’t exaggerate in your cases, eh, Sworbreck?’

‘They are legends made flesh, captain general,’ mumbled the writer.

‘We will have to give them a chapter to themselves. Perhaps two! The very best of luck to you and your companions. I will recommend you wherever I go!’ Cosca turned away as though that concluded their business.

Sweet looked to Temple, and Temple could only shrug. There was nothing he could do about this either.

The old scout cleared his throat. ‘There’s just the matter of our share o’ the proceeds. As I recall, we discussed a twentieth—’

‘What about my share?’ Cantliss elbowed his way past Sweet to stare up. ‘It was me told you there’d be rebels up there! Me who found those bastards out!’

‘Why, so you did!’ said Cosca. ‘You are a veritable child-stealing Prophet and we owe you all our success!’

Cantliss’ bloodshot eyes lit with a fire of greed. ‘So . . . what am I due?’

Friendly stepped up from behind, innocuously slipped a noose over his head, and as Cantliss glanced around, Jubair hauled with all his considerable weight on the rope, which had been looped over a beam projecting from the side of the broken tower. Hemp grated as the bandit was hoisted off his feet. One kicking foot knocked a black spray of ink across Sworbreck’s ledger and the writer stumbled up, ashen-faced, as Cantliss pawed feebly at the noose with his broken hand, eyes bulging.

‘Paid in full!’ shouted Cosca. Some of the mercenaries half-heartedly cheered. A couple laughed. One threw an apple core and missed. Most barely raised an eyebrow.

‘Oh God,’ whispered Temple, picking at the stitching on his buttons and staring at the tarred planks under his feet. But he could still see Cantliss’ squirming shadow there. ‘Oh God.’

Friendly wound the rope about a tree-stump and tied it off. Hedges, who’d been shoving his way towards the wagon, cleared his throat and carefully retreated, smiling no longer. Shy spat through the gap in her front teeth, and turned away. Lamb stood watching until Cantliss stopped twisting about, one hand resting slack on the hilt of the sword he had taken from the Dragon People. Then he frowned towards the door through which Savian had been taken, and flicked his stripped chicken bone into the mud.

‘Seventeen times,’ said Friendly, frowning up.

‘Seventeen times what?’ asked Cosca.

‘He kicked. Not counting that last one.’

‘That last one was more of a twitch,’ said Jubair.

‘Is seventeen a lot?’ asked the Old Man.

Friendly shrugged. ‘About average.’

Cosca looked down at Sweet, grey brows high. ‘You were saying something about a share, I think?’

The old scout watched Cantliss creaking back and forth, with a hooked finger gently loosened his collar and opted for the easy way again. ‘Must’ve misremembered. Reckon I’ll just be heading on back to Crease, if that’s all the same with you.’

‘As you wish.’ Below them, the first man in line upended his pack and sent gold and silver sliding across the table in a glittering heap. The captain general plumped his hat back on and flicked the feather. ‘Happy journey!’

Going Back

‘That fucking old shit-fucker!’ snarled Sweet, slashing with a stick at a branch that hung across the road and showering snow all over himself. ‘Prickomo fucking Cocksca! That bastard old arsehole-fucker!’

‘You said that one already, as I recall,’ muttered Shy.

‘He said old arsehole bastard-fucker,’ said Crying Rock.

‘My mistake,’ said Shy. ‘That’s a whole different thing.’

‘Ain’t fucking disagreeing, are you?’ snapped Sweet.

‘No I’m not,’ said Shy. ‘He’s a hell of a fucker, all right.’

‘Shit . . . fuck . . . shit . . . fuck . . .’ And Sweet kicked at his horse and whipped at the tree-trunks in a rage as he passed. ‘I’ll get even with that maggot-eaten bastard, I can tell you that!’

‘Let it be,’ grunted Lamb. ‘Some things you can’t change. You got to be realistic.’

‘That was my damn retirement got stole there!’

‘Still breathing, ain’t you?’

‘Easy for you to say! You didn’t lose no fortune!’

Lamb gave him a look. ‘I lost plenty.’

Sweet worked his mouth for a moment, then shouted, ‘Fuck!’ one last time and flung his stick away into the trees.

A cold and heavy quiet, then. The iron tyres of Majud’s wagon scrape-scraping and some loose part in Cursnbick’s apparatus in the back clank-clanking under its canvas cover and the horse’s hooves crunch-crunching in the snow on the road, rutted from the business flowing up from Crease. Pit and Ro lay in the back under a blanket, faces pressed up against each other,

peaceful now in sleep. Shy watched them rocking gently as the axles shifted.

'I guess we did it,' she said.

'Aye,' said Lamb, but looking a long stretch short of a celebration. 'Guess so.'

They rounded another long bend, road switching back one last time as it dropped down steep off the hills, the stream beside half-frozen, white ice creeping out jagged from each bank to almost meet in the middle.

Shy didn't want to say anything. But once a thought was in her head she'd never been much good at keeping it there, and this thought had been pricking at her ever since they left Beacon. 'They're going to be cutting into him, ain't they? Asking questions.'

'Savian?'

'Who else?'

The scarred side of Lamb's face twitched a little. 'That's a fact.'

'Ain't a pretty one.'

'Facts don't tend to be.'

'He saved me.'

'Aye.'

'He saved you.'

'True.'

'We really going to fucking leave him, then?'

Lamb's face twitched again, jaw-muscles working as he frowned out hard across the country ahead. The trees were thinning as they dropped out of the mountains, the moon fat and full in a clear sky star-dusted, spilling light over the high plateau. A great flat expanse of dry dirt and thorny scrub looked like it could never have held life, all half carpeted now with sparkling snow. Through the midst, straight as a sword-cut, the white strip of the old Imperial Road, a scar through the country angling off towards Crease, wedged somewhere in the black rumour of hills on the horizon.

Lamb's horse slowed to a walk, then stopped.

'Shall we halt?' asked Majud.

'You told me you'd be my friend for life,' said Lamb.

The merchant blinked. 'And I meant it.'

'Then keep on.' Lamb turned in his saddle to look back. Behind them, somewhere high up in the folded, forested ridges there was a glow. The

great bonfire the mercenaries had stacked high in the middle of Beacon to light their celebrations. ‘Got a good road here and a good moon to steer by. Keep on all night, quick and steady, you might make Crease by dark tomorrow.’

‘Why the rush?’

Lamb took a long breath, looked to the starry sky and breathed out smoke in a grumbling sigh. ‘There’s going to be trouble.’

‘We going back?’ asked Shy.

‘You’re not.’ The shadow of his hat fell across his face as he looked at her so his eyes were just two gleams. ‘I am.’

‘What?’

‘You’re taking the children. I’m going back.’

‘You always were, weren’t you?’

He nodded.

‘Just wanted to get us far away.’

‘I’ve only had a few friends, Shy. I’ve done right by even fewer. Could count ’em on one hand.’ He turned his left hand over and looked at the stump of his missing finger. ‘Even this one. This is how it has to be.’

‘Ain’t nothing has to be. I ain’t letting you go alone.’

‘Yes y’are.’ He eased his horse closer, looking her in the eye. ‘Do you know what I felt, when we came over that hill and saw the farm all burned out? The first thing I felt, before the sorrow and the fear and the anger caught up?’

She swallowed, her mouth all sticky-dry, not wanting to answer, not wanting to know the answer.

‘Joy,’ whispered Lamb. ‘Joy and relief. ’Cause I knew right off what I’d have to do. What I’d have to be. Knew right off I could put an end on ten years of lying. A man’s got to be what he is, Shy.’ He looked back at his hand and made a three-fingered fist of it. ‘I don’t . . . *feel* evil. But the things I done. What else can you call ’em?’

‘You ain’t evil,’ she whispered. ‘You’re just . . .’

‘If it hadn’t been for Savian I’d have killed you in them caves. You and Ro.’

Shy swallowed. She knew it well enough. ‘If it hadn’t been for you, we’d never have got the children back.’

Lamb looked at the pair of 'em, Ro with her arm over Pit. Stubble of hair showing dark now, almost grown over the scratch down her scalp. Both so changed. 'Did we get 'em back?' he asked, and his voice was rough. 'Sometimes I think we just lost us, too.'

'I'm who I was.'

Lamb nodded, and it seemed he had the glimmer of tears in his eyes. 'You are, maybe. But I don't reckon there's any going back for me.' He leaned from his saddle then and hugged her tight. 'I love you. And them. But my love ain't a weight anyone should have to carry. Best of luck, Shy. The very best.' And he let her go, and turned his horse, and he rode away, following their tracks back towards the trees, and the hills, and the reckoning beyond.

'What the hell happened to being realistic?' she called after him.

He stopped just a moment, a lonely figure in all that moonlit white. 'Always sounded like a good idea but, being honest? It never worked for me.'

Slow, and numb, Shy turned her back on him. Turned her back and rode on across the plateau, after the wagon and Majud's hired men, after Sweet and Crying Rock, staring at the white road ahead but seeing nothing, tongue working at the gap between her teeth and the night air cold, cold in her chest with each breath. Cold and empty. Thinking about what Lamb had said to her. What she'd said to Savian. Thinking about all the long miles she'd covered the last few months and the dangers she'd faced to get this far, and not knowing what she could do. This was how it had to be.

Except when folk told Shy how things had to be, she started thinking on how to make 'em otherwise.

The wagon hit a lump and with a clatter Pit got jolted awake. He sat up, and he stared blinking about him, and said, 'Where's Lamb?' And Shy's hands went slack on the reins, and she let her horse slow, then stop, and she sat there solemn.

Majud looked over his shoulder. 'Lamb said keep on!'

'You got to do what he tells you? He ain't your father, is he?'

'I suppose not,' said the merchant, pulling up the horses.

'He's mine,' muttered Shy. And there it was. Maybe he wasn't the father she'd want. But he was still the only one she'd got. The only one all three of 'em had got. She'd enough regrets to live with.

'I've got to go back,' she said.

‘Madness!’ snapped Sweet, sitting his horse not far off. ‘Bloody madness!’

‘No doubt. And you’re coming with me.’

A silence. ‘You know there’s more’n a hundred mercenaries up there, don’t you? Killers, every man?’

‘The Dab Sweet I heard stories of wouldn’t take fright at a few mercenaries.’

‘Don’t know if you noticed, but the Dab Sweet you heard stories of ain’t much like the one wearing my coat.’

‘I hear you used to be.’ She rode up to him and reined in close. ‘I hear you used to be quite a man.’

Crying Rock slowly nodded. ‘That is true.’

Sweet frowned at the old Ghost woman, and frowned at Shy, and finally frowned at the ground, scratching at his beard and bit by bit slumping down in his saddle. ‘Used to be. You’re young and got dreams ahead of you still. You don’t know how it is. One day you’re something, so promising and full o’ dares, so big the world’s too small a place to hold you. Then, ’fore you know it, you’re old, and you realise all them things you had in mind you’ll never get to. All them doors you felt too big to fit through have already shut. Only one left open and it leads to nothing but nothing.’ He pulled his hat off and scrubbed at his white hair with his dirty nails. ‘You lose your nerve. And once it’s gone where do you find it? I got scared, Shy South. And once you get scared there ain’t no going back, there just ain’t no—’

Shy caught a fist of his fur coat and dragged him close. ‘I ain’t giving up this way, you hear me? I just ain’t *fucking* having it! Now I need that bastard who killed a red bear with his hands up at the source of the Sokwaya, whether it bloody well happened or not. You hear me, you old shit?’

He blinked at her for a moment. ‘I hear you.’

‘Well? You want to get even with Cosca or you just want to swear about it?’

Crying Rock had brought her horse close. ‘Maybe do it for Leef,’ she said. ‘And those others buried on the plains.’

Sweet stared at her weather-beaten face for a long moment, for some reason with the strangest, haunted look in his eye. Then his mouth twitched

into a smile. ‘How come after all this time you’re still so damn beautiful?’ he asked.

Crying Rock just shrugged, like facts were facts, and stuck her pipe between her teeth.

Sweet reached up and brushed Shy’s hand away. He straightened his fur coat. He leaned from his saddle and spat. He looked with narrowed eyes up towards Beacon and set his jaw. ‘If I get killed I’m going to haunt your skinny arse for life.’

‘If you get killed I doubt my life’ll be too long a stretch.’ Shy slipped down from her saddle and crunched stiff-legged to the wagon, stood looking down at her brother and sister. ‘Got something to take care of,’ she said, putting a gentle hand on each of them. ‘You go on with Majud. He’s a little on the stingy side but he’s one of the good ones.’

‘Where you going?’ asked Pit.

‘Left something behind.’

‘Will you be long?’

She managed to smile. ‘Not long. I’m sorry, Ro. I’m sorry for everything.’

‘So am I,’ said Ro. Maybe that was something. For sure it was all she’d get.

She touched Pit’s cheek. Just a brush with her fingertips. ‘I’ll see you two in Crease. You’ll hardly notice I’m gone.’

Ro sniffed, sleepy and sullen, and wouldn’t meet her eye, and Pit stared at her, face all tracked with tears. She wondered if she really would see them in Crease. Madness, like Sweet said, to come all this way just to let them go. But there was no point to long goodbyes. Sometimes it’s better to do a thing than live with the fear of it. That’s what Lamb used to say.

‘Go!’ she shouted at Majud, before she had the chance to change her mind. He nodded to her, and snapped the reins, and the wagon rolled on.

‘Better to do it,’ she whispered at the night sky, and she clambered back into her saddle, turned her horse about, and gave it her heels.

Answered Prayers

Temple drank. He drank like he had after his wife died. As if there was something at the bottom of the bottle he desperately needed. As if it was a race he had bet his life on. As if drinking was a profession he planned on rising right to the top of. Tried most of the others, hadn't he?

'You should stop,' said Sworbreck, looking worried.

'You should start,' said Temple, and laughed, even if he'd never felt like laughing less. Then he burped and there was some sick in it, and he washed the taste away with another swallow.

'You have to pace yourself,' said Cosca, who was not pacing himself in the least. 'Drinking is an art, not a science. You caress the bottle. You tease it. You romance it. A drink . . . a drink . . . a drink . . .' kissing at the air with each repetition, eyelids flickering. 'Drinking is like . . . *love*.'

'What the fuck do you know about love?'

'More than I'd like,' answered the Old Man, a faraway look in his yellowed eye, and he gave a bitter laugh. 'Despicable men still love Temple. Still feel pain. Still nurse wounds. Despicable men most of all, maybe.' He slapped Temple on the back, sent a searing swig the wrong way and induced a painful coughing fit. 'But let's not be maudlin! We're rich, boy! All rich. And rich men need make no apologies. To Visserine for me. Take back what I lost. What was stolen.'

'What you threw away,' muttered Temple, quietly enough not to be heard over the racket.

'Yes,' mused Cosca. 'Soon there'll be space for a new captain general.' He took in the noisy, crowded, sweltering room with a sweep of his arm. 'All this will be yours.'

It was quite a scene of debauch to cram into a one-roomed hovel, lit by a single guttering lamp and hazy with chagga smoke, noisy with laughter and conversations in several languages. Two big Northmen were wrestling, possibly in fun, possibly with the intention of killing each other, people occasionally lurching out of their way. Two natives of the Union and an Imperial bitterly complained as their table was jogged in the midst of a card-game, bottles tottering on top. Three Styrians had shared a husk-pipe and were blissfully lounging on a burst mattress in one corner, somewhere between sleep and waking. Friendly was sitting with legs crossed and rolling his dice between them, over and over and over, frowning down with furious concentration as though the answers to everything would soon appear on their dozen faces.

'Hold on,' muttered Temple, his pickled mind only now catching up. 'Mine?'

'Who better qualified? You've learned from the best, my boy! You're a lot like me, Temple, I've always said so. Great men march often in the same direction, did Stolicus say?'

'Like you?' whispered Temple.

Cosca tapped his greasy grey hair. 'Brains, boy, you've got the brains. Your morals can be stiff at times but they'll soon soften up once you have to make the tough choices. You can talk well, know how to spot people's weaknesses, and above all you understand the *law*. The strong-arm stuff's all going out of fashion. I mean, there'll always be a place for it, but the law, Temple, that's where the money's going to be.'

'What about Brachio?'

'Family in Puranti.'

'Really?' Temple blinked across the room at Brachio, who was in a vigorous embrace with a large Kantic woman. 'He never mentioned them.'

'A wife and two daughters. Who talks about their family with scum like us?'

'What about Dimbik?'

'Pah! No sense of humour.'

'Jubair?'

'Mad as a plum jelly.'

'But I'm no soldier. I'm a fucking coward!'

‘Admirable thing in a mercenary.’ Cosca stretched forward his chin and scratched at his rashy neck with the backs of his yellowed nails. ‘I’d have done far better with a healthy respect for danger. It’s not as if you’ll be swinging the steel yourself. The job’s all talk. Blah, blah, blah and big hats. That and knowing when not to keep your word.’ He wagged a knobbly finger. ‘I was always too bloody emotional. Too bloody loyal. But you? You’re a treacherous bastard, Temple.’

‘I am?’

‘You abandoned me when it suited and found new friends, then when it suited you abandoned them and sauntered straight back without so much as a by-your-leave!’

Temple blinked at that. ‘I rather had the feeling you’d have killed me otherwise.’

Cosca waved it away. ‘Details! I’ve had you marked as my successor for some time.’

‘But . . . no one respects me.’

‘Because you don’t respect yourself. Doubt, Temple. Indecision. You simply worry too much. Sooner or later you have to do something, or you’ll never do anything. Overcome that, you could be a wonderful captain general. One of the greats. Better than me. Better than Sazine. Better than Murcatto, even. You might want to cut down on the drinking, though.’ Cosca tossed his empty bottle away, pulled the cork from another with his teeth and spat it across the room. ‘Filthy habit.’

‘I don’t want to do this any more,’ Temple whispered.

Cosca waved that away, too. ‘You say that all the time. Yet here you are.’

Temple lurched up. ‘Got to piss.’

The cold air slapped him so hard he nearly fell against one of the guards, sour-faced from having to stay sober. He stumbled along the wooden side of Superior Pike’s monstrous wagon, thinking how close his palm was to a fortune, past the stirring horses, breath steaming out of their nosebags, took a few crunching steps into the trees, sounds of revelry muffled behind him, shoved his bottle down in the frozen snow and unlaced with drunken fingers. Bloody hell, it was cold still. He leaned back, blinking at the sky, bright stars spinning and dancing beyond the black branches.

Captain General Temple. He wondered what Haddish Kahdia would have thought of that. He wondered what God thought of it. How had it come to

this? He'd always had good intentions, hadn't he? He'd always tried to do his best.

It's just that his best had always been shit.

'God?' he brayed at the sky. 'You up there, you bastard?' Perhaps He was the mean bully Jubair made Him out to be, after all. 'Just . . . give me a sign, will you? Just a little one. Just steer me the right way. Just . . . just give me a nudge.'

'I'll give you a nudge.'

He froze for a moment, still dripping. 'God? Is that you?'

'No, fool.' There was a crunch as someone pulled his bottle out of the snow.

He turned. 'I thought you left.'

'Came back.' Shy tipped the bottle up and took a swig, one side of her face all dark, the other lit by the flickering bonfire in the camp. 'Thought you'd never come out o' there,' she said, wiping her mouth.

'Been waiting?'

'Little while. Are you drunk?'

'Little bit.'

'That works for us.'

'It works for me.'

'I see that,' she said, glancing down.

He realised he hadn't laced-up yet and started fumbling away. 'If you wanted to see my cock that badly, you could just have asked.'

'No doubt a thing o' haunting beauty but I came for something else.'

'Got a window needs jumping through?'

'No. I might need your help.'

'Might?'

'Things run smooth you can just creep back to drowning your sorrows.'

'How often do things run smooth for you?'

'Not often.'

'Is it likely to be dangerous?'

'Little bit.'

'Really a little bit?'

She drank again. 'No. A lot.'

'This about Savian?'

'Little bit.'

‘Oh God,’ he muttered, rubbing at the bridge of his nose and willing the dark world to be still. Doubt, that was his problem. Indecision. Worrying too much. He wished he was less drunk. Then he wished he was more. He’d asked for a sign, hadn’t he? Why had he asked for a sign? He’d never expected to get one.

‘What do you need?’ he muttered, his voice very small.

Sharp Ends

Practical Wile slid a finger under his mask to rub at the little chafe marks. Not the worst part of the job, but close.

‘There it is, though,’ he said, rearranging his cards, as if that made his hand any less rotten, ‘I daresay she’s found someone else by now.’

‘If she’s got any sense,’ grunted Pauth.

Wile nearly thumped the table, then worried that he might hurt his hand and stopped short. ‘This is what I mean by undermining! We’re supposed to look out for each other but you’re always talking me down!’

‘Weren’t nothing in the oaths I swore about not talking you down,’ said Pauth, tossing a couple of cards and sliding a couple more off the deck.

‘Loyalty to his Majesty,’ threw out Bolder, ‘and obedience to his Eminence and the ruthless rooting out of treasons, but nothing about looking out for no one.’

‘Doesn’t mean it’s a bad idea,’ grumbled Wile, rerearranging his rotten hand.

‘You’re confusing how you’d like the world to be with how it is,’ said Bolder. ‘Again.’

‘A little solidarity is all I’m asking. We’re all stuck in the same leaky boat.’

‘Start baling and stop bloody moaning, then.’ Pauth had a good scratch under his own mask. ‘All the way out here you’ve done nothing but moan. The food. The cold. Your mask sores. Your sweetheart. My snoring. Bolder’s habits. Lorsen’s temper. It’s enough to make a man quite aggravated.’

‘Even if life weren’t aggravating enough to begin with,’ said Ferring, who was out of the game and had been sitting with his boots up on the table for the best part of an hour. Ferring had the most unnatural patience with doing nothing.

Pauth eyed him. ‘Your boots are pretty damn aggravating.’

Ferring eyed him back. Those sharp blue eyes of his. ‘Boots is boots.’

‘Boots is boots? What does that even mean? Boots is boots?’

‘If you’ve nothing worth saying, you two might consider not saying it.’ Bolder nodded his lump of a head towards the prisoner. ‘Take a page out of his book.’ The old man hadn’t said a word to Lorsen’s questions. Hadn’t done much more than grunt even when they burned him. He just watched, eyes narrowed, raw flesh glistening in the midst of his tattoos.

Ferring’s eyes shifted over to Wile’s. ‘You think you’d take a burning that well?’

Wile didn’t reply. He didn’t like thinking about taking a burning. He didn’t like giving one to someone else, whatever oaths he’d sworn, whatever treasons, murders or massacres the man was meant to have masterminded. One thing holding forth about justice at a thousand miles removed. Another having to press metal into flesh. He just didn’t like thinking about it at all.

It’s a steady living, the Inquisition, his father had told him. *Better asking the questions than giving the answers anyway, eh?* And they’d laughed together at that, though Wile hadn’t found it funny. He used to laugh a lot at unfunny things his father said. He wouldn’t have laughed now. Or maybe that was giving himself too much credit. He’d a bad habit of doing that.

Sometimes Wile wondered whether a cause could be right that needed folk burned, cut and otherwise mutilated. Hardly the tactics of the just, was it, when you took a step back? Rarely seemed to produce any truly useful results either. Unless pain, fear, hate and mutilation were what you were after. Maybe it *was* what they were after.

Sometimes Wile wondered whether the torture might cause the very disloyalty the Inquisition was there to stop, but he kept that notion very much to himself. Takes courage to lead a charge, but you’ve got people behind you there. Takes a different and rarer kind to stand up all alone and say, ‘I don’t like the way we do things.’ Especially to a set of torturers. Wile didn’t have either kind of courage. So he just did as he was told and tried

not to think about it, and wondered what it would be like to have a job you believed in.

Ferring didn't have that same problem. He liked the work. You could see it in those blue, blue eyes of his. He grinned over at the tattooed old man now and said, 'Doubt he'll be taking a burning that well by the time he gets back to Starikland.' The prisoner just sat and watched, blue-painted ribs shifting with his crackly breathing. 'Lot of nights between here and there. Lot of burnings, maybe. Yes, indeedy. Reckon he'll be good and talkative by—'

'I already suggested you shut up,' said Bolder. 'Now I'm thinking o' making it an instruction. What do you—'

There was a knock at the door. Three quick knocks, in fact. The Practicals looked at each other, eyebrows up. Lorsen back with more questions. Once Lorsen had a question in mind, he wasn't a man to wait for an answer.

'You going to get that?' Pauth asked Ferring.

'Why would I?'

'You're closest.'

'You're shortest.'

'What's that got to fucking do with anything?'

'It amuses me.'

'Maybe my knife up your arse will amuse me!' And Pauth slipped his knife out of his sleeve, blade appearing as if by magic. He loved to do that. Bloody show-off.

'Will you two infants *please* shut up?' Bolder chucked down his cards, levered his bulk from his chair and slapped Pauth's knife aside. 'I came out here to get a break from my bloody children, not to mind three more.'

Wile rearranged his cards again, wondering if there was some way he could win. One win, was that too much to ask? But such a rotten hand. His father had always said *there are no rotten hands, only rotten players*, but Wile believed otherwise.

Another insistent knocking. 'All right, I'm coming!' snapped Bolder, dragging back the bolts. 'It's not as if—'

There was a clatter, and Wile looked up to see Bolder lurching against the wall looking quite put out and someone barging past. Seemed a bit strong even if they'd taken a while to answer the door. Bolder obviously agreed, because he opened his mouth to complain, then looked surprised when he

gurgled blood everywhere instead. That was when Wile noticed there was a knife-handle sticking from his fat throat.

He dropped his cards.

'Eh?' said Ferring, trying to get up, but his boots were tangled with the table. It wasn't Lorsen who'd been knocking, it was the big Northman, the one with all the scars. He took a stride into the room, teeth bared, and crunch! Left a knife buried in Ferring's face to the cross-piece, his nose flattened under it and blood welling and Ferring wheezed and arched back and kicked the table over, cards and coins flying.

Wile stumbled up, the Northman turning to look at him, blood dotting his face and pulling another knife from inside his coat, and—

'Stop!' hissed Pauth. 'Or I kill him!' Somehow he'd got to the prisoner, kneeling behind the chair he was roped to, knife blade pressed against his neck. Always been a quick thinker, Pauth. Good thing someone was.

Bolder had slid to the floor, was making a honking sound and drooling blood into a widening pool.

Wile realised he was holding his breath and took a great gasp.

The scarred Northman looked from Wile, to Pauth, and back, lifted his chin slightly, then gently lowered his blade.

'Get help!' snapped Pauth, and he tangled his fingers in the prisoner's grey hair and pulled his head back, tickling his stubbled neck with the point of his knife. 'I'll see to this.'

Wile circled the Northman, his knees all shaky, pushing aside one of the leather curtains that divided up the fort's downstairs, trying to keep as safe a distance as possible. He slithered in Bolder's blood and nearly went right over, then dived out of the open door and was running.

'Help!' he screeched. 'Help!'

One of the mercenaries lowered a bottle and stared at him, cross-eyed. 'Wha?' The celebrations were still half-heartedly dragging on, women laughing and men singing and shouting and rolling in a stupor, none of them enjoying it but going through the motions anyway like a corpse that can't stop twitching, all garishly lit by the sizzling bonfire. Wile slid over in the mud, staggered up, dragging down his mask so he could shout louder.

'Help! The Northman! The prisoner!'

Someone was pointing at him and laughing, and someone shouted at him to shut up, and someone was sick all over the side of a tent, and Wile stared

about for anyone who might exert some control over this shambles and suddenly felt somebody clutch at his arm.

'What are you jabbering about?' None other than General Cosca, dewy eyes gleaming with the firelight, lady's white powder smeared across one hollow, rash-speckled cheek.

'That Northman!' squealed Wile, grabbing the captain general by his stained shirt. 'Lamb! He killed Bolder! And Ferring!' He pointed a trembling finger towards the fort. 'In there!'

To give him his due, Cosca needed no convincing. 'Enemies in the camp!' he roared, flinging his empty bottle away. 'Surround the fort! You, cover the door, make sure no one leaves! Dimbik, get men around the back! You, put that woman down! Arm yourselves, you wretches!'

Some snapped to obey. Two found bows and pointed them uncertainly towards the door. One accidentally shot an arrow into the fire. Others stared baffled, or continued with their revelry, or stood grinning, imagining that this was some elaborate joke.

'What the hell happened?' Lorsen, black coat flapping open over his nightshirt, hair wild about his head.

'It would appear our friend Lamb attempted a rescue of your prisoner,' said Cosca. 'Get away from that door, you idiots – do you think this is a joke?'

'Rescue?' muttered Sworbreck, eyebrows raised and eyeglasses skewed, evidently having recently crawled from his bed.

'Rescue?' snapped Lorsen, grabbing Wile by the collar.

'Pauth took the prisoner . . . prisoner. He's seeing to it—'

A figure lurched from the fort's open door, took a few lazy steps, eyes wide above his mask, hands clasped to his chest. Pauth. He pitched on his face, blood turning the snow around him pink.

'You were saying?' snapped Cosca. A woman shrieked, stumbled back with a hand over her mouth. Men started to drag themselves from tents and shacks, bleary-eyed, pulling on clothes and bits of armour, fumbling with weapons, breath smoking in the cold.

'Get more bows up here!' roared Cosca, clawing at his blistered neck with his fingernails. 'I want a pincushion of anything that shows itself! Clear the bloody civilians away!'

Lorsen was hissing in Wile's face. 'Is Conthus still alive?'

‘I think so . . . he was when I . . . when I—’

‘Cravenly fled? Pull your mask up, damn it, you’re a disgrace!’

Probably the Inquisitor was right, and Wile was a disgraceful Practical. He felt strangely proud of that possibility.

‘Can you hear me, Master Lamb?’ called Cosca, as Sergeant Friendly helped him into his gilded, rusted breastplate, a combination of pomp and decay that rather summed up the man.

‘Aye,’ came the Northman’s voice from the black doorway of the fort. The closest thing to silence had settled over the camp since the mercenaries returned in triumph the previous day.

‘I am so pleased you have graced us with your presence again!’ The captain general waved half-dressed bowmen into the shadows around the shacks. ‘I wish you’d sent word of your coming, though, we could have prepared a more suitable reception!’

‘Thought I’d surprise you.’

‘We appreciate the gesture! But I should say I have some hundred and fifty fighting men out here!’ Cosca took in the wobbling bows, dewy eyes and bilious faces of his Company. ‘Several of them are very drunk, but still. Long established admirer though I am of lost causes I really don’t see the happy ending for you!’

‘I’ve never been much for happy endings,’ came Lamb’s growl. Wile didn’t know how a man could sound so steady under these circumstances.

‘Nor me, but perhaps we can engineer one between us!’ With a couple of gestures Cosca sent more men scurrying down either side of the fort and ordered a fresh bottle. ‘Now why don’t you two put your weapons down and come out, and we can all discuss this like civilised men!’

‘Never been much for civilisation either,’ called Lamb. ‘Reckon you’ll have to come to me.’

‘Bloody Northmen,’ muttered Cosca, ripping the cork from his latest bottle and flinging it away. ‘Dimbik, are any of your men not drunk?’

‘You wanted them as drunk as possible,’ said the captain, who had got himself tangled with his bedraggled sash as he tried to pull it on.

‘Now I need them sober.’

‘A few who were on guard, perhaps—’

‘Send them in.’

‘And we want Conthus alive!’ barked Lorsen.

Dimbik bowed. ‘We will do our best, Inquisitor.’

‘But there can be no promises.’ Cosca took a long swallow from his bottle without taking his eyes from the house. ‘We’ll make that Northern bastard regret coming back.’

‘You shouldn’t have come back,’ grunted Savian as he loaded the flatbow.

Lamb edged the door open to peer through. ‘Regretting it already.’ A thud, splinters, and the bright point of a bolt showed between the planks. Lamb jerked his head back and kicked the door wobbling shut. ‘Hasn’t quite gone the way I’d hoped.’

‘You could say that about most things in life.’

‘In my life, no doubt.’ Lamb took hold of the knife in the Practical’s neck and ripped it free, wiped it on the front of the dead man’s black jacket and tossed it to Savian. He snatched it out of the air and slid it into his belt.

‘You can never have too many knives,’ said Lamb.

‘It’s a rule to live by.’

‘Or die by,’ said Lamb as he tossed over another. ‘You need a shirt?’

Savian stretched out his arms and watched the tattoos move. The words he’d tried to live his life by. ‘What’s the point in getting ’em if you don’t show ’em off? I’ve been covering up too long.’

‘Man’s got to be what he is, I reckon.’

Savian nodded. ‘Wish we’d met thirty years ago.’

‘No you don’t. I was a mad fucker then.’

‘And now?’

Lamb stuck a dagger into the tabletop. ‘Thought I’d learned something.’ He thumped another into the doorframe. ‘But here I am, handing out knives.’

‘You pick a path, don’t you?’ Savian started drawing the string on the other flatbow. ‘And you think it’s just for tomorrow. Then thirty years on you look back and see you picked your path for life. If you’d known it then, you’d maybe have thought more carefully.’

‘Maybe. Being honest, I’ve never been much for thinking carefully.’

Savian finally fumbled the string back, glancing at the word *freedom* tattooed around his wrist like a bracelet. ‘Always thought I’d die fighting for the cause.’

‘You will,’ said Lamb, still busy scattering weapons around the room. ‘The cause of saving my fat old arse.’

‘It’s a noble calling.’ Savian slipped a bolt into place. ‘Reckon I’ll get upstairs.’

‘Reckon you’d better.’ Lamb drew the sword he’d taken from Waerdinur, long and dull with that silver letter glinting. ‘We ain’t got all night.’

‘You’ll be all right down here?’

‘Might be best if you just stay up there. That mad fucker from thirty years ago – sometimes he comes visiting.’

‘Then I’ll leave the two of you to it. You shouldn’t have come back.’ Savian held out his hand. ‘But I’m glad you did.’

‘Wouldn’t have missed it.’ Lamb took a grip on Savian’s hand and gave it a squeeze, and they looked each other in the eye. Seemed in that moment they had as good an understanding between them as if they had met thirty years ago. But the time for friendship was over. Savian had always put more effort into his enemies, and there was no shortage outside. He turned and took the stairs three at a time, up into the garret, a flatbow in each hand and the bolts over his shoulder.

Four windows, two to the front, two to the back. Straw pallets around the walls and a low table with a lit lamp, and in its flickering pool of light a hunting bow and a quiver of arrows, and a spiked mace, too, metal gleaming. One handy thing about mercenaries, they leave weapons lying about wherever they go. He slipped in a crouch to the front, propped one of the flatbows carefully under the left-hand window and then scurried over to the right with the other, hooking the shutters open and peering out.

There was a fair bit of chaos under way outside, lit by the great bonfire, sparks whirling, folk hurrying this way and that on the far side. Seemed some of those who’d come to get rich on the Company’s scraps hadn’t reckoned on getting stuck in the middle of a fight. The corpse of one of the Practicals was stretched out near the door but Savian shed no tears for him. He’d cried easily as a child, but his eyes had good and dried up down the years. They’d had to. With what he’d seen, and what he’d done, too, there wouldn’t have been enough salt water in the world.

He saw archers, squatting near the shacks, bows trained towards the fort, made a quick note of the positions, of the angles, of the distances. Then he saw men hurrying forward, axes at the ready. He snatched the lamp off the

table and tossed it spinning through the dark, saw it shatter on the thatch roof of one of the shacks, streaks of fire shooting hungrily out.

'They're coming for the door!' he shouted.

'How many?' came Lamb's voice from downstairs.

'Five, maybe!' His eyes flickered across the shadows down there around the bonfire. 'Six!' He worked the stock of the flatbow into his shoulder, settling down still and steady around it, warm and familiar as curling around a lover's back. He wished he'd spent more of his time curled around a lover and less around a flatbow, but he'd picked his path and here was the next step along it. He twitched the trigger and felt the bow jolt and one of the axemen took a tottering step sideways and sat down.

'Five!' shouted Savian as he slipped away from the window and over to another, setting down the first bow and hefting the second. Heard arrows clatter against the frame behind, one spinning into the darkness of the room. He levelled the bow, caught a black shape against the fire and felt the shot, a mercenary staggered back and tripped into the flames and even over the racket Savian could hear him screaming as he burned.

He slid down, back against the wall under the window. Saw an arrow flit through above him and shudder into a rafter. He was caught for a moment with a coughing fit, managed to settle it, breath rasping, the burns around his ribs all stinging fresh. Axes at the door, now, he could hear them thudding. Had to leave that to Lamb. Only man alive he'd have trusted alone with that task. He heard voices at the back, quiet, but he heard them. Up onto his feet and he scuttled to the back wall, taking up the hunting bow, no time to buckle the quiver, just wedging it through his belt.

He dragged in a long, crackling breath, stifled a cough and held it, nocked an arrow, drew the string, in one movement poked the limb of the bow behind the shutters and flicked them open, stood, leaned out and pushed the air slow through his pursed lips.

Men crouched in the shadows against the foot of the back wall. One looked up, eyes wide in his round face, and Savian shot him in his open mouth no more than a stride or two away. He nocked another shaft. An arrow whipped past him, flicking his hair. He drew the bow, calm and steady. He could see light gleam on the archer's arrowhead as he did the same. Shot him in the chest. Drew another arrow. Saw a man running past. Shot him too and saw him crumple in the snow. Crunching of footsteps as

the last of them ran away. Savian took a bead and shot him in the back, and he crawled and whimpered and coughed, and Savian nocked an arrow and shot him a second time, elbowed the shutters closed and breathed in again.

He was caught with a coughing fit and stood shuddering against the wall. He heard a roar downstairs, clash of steel, swearing, crashing, ripping, fighting.

He stumbled to the front window again, nocking an arrow, saw two men rushing for the door, shot one in the face and his legs went from under him. The other skidded to a stop, scuttled off sideways. Arrows were frozen in the firelight, clattering against the front of the building as Savian twisted away.

A crack and the shutters in the back window swung open showing a square of night sky. Savian saw a hand on the sill, let fall the bow and snatched up the mace as he went, swinging it low and fast to miss the rafters and smashing it into a helmeted head as it showed itself, knocking someone tumbling out into the night.

He spun, black shape in the window as a man slipped into the attic, knife in his teeth. Savian lunged at him but the haft of the mace glanced off his shoulder and they grappled and struggled, growling at each other. Savian felt a burning in his gut, fell back against the wall with the man on top of him, reached for the knife at his belt. He saw one half of the mercenary's snarling face lit by firelight and Savian stabbed at it, ripped it open, black pulp hanging from his head as he stumbled, thrashing blindly around the attic. Savian clawed his way up and fell on him, dragged him down and stabbed and coughed and stabbed until he stopped moving, knelt on top of him, each cough ripping at the wound in his guts.

A bubbling scream had started downstairs, and Savian heard someone squealing, 'No! No! No!' slobbering, desperate, and he heard Lamb growl, 'Yes, you fucker!' Two heavy thuds, then a long silence.

Lamb gave a kind of groan downstairs, another crash like he was kicking something over.

'You all right?' he called, his own voice sounding tight and strange.

'Still breathing!' came Lamb's, even stranger. 'You?'

'Picked up a scratch.' Savian peeled his palm away from his tattooed stomach, blood there gleaming black. Lot of blood.

He wished he could talk to Corlin one last time. Tell her all those things you think but never say because they're hard to say and there'll be time later. How proud he was of what she'd become. How proud her mother would've been. To carry on the fight. He winced. Or maybe to give up the fight, because you only get one life and do you want to look back on it and see just blood on your hands?

But it was too late to tell her anything. He'd picked his path and here was where it ended. Hadn't been too poor a showing, all told. Some good and some bad, some pride and some shame, like most men. He crawled coughing to the front, took up one of the flatbows and started wrestling at the string with sticky hands. Damn hands. Didn't have the strength they used to.

He stood up beside the window, men still moving down there, and the shack he threw the lamp on sending up a roaring blaze now, and he bellowed out into the night. 'That the best you can do?'

'Sadly for you,' came Cosca's voice. 'No!'

Something sparked and fizzled in the darkness, and there was a flash like daylight.

It was a noise like to the voice of God, as the scriptures say, which levelled the city of the presumptuous Nemai with but a whisper. Jubair peeled his hands from his ears, all things still ringing even so, and squinted towards the fort as the choking smoke began to clear.

Much violence had been done to the building. There were holes finger-sized, and fist-sized, and head-sized rent through the walls of the bottom floor. Half of the top floor had departed the world, splintered planks smouldering in places, three split beams still clinging together at one corner as a reminder of the shape of what had been. There was a creaking and half the roof fell in, broken shingles clattering to the ground below.

'Impressive,' said Brachio.

'The lightning harnessed,' murmured Jubair, frowning at the pipe of brass. It had nearly leaped from its carriage with the force of the blast and now sat skewed upon it, smoke still issuing gently from its blackened mouth. 'Such a power should belong only to God.'

He felt Cosca's hand upon his shoulder. 'And yet He lends it to us to do His work. Take some men in there and find those two old bastards.'

‘I want Conthus alive!’ snapped Lorsen.

‘If possible.’ The Old Man leaned close to whisper. ‘But dead is just as good.’

Jubair nodded. He had come to a conclusion long years before that God sometimes spoke through the person of Nicomo Cosca. An unlikely prophet, some might say – a treacherous, lawless pink drunkard who had never uttered a word of prayer in all his long life – but from the first moment Jubair had seen him in battle, and known he had no fear, he had sensed in him some splinter of the divine. Surely he walked in God’s shadow, as the Prophet Khalul had walked naked through a rain of arrows with only his faith to protect him and emerged untouched, and so forced the Emperor of the Gurkish to honour his promise and abase himself before the Almighty.

‘You three,’ he said, picking out some of his men with a finger, ‘on my signal go in by the door. You three, come with me.’

One of them, a Northman, shook his head with starting eyes round as full moons. ‘It’s . . . *him*,’ he whispered.

‘Him?’

‘The . . . the . . .’ And in dumbstruck silence he folded the middle finger on his left hand back to leave a gap.

Jubair snorted. ‘Stay then, fool.’ He trotted around the side of the fort, through shadow and deeper shadow, all the same to him for he carried the light of God within. His men peered up at the building, breathing hard, afraid. They supposed the world was a complicated place, full of dangers. Jubair pitied them. The world was simple. The only danger was in resisting God’s purpose.

Fragments of timber, rubbish and dust were scattered across the snow behind the building. That and several arrow-shot men, one sitting against the wall and softly gurgling, hand around a shaft through his mouth. Jubair ignored them and quietly scaled the back wall of the fort. He peered into the ruined loft, furniture ripped apart, a mattress spilling straw, no signs of life. He brushed some embers away and pulled himself up, slid out his sword, metal glinting in the night, fearless, righteous, godly. He eased forward, watching the stairwell, black with shadows. He heard a sound from down there, a regular thump, thump, thump.

He leaned out at the front of the building and saw his three men clustered below. He hissed at them, and the foremost kicked the door wide and plunged inside. Jubair pointed the other two to the stairwell. He felt something give beneath the sole of his boot as he turned. A hand. He bent and dragged a timber aside.

'Conthus is here!' he shouted.

'Alive?' came Lorsen's shrill bleat.

'Dead.'

'Damn it!'

Jubair gathered up what was left of the rebel and rolled it over the ragged remnant of the wall, tumbling down the snow drifted against the side of the building to lie broken and bloody, tattoos ripped with a score of wounds. Jubair thought of the parable of the proud man. God's judgement comes to great and small alike, all equally powerless before the Almighty, inevitable and irreversible, and so it was, so it was. Now there was only the Northman, and however fearsome he might be, God had a sentence already in mind—

A scream split the night, a crashing below, roars and groans and a metal scraping, then a strange hacking laugh, another scream. Jubair strode to the stairs. A wailing below, now, as horrible as the sinful dead consigned to hell, blubbering off into silence. The point of Jubair's sword showed the way. Fearless, righteous . . . He hesitated, licking at his lips. To feel fear was to be without faith. It is not given to man to understand God's design. Only to accept his place in it.

And so he clenched his jaw tight, and padded down the steps.

Black as hell below, light shining in rays of flickering red, orange, yellow, through the holes in the front wall, casting strange shadows. Black as hell and like hell it reeked of death, so strong the stench it seemed a solid thing. Jubair half-held his breath as he descended, step by creaking step, eyes adjusting to the darkness by degrees.

What revelation?

The leather curtains that had divided up the space hung torn, showered and spotted with black, stirred a little as if by wind though the space was still. His boot caught something on the bottom step and he looked down. A severed arm. Frowning, he followed its glistening trail to a black slick, flesh humped and mounded and inhumanly abused, hacked apart and tangled

together in unholy configurations, innards dragged out and rearranged and unwound in glistening coils.

In the midst stood a table and upon the table a pile of heads, and as the light shifted from the flames outside they looked upon Jubair with expressions awfully vacant, madly leering, oddly questioning, angrily accusatory.

'God . . .' he said. Jubair had done butchery in the name of the Almighty and yet he had seen nothing like this. This was written in no scripture, except perhaps in the forbidden seventh of the seven books, sealed within the tabernacle of the Great Temple in Shaffa, in which were recorded those things that Glustrod brought from hell.

'God . . .' he muttered. And jagged laughter bubbled from the shadows, and the skins flapped, and rattled the rings they hung upon. Jubair darted forward, stabbed, cut, slashed at darkness, caught nothing but dangling skin, blade tangled with leather and he slipped in gore, and fell, and rose, turning, turning, the laughter all around him.

'God?' mumbled Jubair, and he could hardly speak the holy word for a strange feeling, beginning in his guts and creeping up and down his spine to set his scalp to tingle and his knees to shake. All the more terrible for being only dimly remembered. A childish recollection, lost in darkness. For as the Prophet said, the man who knows fear every day becomes easy in its company. The man who knows not fear, how shall he face this awful stranger?

'God . . .' whimpered Jubair, stumbling back towards the steps, and suddenly there were arms around him.

'Gone,' came a whisper. 'But I am here.'

'Damn it!' snarled Lorsen again. His long-cherished dream of presenting the infamous Conthus to the Open Council, chained and humbled and plastered with tattoos that might as well have read *give Inquisitor Lorsen the promotion he has so long deserved*, had gone up in smoke. Or down in blood. Thirteen years minding a penal colony in Angland, for this. All the riding, all the sacrifice, all the indignity. In spite of his best efforts the entire expedition had devolved into a farce, and he had no doubt upon which undeserving head would be heaped the blame. He slapped at his leg in a fury. 'I wanted him alive!'

‘So did he, I daresay.’ Cosca stared narrow-eyed through the haze of smoke towards the ruined fort. ‘Fate is not always kind to us.’

‘Easy for you to say,’ snapped Lorsen. To make matters worse – if that were possible – he had lost half his Practicals in one night, and that the better half. He frowned over at Wile, still fussing with his mask. How was it possible for a Practical to look so pitiably unthreatening? The man positively radiated doubt. Enough to plant the seeds of doubt in everyone around him. Lorsen had entertained doubts enough over the years but he did what one was supposed to, and kept them crushed into a tight little packet deep inside where they could not leak out and poison his purpose.

The door slowly creaked open and Dimbik’s archers shifted nervously, flatbows all levelled towards that square of darkness.

‘Jubair?’ barked Cosca. ‘Jubair, did you get him? Answer me, damn it!’

Something flew out, bounced once with a hollow clonk and rolled across the snow to rest near the fire.

‘What is that?’ asked Lorsen.

Cosca worked his mouth. ‘Jubair’s head.’

‘Fate is not always kind,’ murmured Brachio.

Another head arced from the doorway and bounced into the fire. A third landed on the roof of one of the shacks, rolled down it and lodged in the gutter. A fourth fell among the archers and one of them let his bow off as he stumbled away from it, the bolt thudding into a barrel nearby. More heads, and more, hair flapping, tongues lolling, spinning, and dancing, and scattering spots of blood.

The last head bounced high and rolled an elliptical course around the fire to stop just next to Cosca. Lorsen was not a man to be put off by a little gore, but even he had to admit to being a little unnerved by this display of mute brutality.

Less squeamish, the captain general stepped forward and angrily kicked the head into the flames. ‘How many men have those two old bastards killed between them?’ Though the Old Man was no doubt a good deal older than either.

‘About twenty, now,’ said Brachio.

‘We’ll fucking run out at this rate!’ Cosca turned angrily upon Sworbreck, who was frantically scratching away in his notebook. ‘What the hell are you writing for?’

The author looked up, reflected flames dancing in his eyeglasses. ‘Well, this is . . . rather dramatic.’

‘Do you find?’

Sworbreck gestured weakly towards the ruined fort. ‘He came to the rescue of his friend against impossible odds—’

‘And got him killed. Is not a man who takes on impossible odds generally considered an incorrigible idiot rather than a hero?’

‘The line between the two has always been blurry . . .’ murmured Brachio.

Sworbreck raised his palms. ‘I came for a tale to stir the blood—’

‘And I’ve been unable to oblige you,’ snapped Cosca, ‘is that it? Even my bloody biographer is deserting me! No doubt I’ll end up the villain in the book I commissioned while yonder decapitating madman is celebrated to the rafters! What do you make of this, Temple? Temple? Where’s that bloody lawyer got to? What about you, Brachio?’

The Styrian wiped fresh tears from his weepy eye. ‘I think the time has come to put an end to the ballad of the nine-fingered Northman.’

‘Finally some sense! Bring up the other tube. I want that excuse for a fort levelled to a stump. I want that meddling fool made mush, do you hear? Someone bring me another bottle. I am sick of being taken fucking lightly!’ Cosca slapped Sworbreck’s notebook from his hands. ‘A little respect, is that too much to ask?’ He slapped the biographer to boot and the man sat down sharply in the snow, one hand to his cheek in surprise.

‘What’s that noise?’ said Lorsen, holding up a palm for silence. A thumping and rumbling spilled from the darkness, rapidly growing louder, and he took a nervous step towards the nearest shack.

‘Bloody hell,’ said Dimbik.

A horse came thundering from the night, eyes wild, and a moment later dozens more, surging down the slope towards the camp, snow flying, a boiling mass of animals, a flood of horseflesh coming at the gallop.

Men flung their weapons down and ran, dived, rolled for any cover. Lorsen tripped over his flapping coat-tail and sprawled in the mud. He heard a whooping and caught a glimpse of Dab Sweet, mounted at the rear of the herd, grinning wildly, lifting his hat in salute as he skirted the camp. Then the horses were among the buildings and all was a hell of milling, kicking, battering hooves, of screaming, thrashing, rearing beasts, and

Lorsen flattened himself helplessly against the nearest hovel, clinging with his fingernails to the rough-sawn wood.

Something knocked his head, almost sent him down, but he clung on, clung on, while a noise like the end of the world broke around him, the very earth trembling under the force of all those maddened animals. He gasped and grunted and squeezed his teeth and eyes together so hard they hurt, splinters and dirt and stones stinging his cheek.

Then suddenly there was silence. A throbbing, ringing silence. Lorsen unpeeled himself from the side of the shack and took a wobbling step or two through the hoof-hammered mud, blinking into the haze of smoke and settling dirt.

'They stampeded the horses,' he muttered.

'Do you fucking think so?' shrieked Cosca, tottering from the nearest doorway.

The camp was devastated. Several of the tents had ceased to be, the canvas and their contents – both human and material – trampled into the snow. The ruined fort continued to smoulder. Two of the shacks were thoroughly aflame, burning straw fluttering down and leaving small fires everywhere. Bodies were humped between the buildings, trampled men and women in various states of dress. The injured howled or wandered dazed and bloodied. Here and there a wounded horse lay, kicking weakly.

Lorsen touched one hand to his head. His hair was sticky with blood. A trickle tickling his eyebrow.

'Dab fucking Sweet!' snarled Cosca.

'I did say he had quite a reputation,' muttered Sworbreck, fishing his tattered notebook from the dirt.

'Perhaps we should have paid him his share,' mused Friendly.

'You can take it to him now if you please!' Cosca pointed with a clawing finger. 'It's in . . . *the wagon*.' He trailed off into a disbelieving croak.

The fortified wagon that had been Superior Pike's gift, the wagon in which the fire tubes had been carried, the wagon in which the Dragon People's vast treasure had been safely stowed . . .

The wagon was gone. Beside the fort there was only a conspicuously empty patch of darkness.

'Where is it?' Cosca shoved Sworbreck out of the way and ran to where the wagon had stood. Clearly visible in the snowy mud among the trampled

hoof-prints were two deep wheel-ruts, angling down the slope towards the Imperial Road.

'Brachio,' Cosca's voice rose higher and higher until it was a demented shriek, 'find some fucking horses and *get after them*!'

The Styrian stared. 'You wanted all the horses corralled together. They're stampeded!'

'Some must have broken from the herd! Find half a dozen and get after those bastards! Now! Now! Now!' And he kicked snow at Brachio in a fury and nearly fell over. 'Where the hell is Temple?'

Friendly looked up from the wagon-tracks and raised an eyebrow.

Cosca closed his hands to trembling fists. 'Everyone who can, get ready to *move*!'

Dimbik exchanged a worried look with Lorsen. 'On foot? All the way to Crease?'

'We'll gather mounts on the way!'

'What about the injured?'

'Those who can walk are welcome. Any who cannot mean greater shares for the rest of us. Now get them moving, you damned idiot!'

'Yes, sir,' muttered Dimbik, pulling off and sourly flinging away his sash which, already a ruin, had become thoroughly besmirched with dung when he dived for cover.

Friendly nodded towards the fort. 'And the Northman?'

'Fuck the Northman,' hissed Cosca. 'Soak the building with oil and burn it. They've stolen our gold! They've stolen my dreams, do you understand?' He frowned off down the Imperial Road, the wagontracks vanishing into the darkness. 'I will *not* be disappointed again.'

Lorsen resisted the temptation to echo Cosca's sentiments that fate is not always kind. Instead, as the mercenaries scrambled over each other in their preparations to leave, he stood looking down at Conthus' forgotten body, lying broken beside the fort.

'What a waste,' he muttered. In every conceivable sense. But Inquisitor Lorsen had always been a practical man. A man who did not balk at hardship and hard work. He took his disappointment and crushed it down into that little packet along with his doubts, and turned his thoughts to what could be salvaged.

‘There will be a price for this, Cosca,’ he muttered at the captain general’s back. ‘There will be a price.’

Nowhere Fast

Every bolt, bearing, plank and fixing in that monster of a wagon banged, clattered or screeched in an insane cacophony so deafening that Temple could scarcely hear his own squeals of horror. The seat hammered at his arse, bounced him around like a heap of cheap rags, threatening to rattle the teeth right out of his head. Tree-limbs came slicing from the darkness, clawing at the wagon's sides, slashing at his face. One had snatched Shy's hat off and now her hair whipped around her staring eyes, fixed on the rushing road, lips peeled back from her teeth as she yelled the most blood-curdling abuse at the horses.

Temple dreaded to imagine the weight of wood, metal and above all gold they were currently hurtling down a mountainside on top of. Any moment now, the whole, surely tested beyond the limits of human engineering, would rip itself apart and the pair of them into the bargain. But dread was a fixture of Temple's life, and what else could he do now but cling to this bouncing engine of death, muscles burning from fingertips to armpits, stomach churning with drink and terror. He hardly knew whether eyes closed or eyes open was the more horrifying.

'Hold on!' Shy screamed at him.

'What the fuck do you think I'm—'

She dragged back on the brake lever, boots braced against the footboard and her shoulders against the back of the seat, fibres starting from her neck with effort. The tyres shrieked like the dead in hell, sparks showering up on both sides like fireworks at the Emperor's birthday. Shy hauled on the reins with her other hand and the whole world began to turn, then to tip, two of the great wheels parting company with the flying ground.

Time slowed. Temple screamed. Shy screamed. The wagon screamed. Trees off the side of the bend hurtled madly towards them, death in their midst. Then the wheels jolted down again and Temple was almost flung over the footboard and among the horses' milling hooves, biting his tongue and choking on his own screech as he was tossed back into the seat.

Shy let the brake off and snapped the reins. 'Might've taken that one a little too fast!' she shouted in his ear.

The line between terror and exultation was ever a fine one and Temple found, all of a sudden, he had broken through. He punched at the air and howled, 'Fuck you, Coscaaaaaaaa!' into the night until his breath ran out and left him gasping.

'Feel better?' asked Shy.

'I'm alive! I'm free! I'm rich!' Surely there was a God. A benevolent, understanding, kindly grandfather of a God and smiling down indulgently upon him even now. 'Sooner or later you have to do something, or you'll never do anything,' Cosca had said. Temple wondered if this was what the Old Man had in mind. It did not seem likely. He grabbed hold of Shy and half-hugged her and shouted in her ear, 'We did it!'

'You sure?' she grunted, snapping the reins again.

'Didn't we do it?'

'The easy part.'

'Eh?'

'They won't just be letting this go, will they?' she called over the rushing wind as they picked up pace. 'Not the money! Not the insult!'

'They'll be coming after us,' he muttered.

'That was the whole point o' the exercise!'

Temple cautiously stood to look behind them, wishing he was less drunk. Nothing but snow and dirt spraying up from the clattering back wheels and the trees to either side vanishing into the darkness.

'They've got no horses, though?' His voice turning into a hopeful little whine at the end.

'Sweet slowed 'em down, but they'll still be coming! And this contraption ain't the fastest!'

Temple took another look back, wishing he was more drunk. The line between exultation and terror was ever a fine one and he was rapidly

crossing back over. ‘Maybe we should stop the wagon! Take two of the horses! Leave the money! Most of the money, anyway—’

‘We need to give Lamb and Savian time, remember?’

‘Oh, yes. That.’ The problem with courageous self-sacrifice was the self-sacrifice part. It had just never come naturally to him. The next jolt brought a wash of scalding vomit to the back of Temple’s mouth and he tried to swallow it, choked, spluttered and felt it burning all the way up his nose with a shiver. He looked up at the sky, stars vanished now and shifting from black to iron-grey as the dawn came on.

‘Woah!’ Another bend came blundering from the gloom and Shy dragged the shrieking brakes on again. Temple could hear the cargo sliding and jingling behind them as the wagon bounded around the corner, the earnest desire of all that weight to plunge on straight and send them tumbling down the mountainside in ruin.

As they clattered back onto the straight there was an almighty cracking and Shy reeled in her seat, one leg kicking, yelling out as she started to tumble off the wagon. Temple’s hand snapped closed around her belt and hauled her back, the limb of the bow over her shoulder nearly taking his eye out as she fell against him, reins flapping.

She held something up. The brake lever. And decidedly no longer attached. ‘That’s the end of that, then!’

‘What do we do?

She tossed the length of wood over her shoulder and it bounced away up the road behind them. ‘Not stop?’

The wagon shot from the trees and onto the plateau. The first glimmer of dawn was spilling from the east, a bright shaving of sun showing over the hills, starting to turn the muddy sky a washed-out blue, the streaked clouds a washed-up pink, setting the frozen snow that blanketed the flat country to glitter.

Shy worked the reins hard and insulted the horses again, which felt a little unfair to Temple until he remembered how much better insults had worked on him than encouragement. Their heads dipped and manes flew and the wagon picked up still more speed, wheels spinning faster on the flat, and faster yet, the snowy scrub whipping past and the wind blasting at Temple’s face and plucking at his cheeks and rushing in his cold nose.

Far ahead he could see horses scattering across the plateau, Sweet and Crying Rock no doubt further off with most of the herd. No dragon's hoard to retire on, but they'd cash in a decent profit on a couple of hundred mounts. When it came to stock, people out here were more concerned with price than origin.

'Anyone following?' called Shy, without taking her eyes off the road.

Temple managed to pry his hand from the seat long enough to stand and look behind them. Just the jagged blackness of the trees, and a rapidly growing stretch of flat whiteness between them and the wagon.

'No!' he shouted, confidence starting to leak back. 'No one . . . wait!' He saw movement. A rider. 'Oh God,' he muttered, confidence instantly draining. More of them. 'Oh God!'

'How many?'

'Three! No! Five! No! Seven!' They were still a few hundred strides behind, but they were gaining. 'Oh God,' he said again as he dropped back down into the shuddering seat. 'Now what's the plan?'

'We're already off the end of the plan!'

'I had a nasty feeling you'd say that.'

'Take the reins!' she shouted, thrusting them at him.

He jerked his hands away. 'And do what?'

'Can't you drive?'

'Badly!'

'I thought you'd done everything?'

'Badly!'

'Shall I stop and give you a fucking lesson? Drive!' She pulled her knife from her belt and offered that to him as well. 'Or you could fight.'

Temple swallowed. Then he took the reins. 'I'll drive.' Surely there was a God. A mean little trickster laughing His divine arse off at Temple's expense. And hardly for the first time.

Shy wondered how much of her life she'd spent regretting her last decision. Too much, that was sure. Looked like today was going to plough the same old furrow.

She dragged herself over the wooden parapet and onto the wagon's tar-painted roof, bucking under her feet like a mean bull trying to toss a rider.

She lurched to the back, shrugged her bow off into her hand, clawed away her whipping hair and squinted across the plateau.

'Oh, shit,' she muttered.

Seven riders, just like Temple said, and gaining ground. All they had to do was get ahead of the wagon, bring down a horse or two in the team and that'd be that. They were out of range still, specially shooting from what might as well have been a raft in rapids. She wasn't bad with a bow but she was no miracle-worker either. Her eyes went to the hatch on the roof, and she tossed the bow down and slithered over to it on her hands and knees, drew her sword and jammed it into the hasp the padlock was on. Way too strong and heavy. The tar around the hinges was carelessly painted, though, the wood more'n halfway rotten. She jammed the point of the sword into it, twisted, gouged, working out the fixings, digging at the other hinge.

'Are they still following?' she heard Temple shriek.

'No!' she forced through her gritted teeth as she wedged her sword under the hatch and hauled back on it. 'I've killed them all!'

'Really?'

'No, not fucking really!' And she went skittering over on her arse as the hatch ripped from its hinges and flopped free. She flung the sword away, thoroughly bent, dragged the hatch open with her fingertips, started clambering down into the darkness. The wagon hit something and gave a crashing jolt, snatched the ladder from her hands and flung her on her face.

Light spilled in from above, through cracks around the shutters of the narrow windows. Heavy gratings down both sides, padlocked and stacked with chests and boxes and saddlebags bouncing and thumping and jingling, treasure spilling free, gold gleaming, gems twinkling, coins sliding across the plank floor, five king's ransoms and change left over for a palace or two. There were a couple of sacks under her, too, crunchy with money. She stood, bouncing from the gratings to either side as the wagon twitched left and right on its groaning springs, started dragging the nearest sack towards the bright line between the back doors. Heavy as all hell but she'd hauled a lot of sacks in her time and she wasn't about to let this one beat her. Shy had taken beatings enough but she'd never enjoyed them.

She fumbled the bolts free, cursing, sweat prickling her forehead, then, holding tight to the grate beside her, booted the doors wide. The wind whipped in, the bright, white emptiness of the plateau opening up, the

clattering blur of the wheels and the snow showering from them, the black shapes of the riders following, closer now. Much closer.

She whipped her knife out and hacked the sack gaping open, dug her fist in and threw a handful of coins out the back, and another, and the other hand, and then both, flinging gold like she was sowing seed on the farm. It came to her then how hard she'd fought as a bandit and slaved as a farmer and haggled as a trader for a fraction of what she was flinging away with every movement. She jammed the next fistful down into her pocket 'cause – well, why not die rich? Then she scooped more out with both hands, threw the empty bag away and went back for seconds.

The wagon hit a rut and tossed her in the air, smashed her head into the low ceiling and sent her sprawling. Everything reeled for a moment, then she staggered up and clawed the next sack towards the swinging, banging doors, growling curses at the wagon, and the ceiling, and her bleeding head. She braced herself against the grate and shoved the sack out with her boot, bursting open in the snow and showering gold across the empty plain.

A couple of the riders had stopped, one already off his horse and on his hands and knees after the coins, dwindling quickly into the distance. But the others came on regardless, more determined than she'd hoped. That's hopes for you. She could almost see the face of the nearest mercenary, bent low over his horse's dipping head. She left the doors banging and scrambled back up the ladder, dragged herself out onto the roof.

'They still following?' shrieked Temple.

'Yes!'

'What are you doing?'

'Having a fucking lie down before they get here!'

The wagon was hurtling into broken land, the plateau folded with little streams, scattered with boulders and pillars of twisted rock. The road dropped down into a shallow valley, steep sides blurring past, wheels rattling harder than ever. Shy wiped blood from her forehead with the back of her hand, slithered across the shuddering roof to the rear, scooping up the bow and drawing an arrow. She squatted there for a moment, breathing hard.

Better to do it than live with the fear of it. Better to do it.

She came up. The nearest rider wasn't five strides back from the swinging doors. He saw her, eyes going wide, yellow hair and a broad chin and

cheeks pinked from the wind. She thought she'd seen him writing a letter back in Beacon. He'd cried while he did it. She shot his horse in the chest. Its head went back, it caught one hoof with the other and horse and rider went down together, tumbling over and over, straps and tackle flapping in a tangle, the others swerving around the wreckage as she ducked back down to get another arrow, thought she could hear Temple muttering something.

'You praying?'

'No!'

'Better start!' She came up again and an arrow shuddered into the wood just beside her. A rider, black against the sky on the valley's edge, drawing level with them, horse's hooves a blur, standing in his stirrups with masterful skill and already pulling back his string again.

'Shit!' She dropped down and the shaft flitted over her head and clicked into the parapet on the other side. A moment later another joined it. She could hear the rest of the riders now, shouting to each other just at the back of the wagon. She put her head up to peer over and a shaft twitched into the wood, point showing between two planks not a hand's width from her face, made her duck again. She'd seen some Ghosts damn good at shooting from horseback, but never as good as this. It was bloody unfair, that's what it was. But fair has never been an enforceable principle in a fight to the death.

She nocked her shaft, took a breath and stuck her bow up above the parapet. Right away an arrow flitted between the limb and the string, and up she came. She knew she was nowhere near as good with a bow as he was, but she didn't have to be. A horse is a pretty big target.

Her shaft stuck to the flights in its ribs and it lost its footing right off, fell sideways, rider flying from his saddle with a howl, his bow spinning up in the air and the pair of them tumbling down the side of the valley behind.

Shy shouted, 'Ha!' and turned just in time to see a man jump over the parapet behind her.

She got a glimpse of him. Kantic, with eyes narrowed and his teeth showing in a black beard, a hooked blade in each hand he must've used for climbing the side of the speeding wagon, an endeavour she'd have greatly admired if he hadn't been fixed on killing her. The threat of murder surely can cramp your admiration for a body.

She threw her bow at him and he knocked it away with one arm while he swung at her overhand with the other. She twisted to the side and the blade

thudded into the parapet. She caught his other arm as it came at her and punched him in the ribs as she slipped around him. The wagon jolted and ditched her on her side. He twisted his curved blade but couldn't get it free of the wood, jerked his hand out of the thong around his wrist. By then she was up in a crouch and had her knife out, drawing little circles in the air with the point, circles, circles, and they watched each other, both with boots planted wide and knees bent low and the juddering wagon threatening to shake them off their feet and the wind threatening to buffet them right over.

'Hell of a spot for a knife-fight,' she muttered.

The wagon bumped and he stumbled a little, took his eye off her just long enough. She sprang at him, raising the knife like she'd stab him overhand, then whipped down low and past, slashing at his leg as she went, turning to stab him in the back, but the wagon jumped and spun her all the way round and grunting into the parapet.

When she turned he was coming at her roaring, cutting at the wind and her jerking back from the first slash and weaving away from the second, roof of the wagon treacherous as quicksand under her bootheels and her eyes crossed on that blur of metal. She caught the third cut on her own blade, steel scraping on steel and off and slitting her left forearm, ripped sleeve flapping.

They faced each other again, both breathing hard, both a little bit knifed but nothing too much changed. Her arm sang as she squeezed her bloody fingers but they still worked. She feinted, and a second, trying to draw him into a mistake, but he kept watching, swishing that hooked knife in front of him as if he was trying to snag a fish, the broken valley still thundering past on both sides.

The wagon bounced hard and Shy was off her feet a moment, yelping as she toppled sideways. He slashed at her and missed, she stabbed at him and the blade just grazed his cheek. Another jolt flung them together and he caught her wrist with his free hand, tried to stab at her but got his knife tangled in her coat and she grabbed his wrist, twisted it up, not that she wanted the fucking thing but there was no letting go of it now, their knives both waggling hopelessly at the sky, streaked with each other's blood as they staggered around the bucking roof.

She kicked at his knee and made it buckle but he had the strength, and step by wobbling step he wrestled her to the parapet and started to bend her

over it, his weight on top of her. He twisted his knife, twisting her grip loose, getting it free, both of them snarling spit at each other, wood grinding into her back and the wagon's wheels battering the ground not so far behind her head, specks of dirt stinging her cheek, his snarling face coming closer and closer and closer—

She darted forwards and sank her teeth into his nose, biting, biting, her mouth salty with blood and him roaring and twisting and pulling away and suddenly she was right over backwards, breath whooping in as she tumbled over the parapet, plummeted down and smashed against the side of the wagon, breath groaning out, her fallen knife pinging from the road and somehow holding on by one clutching hand, all the fibres in her shoulder strained right to the point of tearing.

She swung wriggling around, road rushing underneath her, honking mad sounds through gritted teeth, legs milling at the air as she tried to get her other hand onto the parapet. Made a grab and missed and swung away and the whirling wheel clipped her boot and near snatched her off. Made another grab and got her fingertips over, worked her hand, groaning and whimpering and almost out of effort, everything numb, but she wouldn't be beaten and she growled as she dragged herself back over.

The mercenary was staggering about with an arm around his neck Temple's face next to his, both of them grunting through bared teeth. She lunged at him, half-falling, grabbed hold of his knife-arm in both hands and twisted it, twisted it down, both arms straining, and his jowls were trembling, torn nose oozing blood, eyes rolling towards the point of his knife as she forced it down towards him. He said something in Kantic, shaking his head, the same word over and over, but she wasn't in a mood to listen even if she'd understood. He wheezed as the point cut through his shirt and into his chest, mouth going wide open as the blade slid further, right to the cross-piece, and she fell on top of him, blood slicking the roof of the wagon.

There was something in her mouth. The tip of his nose. She spat it out and mumbled at Temple, 'Who'th driving?'

The wagon tipped, there was a grinding jolt, and Shy was flying.

Temple groaned as he rolled over to lie staring at the sky, arms out wide, the snow pleasantly cool against his bare neck—

‘Uh!’ He sat up, wincing at a range of stabbing pains, and stared wildly about.

A shallow canyon with walls of streaked stone and earth and patched snow, the road down the centre, the rest strewn with boulders and choked with thorny scrub. The wagon lay on its side a dozen strides away, one door ripped off and the other hanging wide, one of the uppermost wheels gone and the other still gently turning. The tongue had sheared through and the horses were still going, no doubt delighted by their sudden liberation, already a good way down the road and dwindling into the distance.

The sun was just finding its way into the bottom of the canyon, making gold glitter, a trail of treasure spilled from the back of the stricken wagon and for thirty strides or so behind. Shy sat in the midst of it.

He started running, immediately fell and took a mouthful of snow, spat out a tiny golden coin and floundered over. She was trying to stand, torn coat tangled in a thorn bush, and sank back down as he got there.

‘My leg’s fucked,’ she forced through gritted teeth, hair matted and face streaked with blood.

‘Can you use it?’

‘No. Hence *fucked*.’

He hooked an arm around her, managed with an effort to get them both to standing, her on one good leg, him on two shaky ones. ‘Got a plan yet?’

‘Kill you and hide in your body?’

‘Better than anything I’ve got.’ He looked about the canyon sides for some means of escape, started tottering over to the most promising place with Shy hopping beside him, both of them wheezing with pain and effort. It might almost have been comical had he not known his erstwhile colleagues must be near. But he did know. So it wasn’t.

‘Sorry I got you into this,’ she said.

‘I got myself into this. A long time ago.’ He grabbed at a trailing bush but it came free and tumbled hopelessly down in a shower of earth, most of which went straight into his mouth.

‘Leave me and run,’ said Shy.

‘Tempting . . .’ He cast about for another way up. ‘But I already tried that and it didn’t work out too well.’ He picked at some roots, brought down some gravel, the slope as unreliable as he’d been down the years. ‘I’m trying not to make the same mistakes over and over these days . . .’

‘How’s that going for you?’ she grunted.

‘Right now it could be better.’ The lip was only a couple of strides above his hand but it might as well have been a mile distant, there was no—

‘Hey, hey, Temple!’

A single horseman came up the road at an easy walk, between the two ruts the wagon-wheels had left. Everyone else was thinner than when they left Starikland, but somehow not Brachio. He stopped not far away, leaning his bulk over his saddle horn and speaking in Styrian. ‘That was quite a chase. Didn’t think you had it in you.’

‘Captain Brachio! What a pleasure!’ Temple twisted around to put himself between Shy and the mercenary. A pathetic effort at gallantry, he was almost embarrassed to have made it. He felt her take his hand, though, fingers sticky with blood, and was grateful, even if it was just to keep her balance.

Some more earth slid down behind and, looking around, he saw another rider above them, loaded flatbow loose in his hands. Temple realised his knees were shaking. God, he wished he was a brave man. If only for these last few moments.

Brachio nudged his horse lazily forward. ‘I told the Old Man you couldn’t be trusted, but he always had a blind spot for you.’

‘Well, good lawyers are hard to find.’ Temple stared around as though the means of their salvation might suddenly present themselves. They did not. He struggled to put some confidence in his creaking voice. ‘Take us back to Cosca and maybe I can tidy this up—’

‘Not this time.’ Brachio drew his heavy sword, steel scraping, and Shy’s fingers tightened around Temple’s. She might not have understood the words but a naked blade never needs translating. ‘Cosca’s on his way, and I think he’ll want everything tidy when he gets here. That means you dead, in case you were wondering.’

‘Yes, I’d gathered,’ croaked Temple. ‘When you drew the sword. But thanks for the explanation.’

‘Least I could do. I like you, Temple. I always have. You’re easy to like.’

‘But you’re going to kill me anyway.’

‘You say it like there’s a choice.’

‘I blame myself. As always. Just . . .’ Temple licked his lips, and twisted his hand free of Shy’s, and looked Brachio in his tired eyes, and tried to

conjure up that earnestness. ‘Maybe you could let the girl go? You could do that.’

Brachio frowned at Shy for a moment, who’d sunk back against the bank and was sitting silent. ‘I’d like to. Believe it or not, I get no pleasure from killing women.’

‘Of course not. You wouldn’t want to take a thing like that back to your daughters.’ Brachio worked his shoulders uncomfortably, knives shifting across his belly, and Temple felt a crack there that he could work at. He dropped on his knees in the snow, and he clasped his hands, and he sent up a silent prayer. Not for him, but for Shy. She actually deserved saving. ‘It was all my idea. All me. I talked her into it. You know I’m awful that way, and she’s gullible as a child, poor thing. Let her go. You’ll feel better about it in the long run. Let her go. I’m begging you.’

Brachio raised his brows. ‘That is quite moving, in fact. I was expecting you to blame her for the whole thing.’

‘I’m somewhat moved,’ agreed the man with the flatbow.

‘We’re none of us monsters.’ And Brachio reached up and dabbed some tears from his leaky eye. The other one stayed dry, however. ‘But she tried to rob us, whoever’s idea it was, and the trouble her father caused . . . No. Cosca wouldn’t understand. And it isn’t as if you’ll be repaying the favour, is it?’

‘No,’ muttered Temple. ‘No, I wouldn’t have thought so.’ He floundered for something to say that might at least delay the inevitable. That might borrow him a few more moments. Just an extra breath. Strange. It was hardly as though he was enjoying himself all that much. ‘Would it help if I said I was very drunk?’

Brachio shook his head. ‘We all were.’

‘Shitty childhood?’

‘Mummy used to leave me in a cupboard.’

‘Shitty adulthood?’

‘Whose isn’t?’ Brachio nudged his horse forward again, its great shadow falling over Temple. ‘Stand up, then, eh? I’d rather get it done quick.’ He worked the shoulder of his sword-arm. ‘Neither one of us wants me hacking away at you.’

Temple looked back at Shy, sitting there bloody and exhausted. ‘What did he say?’ she asked.

He gave a tired shrug. She gave a tired nod. It looked like even she had run out of fight. He blinked up at the sky as he got to his feet. An unremarkable, greyish sky. If there was a God, He was a humourless banker. A bloodless pedant, crossing off His debts in some cosmic ledger. All take their loan and, in the end, all must repay.

'Nothing personal,' said Brachio.

Temple closed his eyes, the sun shining pink through the lids. 'Hard not to take it personally.'

'I guess so.'

There was a rattling sound. Temple winced. He'd always dreamed of facing death with some dignity, the way Kahdia had. But dignity requires practice and Temple had none. He couldn't stop himself cringing. He wondered how much it would hurt, having your head cut off. Did you feel it? He heard a couple of clicks, and a grunt, and he cringed even more. How could you not feel it? Brachio's horse snuffled, pawing the ground, then the metallic clatter of a sword falling.

Temple prised one eye open. Brachio was looking down, surprised. There was an arrow through his neck and two others in his chest. He opened his mouth and blathered blood down his shirt, then slowly tipped from the saddle and crumpled face down on the ground next to Temple's boots, one foot still tangled in its stirrup.

Temple looked around. The man with the flatbow had vanished. His mount stood peacefully riderless at the top of the canyon wall.

'Here's a surprise,' croaked Shy.

A horse was approaching. In the saddle, hands crossed over the horn and the breeze stirring her short hair about her sharp-boned frown, sat Corlin. 'A pleasant one, I hope.'

'Little late.' Shy took hold of Temple's limp hand and used it to drag herself wincing up. 'But I guess we'll live with the timing.'

Horses appeared at the valley sides, and riders on the horses, perhaps three dozen of them, all well armed and some armoured. There were men and women, old and young, some faces Temple recognised from Crease, others strange to him. Three or four held half-drawn bows. They weren't pointed right at Temple. But they weren't pointed far away either. Some had forearms showing, and on the forearms were tattoos. *Doom to the Union. Death to the King. Rise up!*

‘Rebels,’ whispered Temple.

‘You always did have a talent for stating the obvious.’ Corlin slid from the saddle, kicked Brachio’s boot from his stirrup and rolled his corpse over with her foot, leaving him goggling at the sky, fat face caked with dirt. ‘That arm all right?’

Shy pulled her ripped sleeve back with her teeth to show a long cut, still seeping, blood streaked down to her fingertips. The sight of it made Temple’s knees weak. Or even weaker. It was a surprise he was still standing, all in all. ‘Bit sore,’ she said.

Corlin pulled a roll of bandage from her pocket. ‘Feels as if we’ve been here before, doesn’t it?’ She turned her blue, blue eyes on Temple as she started to unroll it around Shy’s arm. She never seemed to blink. Temple would have found that unnerving if he’d had any nerves left. ‘Where’s my uncle?’

‘In Beacon,’ he croaked, as the rebels dismounted and began to lead their horses down the steep sides of the canyon, scattering dirt.

‘Alive?’

‘We don’t know,’ said Shy. ‘They found out he was Conthus.’

‘That so?’ Corlin took Temple’s limp hand and clamped it around Shy’s wrist. ‘Hold that.’ She started to unbutton her coat.

‘Lamb went back for him but they ran into some trouble. That’s when we took the wagon. Sweet stampeded the horses, to give them some . . . time . . .’

Corlin shrugged off her coat and tossed it over her horse’s neck, her sinewy arms blue with letters, words, slogans from shoulder to wrist.

‘I’m Conthus,’ she said, pulling a knife from her belt.

There was a pause.

‘Oh,’ said Temple.

‘Ah,’ said Shy.

Corlin, or Conthus, cut the bandage with one quick movement then pushed a pin through it. Her narrowed eyes moved towards the wreckage of the wagon, calmly taking in the gold twinkling in the snow. ‘Looks like you came into some money.’

Temple cleared his throat. ‘Little bit. Lawyers’ fees have been shooting up lately—’

‘We could use a couple of horses.’ Shy twisted her bandaged forearm free of Temple’s grip and worked the fingers. ‘Nicomo Cosca won’t be far behind us.’

‘You just can’t stay clear of trouble, can you?’ Corlin patted Brachio’s mount on the neck. ‘We have two spare, as it goes. But it’ll cost.’

‘Don’t suppose you feel like haggling?’

‘With you? I don’t think so. Let’s just call it a generous contribution to the liberation of Starikland.’ She jerked her head at her fellows and they hurried forward, sacks and saddlebags at the ready. One big lad nearly knocked Temple over with a shoulder in his hurry. Some started rooting on hands and knees, scooping up the gold scattered about the wreck. Others wriggled inside and soon could be heard smashing the gratings and breaking open the boxes to steal the dragon’s hoard for a third time that week.

A few moments ago, Temple had been rich beyond the hopes of avarice, but since a few moments later he had been on the point of losing his head, it felt rude to complain about this outcome.

‘A noble cause,’ he whispered. ‘Do help yourselves.’

Times Change

The Mayor stood in her accustomed position at her balcony, hands at their familiar, polished places on the rail, and watched Curnsbick's men hard at work on his new manufactory. The huge frame already towered over the amphitheatre, the new over the ancient, cobwebbed with scaffolding on the site Papa Ring's Whitehouse had once occupied. That had been a repugnant building in every sense. A building towards which for years she had directed all her hatred, cunning and fury. And how she missed it.

Never mind Mayor, she had been Queen of the Far Country when Ring stopped swinging, but no sooner had she clutched the garland of triumph than it had withered to wretched stalks. The violence and the fires drove off half the population. Whispers mounted that the gold was running dry. Then word came of a strike to the south near Hope and suddenly people were pouring out of Crease by the hundred. With no one left to fight she had dismissed most of her men. Disgruntled, they had dabbled in arson on their way out of town and burned down a good part of what remained. Even so there were buildings empty, and no rents coming in. Lots in town and claims in the hills that men had killed for lost all value overnight. The gaming halls and the bawdy houses were mostly boarded up, only a trickle of passing custom below her in the Church of Dice, where once she had coined money as though she ran a mint.

Crease was her sole dominion. And it was next to worthless.

Sometimes the Mayor felt she had spent her life building things, with painstaking sweat and blood and effort, only to watch them destroyed. Through her own hubris, and others' vindictiveness, and the fickle thrashings of that blind thug fate. Fleeing one debacle after another.

Abandoning even her name, in the end. Even now, she always kept a bag packed. She drained her glass and poured herself another.

That's what courage is. Taking your disappointments and your failures, your guilt and your shame, all the wounds received and inflicted, and sinking them in the past. Starting again. Damning yesterday and facing tomorrow with your head held high. Times change. It's those that see it coming, and plan for it, and change themselves to suit that prosper. And so she had struck her deal with Curnsbick, and split her hard-won little empire again without so much as a harsh word spoken.

By that time his small manufactory, which had looked pretty damn big when he converted it from an empty brothel, was already belching black smoke from its two tin chimneys, then from three brick ones, which smogged the whole valley on a still day and chased the few whores still plying a threadbare trade off their balconies and back indoors.

By the looks of it, his new manufactory would have chimneys twice the size. The biggest building within a hundred miles. She hardly even knew what the place was for, except that it had something to do with coal. The hills had hidden little gold in the end but they were surrendering the black stuff in prodigious quantities. As the shadows of the manufactory lengthened, the Mayor had started to wonder whether she might have been better off with Ring across the street. Him, at least, she had understood. But Ring was gone, and the world they had fought over was gone with him, drifted away like smoke on the breeze. Curnsbick was bringing men in to build, and dig, and stoke his furnaces. Cleaner, calmer, more sober men than Crease was used to, but they still needed to be entertained.

'Times change, eh?' She held her drink up in salute to no one. To Papa Ring, maybe. Or to herself, when she still had a name. She caught something through the distorting window of her glass, and lowered it. Two riders were coming down the main street, looking as if they'd been going hard, one cradling an injured arm. It was that girl Shy South. Her and Temple, the lawyer.

The Mayor frowned. After twenty years dodging catastrophes she could smell danger at a thousand paces, and her nose was tickling something fierce as those two riders reined in at her front door. Temple slithered from his horse, fell in the mud, stumbled up and helped down Shy, who was limping badly.

The Mayor drained her glass and sucked the liquor from her teeth. As she crossed her rooms, buttoning her collar tight, she glanced at the cupboard where she kept that packed bag, wondering if today would be its day.

Some people are trouble. Nicomo Cosca was one. Lamb was another. Then there are people who, without being troublesome in themselves, always manage to let trouble in when they open your door. Temple, she had always suspected, was one of those. Looking at him now as she swept down the stairs, leaning against the counter in her sadly deserted gaming hall, she was sure of it. His clothes were torn and bloodied and caked in dust, his expression wild, his chest heaving.

'You look as if you've come in a hurry,' she said.

He glanced up, the slightest trace of guilt in his eye. 'You might say that.'

'And ran into some trouble on the way.'

'You might say that, too. Might I ask you for a drink?'

'Can you pay for it?'

'No.'

'I'm no charity. What are you doing here?'

He took a moment to prepare and then produced, like a magician's trick, an expression of intense earnestness. It put her instantly on her guard. 'I have nowhere else to go.'

'Are you sure you've tried hard enough?' She narrowed her eyes. 'Where's Cosca?'

He swallowed. 'Funny you should ask.'

'I'm not laughing.'

'No.'

'So it's not funny?'

'No.' He visibly abandoned earnestness and settled for simple fear. 'I would guess he's no more than a few hours behind us.'

'He's coming here?'

'I expect so.'

'With all his men?'

'Those that remain.'

'Which is how many?'

'Some died in the mountains, a lot deserted—'

'How many?'

'I would guess at least a hundred still.'

The Mayor's nails dug at her palms as she clenched her fists. 'And the Inquisitor?'

'Very much present, as far as I am aware.'

'What do they want?'

'The Inquisitor wants to torture his way to a brighter tomorrow.'

'And Cosca?'

'Cosca wants a fortune in ancient gold that he stole from the Dragon People, and that . . .' Temple picked nervously at his frayed collar. 'I stole from him.'

'And where is this twice-stolen fortune now?'

Temple grimaced. 'Stolen. The woman Corlin took it. She turns out to be the rebel leader Conthus. It's been a day of surprises,' he finished, lamely.

'So . . . it . . . appears,' whispered the Mayor. 'Where is Corlin?'

Temple gave that helpless shrug of which he was so fond. 'In the wind.'

The Mayor was less fond of that shrug. 'I have not the men to fight them,' she said. 'I have not the money to pay them off. I have no ancient hoard for Nicomo *bloody* Cosca and for damn sure no brighter tomorrow for Inquisitor *fucking* Lorsen! Is there any chance your *head* will pacify them?'

Temple swallowed. 'I fear not.'

'So do I. But in the absence of a better suggestion I may have to make the offer.'

'As it happens . . .' Temple licked his lips. 'I have a suggestion.'

The Mayor took a fistful of Temple's shirt and dragged him close. 'Is it a good one? Is it the best suggestion I ever heard?'

'I profoundly doubt it, but, circumstances being what they are . . . do you have that treaty?'

'I'm tired,' said Corporal Bright, glancing unimpressed at the piled-up hovels of Crease.

'Aye,' grunted Old Cog in reply. He kept having to force his eyelids up, they were that heavy from last night's revelry, then the terror o' the stampede, then a healthy trek on foot and a hard ride to follow.

'And dirty,' said Bright.

'Aye.' The smoke of last night's fires, and the rolling through the brush running from stomping horses, then the steady showering of dirt from the hooves of the galloping mounts in front.

‘And sore,’ said Bright.

‘No doubt.’ Last night’s revelry again, and the riding again, and Cog’s arm still sore from the fall in the mountains and the old wound in his arse always aching. You wouldn’t think an arrow in the arse would curse you all your days but there it is. Arse armour. That was the key to the mercenary life.

‘It’s been a testing campaign,’ said Cog.

‘If you can apply the word to half a year’s hard riding, hard drinking, killing and theft.’

‘What else would y’apply it to?’

Bright considered that a moment. ‘True. Have you seen a worse, though? You been with Cosca for years.’

‘The North was colder. Kadir was dustier. That last Styrian mess was bloodier. Full-on revolt in the Company at one point.’ He shifted the manacles at his belt. ‘Gave up on using chains and had to go with hangings for every infraction. But all considered, no. I ain’t seen a worse.’ Cog sniffed up some snot, worked it thoughtfully about his mouth, gathering a good sense of its consistency, then leaned back and spat it arcing through a hovel’s open window.

‘Never saw a man could spit like you,’ said Bright.

‘It’s all about putting the practice in,’ said Cog. ‘Like anything else.’

‘Keep moving!’ roared Cosca over his shoulder, up at the head of the column. If you could call eighteen men a column. Still, they were the lucky ones. The rest of the Company were most likely still slogging across the plateau on foot. The ones that were still alive, anyway.

Bright’s thoughts were evidently marching in the same direction. ‘Lost a lot o’ good men these last few weeks.’

‘Good might be stretching it.’

‘You know what I mean. Can’t believe Brachio’s gone.’

‘He’s a loss.’

‘And Jubair.’

‘Can’t say I’m sorry that black bastard’s head ain’t attached no more.’

‘He was a strange one, right enough, but a good ally in a tough corner.’

‘I’d rather stay out o’ the tough corners.’

Bright looked sideways at him, then dropped his horse back a stretch so the others up front wouldn’t mark him. ‘Couldn’t agree more. I want to go

home, is what I'm saying.'

'Where's home to men like us?'

'I want to go anywhere but here, then.'

Cog glanced about at the tangled mass of wood and ruins that was Crease, never a place to delight a cultured fellow and less so than ever now by the looks of things, parts of it burned out and a lot of the rest near deserted. Those left looked like the ones who couldn't find a way to leave, or were too far gone to try. A beggar of truly surpassing wretchedness hobbled after them for a few strides with his hand out before falling in the gutter. On the other side of the street a toothless old woman laughed, and laughed, and laughed. Mad. Or heard something real funny. Mad seemed likelier.

'I take your point,' said Cog. 'But we've got that money to find.' Even though he weren't entirely sure he wanted to find it. All his life he'd been clutching at every copper he could get his warty fingers around. Then suddenly he had so much gold none of it seemed worth anything any more. So much the world seemed to make no sense in the light of it.

'Didn't you keep a little back?'

'O' course. A little.' More than a little, in fact, the pouch under his armpit was heavy with coins. Not so much it made him sweat, but a tidy haul.

'We all did,' muttered Bright. 'So it's Cosca's money we're after really, ain't it?'

Cog frowned. 'There's the principle 'n all.'

'Principle? Really?'

'Can't let folks just up and rob you.'

'We robbed it ourselves, didn't we?' said Bright, an assertion Cog could by no means deny. 'I'm telling you, it's cursed. From the moment we laid our hands on it things have gone from shit to shitter.'

'No such thing as curses.'

'Tell it to Brachio and Jubair. How many of us set off from Starikland?'

'More'n four hundred, according to Friendly, and Friendly don't get a count wrong.'

'How many now?'

Cog opened his mouth, then closed it. The point was obvious to all.

'Exactly,' said Bright. 'Hang around out here much longer we'll be down to none.'

Cog sniffed, and grunted, and spat again, right into a first-floor window this time around. An artist has to challenge himself, after all. ‘Been with Cosca a long time.’

‘Times change. Look at this place.’ Bright nodded towards the vacant hovels that a month or two before had boiled over with humanity. ‘What’s that stink, anyway?’

Cog wrinkled his nose. The place had always stunk, o’ course, but that healthy, heartening stench of shit and low living that had always smelled like home to him. There was an acrid sort of a flavour on the air now, a pall of brownish smoke hanging over everything. ‘Don’t know. Can’t say I care for it one bit.’

‘I want to go home,’ said Bright, miserably.

The column was coming to the centre of town now, in so far as the place had one. They were building something on one side of the muddy street, teetering scaffold and lumber stacked high. On the other side the Church of Dice still stood, where Cog had spent several very pleasant evenings a month or two before. Cosca held up his fist for a halt in front of it and with the help of Sergeant Friendly disentangled himself from the saddle and clambered stiffly down.

The Mayor stood waiting on the steps in a black dress buttoned to the neck. What a woman that was. A lady, Cog would almost have said, dusting the word off in the deepest recesses of his memory.

‘General Cosca,’ she said, smiling warmly. ‘I did not think—’

‘Don’t pretend you’re surprised!’ he snapped.

‘But I am. You come at a rather inopportune time, we are expecting—’

‘Where is my gold?’

‘I’m sorry?’

‘By all means play the wide-eyed innocent. But we both know better. Where is my damned notary, then?’

‘Inside, but—’

The Old Man shouldered past her and limped grumbling up the steps, Friendly, Sworbreck, and Captain Dimbik following.

The Mayor caught Lorsen’s arm with a gentle hand. ‘Inquisitor Lorsen, I must protest.’

He frowned back. ‘My dear Lady Mayor, I’ve been protesting for months. Much good it has done me.’

Cosca had seemed heedless of the half dozen frowning thugs lounging on either side of the door. But Cog noted them well enough as he climbed the steps after the others, and from the worried look on Bright's face he did too. Might be that the Company had the numbers, and more coming across the plateau as fast as they could walk, but Cog didn't fancy fighting right then and there.

He didn't fancy fighting one bit.

Captain Dimbik straightened his uniform. Even if the front was crusted with dirt. Even if it was coming apart at the seams. Even if he no longer even belonged to any army, had no nation, fought for no cause or principle a sane man could believe in. Even if he was utterly lost and desperately concealing a bottomless hatred and pity for himself, even then.

Better straight than crooked.

The place had changed since last he visited. The gaming hall had been largely cleared to leave an expanse of creaking boards, the dice-and card-tables shifted against the walls, the women ushered away, the clients vanished. Only ten or so of the Mayor's thugs remained, noticeably armed and scattered watchfully about under the empty alcoves in the walls, a man wiping glasses behind the long counter, and in the centre of the floor a single table, recently polished but still showing the stains of hard use. Temple sat there before a sheaf of papers, peculiarly unconcerned as he watched Dimbik's men tramp in to surround him.

Could you even call them men? Ragged and haggard beyond belief and their morale, never the highest, ebbed to a sucking nadir. Not that they had ever been such very promising examples of humanity. Dimbik had tried, once upon a time, to impose some discipline upon them. After his discharge from the army. After his disgrace. He remembered, dimly, as if seen through a room full of steam, that first day in uniform, so handsome in the mirror, puffed up on stories of derring-do, a bright career at his fingertips. He miserably straightened the greasy remnants again. How could he have sunk so low? Not even scum. Lackey to scum.

He watched the infamous Nicomo Cosca pace across the empty floor, bent spurs jingling, his eyes fixed upon Temple and his rat-like face locked in an expression of vengeful hatred. To the counter, he went, of course, where

else? He took up a bottle, spat out its cork and swallowed a good quarter of the contents in one draught.

'So here he is!' grated the Old Man. 'The cuckoo in the nest! The serpent in the bosom! The . . . the . . .'

'Maggot in the shit?' suggested Temple.

'Why not, since you mention it? What did Verturio say? Never fear your enemies, but your friends, *always*. A wiser man than I, no doubt! I forgave you! *Forgave* you and how am I repaid? I hope you're taking notes, Sworbreck! You can prepare a little parable, perhaps, on the myth of redemption and the price of betrayal.' The author scrambled to produce his pencil as Cosca's grim smile faded to leave him simply grim. 'Where is my gold, Temple?'

'I don't have it.' The notary held up his sheaf of papers. 'But I do have this.'

'It better be valuable,' snapped Cosca, taking another swallow. Sergeant Friendly had wandered to one of the dice-tables and was sorting dice into piles, apparently oblivious to the escalating tension. Inquisitor Lorsen gave Dimbik a curt nod as he entered. Dimbik respectfully returned it, licked a finger and slicked his front hairs into position, wondering if the Inquisitor had been serious about securing him a new commission in the King's Own when they returned to Adua. Most likely not, but we all need pretty dreams to cling to. The hope of a second chance, if not the chance itself . . .

'It is a treaty.' Temple spoke loudly enough for the whole room to hear. 'Bringing Crease and the surrounding country into the Empire. I suspect his Radiance the Emperor will be less than delighted to find an armed party sponsored by the Union has encroached upon his territory.'

'I'll give you an encroachment you won't soon forget.' Cosca let his left hand rest on the hilt of his sword. 'Where the hell is my *gold*?'

With a draining inevitability, the atmosphere ratcheted towards bloodshed. Coats were flicked open, itchy fingers crept to ready grips, blades were loosened in sheaths, eyes were narrowed. Two of Dimbik's men eased the wedges from the triggers of their loaded flatbows. The glass-wiper had put a surreptitious hand on something beneath the counter, and Dimbik did not doubt it would have a point on the end. He watched all this with a helpless sense of mounting horror. He hated violence. It was the uniforms he'd become a soldier for. The epaulettes, and the marching, and the bands—

‘Wait!’ snapped Lorsen, striding across the room. Dimbik was relieved to see that someone in authority still had a grip on their reason. ‘Superior Pike said most clearly there were to be no Imperial entanglements!’ He snatched the treaty from Temple’s hand. ‘This expedition has been enough of a disaster without our starting a war!’

‘You cannot mean to dignify this charade,’ sneered Cosca. ‘He lies for a living!’

‘Not this time.’ The Mayor glided into the room with another pair of her men, one of whom had lost an eye but in so doing gained considerably in menace. ‘That document is endorsed by elected representatives of the townspeople of Crease and is fully binding.’

‘I consider it my best work.’ If he was lying, Temple was even more smug about it than usual. ‘It makes use of the principle of inviolate ownership enshrined at the formation of the Union, refers back to the earliest Imperial claim on the territory, and is even fully binding under mining law. I feel confident you will find it incontestable in any court.’

‘Alas, my lawyer departed my service under something of a cloud,’ forced Cosca through gritted teeth. ‘If we contest your treaty it will have to be in the court of sharp edges.’

Lorsen snorted. ‘It’s not even signed.’ And he tossed the document flapping onto the table.

Cosca narrowed his bloodshot eyes. ‘What if it were? You of all people should know, Temple, that the only laws that matter are those backed by force. The nearest Imperial troops are weeks away.’

Temple’s smile only widened. ‘Oh, they’re a little closer than that.’

The doors were suddenly flung wide and, under the disbelieving eyes of the heavily armed assembly, soldiers tramped into the Church of Dice. Imperial troops, in gilded greaves and breastplates, with broad-bladed spears in their fists and short-bladed swords at their hips, with round shields marked with the hand of Juvens, and the five thunderbolts, and the sheaf of wheat, and all looking as if they had marched straight from antiquity itself.

‘What the *shit* . . .’ muttered Cosca.

In the centre of this bizarre honour guard strode an old man, his short beard white as snow, his gilded helm adorned with a tall plume. He walked slowly, deliberately, as though it caused him pain, yet perfectly erect. He looked neither to the left nor to the right, as if Cosca and his men, the

Mayor and her men, Temple and Lorsen and everyone else were all insects utterly beneath his notice. As if he were a god obliged for this moment to walk among the filth of humanity. The mercenaries edged nervously away, repelled not so much by fear of the Emperor's legions as by this old man's aura of untouchable command.

The Mayor prostrated herself at his feet in a rustling of skirts. 'Legate Sarmis,' she breathed. 'Your Excellency, we are inexpressibly honoured by your presence . . .'

Dimbik's jaw dropped. Legate Sarmis, who had crushed the Emperor's enemies at the Third Battle of Darmium and ordered every prisoner put to death. Who across the Circle of the World was famous for his military brilliance and infamous for his ruthlessness. Who they had all supposed was many hundreds of miles away to the south. Standing before them now, in the flesh. Dimbik somehow felt he had seen that magnificent face before, somewhere. On a coin, perhaps.

'You *are* honoured,' pronounced the old man, 'for my presence is the presence of his Radiance, the Emperor, Goltus the First.' The Legate's body might have been withered by age but his voice, seasoned with the slightest Imperial accent, was that of a colossus, booming from the lofty rafters, as awe-inspiring as deep thunder close at hand. Dimbik's knees, always weakened by authority, positively itched to bend.

'Where is the instrument?' intoned the Legate.

The Mayor rose and abjectly indicated the table, on which Temple had arranged pen and document. Sarmis grunted as he stiffly leaned over it.

'I sign with the name Goltus, for this hand is the hand of the Emperor.' With a flourish that would have been outrageous under any other circumstances, he signed. 'And so it is done. You stand now upon Imperial soil, and are Imperial subjects under the protection of his Radiance! Warmed by his bounty. Humbled beneath his law.' The ringing echoes faded and he frowned, as though he had only just become aware of the mercenaries. His merciless gaze swept over them and Dimbik felt a chill to his very core.

Sarmis formed his words with fearsome precision. 'Who are these . . . people?'

Even Cosca had been silenced by the theatre of the moment, but now, much to everyone's dismay, he found his voice again. It sounded cracked,

weak, almost ridiculous after the Legate's, but he found it nonetheless, waving his half-emptied bottle for added emphasis. 'I am Nicomo Cosca, Captain General of the Company of the Gracious Hand, and—'

'And we were just leaving!' snapped Lorsen, seizing Cosca's elbow.

The Old Man refused to be moved. 'Without my gold? I hardly think so!'

Dimbik did not care in the least for the way things were going. Probably no one did. There was a gentle rattle as Friendly threw his dice. The Mayor's one-eyed thug suddenly had a knife in his hand. That did not strike him as a positive development.

'Enough!' hissed Lorsen, halfway now to wrestling the Old Man by his armpit. 'When we reach Starikland every man will get a bonus! Every man!'

Sworbreck was crouching against the counter, apparently trying to vanish into the floor while madly scribbling in his notebook. Sergeant Cog was edging towards the doorway, and he had good instincts. The odds had changed, and not for the better. Dimbik had begged Cosca to wait for more men, the old fool, but he might as well have argued with the tide. And now all it would take was a loose trigger and there would be a bloodbath.

Dimbik held one hand up to the flatbowmen as to a skittish horse. 'Easy . . .'

'I shit on your bonus!' snarled Cosca, struggling with scant dignity to shake Lorsen off. 'Where's my fucking gold?'

The Mayor was backing away, one pale hand against her chest, but Sarmis only appeared to grow in stature, his white brows drawing inwards. 'What is this impertinence?'

'I can only apologise,' blathered Temple, 'we—'

Sarmis struck him across the face with the back of his hand and knocked him to the floor. 'Kneel when you address me!'

Dimbik's mouth was dry, the pulse pounding in his head. That he would have to die for Cosca's absurd ambitions seemed horribly unfair. His sash had already given its life for the dubious cause and that seemed more than sacrifice enough. Dimbik had once been told that the best soldiers are rarely courageous. That was when he had been sure it was the career for him. He started to slide one hand towards his sword, far from sure what he would do with it once it reached the hilt.

‘I will not be disappointed again!’ shrieked the Old Man, struggling to reach his own hilt with Lorsen restraining him and a half-full bottle still clutched in his other fist. ‘Men of the Gracious Hand! Draw your—’

‘No!’ Lorsen’s voice barked out like a slamming door. ‘Captain General Dimbik, take the traitor Nicomo Cosca under arrest!’

There was the very slightest pause.

Probably no more than a breath, for all it felt far longer. While everyone assessed the odds and the outcomes. While everyone judged just where the shifting power sat. While everything dropped into place in Dimbik’s mind and, no doubt, the minds of every other person present. Just a breath, and everything was rearranged.

‘Of course, Inquisitor,’ said Dimbik. The two flatbowmen raised their weapons to point them at Cosca. They looked slightly surprised that they were doing it, but they did it nonetheless.

Friendly looked up from his dice and frowned slightly. ‘Two,’ he said.

Cosca gazed slack-jawed at Dimbik. ‘So that’s how it is?’ The bottle dropped from his nerveless fingers, clattered to the floor and rolled away, dribbling liquor. ‘That’s how it is, is it?’

‘How else would it be?’ said Dimbik. ‘Sergeant Cog?’

That venerable soldier stepped forward, for once, with an impressive degree of military snap. ‘Sir?’

‘Please disarm Master Cosca, Master Friendly, and Master Sworbreck.’

‘Place them in irons for the trip,’ said Lorsen. ‘They will face trial on our return.’

‘Why me?’ squeaked Sworbreck, eyes wide as saucers.

‘Why not you?’ Corporal Bright looked the author over and, finding no weapon, he jerked the pencil from his hand, tossed it on the floor and made great show of grinding it under his heel.

‘Prisoner?’ muttered Friendly. For some reason he had the faintest smile on his face as the manacles were snapped around his wrists.

‘I’ll be back!’ snarled the Old Man, spraying spit over his shoulder as Cog dragged him wriggling away, empty scabbard flapping. ‘Laugh while you can, because Nicomo Cosca always laughs last! I’ll be revenged on the whole pack of you! I will not be disappointed again! I will—’ The door swung shut upon him.

‘Who was that drunkard?’ asked Sarmis.

‘Nicomo Cosca, your Excellency,’ muttered Temple, still on his knees and with one hand pressed to his bloody mouth. ‘Infamous soldier of fortune.’

The Legate grunted. ‘Never heard of him.’

Lorsen placed one hand upon his breast and bowed low. ‘Your Excellency, I pray that you accept my apologies for any and all inconveniences, trespasses and—’

‘You have eight weeks to leave Imperial territory,’ said Sarmis. ‘Any of you found within our borders after that time will be buried alive.’ He slapped dust from his breastplate. ‘Have you such a thing as a bath?’

‘Of course, your Excellency,’ murmured the Mayor, virtually grovelling. ‘We will do the very best we can.’ She turned her eyes to Dimbik as she ushered the Legate towards the stairs. ‘Get out,’ she hissed.

The brand-new captain general was by no means reluctant to oblige. With the greatest of relief, he and his men spilled into the street and prepared their tired mounts for the trip out of town. Cosca had been manhandled into his saddle, sparse hair in disarray, gazing down at Dimbik with a look of stunned upset.

‘I remember when I took you on,’ he muttered. ‘Drunk, and spurned, and worthless. I graciously offering my hand.’ He attempted to mime the offering of his hand but was prevented by his manacles.

Dimbik smoothed down his hair. ‘Times change.’

‘Here is justice, eh, Sworbreck? Here is loyalty! Take a good look, all of you, this is where charity gets you! The fruits of polite behaviour and thought for your fellow man!’

‘For pity’s sake, someone shut him up,’ snapped Lorsen, and Cog leaned from his saddle and stuffed a pair of socks in Cosca’s mouth.

Dimbik leaned closer to the Inquisitor. ‘It might be best if we were to kill them. Cosca still has friends among the rest of the Company, and—’

‘A point well made and well taken, but no. Look at him.’ The infamous mercenary did indeed present a most miserable picture, sitting hunched on horseback with hands manacled behind him, his torn and muddied cloak all askew, the gilt on his breastplate all peeling and rust showing beneath, his wrinkled skin blotchy with rash, one of Cog’s socks dangling from his mouth. ‘Yesterday’s man if ever there was one. And in any case, my dear Captain General . . .’ Dimbik stood tall and straightened his uniform at the title. He very much enjoyed the ring of it. ‘We need someone to blame.’

In spite of the profound pain in his stomach, the ache in his legs, the sweat spreading steadily under his armour, he remained resplendently erect upon the balcony, rigid as a mighty oak, until long after the mercenaries had filed away into the haze. Would the great Legate Sarmis, ruthless commander, undefeated general, right hand of the Emperor, feared throughout the Circle of the World, have allowed himself to display the least trace of weakness, after all?

It felt an age of agony before the Mayor stepped out onto the balcony with Temple behind her, and spoke the longed for words 'They're gone.'

Every part of him sagged and he gave a groan from the very bottom of his being. He removed that ridiculous helmet, wiping the sweat from his forehead with a trembling hand. He could scarcely recall having donned a more absurd costume in all his many years in the theatre. No garlands of flowers flung by an adoring audience, perhaps, as had littered the broad stage of Adua's House of Drama after his every appearance as the First of the Magi, but his satisfaction was no less complete.

'I told you I had one more great performance in me!' said Lestek.

'And so you did,' said the Mayor.

'You both provided able support, though, for amateurs. I daresay you have a future in the theatre.'

'Did you have to hit me?' asked Temple, probing at his split lip.

'Someone had to,' muttered the Mayor.

'Ask yourself rather, would the terrible Legate Sarmis have struck you, and blame him for your pains,' said Lestek. 'A performance is all in the details, my boy, all in the details! One must inhabit the role entirely. Which occurs to me, do thank my little legion before they disperse, it was an ensemble effort.'

'For five carpenters, three bankrupt prospectors, a barber and a drunk, they made quite an honour guard,' said Temple.

'That drunk scrubbed up surprisingly well,' said Lestek.

'A good find,' added the Mayor.

'It really worked?' Shy South had limped up to lean against the door frame.

'I told you it would,' said Temple.

'But you obviously didn't believe it.'

'No,' he admitted, peering up at the skies. 'There really must be a God.'

‘Are you sure they’ll believe it?’ asked the Mayor. ‘Once they’ve joined up with the rest of their Company and had time to think it over?’

‘Men believe what they want to,’ said Temple. ‘Cosca’s done. And those bastards want to go home.’

‘A victory for culture over barbarity!’ said Lestek, flicking the plume on the helmet.

‘A victory for law over chaos,’ said Temple, fanning himself with his worthless treaty.

‘A victory for lying,’ said the Mayor, ‘and only by the narrowest of margins.’

Shy South shrugged and said, with her talent for simplicity, ‘A win’s a win.’

‘All too true!’ Lestek took a long breath through his nose and, even with the pain, even though he knew he did not have long left, perhaps because he knew it, he breathed out with the deepest fulfilment. ‘As a young man I found happy endings cloying but, call me soppy, with age, I have come to appreciate them more and more.’

The Cost

Shy scooped up water and splashed it on her face, and groaned at the cold of it, just this side of ice. She worked her fingertips into her sore eyelids, and her aching cheeks, and her battered mouth. Stayed there, bent over the basin, her faint reflection sent scattering by the drops from her face. The water was pink with blood. Hard to say where from exactly. The last few months had left her beaten as a prizefighter. Just without the prize.

There was the long rope-burn coiling around one forearm and the new cut down the other, blood spotted through the bandage. Her hands were ripped up front and back, crack-nailed and scab-knuckled. She picked at the scar under her ear, a keepsake from that Ghost out on the plains. He'd almost got the whole ear to remember her by. She felt the lumps and scabs on her scalp, the nicks on her face, some of them she couldn't even remember getting. She hunched her shoulders and wriggled her spine and all the countless sores and grazes and bruises niggled at her like a choir of ugly little voices.

She looked down into the street and watched the children for a moment. Majud had found them some new clothes – dark suit and shirt for Pit, green dress with lace at the sleeves for Ro. Better than Shy had ever been able to buy them. They might've passed for some rich man's children if it hadn't been for their shaved heads, the dark fuzz just starting to grow back. Curnsbick was pointing to his vast new building, talking with big, enthusiastic gestures, Ro watching and listening solemnly, taking it all in, Pit kicking a stone about the mud.

Shy sniffed, and swallowed, and splashed more water on her face. Couldn't be crying if her eyes were wet already, could she? She should've

been leaping with joy. In spite of the odds, the hardships, the dangers, she'd got them back.

But all she could think of was the cost.

The people killed. A few she'd miss and a lot she wouldn't. Some she'd even have called evil, but no one's evil to themselves, are they? They were still people dead, could do no good now, could make no amends and right no wrongs, people who'd taken a lifetime to make, plucked out from the world and turned to mud. Sangeed and his Ghosts. Papa Ring and his crooks. Waerdinur and his Dragon People. Leef left under the dirt out on the plains, and Grega Cantliss doing the hanged man's dance, and Brachio with the arrows in him, and—

She stuck her face in the cloth and rubbed, hard, like she could rub them all away, but they were stuck tight to her. Tattooed into her sure as the rebel slogans into Corlin's arms.

Was it her fault? Had she set it all rolling when she came out here like the kicked pebble that starts the landslide? Or was it Cantliss' fault, or Waerdinur's, or Lamb's? Was it everyone's? Her head hurt from trying to pull apart the tapestry of everything happened and follow her own nasty little thread through it, sifting for blame like a fevered miner dredging at a stream-bed. No point picking at it any more than at a scab. But still, now it was behind her, she couldn't stop looking back.

She limped to the bed and sat with a groaning of old springs, arms around herself, wincing and twitching at flashes of things happened like they were happening now.

Cantliss smashing her head against a table leg. Her knife sliding into flesh. Grunting in her face. Things she'd had to do. Wrestling with a crazy Ghost. Leef without his ears. Sangeed's head coming off, thud. It had been them or her. Looking down at that girl she'd shot, not much older'n Ro. Arrow in a horse and the rider tumbling. No choice, she'd had no choice. Lamb flinging her against the wall, Waerdinur's skull split, click, and she was flying from the wagon, and over, and over, and over—

She jerked her head up at a knock, wiped her eyes on her bandage. 'Who's there?' Doing her best to sound like it was any other morning.

'Your lawyer.' Temple swung the door open, that earnest look on his face which she could never quite be sure was genuine. 'Are you all right?'

'I've had easier years.'

‘Anything I can do?’

‘Guess it’s a little late to ask you to keep that wagon on the road.’

‘A little.’ He came and sat down on the bed next to her. Didn’t feel uncomfortable. You go through what they’d been through together, maybe uncomfortable goes off the menu. ‘The Mayor wants us gone. She says we’re bad luck.’

‘Hard to argue with her. I’m surprised she hasn’t killed you.’

‘I suppose she still might.’

‘Just need to wait a little longer.’ Shy grunted as she wormed her foot into her boot, trying to work out how bad the ankle hurt. Bad enough she stopped trying. ‘Just ’til Lamb comes back.’

There was a silence then. A silence in which Temple didn’t say, ‘Do you really think he’s coming back?’ Instead he just nodded, as if Lamb coming was as sure as tomorrow, and she was grateful for that much. ‘Then where are you heading?’

‘That’s a question.’ New lives out west didn’t look much different to the old ones. No short cuts to riches, leastways, or none a sane woman might want to take. And it was no place for children neither. She’d never thought farming would look like the comfortable option, but now she shrugged. ‘The Near Country for me, I reckon. It’s no easy life but I’ve spotted nothing easier.’

‘I hear Dab Sweet and Crying Rock are putting together a Fellowship for the trip back. Majud’s going along, aiming to make some deals in Adua. Lord Ingelstad too.’

‘Any Ghosts turn up his wife can frown ’em to death.’

‘She’s staying. I hear she bought Camling’s Hostelry for a song.’

‘Good for her.’

‘The rest will be heading east within the week.’

‘Now? ’Fore the weather breaks?’

‘Sweet says now’s the time, before the meltwater swells the rivers and the Ghosts get tetchy again.’

She took a long breath. Could’ve done with a year or two in bed but life hadn’t often served her what she ordered. ‘Might be I’ll sign up.’

Temple looked across from under his brows. Nervous, almost. ‘Maybe . . . I’ll tag on?’

‘Can’t stop you, can I?’

‘Would you want to?’

She thought about that. ‘No. Might need someone to ride drag. Or jump out of a window. Or drive a wagon full of gold off a road.’

He puffed himself up. ‘As it happens, I am expert in all three. I’ll talk to Sweet and let him know we’ll be joining up. I suppose it’s possible he won’t value my skills as highly as you do, though . . . I might have to buy my way in.’

They looked at each other for a moment. ‘You coming up a little short?’

‘You didn’t exactly give me time to pack. I’ve nothing but the clothes I’m wearing.’

‘Lucky for you I’m always willing to help out.’ She reached into her pocket and drew out a few of the ancient coins she’d taken while the wagon sped across the plateau. ‘Will that cover it?’

‘I’d say so.’ He took them between finger and thumb but she didn’t let go.

‘Reckon that’s about two hundred marks you owe.’

He stared at her. ‘Are you trying to upset me?

‘I can do that without trying.’ And she let go the coins.

‘I suppose a person should stick to what they’re good at.’ He smiled, and flicked one of the coins spinning up and snatched it from the air. ‘Seems I’m at my best in debt.’

‘Tell you what.’ She grabbed a bottle from the table by her bed and wedged it in her shirt pocket. ‘I’ll pay you a mark to help me downstairs.’

Outside a sleety drizzle had set in, falling brown around Curnsbick’s belching chimneys, his workmen struggling in the mush on the far side of the street. Temple helped her to the rail and she leaned against it, watching. Funny thing. She didn’t want to let go of him.

‘I’m bored,’ said Pit.

‘One day, young man, you will learn what a luxury it is to be bored.’ Temple offered him his hand. ‘Why not help me seek out that noted scout and frontiersman, Dab Sweet? There may even be gingerbread in it for you. I have recently come into some money.’

‘All right.’ Temple lifted the boy onto his shoulders and they set off down the rattling porches at half a jog, Pit laughing as he bounced.

He had a touch with the children, had Temple. More than she had, now, it seemed. Shy hopped to the bench against the front of the house and dropped onto it, stretched her hurt leg out in front of her and eased back. She grunted

as she let her muscles go soft by slow degrees, and finally pulled the cork from her bottle with that echoing *thwop* that sets your mouth watering. Oh, the simple joy of doing nothing. Thinking nothing. She reckoned she could allow herself a rest.

It had been hard work, the last few months.

She lowered that bottle, looking up the street, liquor burning at the cuts in her mouth in a way that wasn't entirely unpleasant. There was a rider coming through the murk of smoke and drizzle. A particularly slouching rider coming at a slow walk, taking shape as he came closer – big, and old, and battered. His coat was torn, and dirtied, and ash-smeared. He'd lost his hat, short scrub of grey hair matted with blood and rain, face streaked with dirt, mottled with bruise, scabbed and grazed and swollen.

She took another sip from her bottle. 'I was wondering when you'd turn up.'

'You can stop,' grunted Lamb, stopping himself, his old horse looking like it didn't have another stride in it. 'The children all right?'

'They're as well as they were.'

'How about you?'

'Don't know when I was last all right, but I'm still just about alive. You?'

'Just about.' He clambered down from his horse, teeth gritted, not even bothering to tie it up. 'Say one thing for me . . . say I'm a survivor.' He held his ribs as he limped up the steps and onto the porch. He looked at the bench, then his sword, realised he wouldn't be able to sit with it on, started struggling with the buckle on the belt, his knuckles scabbed raw and two of the fingers he still had bandaged together and held stiff.

'By . . . the . . . fucking—'

'Here.' She leaned and flicked the buckle open and he pulled the sword off, belt dangling, cast about for somewhere to put it, then gave up and dropped it on the boards, sank down beside her and slowly, slowly stretched his legs out next to hers.

'Savian?' she asked.

Lamb shook his head a little. Like shaking it a lot would hurt him. 'Where's Cosca?'

'Gone.' She passed him the bottle. 'Temple lawyered him off.'

'Lawyered him?'

‘With a little help from the Mayor and a final performance of remarkable quality.’

‘Well, I never did.’ Lamb took a long swig and wiped his scabbed lips, looking across the street at Curnsbick’s manufactory. A couple of doors down, above an old card-hall, they were hauling up a sign reading *Valint and Balk, Bankers*. Lamb took another swallow. ‘Times sure are changing.’

‘Feel left out?’

He rolled one eye to her, half-swollen shut and all blown and bloodshot, and offered the bottle back. ‘For a while now.’

They sat there, looking at each other, like two survivors of an avalanche. ‘What happened, Lamb?’

He opened his mouth, as if he was thinking about where to start, then just shrugged, looking even more tired and hurt than she did. ‘Does it matter?’

If there’s nothing needs saying, why bother? She lifted the bottle. ‘No. I guess not.’

Last Words

‘Just like old times, eh?’ said Sweet, grinning at the snow-patched landscape.

‘Colder,’ said Shy, wriggling into her new coat.

‘Few more scars,’ said Lamb, wincing as he rubbed gently at the pinked flesh around one of his face’s recent additions.

‘Even bigger debts,’ said Temple, patting his empty pockets.

Sweet chuckled. ‘Bunch o’ bloody gripers. Still alive, ain’t you, and found your children, and got the Far Country spread out ahead? I’d call that a fair result.’

Lamb frowned off towards the horizon. Shy grumbled her grudging agreement. Temple smiled to himself, and closed his eyes, and tipped his face back to let the sun shine pink through his lids. He was alive. He was free. His debts were deeper than ever, but still, a fair result. If there was a God, He was an indulgent father, who always forgave no matter how far His children strayed.

‘Reckon our old friend Buckhorm’s prospered,’ said Lamb, as they crested a rise and looked down on his farmstead.

It had been carefully sited beside a stream, a set of solid-looking cabins arranged in a square, narrow windows facing outwards, a fence of sharpened logs closing up the gaps and a wooden tower twice a man’s height beside the gate. A safe, and civilised, and comfortable-looking place, smoke slipping gently up from a chimney and smudging the sky. The valley around it, as far as Temple could see, was carpeted with tall green grass, patched white with snow in the hollows, dotted brown with cattle.

‘Looks like he’s got stock to trade,’ said Shy.

Sweet stood in his stirrups to study the nearest cow. ‘Good stock, too. I look forward to eating ’em.’ The cow peered suspiciously back, apparently less enamoured of that idea.

‘Maybe we should pick up some extra,’ said Shy, ‘get a herd together and drive ’em back to the Near Country.’

‘Always got your eyes open for a profit, don’t you?’ asked Sweet.

‘Why close your eyes to one? Specially when we’ve got one of the world’s foremost drag riders sitting idle.’

‘Oh God,’ muttered Temple.

‘Buckhorm?’ bellowed Sweet as the four of them rode up. ‘You about?’ But there was no reply. The gate stood ajar, a stiff hinge faintly creaking as the breeze moved it. Otherwise, except for the cattle lowing in the distance, all was quiet.

Then the soft scrape as Lamb drew his sword. ‘Something ain’t right.’

‘Aye,’ said Sweet, laying his flatbow calmly across his knees and slipping a bolt into place.

‘No doubt.’ Shy shrugged her own bow off her shoulder and jerked an arrow from the quiver by her knee.

‘Oh God,’ said Temple, making sure he came last as they eased through the gateway, hooves of their horses squelching and crunching in the half-frozen mud. Was there no end to it? He peered at the doors and into the windows, grimacing with anticipation, expecting any and every horror from a welter of bandits, to a horde of Ghosts, to Waerdinur’s vengeful dragon erupting from the earth to demand its money back.

‘Where’s my gold, Temple?’

The dragon would have been preferable to the awful phantom that now stooped beneath the low lintel of Buckhorm’s house and into the light. Who else but that infamous soldier of fortune, Nicomo Cosca?

His once-fine clothes were reduced to muddy rags, corroded breastplate lost and his filthy shirt hanging by two buttons, one trouser-leg torn gaping and a length of scrawny, trembling white calf exposed. His magnificent hat was a memory, the few strands of grey hair he had so carefully cultivated to cross his liver-spotted pate now floating about his skull in a grease-stiffened nimbus. His rash had turned crimson, scabbed with nail marks and, like mould up a cellar wall, spread flaking up the side of his head to speckle his waxy face. His hand quivered on the door, his gait was uncertain, he looked

like nothing so much as a corpse exhumed, brought to a mockery of life by sorcerous intervention.

He turned his mad, bright, feverish eyes on Temple and slapped the hilt of his sword. One trapping of glory he had managed to retain. ‘Like the ending of a cheap storybook, eh, Sworbreck?’ The writer crept from the darkness behind Cosca, equally filthy and with bare feet to add to his wretchedness, one lens of his eyeglasses cracked, his empty hands fussing with each other. ‘One final appearance for the villains!’

Sworbreck licked his lips, and remained silently loitering. Perhaps he could not tell who were the villains in this particular metaphor.

‘Where’s Buckhorm?’ snapped Shy, training her drawn bow on Cosca and prompting his biographer to cower behind him for cover.

The Old Man was less easily rattled. ‘Driving some cattle down to Hope with his three eldest sons, I understand. The lady of the house is within but, alas, cannot see visitors just at present. Ever so slightly tied up.’ He licked at his chapped lips. ‘I don’t suppose any of you have a drink to hand?’

‘Left mine over the rise with the rest of the Fellowship.’ Shy jerked her head towards the west. ‘I find if I have it, I drink it.’

‘I’ve always had the very same problem,’ said Cosca. ‘I would ask one of my men to pour me a glass, but thanks to Master Lamb’s fearsome talents and Master Temple’s underhanded machinations, my Company is somewhat reduced.’

‘You played your own hand in that,’ said Temple.

‘Doubtless. Live long enough, you see everything ruined. But I still hold a few cards.’ Cosca gave a high whistle.

The doorway of the barn banged open and several of Buckhorm’s younger children shuffled through into the courtyard, wide-eyed and fearful, some of their faces streaked with tears. Sergeant Friendly was their shepherd, an empty manacle swinging by the chain, the other still locked around his thick wrist. The blade of his cleaver glimmered briefly in the sun.

‘Hello, Temple,’ he said, showing as little emotion as if they’d been reunited at a tavern counter.

‘Hello,’ croaked Temple.

‘And Master Hedges was good enough to join us.’ Cosca pointed past them, finger shaking so badly it was hard at first to tell at what. Looking around, Temple saw a black outline appear at the top of the little turret by

the gate. The self-professed hero of the Battle of Osrung, and pointing a flatbow down into the yard.

'Real sorry about this!' he shouted.

'You're that sorry, you can drop the bow,' growled Shy.

'I just want what I'm owed!' he called back.

'I'll give you what you're fucking owed, you treacherous—'

'Perhaps we can establish exactly what everyone is owed once the money is returned?' suggested Cosca. 'As a first step, I believe throwing down your weapons would be traditional?'

Shy spat through the gap in her front teeth. 'Fuck yourself.' The point of her arrow did not deviate by a hair.

Lamb stretched his neck out one way, then the other. 'We don't hold much with tradition.'

Cosca frowned. 'Sergeant Friendly? If they do not lay down their arms within the count of five, kill one of the children.'

Friendly shifted his fingers around the grip of his cleaver. 'Which one?'

'What do I care? You pick.'

'I'd rather not.'

Cosca rolled his eyes. 'The biggest one, then, and work your way down. Must I manage every detail?'

'I mean I'd rather not—'

'One!' snapped the Old Man.

Nobody gave the slightest impression of lowering their weapons. Quite the reverse. Shy stood slightly in her stirrups, scowling down her arrow. 'One o' those children dies, you're next.'

'Two!'

'Then you!' For that of a war hero, Hedges' voice had risen to a decidedly unheroic register.

'Then the fucking lot of you,' growled Lamb, hefting his heavy sword.

Sworbreck stared at Temple around Cosca's shoulder, palms open, as though to say, *What can reasonable men do under such circumstances?*

'Three!'

'Wait!' shouted Temple. 'Just . . . wait, damn it!' And he scrambled down from his horse.

'What the hell are you doing?' Shy snarled around the flights of her arrow.

'Taking the hard way.'

Temple began to walk slowly across the courtyard, mud and straw squelching under his boots, the breeze stirring his hair, the breath cold in his chest. He did not go with a smile, as Kahdia had gone to the Eaters when they padded into the Great Temple, black figures in the darkness, giving his life for the lives of his students. It took a mighty effort, wincing as if he was walking into a gale. But he went.

The sun found a chink in the clouds and glinted on the drawn steel, each edge and point picked out with painful brightness. He was scared. He wondered if he might piss himself with each step. This was not the easy way. Not the easy way at all. But it was the right way. If there is a God, He is a solemn judge, and sees to it that each man receives his rightful deservings. So Temple knelt in the dung before Nicomo Cosca, and looked up into his bloodshot eyes, wondering how many men he had killed during that long career of his.

'What do you want?' he asked.

The ex-captain general frowned. 'My gold, of course.'

'I'm sorry,' said Temple. He even was a little. 'But it's gone. Conthus has it.'

'Conthus is dead.'

'No. You got the wrong man. Conthus took the money and it isn't coming back.' He did not try to be earnest. He simply gazed into Cosca's worn-out face and told the truth. In spite of the fear, and the high odds on his imminent death, and the freezing water leaking through the knees of his trousers, it felt good.

There was a pause pregnant with doom. Cosca stared at Temple, and Shy at Cosca, and Hedges at Shy, and Sweet at Hedges, and Friendly at Sweet, and Lamb at Friendly, and Sworbreck at everyone. All poised, all ready, all holding their breath.

'You betrayed me,' said Cosca.

'Yes.'

'After all I did for you.'

'Yes.'

The Old Man's wriggling fingers drifted towards his sword hilt. 'I should kill you.'

'Probably,' Temple was forced to admit.

‘I want my money,’ said Cosca, but the slightest plaintive note had crept into his voice.

‘It isn’t your money. It never was. Why do you even want it?’

Cosca blinked, hand hovering uncertainly. ‘Well . . . I can use it to take back my dukedom—’

‘You didn’t want the dukedom when you had it.’

‘It’s . . . money.’

‘You don’t even like money. When you get it you throw it away.’

Cosca opened his mouth to refute that statement, then had to accept its obvious truth. He stood there, rashy, quivering, hunched, aged even beyond his considerable years, and looked down at Temple as though he was seeing him for the first time. ‘Sometimes,’ he muttered, ‘I think you’re hardly like me at all.’

‘I’m trying not to be. What do you want?’

‘I want . . .’ Cosca blinked over at the children, Friendly with one hand on the shoulder of the eldest and his cleaver in the other. Then at Lamb, grim as a gravedigger with his sword drawn. Then at Shy, bow trained on him, and at Hedges, bow trained on her. His bony shoulders sagged.

‘I want a chance to do it all again. To do it . . . *right*.’ Tears showed in the Old Man’s eyes. ‘How ever did it go so wrong, Temple? I had so many advantages. So many opportunities. All squandered. All slipped away like sand through a glass. So many disappointments . . .’

‘Most of them you brought on yourself.’

‘Of course.’ Cosca gave a ragged sigh. ‘But they’re the ones that hurt the worst.’ And he reached for his sword.

It was not there. He frowned down, puzzled. ‘Where’s my— uh?’

The blade slid out of his chest. He and Temple both stared at it, equally shocked, sun glinting on the point, blood spreading quickly out into his filthy shirt. Sworbreck let go of the hilt and stepped back, mouth hanging open.

‘Oh,’ said Cosca, dropping to his knees. ‘There it is.’

Behind him Temple heard a flatbow go off and, almost simultaneously, another. He spun clumsily about, falling in the muck on one elbow.

Hedges gave a cry, bow tumbling from his hand. There was a bolt through the palm of the other. Sweet lowered his own bow, at first looking shocked, then rather pleased with himself.

‘I stabbed him,’ muttered Sworbreck.

‘Am I shot?’ asked Shy.

‘You’ll live,’ said Lamb, flicking at the flights of Hedges’ bolt. It was stuck through her saddle horn.

‘My last words . . .’ With a faint groan, Cosca toppled onto his side in the mud next to Temple. ‘I had some wonderful ones . . . worked out. What were they now?’ And he broke out into that luminous smile of which only he was capable, good humour and good intentions radiating from his deep-lined face. ‘Ah! I remember . . .’

Nothing more. He was still.

‘He’s dead,’ said Temple, voice flat. ‘No more disappointments.’

‘You were the last,’ said Friendly. ‘I told him we’d be better off in prison.’ He tossed his cleaver in the muck and patted Buckhorm’s eldest son on the shoulder. ‘You four can go inside to your mother.’

‘You shot me!’ shrieked Hedges, clutching at his skewered hand.

Sworbreck adjusted his broken eyeglasses as though he could scarcely credit the evidence of his senses. ‘Astonishing skill!’

‘I was aiming for his chest,’ said the scout, under his breath.

The author stepped gingerly around Cosca’s corpse. ‘Master Sweet I wonder whether I might speak to you about a book I have in mind.’

‘Now? I really don’t see—’

‘A generous share of the profits would be forthcoming.’

‘—any way I could turn you down.’

Cold water was leaking through the seat of Temple’s trousers, gripping his arse in its icy embrace, but he found he could not move. Facing death certainly can take it out of you. Especially if you’ve spent most of your life doing your best to avoid facing anything.

He realised Friendly was standing next to him, frowning down at Cosca’s body. ‘What do I do now?’ he asked.

‘I don’t know,’ said Temple. ‘What does anyone do?’

‘I plan an authentic portrait of the taming and settlement of the Far Country,’ Sworbreck was blathering. ‘A tale for the ages! One in which you have played a pivotal role.’

‘I’m pivotal, all right,’ said Sweet. ‘What’s pivotal?’

‘My hand!’ shrieked Hedges.

‘You’re lucky it’s not through your face,’ said Lamb.

Somewhere inside, Temple could hear the tearful sounds of the Buckhorm children being reunited with their mother. Good news, he supposed. A fair result.

'My readers will thrill to your heroic exploits!'

'I've certainly thrilled to 'em,' snorted Shy. 'The heroic scale of your digestive gases would never be believed back east.'

Temple looked up, and watched the clouds moving. If there was a God, the world seemed exactly the way it would be if there wasn't one.

'I must insist on absolute honesty. I will entertain no more exaggeration! Truth, Master Sweet, is at the heart of all great works of art.'

'No doubt at all. Which makes me wonder – have you heard of the time I killed a great red bear with naught but these two hands . . .'

Some Kind of Coward

Nothing was quite the way she remembered it. All small. All drab. All changed.

Some new folks had happened by and built a house where theirs had stood, and a new barn, too. Couple of fields tilled and coming up nice, by all appearances. Flowers blooming around the tree they'd hanged Gully from. The tree Ro's mother was buried under.

They sat there, on horseback, frowning down, and Shy said, 'Somehow I thought it'd be the way we left it.'

'Times move on,' said Lamb.

'It's a nice spot,' said Temple.

'No it's not,' said Shy.

'Shall we go down?'

Shy turned her horse away. 'Why?'

Ro's hair was grown back to a shapeless mop. She'd taken Lamb's razor one morning meaning to shave it off again, and sat there by still water, holding her dragon scale and thinking of Waerdinur. Couldn't picture his face no more. Couldn't remember his voice or the Maker's lessons he'd so carefully taught her. How could it all have washed away so fast? In the end she just put the razor back and let her hair grow.

Times move on, don't they?

They'd moved on in Squaredeal, all right, lots of land about cleared and drained and put under the plough, and new buildings sprung up all over and new faces everywhere passing through or stopping off or settling down to all sorts of business.

Not everything had prospered. Clay was gone and there was a drunk idiot running his store and it had no stock and half the roof had fallen in. Shy argued him down to one Imperial gold piece and a dozen bottles of cheap spirit and bought the place as a going concern. Nearly going, at least. They all set to work next morning like it was the last day of creation, Shy haggling merciless as a hangman for stock, Pit and Ro laughing as they swept dust over each other, Temple and Lamb hammering away at the carpentry, and it weren't long before things got to feel a bit like they used to. More than Ro had ever thought they would.

Except sometimes she'd think of the mountains and cry. And Lamb still wore a sword. The one he'd taken from her father.

Temple took a room over the road and put a sign above the door saying *Temple and Kahdia: Contracts, Clerking and Carpentry*.

Ro said to him, 'This Kahdia ain't around much, is he?'

'Nor will he be,' said Temple. 'But a man should have someone to blame.'

He started doing law work, which might as well have been magic far as most folk around there were concerned, children peering in at his window to watch him write by candlelight. Sometimes Ro went over there and listened to him talk about the stars, and God, and wood, and the law, and all kinds of faraway places he'd been on his travels, and in languages she'd never even heard before.

'Who needs a teacher?' Shy asked. 'I was taught with a belt.'

'Look how that turned out,' said Ro. 'He knows a lot.'

Shy snorted. 'For a wise man he's a hell of a fool.'

But once Ro woke in the night and came down, restless, and saw them out the back together, kissing. There was something in the way Shy touched him made it seem she didn't think he was quite the fool she said he was.

Sometimes they went out around the farmsteads, more buildings springing up each week that passed, buying and selling. Pit and Ro swaying on the seat of the wagon next to Shy, Lamb riding along beside, always frowning hard at the horizon, hand on that sword.

Shy said to him, 'There's naught to worry about.'

And without looking at her he said, 'That's when you'd better worry.'

They got in one day at closing time, the long clouds pinking overhead as the sun sank in the west and the lonely wind sighing up and sweeping dust down the street and setting that rusty weathervane to squeak. No

Fellowships coming through and the town quiet and still, some children laughing somewhere and a grandmother creaking in her rocker on her porch and just one horse Ro didn't know tied up at the warped rail.

'Some days work out,' said Shy, looking at the back of the wagon, just about empty.

'Some don't,' Ro finished for her.

Calm inside the store, just Wist soft snoring in his chair with his boots up on the counter. Shy slapped 'em off and woke him with a jolt. 'Everything good?'

'Slow day,' said the old man, rubbing his eyes.

'All your days are slow,' said Lamb.

'Like you're so bloody quick. Oh, and there's someone been waiting for you. Says you and him got business.'

'Waiting for me?' asked Shy, and Ro heard footsteps in the back of the store.

'No, for Lamb. What did you say your name was?'

A man pushed a hanging coil of rope aside and came into the light. A great, tall man, his head brushing the low rafters, a sword at his hip with a grip of scored grey metal, just like Lamb's. Just like her father's. He had a great scar angled across his face and the guttering candle-flame twinkled in his eye. A silver eye, like a mirror.

'My name's Caul Shivers,' he said, voice quiet and all croaky soft and every hair Ro had stretched up.

'What's your business?' muttered Shy.

Shivers looked down at Lamb's hand, and the stump of the missing finger there, and he said, 'You know my business, don't you?'

Lamb just nodded, grim and level.

'You're after trouble, you can fucking ride on!' Shy's voice, harsh as a crow's. 'You hear me, bastard? We've had all the trouble we—'

Lamb put his hand on her forearm. The one with the scar coiling around it. 'It's all right.'

'It's all right if he wants my knife up his—'

'Stay out of it, Shy. It's an old debt we got. Past time it was paid.' Then he spoke to Shivers in Northern. 'Whatever's between me and you, it don't concern these.'

Shivers looked at Shy, and at Ro, and it seemed to her there was no more feeling in his living eye than in his dead. ‘It don’t concern these. Shall we head outside?’

They walked down the steps in front of the store, not slow and not fast, keeping a space between them, eyes on each other all the way. Ro, and Shy, and Pit, and Wist edged after them onto the porch, watching in a silent group.

‘Lamb, eh?’ said Shivers.

‘One name’s good as another.’

‘Oh, not so, not so. Threetrees, and Bethod, and Whirrun of Bligh, and all them others forgotten. But men still sing your songs. Why’s that, d’you reckon?’

‘’Cause men are fools,’ said Lamb.

The wind caught a loose board somewhere and made it rattle. The two Northmen faced each other, Lamb’s hand dangling loose at his side, stump of the missing finger brushing the grip of his sword, and Shivers gently swept his coat clear of his own hilt and held it back out of the way.

‘That my old sword you got there?’ asked Lamb.

Shivers shrugged. ‘Took it off Black Dow. Guess it all comes around, eh?’

‘Always.’ Lamb stretched his neck out one way, then the other. ‘It always comes around.’

Time dragged, dragged. Those children were still laughing somewhere, and maybe the echoing shout of their mother calling them in. That old woman’s rocker softly creak, creaking on the porch. That weathervane squeak, squeaking. A breeze blew up then and stirred the dust in the street and flapped the coats of the two men, no more than four or five strides of dirt between them.

‘What’s happening?’ whispered Pit, and no one answered.

Shivers bared his teeth. Lamb narrowed his eyes. Shy’s hand gripped almost painful hard at Ro’s shoulder, the blood pounding now in her head, the breath crawling in her throat, slow, slow, the rocker creaking and that loose board rattling and a dog barking somewhere.

‘So?’ growled Lamb.

Shivers tipped his head back, and his good eye flickered over to Ro. Stayed on her for a long moment. And she bunched her fists, and clenched her teeth, and she found herself wishing he’d kill Lamb. Wishing it with all

her being. The wind came again and stirred his hair, flicked it around his face.

Squeak. Creak. Rattle.

Shivers shrugged. ‘So I’d best be going.’

‘Eh?’

‘Long way home for me. Got to tell ’em that nine-fingered bastard is back to the mud. Don’t you think, Master Lamb?’

Lamb curled his left hand into a fist so the stump didn’t show, and swallowed. ‘Long dead and gone.’

‘All for the best, I reckon. Who wants to run into him again?’ And just like that Shivers walked to his horse and mounted up. ‘I’d say I’ll be seeing you but . . . I think I’d best not.’

Lamb still stood there, watching. ‘No.’

‘Some men just ain’t stamped out for doing good.’ Shivers took a deep breath, and smiled. A strange thing to see on that ruined face. ‘But it feels all right, even so. To let go o’ something.’ And he turned his horse and headed east out of town.

They all stood stock still a while longer, with the wind, and the creaking rocker, and the sinking sun, then Wist gave a great rattling sigh and said, ‘Bloody hell I near shit myself!’

It was like they could all breathe again, and Shy and Pit hugged each other, but Ro didn’t smile. She was watching Lamb. He didn’t smile either. Just frowned at the dust Shivers left behind him. Then he strode back to the store, and up the steps, and inside without a word. Shy headed after. He was pulling things down from the shelves like he was in a hurry. Dried meat, and feed, and water, and a bedroll. All the things you’d need for a trip.

‘What’re you doing, Lamb?’ asked Shy.

He looked up for a moment, guilty, and back to his packing. ‘I always tried to do the best I could for you,’ he said. ‘That was the promise I made your mother. The best I can do now is go.’

‘Go where?’

‘I don’t know.’ He stopped for a moment, staring at the stump of his middle finger. ‘Someone’ll come, Shy. Sooner or later. Got to be realistic. You can’t do the things I’ve done and walk away smiling. There’ll always be trouble at my back. All I can do is take it with me.’

‘Don’t pretend this is for us,’ said Shy.

Lamb winced. ‘A man’s got to be what he is. Got to be. Say my goodbyes to Temple. Reckon you’ll do all right with him.’

He scooped up those few things and back out into the street, wedged them into his saddlebags and like that he was ready.

‘I don’t understand,’ said Pit, tears on his face.

‘I know.’ Lamb knelt in front of him, and it seemed his eye was wet too. ‘And I’m sorry. Sorry for everything.’ He leaned forward and gathered the three of them in an awkward embrace.

‘The dead know I’ve made mistakes,’ said Lamb. ‘Reckon a man could steer a perfect course through life by taking all the choices I didn’t. But I never regretted helping raise you three. And I don’t regret that I brought you back. Whatever it cost.’

‘We need you,’ said Shy.

Lamb shook his head. ‘No you don’t. I ain’t proud o’ much but I’m proud o’ you. For what that’s worth.’ And he turned away, and wiped his face, and hauled himself up onto his horse.

‘I always said you were some kind of coward,’ said Shy.

He sat looking at them for a moment, and nodded. ‘I never denied it.’

Then he took a breath, and headed off at a trot towards the sunset. Ro stood there on the porch, Pit’s hand in her hand, and Shy’s on her shoulder, and they watched him.

Until he was gone.

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